The efficacies of trance-possession ritual performances in contemporary Thai Theravada Buddhism

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the contemporary forms of trance-possession rituals performed in Thai Buddhism. It explores the way in which the trance-possession rituals are conceptualised by Thai Buddhist people as having therapeutic potentiality, through the examination of the ritual efficacy that is established through participants' lived experience. My main research question focuses on how trance-possession rituals operate within a contemporary Thai cultural context and what are the contributory factors to participants' expressing a sense of efficacy in the ritual. This thesis proposes that applied drama can be used as a 'lens' to examine the participants' embodied experiences, particularly in relation to the ritual's potential efficacy. In addition, the thesis also draws on discourses from anthropology, to enable a clearer understanding of the Thai socio-cultural aspects.

I proceed to examine the efficacy of trance-possession ritual by focusing on the Parn Yak chanting ritual and rituals in *sak yant*, the spiritual tattoo tradition, as the two examples. Through the interdisciplinary study as mentioned above, these rituals are investigated and interpreted through several aspects. This study uses interviews with monks, participants and people involved with rituals as well as documentary and archival research. As part of my research, I also critically reflect upon my ethnographic experiences, between 2006-2012, of a variety of these rituals that are performed in temples around central Thailand. My attendance at the Parn Yak rituals in and around Bangkok involved both complete participation as well as observation. For the rituals of *sak yant* tattooing, I observed a tattoo master's practices at Wat Bang Phra temple in Nakhon Pathom province.

This thesis intends to offer an alternative approach to examine participants' experiences of efficacy during and after the rituals. The research examines the therapeutic transformation of participants through the embodied process during rituals, and suggests that participants' embodiment during lived experience in ritual together with their historical and sociocultural context influence the ways that they articulate their sense of efficacy in the ritual. The thesis offers insights and ideas for further exploration of Thai Buddhist rituals as culturally therapeutic performances.

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Introduction

This thesis examines two of the practices and traditions of trance-possession rituals found in contemporary Thailand[1]: the Parn Yak chanting ritual and the rituals of *sak yant* spiritual tattoo practices. This investigation draws mainly upon theories and perspectives from applied drama and anthropology, viewed as a 'lens' by which to examine the ways in which ritual participants discuss the experiential qualities of engaging in the performance aspects of the ceremonies and the socio-cultural factors which create that experience. As part of my research, I also critically reflect upon my own ethnographic experience in order to investigate how these trance-possession rituals are viewed as a therapeutic medium. Furthermore, some aspects of Theravada Buddhist philosophy and discourses from performance studies are also used throughout the thesis in order to help analyse the embodied process during ritual experiences. The use of this interdisciplinary research framework is essential, because the ritual performances and experiences are not the same across cultures but specific to the context and individual in which they occur.

This research has the nature of being intercultural. The theoretical ideas used in this study are primarily drawn from my familiarity with Western concepts and perspectives on performance studies, particularly applied drama. These disciplines form parts of my embodied experience from my education and practices in performing arts. These theoretical concepts are beneficial to this study, as they can lead to a clearer understanding of the psychophysical transformation of ritual observers and their articulation of the sense of efficacy. Western concepts are interwoven with aspects of Buddhist philosophy and an understanding of the Thai cultural context, which offer insight into Thai worldviews. Therefore, this study is defined by the combination of these theoretical ideas and perspectives, which I embody through my training in Western performance studies and my cultural experience as a Thai Buddhist. Applying the theories can provide an intercultural and a more localised approach to the study of rituals as a culturally specific phenomenon. Throughout this research, I have been aware of the cultural differences between the potential

[1] I use the term 'contemporary' to describe a period of time covering the last 40-50 years.

readers of this thesis and myself. It is my intention to produce a report that can be understood by both Thai and non-Thai readers, as my research is also in the nature of being transcultural. Therefore, the context and cultural aspects of Thai ritual practices will be elaborated on in this thesis.

The methods used in this research include the analysis of data gathered from historical and archival documents and various scholarly and popular publications as well as collections of fieldnotes from ethnographic studies. During fieldwork trips, I was both a participant and observer in four Parn Yak rituals that took place in Bangkok and other neighbouring cities from 2006 to 2007. For the tradition and rituals of *sak yant*, I observed the practices of a tattoo master at Wat Bang Phra Temple in Nakhon Pathom province in 2009, 2011 and 2012.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the two trance-possession rituals studied in this research. It outlines the research objectives and questions, as well as a discussion of the methods and problematic issues related to the topic and the challenges of conducting the fieldwork. Examples of ethnographic experiences are also presented in this chapter to set the scene for further discussion in subsequent chapters. In order to establish the research context for the thesis, the chapter investigates selected concepts from the perspectives of anthropology, performance studies, particularly applied drama, and Theravada Buddhist studies, which are helpful in examining the articulation of the therapeutic experiences of those involved in the rituals.

Chapter 2 focuses on the complexity of beliefs found in Thailand by examining the history and development of Thai Theravada Buddhism. Thai beliefs, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and animism are investigated in order to understand how they are integrated in the current form of Thai Buddhism. Several aspects of contemporary Thai Buddhist culture will be explored, followed by an examination of some of the main concepts in Buddhism that influence Thai Buddhist perspectives and practices.

Chapter 3 explores the Thai perspectives of health and wellbeing, which, in turn, provide an overview of the importance of rituals to Thai people as a therapeutic

practice. This chapter offers insights into how Thai perspectives on healthcare and the efficacy of healing practices can be understood in relation to the people's sense of therapeutic transformation.

Chapter 4 concentrates on my ethnographic experience of the two forms of trance-possession rituals in central Thailand, Parn Yak and *sak yant*. The chapter also provides an overview of historical and performative aspects of the rituals in order to offer an understanding of how these two ritual forms are practised in the Thai culture and how their efficacy is perceived by those practising contemporary Thai Buddhism.

Chapter 5 draws on the theoretical ideas discussed in Chapter 1 to provide evidence as to how Parn Yak and *sak yant* operate as therapeutic practices within a contemporary context and how the efficacy of these rituals are conceptualised and expressed by Thai people. This chapter addresses applied drama as a 'lens' to examine the articulation of therapeutic efficacy. Furthermore, some aspects of performance studies and Theravada Buddhist philosophy are applied to help explore how a sense of efficacy is established through embodied experienced during the rituals. Collective experience is also investigated to understand how participants are able to achieve therapeutic transformation. This is the final chapter and will be followed by the conclusion, which will provide a summary of the whole thesis and indicate potential areas for future research.

Chapter 1

Research and its contexts

An overview of the rituals of Parn Yak and *sak yant*

Although different in process and detail, both rituals encourage their observers to be in a state of 'trance',[2] and the two ceremonies are usually regarded to be interconnected. Parn Yak is a chanting ritual that is specifically conducted to eliminate negative forces from the bodies of those who attend (The Royal institute of Thailand, 2007: 54). Some Thais attend Parn Yak believing that the negativity from evil spirits that possessed them can be expelled by this chanting (Kapur-Fic, 1998: 217). Nonetheless, the ritual is not only conducted for exorcism, but also to empower the spirits within the body. For example, some Thai Buddhists believe that there are benign spirits residing within them (Samutthakhup, 1996: 97-98). They participate in the chanting in order to empower these spirits whom they believe have the power to bring them good health and prosperity.[3]

The practice of Parn Yak[4] is the recital of Atanatiya *sutta*, the Pali chant that was designed specifically to protect against evil spirits such as evil demons[5] [Thai: ยักษ์/*yak*] and spirits of the dead (Yindee, 2000: 2). The chanting is well known for its unique style, e.g. loud sounds and vigorous rhythms. The chanting performances are also usually accompanied by other features such as the use of loud speakers and firecrackers. If trance-possession occurs, the monk will individually treat each person to alleviate the symptoms (Kapur-Fic, 1998: 218). Nowadays, Parn Yak is widely practiced throughout the country, especially in central Thailand (Yindee, 2000: 2).

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[2] The terms 'trance' and 'trance-possession' will be discussed in the context of the thesis later in this chapter.

[3] Evidence of this also has been revealed in my field research. Some informants told me they believe they have benign spirits within their body; hence, they attended Parn Yak to empower the spirits in exchange for prosperity (my fieldnotes, April 2007)

[4] Atanatiya is the official Pali name of the chant, while Parn Yak *sutta* is the name that most Thai people use when talking of the chanting *suttas* in the Parn Yak ritual.

[5] Although all demons or Yaks [Pali: *yakkha*; Sanskrit: *yaksa*] have a frightening physical appearance, according to Thai literature and Tipitaka, some demons are benign and some of them are even Buddhists (Punyanubhab, 2007: 1999). Hence, I use the word 'evil' here to indicate the demons that are not benign. The definition of Buddhist demons or Yaks will be explained in Chapter 4.

Sak yant is named for the tradition of people who have Thai spiritual tattoos [Thai: ยันต์/*yant*]. Many Thai Buddhists have a belief in the spiritual power of tattoos. For example, they believe that those who have tattoos will be imbued with protection, physical abilities, good luck and love/sexual relationships (Salguero, 2006: 106). The practicing members of *sak yant* believe that the spirits are sealed within their bodies, since they are tattooed by tattoo masters. As it is believed that these spirits can sometimes possess the owners' bodies, the trance-possession in *sak yant* usually occurs during the process of tattooing, and also during *wai kru,* the annual trance-possession rituals for tattoo wearers. Nowadays, the *wai kru* ritual, especially in the Wat Bang Phra temple that I studied, is internationally renowned for the large phenomenon of collective trance-possession. The state of trance-possession in this ritual is described by Scheinfeld, a dermatologist who studied the use of tattoos in religions. He stated, 'These Thai tattoo recipients can fall into a state of ecstasy or burst into violent dream-like states or fervent trances' (Scheinfeld, 2007: 364). Apart from rituals within their tradition, the *yant* tattoo wearers have also been found to enter trance-possession states in other rituals including Parn Yak. In this way, *sak yant* is often broadcast across the mass media and is usually associated with Parn Yak.

Although trance-possession is often encouraged, many Thais tend not to consider these two rituals in this way, since the main objective is not to induce a state of trance; nevertheless, trance and possession are regarded as a significant element of both rituals. For example, the sounds of Parn Yak, which are believed to have the power to exorcise evil spirits, are also seen as a way to encourage the attendees to enter into a trance.

Research objectives

During the field study, many respondents spoke about their experience of 'feeling good' and 'feeling better' [Thai: สบายใจขึ้น/*sabai jai khun*] after trance-possession rituals. I am particularly interested in what it is that Thai Buddhists mean by 'feeling better' in this context. This led to the object of the thesis analysis: to investigate the context that contributes to Thais' expression of their sense of therapeutic efficacy. For example, when the ritual attendees are using this term, what does 'feel better' mean in their context and how is this understood within the

whole ritual experience? Additionally, this thesis asks how trance-possession rituals can be considered by contemporary Thai people as having therapeutic potentiality. The embodied experiences and socio-cultural aspects that are focused on in this research may shed light on the answers to these questions.

In this study, trance-possession rituals are specifically examined in the context of contemporary Thailand. Moving forward in the thesis, it becomes clear that there are several socio-cultural factors that significantly contribute to the creating of ritual experience, for instance, the Buddhist belief of *kamma*[Thai: กรรม/*kam*; Pali: *kamma*][6] or karma as it is known in the West. Other contributory factors include the Thai worldview on bodymind[7] and wellbeing, the roles of monks as ritual facilitators, the belief in spiritual and virtuous powers of the Buddha and monks, and the commercialisation, such as the commodification of ritual objects and the marketing aspect of rituals. The thesis suggests that these factors together can encourage those who attend the rituals to believe and contribute to the ways in which they express that they 'feel better'.

The thesis considers contemporary forms of trance-possession rituals. From this research, it is apparent that the rituals studied in this thesis may be reformulated to fit within the Thai contemporary context[8]. In order to be perceived as 'authentic', these rituals have become, using Eric Hobsbawm's term, 'invented tradition' (2012: 1). Nonetheless, the rituals are often viewed as 'traditional' and the notions of 'tradition' and 'authenticity' are also constructed and marketed to become part of the experience for those who attend. Essential to the understanding of this vexing issue of tradition and authenticity is the fact that many elements have been constructed and adjusted over time in order to engage ritual participants. Therefore, the historical context, and the dynamics of these trance-possession rituals will also be investigated.

Although there has been previous research on these rituals, none have studied them as a form of cultural performance. Furthermore, the influence of embodied

[6] The Thai concept of *kamma* will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 5.
[7] The Thai concept of body and mind will be discussed in Chapter 3.
[8]Their history[8] is complicated and difficult to trace, as there was no written record of these rituals before the 1990s (Yindee, 2000: 86-92). The issue of ritual origins and histories will be discussed later in this chapter and also in Chapter 4.

cultural knowledge on ritual manifestation has not been included in the discussion in past studies. By exploring the rituals under investigation using a specific cultural context, this research offers new insights into the understanding of Thai Buddhist rituals from a broader perspective. Additionally, no studies of these rituals have been found that are written in English; therefore, this thesis also aims to be a reference for both Thai and non-Thai researchers.

The key research objectives and questions are as follows:

The objectives of the study are:

1. To study the contemporary phenomenon of trance-possession rituals and their practices in central Thailand.
2. To investigate the socio-cultural factors that contribute to expressing a sense of efficacy in the ritual.
3. To study the phenomenon of these rituals in the contemporary cultural context of central Thailand, and to question why people still attend these rituals.

The key research questions are:

1. How do trance-possession rituals operate within a contemporary Thai cultural context?
2. What are the socio-cultural factors that contribute to expressing a sense of efficacy in the ritual? How do these factors, together with embodied experience, lead participants to state that they 'feel better'?
3. How have the practices of trance-possession rituals been conceptualised by Thai Buddhist people as having therapeutic potentiality?

A Theoretical context

This thesis aims to examine ritual practices by drawing on the aspects of performance studies, particularly applied drama as a 'lens' to examine the embodied experience of ritual participants. Applied drama, as it is understood in the West, has rarely been acknowledged in Thailand, except in the work of a few drama practitioners who graduated recently from Western universities and Western drama practitioners who visit Thailand to conduct workshops. The reason behind selecting applied drama as a specific framework rather than using

other approaches in performance studies is that practices in trance-possession rituals in this thesis and applied drama, to some extent, share the same fundamental aim of examining the potential for therapeutic transformation through embodied experiences.

Suggesting that there is an equivalence between the two disciplines proves to be somewhat difficult. Similar to the use of performance analogies to analyse ritual, considering a Buddhist ritual as a form of performance poses the challenge of universalism. Catherine Bell (1998), in her article about using performance approach to investigate ritual, explains that the problems include:

> […] the tendency to assume that performance is a single, coherent thing, sufficiently the same everywhere, that to approach something as "performance" implied a general formula for explaining it (Bell, 1998: 218).

This research did not seek to draw an analogy nor attempt to be a comparative study between applied drama practices and trance-possession rituals. Nonetheless, it set out to demonstrate how applied drama can offer a way to understand the articulation of people's embodied experiences, particularly in relation to the ritual's perceived efficacy. Although the notion of body, mind and embodiment has been widely explored by performance studies scholars (as well as anthropologists), applied drama is directly and richly engaged in the ways in which the participant expresses a sense of personal therapeutic transformation. In this way, employing methodologies of applied drama can provide a new form of knowledge and framework for the understanding of embodied experiences, particularly in relation to ritual.

The aspects of anthropology are paramount when examining the experiential nature of rituals from perspectives of performance studies, as Jerri Daboo, in her study of Tarantism rituals points out:

> It is necessary to have an anthropological approach which examines the particular cultural circumstances that create the specific nature of the experience in the context in which it occurs. Performing *pizzica* music and dance will clearly not produce the same type of experience for everyone, and the significance of the 'larger historical, cultural and spiritual context' is vital in order to not reduce the experience to being 'the same' across all cultures and forms. This is the potential danger within performance studies

> when discussing these experiences without reference to the specific historical and socio-cultural determinants of the individual (Daboo, 2010: 53-54).

As the trance-possession rituals that I examined are culturally specific, anthropology and concepts from ethnography can be employed to gain insight into the way in which trance-possession rituals in this thesis are performed and perceived within a Thai contemporary context.

Although utilising aspects of anthropology, this thesis does not intend to be an anthropological study of rituals. The thesis is situated broadly in the field of performance studies as it richly engages in the ideas, such as embodiment and lived experience, from the field of performance studies, while adopting and utilising the methodologies and discourses from anthropology to enable a clearer understanding of the cultural context.

Constructing the definition of 'ritual'

The concept of ritual and its practices have long been studied, analysed and investigated in many aspects from various academic areas. For the term per se, a large number of definitions have been proposed by scholars from extensive range of disciplines such as anthropology, religion and performance studies. However, it seems impossible for these scholars to reach a unanimous answer to the question, 'What is meant by ritual?' These definitions are varied. For example, ritual can be regarded as a form of formal acts (Kertzer, 1989: 9; Moore and Myerhoff, 1977: 7-8, 22; Rappaport, 1979: 175; Turner, 1967: 19). Turner (1967: 19), van Beek (1982: 13-14), and van Baal (1981: 163) refer to the term 'ritual' as those activities that relate to the beliefs in the mystical powers or beings, and indicate that ritual may be practiced as a means to communicate with them. Others consider the term in a secular context, for example, Moore and Myerhoff (1977: 3-24). The functional aspects of rituals are also addressed, for example, ritual is regarded as a method or intentional act for efficacy. Crossley (2004), in his essay on the body technique of ritual, asserts that ritual is "the technique for achieving transformation" (2004:39). Furthermore, some view ritual as the act that can shift participants away from the everyday life. Schechner (2006: 52) calls this condition a 'second reality', while Geertz (1973: 112) states that ritual can help

participants experience this second reality, because there is a fusion between 'the world as lived and the world as imagined'.

Several scholars also assert that ritual is meaningful. They view that ritual can "deal with or refer to postulated matters about society or ideology" (Moore and Myerhoff, 1977:22) because ritual "has purpose and meaning for the people concerned" (La Fontaine, 1985: 11). There are studies that examine ritual as cultural activities that carry symbolic meanings, for example, those of Geertz (1973) and Turner (1967).

Others suggest that rituals are necessarily meaningless. This idea was espoused by Frits Staal, who explicitly proposed that "[r]itual is pure activity without meaning or goal" (1979: 9). Staal explains that ritual is a form of "activity governed by explicit rules" (1979: 4), and that it does not have to contain function, aim or meaning that refers to something other than itself, since ritual has 'intrinsic value'; therefore, it should be studied for its own sake (1979: 9). A similar point was made by William Sax (2010: 3-4) in his essay on the problem of ritual efficacy. He notes that the term 'ritual' is often used as a broad term to label some activities that seem to be 'nonrational' for those who study them:

> According to our meteoroidal theories dancing cannot really make it rain, and so when someone performs a rain dance, we call it a ritual.[…] According to medical theories, disease cannot be cured by worshiping ancestors, and so when people attempt to do so, we label it "ritual". […] But for those performing the rain dance, […] or the healing, these rituals do indeed fit into a cosmology in terms of which they make sense (Sax, 2010:4)

In a similar vein, Goody also opposes the idea of the symbolically meaningfulness of ritual, stating that the meaning of ritual "is assigned by the observer in order to make sense of otherwise irrational, pseudo-rational or non-rational behaviour" (1961: 157).

As explained above, the term 'ritual' becomes a focus of debate in regard to various aspects from an extensive range of disciplines. Several scholars (Goody, 1961: 142-164; Parkin, 1992: 18; Snoek, 2008: 3) admit that the attempt to give definition to the term 'ritual' proves to be somewhat difficult and problematic.

Aware of this issue, some of them attempt to use alternative or additional terms such as 'public event' (Handelman, 2008: 38-49) or 'cultural performance' (Singer, 1972) when referring to ritual acts. Snoek, (2008: 3) notes that some scholars even avoid this problematic task by not attempting to define the term. Nonetheless, Parkin (1992: 13) argues that this is because the understanding of ritual is not drawn "from definitional criteria but from extended case studies" (Parkin, 1992: 13). In order to define ritual, Platvoet (1995: 41) and Snoek (2008: 10) suggest that the definition should be constructed specifically according to a particular research or discipline.

Ritual and performance

The performance aspect in rituals has long been a topic for study. There are scholars both from the field of performance studies and ritual studies who address the relationship between ritual and performance in various aspects.[9] One example of those who come from a performance studies background is Schechner who attempts to differentiate ritual from theatre by suggesting that ritual prioritises its performance toward 'efficacy', while theatre is toward 'entertainment' (2006: 79-80). Nonetheless, he also admits that theatre performance may also contain efficacy, while ritual can also be entertaining (2006: 80). He suggests that the efficacy and entertainment dyad is not a flat binary but rather:

> […] a braid or helix, tightening and loosening over time and in specific cultural contexts. Efficacy and entertainment are not opposites but "dancing partners", each depending on and in continuous active relationship to the other (Schechner, 2006: 80).

The element of being for both efficacy and entertainment is also found in Thai trance-possession rituals. Apart from participants, both Parn Yak rituals and practices in *sak yant* traditions attract many observers who come to watch the rituals and trance-possession acts that occur in the events. Some participants reported to me that one of the reasons that they attend is because they also would like to 'see rituals'. Sometimes, the experiences of efficacy and entertainment occur simultaneously. For example, during my field study of Parn Yak, a young

[9] For example, Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1980 and 1986; Beeman, 1993; Kapferer, 1991.

informant[10] told me that while she feels better[11] after attending the ritual. She also found the ritual experience to be, in her words, 'scary but fun' (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007).

Due to this interweaving of efficacy and entertainment, ritual and other performances, e.g. drama and theatre, cannot be markedly distinguished, because, as they are both 'a next of kin' to each other (Grimes, 1995: 163). In his essay *The Obvious Aspect of Ritual*, Rappaport explains the importance of the performance aspect of ritual. He states, "Performance is the sine qua none of ritual, for if there is no performance, there is no ritual" (Rappaport, 1979: 175). For this reason, several ritual studies' scholars are also interested in the performance approach. One such scholar is Grimes who incorporates his work in ritual studies with perspectives from performance studies. Grimes's first interest in performance approach was when he was a participant observer in an actors' training workshop from 1976-1977 at the Actor's Lab.[12] This fieldwork caused him to acknowledge the aspect of bodily experience in a ritual enactment, in which he also suggested the use of bodily and imaginative exercise in ritual studies (Grimes, 1995: 19-20). Since then, Grimes has continued to use a performance approach to examine rituals. His recent project, on which he worked collaboratively with Yale University's Institute of Sacred Music, is a research on improvisation and creativity in ritual (Grimes, 2014).

Another well-known figure in ritual studies who addresses the issue of performance approach to ritual study is Catherine Bell. In contrast to Grimes, Bell (1992: 42) asserts that the idea of performance approach in ritual studies may bring about 'grave disadvantages' because:

> Performance theory rests, of course, on the slippery implications of an extended metaphor, specifically the analogy between ritual activities and the acts of performing and dramatizing (Bell, 1992: 42)

[10] N (age 11), personal communication, 7th April 2007.
[11] She explained that the chanting alleviated her restless feeling. N's testimonial will be described in Chapter 5.
[12]The Actor's Lab was founded in 1972 by Ryszard Nieoczym as a professional research and performance ensemble. At the present, the Actor's Lab is also known as 'LeThal' (Dunkelberg, 2008: 351).

Bell (1998: 218; 1992: 42) points out that using performance perspective to study ritual may undermine the meaning of ritual to merely 'universal phenomenon' or 'an act of performing and dramatizing' which "has nothing to do with the efficacy that the ritual acts are thought to have by those who perform them" (1992: 43).

Bell (1992: 42) notes that this issue may be from the problem of the definition of ritual, which leads to the confusion when approaching ritual as a performance, because a performance approach fails to explain why ritual is different from other performances:

> [A]lthough performance may become a criterion for what is or is not ritual, insofar as performance may become is broadly used for a vast spectrum of activities, there is no basis to differentiate among ways of performing (Bell, 1992: 42).

There is a disagreement with Bell's ideas from those who find the performance approach useful, for example, Grimes who firmly asserts, "I do not find practice theories any more precise or coherent than performance theories […]" (2008: 136). He also suggests that instead of proposing that using performance approach is not useful, a more systematic and critical theory is needed (2008: 136).

Although Grimes and Bell do not have a consensus about performance approach in ritual studies, they both view ritual as an embodied action. They are interested in focusing on the body as a site for expressing and learning during ritual. Bell states that the body learns, in Bell's words, a 'sense of ritual' "through the interaction of the body with a structured and structuring environment" (Bell, 1992: 58). Grimes (2013: 195), in his recent book *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, explicitly asserts that ritual is embodied because:

> An obvious feature of ritual is that it is a human activity. People do it, and they do it in overt, bodily ways. Because it is in and of bodies, ritual is also cultural, since bodies are enculturated. Ritual is not only in the mind or the imagination, even though it can be both mindful and imaginative. […] Ritual, insofar as it can become the object of study, is evidenced by gross motor movements (or a studied, practiced lack of them) in the body, hence the qualifier "embodiment" (Grimes, 2013: 195).

Similar to the field of performance studies, the idea of embodiment and the notion of body in ritual has become a centre of interest among anthropologists. There are a large number of publications on embodiment in various areas, for instance, medical anthropology (Klienman, 1981; Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987: 6-7, Desjarlais, 1996: 143-164), social anthropology (Douglas, 1973 and 2002) and ritual studies (Strathern and Stewart, 1998, Crossley, 2004: 31-51). Some scholars explicitly suggest that the concept of embodiment can be utilised as a framework to examine rituals. For example, Csordas (2002: 5-47), in his award-winning essay *Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology*. He asserts that this framework is based on the idea that "body is not an *object* to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the *subject* of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture" (Csordas, 2002: 5). Another example is the work of Strathern and Stewart (1998: 237-251) who pushed forward by suggesting that the notion of embodiment can be utilised along with the perspectives of communication as a framework to analyse ritual. They note that through spatial and temporal movement in ritual, participants "actually create the transformations in their bodies which are then communicated to and shared with others" (Strathern and Stewart, 1998: 238-239).

As the term is not similarly understood and it has an extensive range of uses, defining 'ritual' can be a problematic and complex issue. The inherent multivocality of ritual makes it difficult for scholars to reach a single consensus explaining the term. Peter Collins, in his essay, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a "Ritual"', points out that due to the fact that no single mode of interpretation is sufficient, a ritual may be examined in various ways (2005: 325). With this reason, I concur with Grimes (2013: 188), Platvoet (1995: 41) and Snoek (2008: 10) that it is essential for researchers to define how they use the term in their work. In this way, I draw on aspects from a variety of definitions above and construct my own concept of ritual within a cultural context to refer to the practices which are studied in this thesis. To do so, I suggest that we should start by looking at how the term 'ritual' is used and perceived in a Thai context.

The term 'ritual' in Thai worldview and in this research

In order to understand the concept of ritual from a Thai perspective, I suggest that it should begin with the discussion of the Thai term referring to rituals, *piteekam* [Thai: พิธีกรรม]. Although this term is widely known as the translated version of ritual in English, I argue that *piteekam* is probably the closest word to the English term 'ritual' as it is understood.

Unlike the term 'ritual' in the West, *piteekam* is often defined in a much narrower sense. Most of the definitions indicate merely the religious or spiritual practices. The most obvious case is the Royal Institute of Thailand[13] that defines the word *piteekam* only as "worshipping" and "patterns and customs that are practiced religiously" (Thai Royal Institute, 1999: my translation). Most Thai textbooks follow this definition by using the term only to refer to religious practices.[14]

However, some sources emphasise the aspect of ritual as 'being intentional acts'. For example, Payutto,[15] a Thai monk who is internationally renowned as a scholar in Buddhist studies, without mentioning the religious aspects, defines *piteekam* as actions that contain ways to achieve efficacy or results according to one's wishes (2008: 4-5: my translation).

Similarly, although still stating that *piteekam* only refers to practices that relate to religions, the Thai Department of Religious Affairs[16] gives a definition that directly emphasises the contribution to the ritual participants/performers' sense of wellbeing.

> *Piteekam* are formulated acts which are created by humans and practiced orderly and systematically in order to offer a method for achieving one's wishes. It can establish the sense of 'feeling good', which can give moral support to humans so that they can continue living with their lives. In addition, *piteekam* means acts that humans practiced according to the beliefs in their religions […] [My translation] (Klinpong and Janpradit, 2009: 1).

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[13] The government agency which has main duty in conducting and publishing research across academic disciplines in Thailand. It publishes the Thai-Thai dictionary that is widely used in Thailand as the standard of dictionaries.

[14] These also include practices that relate to other beliefs, which for some people are not regarded as religions. I will not discuss the concept and definition of religion here as it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

[15] Also known as Phra Dhammapidok.

[16] The department is under the control of the Ministry of Culture.

Let us look into the term itself. The term *piteekam* is actually the combination of two separate words: *pitee* and *kam*. The word *pitee* (or *vitee*) in Thai means 'process, procedure or way', while *kam* means 'action' (Thai Royal Institute, 1999). Therefore, the word *piteekam* in Thai literally means 'the process of performing actions'.

From the examples above, my suggestion is that *piteekam* is perceived in Thailand only as a term that embraces an extended range of religious practices. Thais also use another word '*piteekarn*' [พิธีการ] to refer to any ritual activities that are not religious in nature and are conducted in a secular context, for instance, a graduation ceremony or a wedding reception. This makes *piteekam* the term that is merely used in the areas of religion and belief. Nonetheless, these two terms are very similar, and sometimes they are used interchangeably.[17]

Due to the fact that *piteekam* is the term that is used to refer to all the Thai rituals that are studied in this thesis and the English term 'ritual' is widely perceived in Thailand as *piteekam*, my use of the term 'ritual' in this thesis is based on the term *piteekam* in the Thai context.

I am exploring the potential of the definitions and perspectives that are explained above along with the notion of *piteekam* in a Thai context in order to construct the definition specifically for this thesis. As a result, I use the term 'ritual' to denote a process of performing actions in a religious context. It has an intention to establish transformation within those who perform or participate in it. Such transformation is only achieved through the process of embodiment that happens during ritual experience, which has spatial and temporal dimensions outside everyday life. In addition, ritual and its actions have individual and/or shared meaning for those who are involved, e.g. performers, participants and their community.

[17]The term *piteekarn* is sometimes translated into English as 'ceremony'. However, similar to ritual, the term 'ceremony' also encounters the problem of definition, as it is similarly contested among scholars. For example, Victor Turner suggests that both terms refer to practices in religious context, but the difference between the two depends on the purpose of the practice. For Turner, "Ritual is transformative, ceremony confirmatory" (Turner, 1967: 95). Unlike Turner, Jan Snoek takes the term 'ritual' as 'script' and ceremony as 'action'; therefore, the term 'ritual' is served as 'a prescription for ceremony' (Snoek, 2008: 9, 14).

It should be noted that the usage of the term 'ritual' in this way is only provisionally applicable to this thesis as it is based on a Thai concept. This usage acknowledges the problems and debates surrounding the term, as well as the need to create a suitable definition for the purposes of this thesis.

On the issue of efficacy

If defining ritual is difficult, the concept of efficacy in ritual has proven to be much more problematic.

Look closely into the term itself. 'Efficacy' is defined by *Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (2011), as 'a method or ability of achieving the intended result'. It also states that the synonym for this term is 'effectiveness'. Similarly, Oxford Dictionary describes the term as "the ability to produce a desired or intended result" (Oxford Dictionary, 2013). Due to the perception that the term 'efficacy' refers to 'the ability' and 'the effectiveness', the notion of efficacy has become a problematic and controversial issue among scholars. Sax (2010: 4) suggests that ritual is the term used to refer to, in Sax's words, 'a certain set of apparently nonrational [*sic*] acts' i.e., when one cannot give the clear causal explanation for the relationship between a particular act and its intended effect, he/she may refer to it as a ritual.

This leads to the perspective that ritual is ineffective and pointless in its popular understanding, particularly in the field of science (Sax, 2010: 6; Sax et al, 2010: 61). Lagare and Souza (2012: 1), in their essay on how ritual efficacy is evaluated, call this condition of ritual as 'irretrievably causally opaque' because it lacks solid evidence to prove that rituals can bring their 'intended result'. Sax states:

> Or perhaps I should say 'apparently ineffective acts,' for […] the popular understanding of ritual is not so much that it is nonrational but rather that it is ineffective" (Sax, 2010: 4).

Considering Sax's idea above, the ritual may still be considered to be ineffective, despite the fact that the 'intended result' actually occurs after the ritual is

performed. This is because the lack of an explainable answer[18] for the question of 'when' and 'how' ritual can establish that 'intended result'.

Furthermore, ritual efficacy is a somewhat problematic term since those who try to define or evaluate it usually have their own criteria (Sax, 2010: 9). Due to the lack of causal explanation (as discussed above) and the using of different standards to define efficacy, those who attempt to verify the term are likely to encounter the problem of how to identify and measure efficacy.

According to Quack and Sax (2010: 5), the problem of efficacy may be sidestepped by studying ritual as a form of expressive and symbolic action instead of an activity with an instrumental aim (ibid). For Quack and Sax (2010: 5), the attempts to reify the concept of efficacy by searching for the 'hidden' and 'implicit' functions of ritual, this is merely the attempt to establish 'legitimate' reasons for the rituals to be performed. Therefore, they assert that ritual is, in fact, regarded as a form of non-rational activity.

Moore and Myerhoff (1977: 12-24) propose the term 'doctrinal' or 'postulated' efficacy' to explain the lack of causal explanation between the acts and results of rituals. They distinguish 'doctrinal' from 'operational' efficacy that operational efficacy relates to the social, physical, psychological detectable effectiveness of a ritual, while doctrinal efficacy is "a matter of postulation" (ibid). They state:

> As the intrinsic explanation, it [doctrinal efficacy] need merely be affirmed. It lacks the dimension of outcome or consequence which is attributed to operational efficacy. Results, successes, failures are part of the operational effects of a ritual (Moore and Myerhoff, 1977: 12).

According to the concept of 'doctrinal efficacy', a ritual is always efficacious and deemed to be 'effective' because "[…] if [ritual] properly performed, it should bring the desired results (Moore and Myerhoff, 1977: 12). Therefore, a ritual cannot provide the intended effect because it is performed improperly, not because it is not effective. Doctrinal/postulated efficacy seems to be the term that counters Sax's concept of ritual as being 'apparently ineffective acts'. Nevertheless, Moore

[18] To be precise, in 'modern scientific standard'.

and Myerhoff's categories for efficacy cannot provide sufficient discussion for the complexities of efficacy and for the question of 'whether in fact, a ritual 'works' or not'.

Emily Ahern (1979: 2) addresses the problem of ritual efficacy, which relates to the intentions of ritual performers/participants. For example, is a ritual intended to have an effect on 'the world'[19] around them (as Moore and Myerhoff may call this 'operational efficacy') or is it rather intended to effect their own experience? (Hence, 'postulated or believed efficacy') (ibid). According to Ahern (1979: 4), the problem lies in the verification of the intention. A ritual may be intended to affect 'the world', but at the same time, it is also intended to affect participants' experience (ibid). The problem arises when those who attend a ritual explicitly express that they intended it to affect 'the world', but the ritual is actually intended to have an effect on them.

Ahern states that the problem of this issue can happen between ritual analysts and ritual participants:

> For example, we [researcher] might want to say Chinese peasants think their rituals influence the gods to cure illness, but in actuality those rituals only affect their own experience of illness […] (Ahern, 1979: 6)

Although I agree with Ahern (ibid) that those who study rituals should be aware that some rituals may not in fact be able to provide the effect that the participants intended (for example, curing illness), I would not refer to participants' expression of ritual efficacy as, in Ahern's words (Ahern, 1979: 6), 'misconceived and erroneous actions'. Efficacy may be perceived variedly in different contexts as it depends on who is asking about efficacy, their intentions and the sociocultural factors.

Quack and Tobelmann (2010: 16) suggest that the usage of the notion of 'efficacy' may be different from the notion of 'effect'. The term 'effect' is often regarded as 'the actual result of a cause'; therefore, effects of a ritual can be infinite, while 'efficacy' is only applied to the effects that are postulated or

[19] In other words, the world outside themselves or the world of their everyday life.

perceived from certain perspectives (Quack and Tobelmann, 2010: 16). In a similar vein, despite proposing that ritual is 'nonrational' and 'ineffective', Sax notes that "It is highly questionable whether one can or should evaluate the effectiveness of one system by the criteria of another […]" (Sax, 2010: 9). The notion of efficacy depends on whose perspectives and how they, borrowing on Quack and Tobelmann's words, 'choose and pick' the effects of ritual to be explored as 'efficacy' (2010: 6).

Quack and Tobelmann (2010: 17-18) push the above idea forward by proposing an interpretative framework in which questions are posed for researchers to consider when dealing with the notion of efficacy. The two main questions are:

> 1. Who or what is held to be efficacious in the ritual? (*efficiens*)?
> 2. What is held to be effected in the ritual? (*efficiendum*) (Quack and Tobelmann, 2010: 18).

Put simply, what/who is regarded as having effects on what/whom? Another important question which should also be considered is 'Who is answering these two questions? The answers come from whose perspective?' Different perspectives can provide different answers. According to Quack and Tobelmann (2010: 17), the notion of efficacy can also depend on the sphere/level, by what means and under which conditions the ritual is seen as having efficacy (by a person who answered the first two primary questions above). Quack and Tobelmann's idea slightly differed from Ahern (1979: 1-17) in that it is not the intentionality of those who are concerned that may enable the understanding of the complexities of the notion of ritual efficacy, but rather on the matter of perspectives.

As argued earlier, the issue that should be considered when dealing with the term 'efficacy' is not whether in fact, efficacy exists, but rather how ritual is considered as having (or not having) efficacy, by whom and from what context. The culture in which rituals are practiced also significantly contributes to the perception and expression of the experience of efficacy, because the different cultures have different, taken from Joachim Quack's words (2010: 57), 'cultural inner logic'. Therefore, cultural context and expectations and other surrounding factors (beliefs, personal experiences, worldview, historical and economic aspects, etc.)

can help explain the answer to the above question; hence they are what this thesis aims to investigate.

In addition, I agree with Quack (2010: 185) that ritual efficacy should be considered "on a case-by-case basis" (ibid). Efficacy in ritual means different things for different sorts of people involved with ritual. For example, regarding *wai kru* ritual in the *sak yant* tradition, Pra Narin,[20] the secretary of Wat Bang Phra Temple argues that during *wai kru*, participants are actually advised not to go into a trance. From my discussion with Pra Narin and also some tattoo masters at this temple, the purpose of *wai kru* is for tattoo wearers to pay homage to their own masters[21]. They strongly argue that while the tattooing process contains the acts that activate and empower the spirit inside the tattoo, the annual *wai kru* ritual is only the display of gratitude, which is considered as an important moral act[22] for Buddhists. For the tattoo masters, it is to be acted upon in the ritual by the gratitude and the homage paid by tattoo wearers who are their disciples.

However, for many participants, *wai kru* is viewed as an opportunity to 'recharge' and 'empower' the spirits of their tattoos. Therefore, the virtuous power of the Buddha and their masters' spiritual power that are present in the ritual are held by participants as being efficacious and affect their tattoo. One of my informants, Mr. L.,[23] states that his trance-possession occurs because the spirits inside his tattoos want to show the masters that they have received the power from them during the process of *wai kru*. In this way, the trance-possession is viewed by participants as evidence that their tattoos are empowered.

It is also necessary to acknowledge that each individual may also perceive the notion of efficacy differently. For example, one participants' perspective towards the ritual efficacy may be different from other participant's.

Quack and Tobelmann's interpretive framework that is discussed above may enable the understanding of how a Parn Yak ritual may be seen as both a success

[20] Pra Narin, personal communication, 9th April 2009.
[21]And the masters of their masters.
[22]In other words, an act of 'bright' *kamma*.
[23] Mr. L. (age 25 years), personal communication, 20th March 2009.

and a failure based on different perspectives. In my fieldwork, two cases of Parn Yak encountered with external circumstances that led to the process being seen as partially completed. In the case at Wat Boonrod Temple, the amplifiers were broken; hence it was difficult for those who sat far from the front of temple hall to hear the chanting. In another Parn Yak at Wat Jantaram, which was conducted outdoors, a heavy rain fell during the chanting. This resulted in many people leaving the ritual, while others sought refuge in nearby temple halls and continued their participation from their shelters. However, the notion of ritual efficacy is perceived differently by different sources.

Pra Kru Sanghavichai, the leading chanter, commented that these external circumstances could interrupt the establishment of trance-possession; therefore, this may result in the failure of the ritual. During my informal interview with him, the monk asserted that trance-possession is one of the important elements that lead to efficacy. The monk told me that he usually intends to encourage participants to be in trance-possession by the sound of chanting. Nevertheless, he also notes that participants who are not in trance-possession can still benefit from listening to the chanting. Pra Kru Sanghavichai suggests that the sound of chanting and the Parn Yak ritual experience can give people, in his words, 'an opportunity to release themselves'.

> It is similar to the experience when you listen to loud music. You do not have to think about anything, as you immerse yourself in the sound of chanting. If you do go into trance-possession, you can release yourself and all your anxieties in life for a period of time. If you don't, it is all right as long as you stay focused on your experience and the sound of Parn Yak. The words in the *sutta* contain only good things, do no harm and can bring protection. After the ritual, you will feel better [My translation].[24]

As some rituals are interrupted by circumstances that prevented them from going to completion, in Pra Kru Sanghavichai's perspective, these two Parn Yak are considered 'unsuccessful' because they cannot create the environment where participants can easily stay focused on the ritual. I remember well that the monk said to me after these two rituals by using almost the same phase to comment on

[24] Pra kru Sanghavichai, personal communication, 18th April 2007. He also firmly asserts that this is only his personal opinion.

the ritual outcome, “Unfortunately, things did not go well because of technical problems” [My translation].[25]

From the perspective of the ritual facilitator (the monk), the power of the *sutta* and the sound of chanting (the *efficiens*) affect participants’ experience (the *efficiendum*). In addition, the ritual will be efficacious under the condition that the ritual environment can make all participants perfectly hear the sound of the chanting and focus on the ritual activities until they are completed.

However, when I talked to those who attended these two rituals, some of them offered different opinions from the monks. For these respondents, the ritual was still regarded as successful, despite the intervention of external factors. The efficacy can be ascribed to, in Quack and Tobelmann’s term, a ‘spiritual sphere’ (2010: 17). For example, Mrs. M, an informant from Wat Jantaram, explains that prior to the ritual, she usually became short-tempered easily, but she felt ‘calmer’ when listening to the chanting. Mrs. M[26] also stated that despite heavy rain, she believed that the ritual still ‘worked’, although she had to sit in the shelter further away from the ritual space. While the monks were chanting, Mrs. M continued talking to me without completely focusing on listening to the chanting. For Mrs. M, the power of the *sutta*, the virtuous power of the Buddha and the spiritual power of the monks were effective as long as she was near the ritual ground and could hear the chanting, albeit not clearly (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007). From her perspective, it is the power of the Buddha and monks (the *efficiens*) that exist in the ritual space that affect her bodymind (the *efficiendum*).

The notion of *kamma* in the Thai Buddhist belief can also be held to be efficacious. Some of the participants[27] told me that they believed that, regardless of the unfortunate circumstances, the act of participation in ritual is sufficient to provide them with protection, because they have conducted good deeds. For Thai Buddhists, participating in ritual, making donations and giving offerings to monks are all considered ‘bright’ *kamma*s, which can later bring good effects to those who take part. For them, perhaps not only the spiritual powers from the ritual but

[25] Pra kru Sanghavichai, personal communication, 18th April 2007.
[26] Mrs. M (age 44), personal communication, 7th April 2007.
[27] Anonymous participants, personal communication, 1st and 7th April 2007.

also their own actions and experience (according to the concept of *kamma*) in the ritual are held to be efficacious (the *efficiens*) and affect their everyday life. Therefore, the ritual can be perceived as successful, even considering the intervention from external circumstance.

Different perspectives provide different concepts of efficacy, and the notion of efficacy needs to be explored from the context in which it is considered. The term 'efficacy' is used in this thesis to describe the beneficial change as articulated by participants during/after their ritual experience. Therefore, using the term in this sense does not mean to raise the question of ritual efficacy, but rather focus on how the sense of efficacy is constructed, articulated and valued by participants of ritual. As many respondents from my fieldwork indicated that they 'feel better', this thesis also aims to examine how this is an expression of the sense of efficacy within the ritual experience. In this way, I base my analysis of the experience of efficacy on exploring the perspectives of ritual participants through the investigation of the potential surrounding factors that contribute to these perspective and expressions.

Previous studies on Thai rituals

Although there are numerous academic publications that focus on trance-possession rituals, these rituals in Thailand are often overlooked by non-Thai researchers. This, perhaps, is because in past decades, the country was usually characterised by an unstable political atmosphere.[28] Moreover, due to the fact that Thailand has never been colonized by a Western country, there had been very few Western authorities located in the country; therefore, in the past, it may not have been convenient for foreigners, particularly Western scholars, to conduct ethnographic works in the country. This means that anthropological research on Thai beliefs have rarely been conducted and published in English.

Among these English language publications, there are two significant contributors to the anthropological studies in Thailand. The first scholar is Stanley Jeyaraja

[28] Due to the effect of the political revolution in 1932.

Tambiah,[29] a social anthropologist whose research concerns Buddhism and beliefs in Northeastern Thailand. Tambiah is admired among Thai scholars as a pioneer in social and political anthropology. His renowned works include *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeastern Thailand* (1970) and *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (1977). Another well-known scholar is Charles F. Kayes whose specialty is the cultural study of Northeastern Thailand and Thai political issues. His works mostly concentrate on the development of Buddhism among political conflicts in Thailand, for example, *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand* (1967).

Nonetheless, these two scholars focus their studies on the political and economic aspects of political issues towards the development of Thai Buddhism, rather than on the aspects of performance, beliefs, experience and the surrounding sociocultural context that contribute to rituals. This may lead to the failure to give attention to the experiential qualities of people engaging in religious practices. For example, Tambiah asserts that reciprocity is the underlying mechanism of Buddhist ritual practices. He suggests that Thais give offerings and make donations to the temple in exchange for gaining prosperity, protection and good health from the monks. In his study of the Buddhists' practices in Thai villages, he states that in ritual, the monks act as mediators who transfer the spiritual power of the Buddha "and transmute it into prosperity and mental states free of pain and charged with merit" (Tambiah, 1968: 163)[30]. According to Tambiah's statement (ibid), the monks in ritual are regarded merely as a 'spiritual power broker'. He seems to overlook the notion of ritual experience,[31] namely participants'

[29] Tambiah is not fully Western, as he actually comes from Sri Lanka, where he spent time working in his early career. However, although he is not a Westerner, I still consider him a Western scholar, as he was educated in the United States and has spent most of his working life there (Harvard University, 2011). Also, having worked in Thailand, as a UNESCO officer in his early career may be a reason that he chose to conduct research on Thailand later.

[30] According to Tambiah (1968: 163), material support of the monks and the temples is the manifestation of merit-making.

[31] In fact, Tambiah implicitly addresses the notion of ritual experience. In one of his essays, he states that ritual is performed in order to affect participants' experience (Tambiah, 1968: 202). However, he did not take this idea further and mention the concept of embodied experience in his works. In his book *Performative Approach to Ritual* (1981), he only examined ritual as a set of expressive acts. Rather than as a performance, in his 'performative' theory of ritual, he views it as a performative activity, while disregarding the idea of using a performance approach to ritual.

embodied experience in ritual and how they speak of that experience, and Thai Buddhist beliefs that contribute to the practices of ritual.

Additionally, few critical studies of trance-possession rituals have been conducted by Thai people. To my knowledge, fewer than ten research studies exist on Parn Yak and the practice of *sak yant* in the database of Thai research, and most of these are unpublished theses. These studies are scattered over a variety of academic fields; however, there is no research in the field of performance studies on these two rituals.

The number of research studies involving spiritual tattoos is slightly higher than those in Parn Yak chanting rituals, as some studies of spiritual tattoos cross over into the field of fine arts. Although the rhythm and notation in Buddhist chanting can also be studied in the field of music, no research of Parn Yak chanting in this field is found in Thailand.[32]

Most research on Parn Yak rituals has been conducted in the area of religious studies. Those who study Parn Yak can be divided into two groups: monk and non-monk scholars. In Thailand, Buddhism is widely studied in higher education. For example, there are universities that are established for the express purpose of teaching Buddhism.[33] Instead of conducting field studies, monks who study in Thai Buddhist ritual tend to focus their studies on Buddhist theories, the interpretation of chanting discourses and the history of the ritual. One such example is *An Analytical Study of the Chanting Ceremony in Theravada Buddhism: A Comparative Study of Beliefs of Graduate Students in Mahidol*

[32] There is relevant research of a similar chanting ritual in Myanmar (Burma). It is an ethno-musicological research conducted by Paul D. Greene. The research includes the study of symbolism, history and notation of *paritta* chanting texts. The chanting and its text in Myanmar is very similar to the chanting in Thailand because Thais and Burmese share a common belief in Buddhism. See: Greene P.D. 'the Drama as Sonic Praxis: Paritta Chant in Burmese Theravada Buddhism', *Asian Music Journal (*2004), Vol. 35, pp. 43-78.

[33] Although laypeople are allowed to study Buddhism in these universities, the majority of students are monks. (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, http://www.mcu.ac.th/En/history.php).

University by Phramaha[34] Chonlatish Chanhorm (2000). The first part of the research is an historical analysis and the interpretation of the chanting *suttas*[35] in the Buddhist scripture [Pali: Tiipitaka; Thai: พระไตรปิฎก/pra tripidok] with little focus on the ritual and its process. The second part is an investigation of Thai perceptions of the Buddhist chanting in contemporary Thailand, which is conducted by using only a quantitative survey. Due to the lack of critical studies on the ritual experiences in this research, Chanhorm (2000: 151-152) states, as a conclusion in this study, that the Buddhist chanting ceremony fails to develop wisdom, as people tend to believe in the power of the chanting more than the Buddhist teachings, which are mentioned in the chanting texts.

Another study that focuses on the Parn Yak chanting ritual is *A Comparative Study of PhanYak Recitation: A Case Study Temples in Bangkok*[36] written by Siriporn Yindee (2000). The aim of this research is to study the evolution of Parn Yak ritual and investigate the belief, knowledge and practices in Buddhism of the participants in contemporary Parn Yak. In this study, Yindee (2000: 125, 194) uses quantitative methods along with qualitative empirical studies by observing rituals around Bangkok.

The quantitative research and its data analysis in Yindee's study seem to be problematic and biased. Most items in the questionnaire regard participants' academic, economical background and general knowledge in Buddhism, both in its philosophy and history (Yindee, 2000: 172-178). This results in a subjective data analysis. Yindee (2000: 158-163) concludes that participants with less education and inferior financial circumstances, are likely to believe in the efficacy of rituals more than those with higher education and superior economical background. Yindee (2000: 161) claims that being less educated can make ritual

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[34] *Phra*, *Pra* (In Thai, literally mean a Buddhist monk. When calling a monk by his name, the word *pra* is put before his name to denote that he is a monk. The word *maha* is an honored academic title for a monk who has passed an examination in Pali and Buddhist languages, which is under the auspices of the Sangha Supreme Council, the authority in Thai National office of Buddhism (The Department of Pali Study website, 2011: www.infopali.net). Although the exam is emphasized only on the study of Buddhist discourse, this level is regarded as a degree equivalent to high school graduation in typical Thai schools.

[35] Series of a chanting text.

[36] Although there are some grammatical errors, this is the English title of this research. Therefore, I have to use this title without any alteration. In addition, the word 'Parn Yak' in this research is spelled 'Phan Yak'. It is still the same ritual with different spelling in English as there is no English word for this ritual.

participants have a lack of critical thinking so that they are interested in the ritual rather than the Buddhist philosophy; therefore, they are likely to be gullible victims of people who organised rituals for commercial purposes.[37] In addition, during her observation, Yindee (2000: 162) reported that several participants often made small donations to the temples; she therefore assumes that these participants do not have a firm faith in Buddhism. However, this does not take into account the fact, as she also reports (Yindee, 2000: 158-163), that the majority of ritual participants have a low income.

For academic references on *sak yant*, although people with these tattoos also attend Parn Yak in order to be in trance, *wai kru*[38]is the only trance-possession ritual that is practiced specifically for tattoo wearers. However, to my knowledge, there is no research of this ritual found in Thailand. There is limited research on spiritual tattoos and the culture that surround this practice. One such example is *Tattoo Evolution, Mass Culture and Art Body* [sic] *Tattoo* (Narakorn, 2005), which is a qualitative study of the culture of tattooing in Thailand. This study concentrates on both decorative and spiritual tattoos by exploring the perception of Thai people toward tattoo practices (Narakorn, 2005: 5, 76-115). This is similar to Kamonsantiroj's *Communication and Perception of Meaning of Tattoos in Contemporary Thai Society* (2005). Kamonsatiroj (2005: 4) considers tattoo as a way of communication between people and their society; therefore, the study is conducted by drawing upon theories in communication studies (Kamonsantiroj, 2005: 5-28, 81-95). Another example of research on spiritual tattooing in Thailand is Mahakhan's *The Study of Thai and Japanese Arts of Tattoo* (1996). The research aims to comparatively study the tattoo between two different countries, Thailand and Japan, in the aspects of history, tradition, belief, design and practice (Mahakhan: 1996: 6).

From the above, it is evident that there is a lack of critical studies on Thai Buddhist rituals such as Parn Yak and *sak yant.* The majority of studies have been carried out by quantitative methods and their limitations often lead to biased presumptions without the understanding of participants' experiences within

[37] This controversial issue of the commercialisation of trance-possession rituals in contemporary Thailand will be discussed further in Chapter 5.
[38] The practice of *wai kru* will be discussed in Chapter 4.

cultural contexts. In addition, most non-academic publications on these two rituals are about the supernatural marvel of the rituals or people in the rituals. Those publications are often involved with methodology more than anthropological information and are not based on the analysis of data from research. As a result, most scholars encounter difficulties in finding references when studying trance-possession ritual practices in Thai Buddhism.

The problematic nature of research: Controversies over rituals and research into them

There are limitations in this research with regard to the topic. The studied rituals are sensitive, because they involve different perspectives on Buddhism in Thailand. Those who concentrate mostly on the Theravada Buddhist philosophy tend to regard these rituals as 'non-pure' or 'contaminated' Buddhist practices, as trance-possession rituals are often viewed as being related to animism and, occasionally, Hinduism. For instance, the events of Parn Yak sometimes involve the ritual of worshipping Hindu deities. As discussed earlier, due to the 'lack of causal explanation' nature of ritual, these practices are also seen by some people as superstitious nonsense, fraud and trickery. Furthermore, the stylised manifestation of trance-possession rituals turns them into events of entertainment or theatrical performances, which in Theravada Buddhism, is discouraged[39]. During (and also prior to) my research, I was told by many Thai Buddhists, such as scholars or monks, that with the reasons explained above, they did not accept the stylised chanting of the Parn Yak ritual and the practices of *sak yant* as practices in Buddhism. This creates a controversy, as these trance-possession rituals are still widely practiced in many temples.

As suggested in the beginning of this chapter, these rituals may emerge specifically for performing within a contemporary Thai context. The government authorities do not seem to acknowledge trance-possession rituals as practices in Thai Buddhism. I encountered an example of this when I visited the Department of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Culture in the hopes of gathering information about Parn Yak and its history. Despite the fact that this ritual is often marketed

[39] According to Buddhist precepts, monks are also strictly prohibited from taking part in such practices. See Chapter 2 for details of Thai Buddhist beliefs.

as ‘traditional’ and having a connection to royal rituals, I was unable to obtain any information that supported this. An officer in the department explained that the Parn Yak ritual is not considered a ‘proper’ Buddhist practice because of its controversial aspects and due to the fact that there are no official records of its history.

In addition, nowadays Parn Yak and *sak yant* practices as well as several Buddhist rituals are also criticised for ‘faith marketing’ (Kasikorn Research Centre, 2007). This is a result of their overly advertised campaigns in the media, the commodification of the amulets that are sold at the ritual sites, the fact that participants have to pay in order to attend, and the monks who perform the ritual are often publicised as having spiritual power. These commercial aspects cause these rituals to often be negatively portrayed as ‘business/commercial Buddhism’ [Thai: *Putta Panit*/พุทธพานิชย์].

As a result of these aspects, trance-possession rituals have continued to be treated with scepticism in contemporary Thailand, which leads to controversy between those who strongly believe and those who remain sceptical (Swearer, 2004: 237). This makes the study of these rituals a difficult task for researchers. For those who oppose the practices, Parn Yak and *sak yant* are not a worthwhile topic of study. As a result, my research has been heavily criticised for dealing with ‘superstitious nonsense’. Furthermore, one of my research objectives, to examine participants’ experience and investigate factors that contribute to their expressing a sense of efficacy, has been seen as an attempt to make these rituals more legitimately practiced as cultural activities.

However, the studies of rituals are often seen as posing a challenge, and being disparaging to spiritual powers. There is a well-known phrase *mai chuer ya loblue* [Thai: ไม่เชื่ออย่าลบหลู่] that literally means ‘if you don’t believe it, do not insult it’. The phrase is widely used in the media and among Thais as a warning to those who criticise or question the existence of spiritual powers. Throughout my research, I have sometimes been accused of being disparaging or insulting to spiritual powers. This is because those who strongly believe in the existence of spiritual power ascribe ritual efficacy to the ‘spiritual sphere’. For them, the attempt to

examine the socio-cultural aspects and participants' experience may be seen as reducing their 'legitimacy of efficacy' at a spiritual level, although it does make the rituals become more widely accepted.

It may be the desire to avoid this controversial issue which has resulted in a lack of critical studies from Thai scholars on contemporary Thai Buddhist rituals, particularly Parn Yak and *sak yant*. Most researchers of trance-possession rituals tend to focus their work on the aspects of Buddhist philosophy and history rather than the participants' experience and performance aspects of the rituals.

It is also necessary to note that some researchers who studied these rituals are monks. As explained above, the examination of ritual as a form of performance may be considered inappropriate for them. Therefore, the ritual can only be studied from the arena of Buddhist teachings.

Ethnographic work leads researchers "into touch with the lives of strangers" (Geertz, 1973: 16), and in this way there are ethical matters which I would like to address. As a Thai, I did not have problem with how to appropriately behave in Thai Buddhist practices. However, the rituals that I am studying are sensitive and seen as controversial practices. I am recognise the vulnerability of the individual participants when they reveal their information. It is important to reveal my position and my research identity to my informants prior to study, as the data I would gather may reveal intimate beliefs and information.[40] All participants that are mentioned in this research were informed of the purpose of my research prior to sharing their stories.[41]

The fieldwork

During 2007-2012, myfield research of the trance-possession ritual took place in five temples in Bangkok and its vicinity, where I observed, participated, interviewed and talked with the monks, participants, the ritual organisers, people who worked in the temples and well-known community figures.

[40] This was impossible in the case of Parn Yaks which are large-scale events; hence, only monks in the ritual and participants with whom I talked were informed.
[41] I affirmed with them that I understood the sensitivity of the topic; thus, their names will not be published in this thesis. Most of them are mentioned using their initials or their nicknames according to their preferences.

In 2006-2007, I attended four Parn Yak rituals as both a participant and observer simultaneously. During field trips, I followed Pra Kru Sanghavichai,[42] the leader of the chanting monks and his team, on their Parn Yak chanting tour across central Thailand for a period of approximately two months. There is an exception in the in Parn Yak at Wat[43] Noinai temple. Although having no connection with monks or ritual organisers, Parn Yak at this temple enabled me to gain insight into the experience of participants. In order to give an overview of Parn Yak rituals and their practice, my first-hand experience at Wat Noinai will be described in this chapter.

Parn Yak rituals in which I conducted fieldwork:

1. **Location**: Wat Noinai [Thai: วัดน้อยใน], Nonthaburi province [Thai: จังหวัดนนทบุรี]

   Located at the edge of Bangkok, the temple is situated in the middle of a cluster of communities with a dense population.

   Ritual space: The temple hall

   Time and date: 1 p.m. on 2nd December 2006

   Participants: Approximately 150 participants whose ages range from 15 to 60. There was no significant difference in the number of male and female participants. Most participants were local people.

2. **Location**: Wat Boonrod [Thai: วัดบุญรอด], Bangkok [Thai: กรุงเทพ]

   The temple is in a densely populated area at the edge of the Sukhumvit, which is a business area in the city centre. Wat Boonrod is large and well-supported by local people. Due to the size of the temple, the Parn Yak is a large-scale event.

   Ritual space: The temple hall and its terrace. Although having a spacious area, the hall and terrace were packed with participants.

   Time and date: 3 p.m. on 1st April 2007.

   Participants: Approximately 1,300 participants whose ages ranged from 5 to 80. There was no significant difference in the number of male and

[42] 'Pra Kru' is one of the titles of Thai monks, while Sanghavichai is his monkhood name.
[43] Wat [Thai: วัด] means 'temple' in Thai.

female participants. Most participants were local people. Nevertheless, due to its location near the city centre, some participants came from other areas.

3. **Location:** Wat Jantaram [Thai: วันจันทาราม], Ratchaburi province [Thai: จังหวัดราชบุรี]

   Located in Ratchaburi province, 80 kilometres west of Bangkok, the temple is not near the residential areas. It is situated next to the highway.
   Ritual space: The temple courtyard. The ritual is performed completely outdoors. According to ritual organisers, 999[44] seats are prepared for participants.
   Time and date: 5 p.m. on 7th April 2007.
   Participants: Approximately 800 participants whose ages ranged from 10 to 60. There was no significant difference in the number of male and female participants. Most participants were local people from areas in Ratchaburi.

4. **Location:** Wat Nongkodsiriwat [Thai: วัดหนองกรดสิริวัฒน์], Supanburi province [Thai: จังหวัดสุพรรณบุรี]. Unlike other temples in my field trips, Wat Nongkodsiriwat is located in the rural area in Supanburi province, approximately 100 kilometres from Bangkok. This small temple is situated at a distance from the main road. It is in a small community and surrounded by rice paddy fields.
   Ritual space: The temple courtyard. The ritual is performed outdoors. Nevertheless, marquees are set up to protect participants and monks from the sun.
   Time and date: 1 p.m. on 15th April 2007.
   Participants: Approximately 100 participants. Due to its remote location, most of them were from nearby communities.

For the spiritual tattoo practice of *sak yant*, although I did not have the direct experience of being tattooed, I conducted my study as an observer at Wat Bang

[44] As nine is popularly regarded as a 'lucky number' in Thailand.

Phra temple in Nakhon Pathom province, west of Bangkok. The temple is one of the most popular places for spiritual tattoos in Thailand. I observed the practices of *sak yant* from one of the tattoo masters in this temple. The field study was conducted in March-April 2009, January 2011 and June 2012. I did not have the opportunity to be in the annual *wai kru* ritual; nevertheless this ritual was researched through documents and accounts of the practicing members of the *sak yant* tradition. While one my observational experiences of the tattoo process of *sak yant* will be described in this chapter, the *wai kru* ritual will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Notes on the fieldwork

As both a participant and observer, I have critically reflected upon my own lived experience along with that of my fellow participants during rituals in the fieldwork.

The information from participants is the major material of my research; nevertheless, the experiences and perspectives of people who are involve with rituals, for example, monks, ritual organisers, temple workers, street venders and important people in the community, have also been examined in order to explore the rituals in a wider context. The individual data from these people was collected primarily through personal communications, observances and informal interviews, while my personal experiences were collected by means of fieldnotes, fieldwork journals, memories and reflections.

In field studies of both rituals, I conducted my ethnographic research closely with the ritual facilitators, i.e., the monks. For Parn Yak, following Pra Kru Sanghavichai to observe several Parn Yak that he performed provided me with insight into the practices and arrangement of Thai Buddhist ritual events. I have also viewed the atmosphere of the ritual from the perspective of both the participants and the organisers. For example, I was occasionally allowed to enter the monks' living quarters such as the abbots' living room where all the monks involved with the ritual rested and had opportunities to talk with the abbots, monks and lay people who prepared the ritual. It was a real privilege to be in the place that is usually regarded as a very private space reserved for only the monks with higher rank in the temples. This is one of the unique features of this thesis, in that

I am a female researcher and these living quarters in Thai temples are normally regarded as inaccessible for women. Similarly, in *sak yant*, I had an opportunity to observe the practices of Luang Pi Peaw, the renowned tattoo master[45] at Wat Bang Phra. I was given the opportunity to act as his assistant for a short period and sit in his residence while talking with several tattoo wearers. In both cases, it was a privilege to do so, as to my knowledge, no female ethnographer has had this experience before.[46]

In addition to collecting data from people at the rituals, the accounts of people who regularly attended the rituals was examined, particularly within the tradition of *sak yant* in which tattoo wearers[47] are regarded as belonging to the same communities. The information is usually gathered by conducting interactive interviews in the form of informal conversations in order to gain "in-depth and intimate understanding of people's experiences with emotionally charged and sensitive topics" (Kiesinger and Healy, 1997: 121).

My position in the field study

The term 'participant-observer' seems to closely match my position as a researcher in the field. At the outset of this research, I considered myself as a partial outsider[48] to the practices of rituals studied in my thesis. I am a Thai Buddhist both through practice and enculturation. I am a central Thai person who grew up with some pre-existing knowledge of the Thai cultural context and Thai Buddhism. However, I was, in fact, unfamiliar with these two forms of rituals prior to my research. Growing up in a family that believes in Theravada Buddhist philosophies rather than in ritual practice, I never attended Parn Yak, and I am not a practicing member of the *sak yant* tradition. At the beginning, I entered the fieldwork with the thought that my position of being both outsider and insider would have its strengths, as it could offer an understanding of the overall Thai Buddhist context, while providing the necessary distance to establish a theoretical framework.

[45] Luang Pi Peaw is also one of the most well-known *sak yant* masters in Thailand and internationally.
[46] I will discuss my position as a female researcher later.
[47] Particularly those who have the same masters.
[48]And partial insider.

My initial assumptions as stated above were seen as applicable to my research topic; nevertheless, it turned out that the simple dichotomy of the insider/outsider was insufficient for articulating my role within the field. DeLyser, in her essay on conducting research in geography as an insider, states that "[i]n every research project we navigate complex and multifaceted insider-outsider issues" (DeLyser, 2001: 442). When undertaking field studies, it has not been easy for me to negotiate the role of researcher between these two positions. I could not see myself completely fitting in the context of these rituals, either as an insider or an outsider. I came to realise that my position constantly shifted along the continuum between insider and outsider rather than taking on both roles simultaneously. My experience is similar to Kath Weston's statement (1996: 275) on her field experience in a specific community:

> A single body cannot bridge that mythical divide between insider and outsider, researcher and researched. I am neither, in any simple way, and yet I am both (Weston, 1996: 275).

The role as the insider/outsider does not come merely from my own point of view, but also from the people in my fieldwork. Vered Amit notes that this is one of the unique features of being a participant-observer in a field in which "the researcher and his/her personal relationships serve as primary vehicles for eliciting findings and insight" (2000: 2). I came to the field as a complete stranger to the people who were involved in ritual. I was initially seen as an outsider; nonetheless, as I was carrying on work in the field, I was also somehow regarded by these people as being 'one of them'. For people with whom I frequently worked, for instance, the monks, I sometimes became the inside, i.e., an assistant and a companion in ritual. Pra Kru Sanghavichai sometimes talked to me as if I was his co-worker. For instance, he turned to me after the chanting finished and said, "Today, 'we' don't have many people in trance" (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007). My fieldwork relationship with the monks also contributed to the way participants viewed my position. Due to the fact that I came with Pra Kru Sanghavichai to the temple, was able to enter monks' living quarters, seated in the front of the hall[49] and frequently had conversations with the chief monk during the ritual process, I was seen by

[49]In some cases.

participants as being on the monks' team and somehow also having responsibilities in the ritual process.

This was also apparent in the case of *sak yant* where I performed an offering ritual to the monk to present that I was willing to be one of his disciples. Through this initial ritual, I was seen as having the same master as other participants, hence belonging to the community of *sak yant*. In addition, I was allowed to sit near the master and assist him in some tasks during the tattooing. People who worked at the temple sometimes asked me to help them with temple chores. When the monk asked some participants to talk to me about their experience in *sak yant*, they were willing to share their stories. This is in contrast to my first time at the temple when I was treated with suspicion[50].

Nevertheless, I was still considered as an outsider by ritual participants. As I mentioned previously, my informants were aware of my position. They saw me as a researcher who, according to Nikki Gerrard, would 'parachute into people's lives [...] and then vanish' (1995: 59). In the Thai Buddhist temples where monks and women are strictly separated, being a female ethnographer also made me visible as an outsider, especially in the case of *sak yant* where most participants were male. Furthermore, due to my own cultural embodiment and background, I also had the feeling that I could not clearly understand the context of the ritual to the extent that sometimes I felt lost in my own culture.

As the expectations of researcher and those who are researched usually do not coincide (Giurchescu, 1999: 49), I entered the field with my own ideas of a participant-observer: being an observer, in other words, the audience of the ritual performances. I could use my participation in the fieldwork to observe participants' expression of experience in ritual as taken from Norman Denzin's words, as 'windows into the inner lives of these persons' (Denzin, 2005: 21).

While I saw myself as a participant and an observer, those whom I researched have more diverse perceptions of my relationship to the ritual community. For them, I was seen as a student, a female, an academic scholar, a non-local, a

[50] This is, perhaps, due to the controversy over ritual.

middle class person and sometimes, a media journalist[51]. As "[…] participant observation is […] a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researcher" (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994: 249), the characteristics ascribed to me by my informants also affected my role in the field. For example, when asked about ritual, some participants were at first reluctant to answer[52], because they expected that I, as an academic researcher, would be an expert and have more knowledge about ritual than them. However, I was also cast into a role of novice by most of my informants and other participants. For them, I was a young female student who had come to learn about ritual; therefore, out of kindness, they taught me how to behave in the ritual, explained the ritual procedure and shared their stories. Therefore, I was still regarded as an outsider, despite the fact that they provided me a sense of comfort and familiarity as being a member in their community.

What I had not anticipated is that people in my fieldwork were observing me as much I was observing them. As I participated in the rituals, my fellow participants often monitored me to see if I had followed their instructions properly. While he was chanting, Pra Kru Sanghavichai frequently looked at me to see my response to the ritual and his chanting. In this way, I not only took on the role of the audience but also the performer. Conversely, people whom I researched were also observers of my acts in the ritual. Similar to the insider/outsider paradigm, the position of participant and observer was not fixed in a dualistic manner but dynamically moved back and forth along the continuum.

Challenges of conducting the fieldwork and limitations of the findings

As a researcher, I encountered several difficulties in conducting the fieldwork. These challenges were primarily a result of the problematic nature of the research topic, my roles and relationships within the field, and my personal perspectives and experience in fieldwork.

Although I was aware that the studied rituals were controversial and sensitive, the difficulties began when I made contacts in fieldwork. Focusing on

[51] In disguise.
[52] Some informants later explained to me that they were afraid that they might give the wrong answer.

ethnography in Thai Buddhist rituals posed an inevitable challenge, particularly when the research was in the field of drama or performance studies. Performance practices tend to be regarded among Thais as opposed to Buddhist practices. For example, examining Buddhist rituals (which are conducted by monks) as performances may be seen as contradictory to the fundamental tenets of Buddhist monks: the observance of the precepts [Pali: *sila*s]. One precept that monks are strictly obliged to observe is to refrain from engaging in any entertainment, such as performances, music, and dance [Pali: *Nacca gita vadita visukkadassana*][53] (Bullit, 2010). For this reason, my requests to contact the organisers and monks while attending the rituals were frequently rejected after my research area was revealed. Furthermore, due to controversial issues regarding the practices of rituals and their commercialised aspects, my fieldwork occasionally put me in difficult, and to some degree, dangerous situations. These conditions affected my access to the field, as people who were involved with these rituals often treated me with suspicion and were reluctant to communicate with me. For example, the abbot of Wat Bang Phra Temple did not welcome me during my first visit, as he suspected that I was a media journalist disguised as a student.[54] Those who attended rituals often showed a reluctance to express their intimate beliefs. In addition, due to the unfamiliarity of Thai people in expressing themselves, some informants explained that it was difficult to articulate their feelings because they were rarely asked about their ritual experience. This may be in part because of the enculturation; they are not used to expressing their feelings objectively.

Moreover, people who had financially benefitted from rituals (such as ritual organisers) often regarded me as their nemesis. Being a female ethnographer became a distinct challenge while researching practices in the temple settings where monks and women are strictly separated. Being a laywoman not only made the initial access to the monks difficult, but also limited my experience during field study, as I could not stay in the monks' living quarters or have conversations with them for a long period of time.

[53] Some laypeople also opt to observe this precept. See Chapter 2 for details of the Buddhist precepts.
[54] I, however, managed to talk with his secretary and later was granted permission to conduct field research in this temple.

It is also important to recognise the limited nature of the fieldwork. I used my observations and my lived experiences as an instrument to study in the field; therefore, this study cannot capture every moment of the rituals. Furthermore, the two forms of trance-possession rituals that I studied are not considered site-specific despite being mainly practiced in central Thailand. Parn Yak rituals are not performed on a regular basis. For example, a local resident[55] at Wat Jantaram commented that he was eager to attend the ritual, since this was the first time that his local temple had organised Parn Yak. The practicing members of *sak yant* also visited their tattoo master at their convenience. Therefore, rather than a thorough immersion in the same location with the same people for an extended period of time, my field study depended on my lived experiences. I was not able to study the experiences of all the people involved in the practices of these rituals, but only those whom I met during fieldwork. Amit (2000: 2) states:

> The ethnographic 'field', therefore, has always been as much characterized by absences as by presences and hence necessitated a variety of corresponding methods […] to explore processes not immediately or appropriately accessible through participant observation (Amit, 2000: 12).

For this reason, in an attempt to confront the limitations of conducting fieldwork, historical and archival documents as well as scholarly and popular publications were used in the research. In addition, it was inevitable that I would not achieve a comprehensive understanding of others' experiences. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 21),

> Subjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they have done and why. […] [Researchers] always seeking better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience they have studied (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 21).

In order to 'make more understandable the worlds of experience' (ibid), I drew on primary evidence from my practice in these rituals as well as a wide range of

[55] My fieldnotes, 7th April 2007.

theoretical discourses from performance studies and anthropology as an overarching methodological framework in this thesis.

As “ethnography is always a matter of risk for researchers” (Benson and O’Neill, 2007: 31), the field experience challenged the way I conceptualised myself as a Thai Buddhist. In the field, I, as a Thai Buddhist with the ascribed characteristics of a ritual scholar, struggled with being expected to have

> […] the ability to act competently […], while simultaneously privately struggling to suspend for analytic purposes precisely those assumptions that must be taken for granted in relation with participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 82).

Although unfamiliarity with the ritual first marked me as an outsider, as a Thai Buddhist, I’ve learnt about the rituals that belong to my own religious beliefs and culture. I have to balance between learning to do new things as a ‘Buddhist lay novice’ while studying the practices of rituals as a researcher. Throughout the fieldwork, I not only became engaged with “the outward process of research but also the inward process of developing own identity as a researcher” (Deutsch, 2004: 885).

Despite being viewed as a native, it is impossible for ethnographers to totally understand the informants’ worldview, because the interpretation of field study will inevitably be based on personal presumption (Geertz, 1983: 58) and shaped by one’s values (Springer, 1991: 178). Therefore, despite having a strong ethical obligation, at times I felt uncomfortable revealing the intimate beliefs of those who participated. Additionally, I realised that although I discussed their experiences and comments on rituals from a cultural and personal contexts, I was also interpreting this information through my own cultural context and personal presumptions.

Although I admit that I have reservations about this issue, I inescapably agree with Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 21) who state:

> There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of-and between-the observer and the observed” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 21).

Through my lived experience in rituals, my world blended with the world of other participants. The findings of the research, which are based on the relationship between both worlds, come from my own voice as well as their voices. In this way, although I can be regarded as conducting research in my own culture, I concur with Buckland, a scholar in dance ethnography, who states, “We do not automatically suppose that the voice of the native researcher necessarily is an authenticity of knowledge in and of itself” (Buckland, 2006: 222).The data from the field study will draw on the testimonials of those who attend rituals; nevertheless, I also acknowledge that, as an ethnographer, the reflections and interpretations of my own ritual experience are also presented in the research.

The examples of ethnographic experiences of Parn Yak and *sak yant*

Some of my ethnographic experiences in Parn Yak and *sak yant* have been presented in this section to set the scene for the discussion of the practices of Thai contemporary Buddhist rituals.

Wat Noinai Temple, Nonthaburi

The first case to be discussed is that of a Parn Yak ritual held in Wat Noinai temple in Nonthaburi province, which is a suburb of Bangkok. The ceremony took place on 2nd December 2006, and it was the first ritual of its kind that I had attended as a part of my field research. Having no previous connection with the temple, I fully participated in every process and was regarded by people who work in the temple as one who merely came to join the ritual seeking to eliminate evil spirits and empower the benign spirits within my body or gain good luck. For this reason, I did not have many opportunities to talk with others in attendance. When I first entered the hall, I noticed several men either standing or sitting around the ritual space and not taking part in the ritual activities. These men were staring at those of us who had come to experience the ritual, and I felt the atmosphere become solemn.

The empty temple hall gradually filled with people. When the Parn Yak chanting actually started two hours later than original scheduled due to other activities, such as chanting and preaching, the hall was almost full. Due to the size of the

temple, the hall can accommodate only around 200 people. This is considered as a fairly small temple hall when compared with other temples in this area. There were approximately 150 people who came to join in the ritual. There was no significant difference in the number of males and females. Their ages ranged from approximately 15 to 60 with the majority of people in their thirties. Wat Noinai temple is situated on the border of Bangkok and Nonthaburi province[56]. Located close to highways, the area of the temple consists of communities with a dense population. Around the area near the temple, there were large banners advertising this event. The ritual attendees in this temple were primarily from nearby areas. Each person purchased a bowl containing a ritual kit [Thai: ขันครู/*kan kru*], which consisted of a yarn of sacred thread, a *yant* [Thai: ยันต์], which is a piece of red cloth containing an image of a deity,[57] sachets of husked and unhusked rice and a small clay amulet containing an image of Buddha. The ritual kits sold for 199 baht, and these were sold at a stall that also sold flowers and garlands for offering at the entrance of the hall. The ritual organizers at this stall made sure that no one entered the ritual ground without buying a kit. Inside the hall, there were webs of sacred threads hanging from the ceiling. Each person took the red *yant* and sacred thread from their bowl, attached them to the webs of ceiling thread above their seat, and placed the thread around their head.

At the beginning of the ritual, five monks sat at the front of the hall near the main statue of Buddha. There was a master of ceremonies who instructed the participants to attach the thread. When the ritual started, the master of ceremonies announced that the monks would first recite other *sutta*s[58] before eventually performing the Parn Yak chanting. Before each process of the event, the master of ceremonies explained the meaning of each process, while regularly encouraging them to make donations or buy the offerings in order to offer them to the monks. Among Parn Yak rituals in my fieldwork, the ritual at Wat Noinai was the most commercial. There was a moment that the master of ceremonies announced that the actual Parn Yak chanting would not begin until enough people purchased offerings. This was my first Parn Yak experience and to my surprise,

[56] This is regarded as a satellite city to Bangkok.
[57] King Vassavana. It is believed that he was a creator of the Atanatiya *sutta*.
[58] The Buddhist *sutta* is a compilation of Buddha's discourse in the Pali canon (a sacred text in Theravada Buddhism). Atanatiya *sutta* is one of Paritta *sutta*s, which is chanted in this ritual, hence the Atanatiya *sutta* is also known as 'Parn Yak', the chanting traditions of Paritta *sutta*s.

no one in attendance expressed disapproval to this announcement. There was a moment of silence and eventually, two to three additional people bought offerings and the ritual continued. As in most Parn Yak, there was a short sermon about the legend, tradition and the virtue of attending the Parn Yak Ritual.

Prior to the Parn Yak chanting, the master of ceremonies of the temple advised the audience to prostate themselves on the floor pretending they were dead while the monks chanted the *sutta,* which is specifically used in Thai Buddhist funeral rituals. After the monks finished chanting, the master of ceremonies explained to the crowd that they were now dead, and it was implied that all bad karma and bad luck were dead with them. Then, the monks chanted again to bring them back to life.[59] After that, everyone got up to their sitting position. In Thailand, it is believed that the ritual can help to eliminate dark *kamma*[60] and evil spirits prior to the chanting of Parn Yak *sutta*.

Eventually, four monks [Thai: พระมหานาค/*pra mahanak*] started to chant Parn Yak. Although knowing that they chanted the *Atanatiya sutta* as in any Parn Yak ritual, I could not identify any word from the *sutta*. In my view, the sounds were rather similar to the sound of humming. The chant began as a low hum, tentative at first. Then, the volume rose and the rhythms became stronger, encouraging a state of trance. The high intensity chanting continued monotonously with sporadic interventions that were similar to a holler. The vocal vibration of the chanting was very intense and when accompanied by the hollering sound, the atmosphere of the ritual became tense and unnerving. I found that the sound and the solemnity inside the ritual hall was somewhat disturbing, and I felt uncomfortable during the chanting (my fieldnotes, 2nd December2006). Although the people remained silent, I noticed that they were, sitting restlessly, for example, changing their sitting position often. Similar to other Parn Yaks in my fieldwork, this is may be due to the long period of sitting as some people told me after the ritual that sitting on the floor made their legs ache, while some of them also reported that they felt that the loud noise and tone of the chanting was ‘a bit’ frightening (my fieldnotes,

[59] The ritual is known in Thailand as a *Bangsukul Pen* ritual. This ritual is normally conducted alone and has its own process and practices; nonetheless, it is sometimes briefly performed prior to Parn Yak chanting. The concept and practices of *Bangsukul Pen* will be described in Chapter 4.
[60] The concept of *kamma* in Thai Buddhism will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 5.

7th April 2007). When asked if they found the sound of chanting disturbing, many respondents replied, 'a bit'. Some of them went on to explain that they believed that the sound of the chanting was helpful in eliminating negativity, as it can also scare evil spiritual powers that reside within their body (my fieldnotes, 2nd December 2006).

After a short period of chanting, some people visibly started to enter into a trance-like state. Their bodies were trembling, and one woman raised one of her hands uncontrollably; nevertheless, everyone remained seated on the floor. As the chanting neared its culmination, the firecrackers, which were hanging outside the hall, were continually lit, emitting a variety of blaring sounds in rapid succession. Similar to the disturbing sound of the chanting, it is widely believed that the sound of firecrackers can eliminate evil spirits.

Some participants, who were in trance-possession[61] screamed, shouted, and jumped. Some women danced,[62] while some men moved similarly to various animals, such as tigers or monkeys. I noticed that some of these men had spiritual tattoos on their bodies. At this time, the men who were present in the hall began their duty: to grasp the bodies of people who were in trance-possession and control the overall security inside the hall. There were approximately ten people who were in a trance-possession; thus the hall was chaotic. The chanting continued. Unlike the other four monks who continued chanting, a chief monk [Thai: พระนั่งปรก/*pra nuangprok*] left his seat to attend to the trance-possessed people. He recited a short verse of the *sutta*, sprinkled the consecrated water and calmed them one by one, while men held them to keep them still. After they were treated by the monk, they appeared calm and were able to sit and continue listening to the chanting.

After the chanting finished, most people in the hall seemed relieved from the tension of the ritual. I saw smiles upon many faces. They picked up their belongings, their ritual kits, and talked and laughed with one another while leaving the ritual hall. They were relaxed, as if all of the intense incidents that had

[61] In my research, I use the term 'trance-possession' to describe the circumstance that happened to some who took part in this ritual. The term will be discussed later.
[62] Their gestures are explicitly similar to those in Thai traditional dance style.

happened in the hall earlier never existed. Those who were in trance-possession looked normal and joined with the other people as they left the temple hall. I did not see anyone pay particular attention to these people. They seemed not to talk much with others who did not take part in the ritual with them. Some of them avoided talking to me when I approached them to ask about their experience.

When watching the enactment of this process, I was not clear whether the trance-possession that I had witnessed was a state which happened to their bodymind during the chanting or merely a performance that was set up by the ritual organisers.[63] As mentioned earlier, Parn Yak has often been criticised for being trickery and commercial to attract donations from those who attend. Nevertheless, I managed to have a short conversation with a few of the people who had attended. Some of them told me that the trance-possession occurs every time they attend Parn Yak and that they believed this was due to the spirits that reside in their bodies. However, they did not mention their experience or feelings in the trance state. Some indicated that they had attended the ritual with the belief that they had been attacked by evil spirits; therefore, they had to attend Parn Yak to eliminate all the negativities caused by these spirits. For this reason, Parn Yak is often viewed in Thailand as a ritual for exorcism.

Apart from exorcising evil spiritual powers, Parn Yak is also seen as a ritual for empowering benign spirits that may reside within the body.[64] Some informants reported that they believed they had benign spirits inside their bodies (my fieldnotes, 2nd December 2006; 7th April 2007). Although the main intention of the Parn Yak ritual is to diminish evil spirits and negativities, these people believed that they needed to attend Parn Yak in order to empower the 'good' spiritual powers within them, even though they were not controlled by these spirits.

Mrs. H[65] explained to me her belief of the efficacy of the Parn Yak ritual.

> The good spirits within me never show themselves. I never show symptoms of possession, even in Parn Yak chanting, but I know that I am a *mee ong* [a person who is possessed by deities or benign spirits]. Attending Parn Yak can help empower theses spirits, because the evil

[63] This aspect will be discussed further in Chapter 5.
[64] The notion of trance-possession in Thailand will be discussed further in Chapter 5.
[65] Mrs. H (age 35), personal communication, 2nd December 2006

> spirits will not be able to attack or disturb them. When I was in the ritual, they can also listen to the Buddhist chanting which can make them satisfied and boost their power. Then, they can protect me and bring good luck to me easier [My translation].

The Parn Yak ritual can also affect those who are not possessed by spirits. Many Thais believe that the negativities will be removed by the Parn Yak chanting. A Parn Yak member[66] in Wat Jantharam told me that she usually had a short temper, but after Parn Yak, her mind was 'cooled'. She insisted that the chanting somehow diminished her negative feelings (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007).

It is also believed that, as all the negativities are eliminated, those who attended the ritual will find it easier to attract good fortune. As we were leaving the temple, there were a lot of lottery ticket sellers in the area asking us to buy tickets.[67]

The tradition and practices of *sak yant*

I primarily studied Parn Yak, as it is widely associated with trance-possession, and in Thailand it is considered a ritual performed intentionally for its therapeutic effect. However, along with Parn Yak, the practices of *sak yant* must be explored in this thesis. Although trance-possession is merely one element that Parn Yak and spiritual tattooing have in common, these two rituals are connected in a number of ways to the extent that it is impossible to talk about Parn Yak without mentioning spiritual tattoos and vice versa.

Wat Bang Phra Temple

Wat Bang Phra is one of the most popular places to get Thai spiritual tattoos. It is located in a community surround by rice paddy fields and is around 20 kilometres from the main road. Despite its remote location, it is a large temple with many buildings and shrines. It is usually a busy temple with many visitors coming to worship, getting tattooed and visiting the tattoo masters. There are four or five monks practicing *sak yant* using their own residence to provide this service. Each residence is often crowded with visitors. I observed the practice of

[66] Mrs. M (age 44), personal communication, 7th April 2007.
[67] My fieldnotes, December 2006. It is common that there are lottery ticket sellers outside the places of Thai Buddhist rituals.

Luang Pi[68] Peaw, who uses his terrace to provide tattoo services. When I went to Wat Bang Phra, his home typically was the busiest of the tattoo masters' residences.

As an example of the experiences in *sak yant*, I would like to describe my early fieldwork in Wat Bang Phra. In the late afternoon on 16thApril 2009, I visited the temple for the second time. Near the entrance of Luang Pi Peaw's residence, there was a stand selling offering trays [Thai: ขันครู/*kan kru*], a rack containing several brooms and cleaning tools. Although not compulsory, those entering the area, particularly the newcomers, are expected to help by sweeping the temple ground when they visit Luang Pi Peaw. Several of my informants also told me that this is the way that Luang Pi Peaw tests their perseverance and devotion as his disciples (my fieldnotes, March 2009). This, perhaps, also creates a sense of solidarity[69] and also establishes a community in which every tattoo wearer is regarded as a follower of the masters in Wat Bang Phra.

Of the 20 male *yant* tattoo wearers on the terrace, three were women. These three women did not come for tattoos but came with their friends who were waiting to be tattooed by the monk. The ages of tattoo recipient varied from around 20 to 50. The youngest person was 20 years, while the oldest was 55.

The small terrace was packed with visitors who were talking to others while waiting. They seemed to know each other. An informant told me that due to the long queue, the monk will give them only one or two tattoos each visit; hence many tattoo wearers repeatedly visit to get more tattoos. Therefore, they are usually familiar with each other. He also noted that in this temple, the practicing members of *sak yant* are like brothers because, "We are disciples of the same master" (my fieldnotes, March 2009).[70][71]

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[68] *Luang Pi* is a word to address a monk who is around the same age as the addresser. Pi [Thai: พี่] means 'brother'. If the monk is older, Thais may call him Luang Por [Thai: พ่อ, English: father] or Luang Lung [Thai: ลุง, English: uncle].

[69] Something which Victor Turner (1969: 132) might call 'spontaneous communitas'.

[70] Although there are several tattoo masters at this temple, all the masters are considered to be the disciples of the late Luang Por Pern, the first master of Wat Bang Phra; hence all members are also the disciples of Luang Por Pern regardless who gave them tattoos.

[71] The sense of community in *sak yant* tradition will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

I bought an offering tray, which consisted of flowers, a candle and incense sticks and gave the offering to Luang Pi Peaw, who accepted the tray and put it on my head while reciting his incantation. Every tattoo recipient had to perform this ritual [Thai: *yok kru*] before receiving a tattoo. The monk accepted the offering before tattooing and put the offering on the person's head after finishing the tattooing process. Despite not having a tattoo, I did this every time I visited him as a greeting and to show respect. I sat near him and observed his practice.

There is no 'first-come, first-served' basis. When a visitor enters the terrace, Luang Pi Peaw, while continually giving tattoos to the other recipients, will have a short conversation with him/her about personal details so that the monk can choose the pattern of the tattoo according to the recipient's desires. Women and those who live far from the temple usually get tattooed first. The monk spent around ten minutes with each person. They can choose to be tattooed with black ink or oil. There is no difference in the efficacy of these two tattoo choices. Tattoos made with oil are invisible; therefore it is alternative for wearers who want their tattoos to be discreet. The monks continually gave tattoos to the recipients. I never saw him rest except for one short period.

On that day, there was a trance-possession that occurred in the evening when Luang Pi Peaw was performing *sak yant* on a man. During the tattooing process, his body was trembling. It took two people to hold him still while the monk was tattooing. After finishing, Luang Pi Peaw muttered an incantation, put his hand on the new tattoo and blew his breath sharply upon it. This act is performed to initially activate the power of the tattoo and to seal the *sak yant* spirit(s) within the body of the recipient. This seemed to aggravate his symptoms of trance-possession. He started a more severe convulsing and growled like a roaring tiger. This incident lasted only a few minutes until he calmed down. After that, the monk put the offering on his head and recited more incantations to finish the process. This man received a tattoo in the pattern of Pali incantations[72] on his upper back. However, his trance-possession did not come from this new tattoo but from the spiritual power of his existing tiger tattoos. He[73] later told me that he goes in trance-possession when he receives new tattoos from Luang Pi Peaw. When

[72] Written in ancient Khmer (Cambodian) scripts.
[73] An anonymous attendee (age 37), personal communication, 16th April 2007.

trance-possession occurs, he is aware of his condition; however, he does not have complete control over his body. He can control himself to not run away from the ritual space but cannot stop the symptoms of the trance-possession. He stated that he did not always have the same state of trance-possession. Sometimes, he only had a mild convulsion and had the itchy feeling of his tattoos. The trance-possession also occurs when he attends ritual such as the annual *wai kru* and Parn Yak. He noted that, in order to maintain the power of his tattoos, he found it necessary to attend *wai kru* every year to pay homage to his tattoo masters; otherwise, the power of the tattoos may weaken (my fieldnotes, 16th April 2009). It is believed that attending Parn Yak chanting can also empower the spirits within the tattoos as all negativities are removed; therefore, many practicing members of *sak yant* also regularly participate in Parn Yak.

This informant stated that he completely believed in the power of his tattoo since he first got one. After he received his first tattoo, he had more freelance jobs in addition to his occupation as a taxi driver in Bangkok. There were many people who hired him to deliver documents and packages. He asserts that at first he did not believe; however, the fact that he never had the additional work before he became a tattoo wearer made him completely believe in the power of *sak yant*. He added that he also felt safe because he had been protected by the spiritual powers within his tattoos and had never had an accident since he had *yant*s on his skin.

The notion of 'tradition' and 'authenticity' in Thai contemporary ritual

As stated earlier, the trance-possession rituals studied in this thesis have been somewhat reformulated for Thai modern times. Several elements in these rituals have been constructed and adjusted over time to approach a contemporary audience. For example, today's changes include preliminary events, such as preaching and *bangsukul pen*, the loudspeaker system, advertisement banners, commodification of ritual objects and the association of the practices of Parn Yak and *sak yant* traditions.

Formulation, modification and change

Hobsbawm suggests that rituals are often presented with references to the historical past, so that they will be recognised as 'authentic' (2012: 1). This is particularly true in the case of Parn Yak, which is often promoted as being a tradition that is derived from the chanting rituals in the Thai royal court.[74] This belief also exists among some Thai scholars (for example, Chanhorm, 2000 and Yindee, 2000). However, it is impossible to identify these court rituals as similar to the traditional form of today's Parn Yak, as there appears to be no information to support this theory. The attempt to consider these rituals as having a linear history may lead to what Daboo (2010: 83), in her discussion on the history of ritual, calls 'one of the great temptations to academics' only in order to achieve "a sense of legitimacy to a historical study to state that 'this is where it started, and this is how it developed'" (ibid).

The traditions of paritta chanting[75] may have been practiced both inside and outside the court since the time that Thais began to adopt Theravada Buddhism[76]. Therefore, I argue that these rituals developed concurrently over a similar time period. Many elements of today's Parn Yak have been used to establish the connection to the past; for example, the chanting style, the wearing of sacred thread, and the use of loud noise[77] to scare the evil spirits away. Some features have been transformed into a contemporary context. They are presented in the scale of events, locations of participants and socio-economic aspects.

For example, apart from serving as an external force to encourage trance-possession, the sound system, such as loudspeakers, can help accommodate a large number of attendees. The use of communicational technologies, e.g. ritual advertisements on social media and banners on the motorway, can also attract participants from outside the area. A local participant commented that this resulted in the rituals of today being conducted on a larger scale that includes many non-local participants, whereas during her childhood, the advertisements

[74] These royal chanting rituals will be discussed further in Chapter 4.
[75] See Footnote 48.
[76] The history of Thai Buddhism will be discussed in Chapter 3.
[77] This takes the form of sounds of gunfire and cannons in the royal rituals and firecrackers in Parn Yak.

of ritual were displayed only at the local market; hence only local people attended the rituals (my fieldnotes, 2nd December 2006).

Catherine Bell (1997: 251) points out that media and tourism could be the external forces that help to shape the way that rituals are performed in contemporary society. Socio-economic and marketing concerns are usually the main reason for incorporating other rituals with the event of Parn Yak. For example, the ritual of *bangsukul pen*[78] or the consecrations of amulets (to be discussed in detail in Chapter 4). The ritual organisers choose the rituals that will be added as a part of the event. These rituals are often organised by external influences, such as the current popularity of certain amulets, and they are usually promoted along with the advertisements of Parn Yak.

In his essay on Ghanaian rituals in urban settings, Wyllie (1968: 30-32) states that the ritual can adjust to time and settings through its congruity within cultures and social structures. He suggests that the ritual congruity operates in three modes: cognitive-affective (the purpose of ritual and the aim that is shared by those who are involved in it), structural (the pattern of ritual interaction and the social structure) and functional (the operation of ritual and its community system) (Wyllie, 1968: 32). Without being congruent with the socio-cultural system, a ritual eventually "becomes obsolete, empty of meaning, and eventually dies out" (Drewal, 1992: 8). As social anthropologist, Peter Collins, notes that while being transformative, ritual also "has the potential to be transformed" (Collins, 2005: 325), Parn Yak and *sak yant* are constantly and creatively adjusted by ritual practitioners/organisers and communities in response to an inherently changeable contemporary cultural context. The two rituals are inevitably transformed, according to Wyllie's concept (1968: 31), to identify and solve the incongruities that may arise from their changing spatio-temporal environments. For Wyllie, the solved incongruities contribute to the persistence of ritual across time and setting (Wyllie, 1968: 32). Because it directly engages with paticipants' context, the ritual congruity, perhaps, can also help sustain the belief and the authenticity of ritual. In this way, I suggest that the transformation of Parn Yak

[78] As in the case of the Wat Noinai Temple, which was previously described in this chapter.

and *sak yant* not only makes the rituals survive through time and settings, but also influences the way in which the sense of efficacy is constructed.

Tradition and authenticity

Rituals can be constantly changed, recreated, revived (Grimes, 1993: 8); nevertheless, the term 'traditional ritual' is usually viewed as a fixed, immutable object which is passed down through generation. The notion of 'tradition' is exemplified in Alfred Kroeber's book *Anthropology* (1948) in which he defines tradition as the "internal handing on through time" (Kroeber, 1948: 411).The concept of 'traditional ritual' as a time-honoured practice is widely observed in Thailand. From his ethnographic experience in Northern Thailand, Rhum (1996: 327) notes that when he asked Thai informants for an explanation of their specific cultural practices, they usually replied, 'It's just traditional' [Thai: เป็นประเพณี/*pen prapheni*].

> [The sentence 'It's traditional,' which was given as a response] was sometimes followed by reflections along the lines of 'now that you mention it, I don't know any other reason why we do this ... anyhow, it doesn't matter'. […] Other explanations given instead of, or in addition to, 'tradition' in the same contexts are 'it's been passed down this way' (sup sup kan ma) and/or 'it is handed down from the ancestors' (sup ma tae pu-nia) (Rhum, 1996: 327).

The notion of traditional ritual contributes to the creation of authenticity in Thai rituals. According to Rhum, Thai informants believe that rituals "are legitimate because they are handed down**" (**1996: 327**).** I often received similar explanations, particularly 'It's been passed down' [Thai: สืบๆ กันมา/*sup sup kan ma*], when participants in my fieldwork attempted to explain their belief in ritual.[79] For example, one female participant in Parn Yak strongly asserted, "If the power of ritual is not real, the ritual would not survive until today.[80][81]

[79] Nevertheless, most of them cannot identify the origin of the ritual. As described in my fieldnotes, most participants merely state that it was practiced a 'long time ago' or since ancient time [Thai: โบราณ/*boran*].

[80] My fieldnotes, April 2007.

[81] [Thai:ถ้ามันไม่จริง มันไม่อยู่มาจนป่านนี้หรอก/*tha mun mai jing, mun mai yuu ma jon pan nee lok*] I also received similar response with this sentence from several participants during my field studies.

The ideology of traditional Buddhist practices in Thailand was constructed in the mid-nineteenth century when the country became exposed to the West. In an attempt to modernize the country and avoid colonisation, King Rama IV[82] first established the concept of pure and authentic Buddhism through:

> his attacks on sacrifice, ritualism and improper monastic practice in the pursuit of a more authentic Buddhism also carried associations of a defence of Siamese Buddhism against popular irrationality and cultural backwardness […] [his movements] centred on the creation and institutionalisation of a rational, systematised and bourgeois Buddhism, which was textual in orientation and respectable on the world stage (White, 2003: 207, 208).

King Rama IV's activities on the purification of Buddhism intensified after the revolution in 1932 when the Thai government and elite groups attempted to modernize Thailand, while maintaining the country's cultural identity (Rhum, 1996: 351). This led to "the general rationalization of Thai religion through a 'scientific' Buddhism and the suppression of spirit cults" (ibid). These movements also contributed to the idea of pure and impure in Thai contemporary Buddhism. Erik White, in his essay on cultural politics in Thai contemporary Buddhism, states that the characteristics of other beliefs such as Hinduism and Animism which are usually found in Thai Buddhist rituals are regarded as "foreign to the fundamental original core of authentic Buddhism" (White, 2003: 208). This conception of the authenticity in Thai Buddhist practices became widely approved among Thai contemporary Buddhist scholars. For example, Vajiramedhi (2012), a famous preacher monk and a renowned scholar in Thailand, argues that in Buddhist teaching, a person's destiny does not depend on spiritual power; therefore, he urges Thai Buddhists to differentiate the pure Buddhist practices from the non-pure practices. Only the practices that belong to this notion of pure Buddhism can be defined as authentic and traditional, while:

> Popular beliefs and practices centring[*sic*] on spiritual entities and powers not recognised as fully legitimate in the newly revised Buddhist canon—ghosts, spirits, gods, protective amulets, magical mantras, and so on—were especially likely targets for repudiation (White, 2003: 208).

[82]Also known as King Mongkut (Reigned 1851-1868).

In this way, trance-possession rituals such as Parn Yak and *sak yant* have been criticized for being 'contaminated', resulting in the controversies over these rituals as discussed above.

Apart from the idea of pure Buddhism, the modern elements in trance-possession rituals, for instance, the sound technologies, are also sometimes considered as a threat. The concept of 'tradition' in Thai context becomes "a yardstick by which the people measure the acceptability of change […]" (Sahlins, 1993: 18). This leads to the challenges to the authenticity of ritual posed by several groups of Thais such as religious authorities. For instance, from my field experiences I found that the Department of Religious Affairs does not appear to acknowledge Parn Yak as a traditional Buddhist ritual. Considering the idea of 'tradition' as a pure and immutable object that is passed down rather than a process can construct a dichotomy between historical and modern, purity and contamination and authenticity and inauthenticity.

However, the notion of tradition as a fixed object may not exist since cultural practice is a dynamic process that responds to the environment. The conceptions of authenticity are also inherently fluid, i.e., it is "not a primitive given, but negotiable" (Cohen, 1988: 379). Authenticity cannot be "sustained by written formulas or formalized practices that are laid down in book or recipes […]" (Sjorslev, 2013: 121), but rather considered as a process that is socially constructed and depend on the interpretation (Bruner, 1994: 408; Moore, 2002: 210; Wang, 1999: 351, 355). Therefore, the notion of ritual authenticity varies across cultures and times.

As Ni Wang expressed:

> Things appear authentic not because they are inherently authentic but because they are constructed as such in terms of points of view, beliefs, perspectives, or powers (Wang, 1999: 351).

If the notion of authenticity depends on the individual's interpretation, it is also a matter of power and authority. Authenticity is "concerned with the views of those voices who are defining what is authentic and what is inauthentic […]" (Daboo,

2010: 216). Those who have power to define a ritual's authenticity can influence perceptions of a ritual's authenticity/inauthenticity. Bruner (1994: 399-400) suggests that the notion of authenticity can be ascribed and validated by those who have power. Similarly, Olsen (2002: 163) states:

> Authenticity, or more correctly the idea of authenticity, is a feature attributed to objects by actors in social processes marked by authority or power (Olsen, 2002: 163).

Those who have power to define a ritual's authenticity can influence both individuals and perceptions of 'authenticity/inauthenticity'. In the case of Thai contemporary trance-possession ritual, it is also important to the notion of belief. For example, non-practicing members of the rituals, particularly those who remain sceptical, may consider an authentic ritual as a traditional and pure practice, as it was defined by the powers of the social elite in the past, and by Thai contemporary scholars and religious authorities. However, the powers and authorities operate within the context of these rituals to establish authenticity as a truthful spiritual experience for those who believe and are involved with the practices. In a ritual context, the power to sanction authenticity lies in the authority of monks and the ritual space. In this way, the issue of power and authority incorporate with the conception of authenticity (Bruner, 1994: 400).

In his essay on the authentication of New Salem as the historical site, Bruner (1994: 400) states:

> The more fundamental question to ask here is not if an object or site is authentic, but rather who has the authority to authenticate, which is a matter of power—or, to put it another way, who has the right to tell the story (Bruner, 1994: 400).

Therefore, complex contradictions emerge, as the powers within and outside the context of these trance-possession rituals are not from the same source. The question of choosing who has the right and power to tell the story of the ritual can be complicated. As discussed earlier, the aspects of interpretation, perspective and belief are critical to the notion of authenticity.

In the context of Thai contemporary trance-possession rituals, the way in which the ritual authenticity is conceived by participants is determined by different groups of people, for example, monks and ritual organisers. Through the uses of power, authority and marketing, they set out to provide authentic ritual experiences for participants. Both in Parn Yak and *sak* yant, the monks and the ritual space hold the significant authority in the ritual event. Similarly, Vanessa Ochs (2007: 156), a scholar in religious studies, notes that participants in rituals believe in the ritual authenticity if those who are recognised as the authority figures make them believe that the ritual is authentic. Establishing belief depends on the practitioner's skill (ibid). As practitioners in Thai Buddhist rituals, monks may be regarded as having personal spiritual abilities; hence, they contribute to the ritual authenticity.

Merely belonging to the monkhood seems to be sufficient in providing a sense of ritual authenticity. Thomas Kirsch, an anthropologist in Southeast Asian studies, states that Thai people consider monks as 'mana-filled objects'. (Kirsch, 1977: 248). This makes them "stand at the apex of the Thai religious and social order" (ibid). Monks are recognised by Thai people as direct disciples of Buddha; therefore, it is believed that they have inherited Buddha's immense spiritual and virtuous power. For this reason, the presence of monks in rituals contributes to the participants' sense of authenticity. During rituals, monks are identified as 'sacred actors' who are worthy of veneration (Jerryson, 2001: 55). Furthermore, monks must strictly observe Buddhist precepts. This establishes a feeling that the performed rituals are genuine, because a fundamental Buddhist precept [Pali: *sila*] is to refrain from lies and deceit.

Gibson and Connell (2005: 138) assert, "Authenticity is not, however, only constructed through perceptions of authorship, but is also linked to place" (Gibson and Connell, 2005: 138). Ritual location and space are also an essential source of authenticity, especially within a Thai Buddhist context. Being temple residents, monks also gain a spatial authority while performing rituals. During my fieldwork at Wat Bang Phra, some tattoo wearers told me that they never fear that they will

be harmed by the trance-possession as long as it occurs inside the temple area, especially in the residence of their masters.[83]

The notion of authentic experience can also be perceived by the characteristics of the ritual place. The presence of monks, many consecrated statues of the Buddha and other religious relics cause Thai Buddhist temples to be regarded as a sacred space. Levi and Kocher (2010: 22-26) in their study on the function and psychology of sacred sites, state,

> Thai *wats* [temples] are designed to encourage an experience of respect toward the Buddha and his teachings. [...] the *wats* encourage an immersion experience that combines spirituality with celebration, which relates to their attitude of respect for spiritual forces" (Levi and Kocher2010: 23).

Furthermore, the temple space is regarded as regularly consecrated since many religious rituals are continually practiced there. Cultural context can contribute to a sense of authenticity. In her book on the establishment of a temple by Thai Diasporas in Wimbledon, Sandra Cate (2003: 24) states that from the Thai perspective, rituals must be performed only in spaces that are marked as sacred. Furthermore, the temple should resemble the temples in Thailand to make them appear 'proper' and 'real' (ibid). The sense of authenticity can be established through the fact that the rituals are conducted in temple spaces.

Ritual authenticity' is also determined by socio-economic factors. Although they have been criticised for belonging to commercial Buddhism, Thai trance-possession rituals still create an authentic ritual experience through the commodification of the monks' spiritual abilities and ritual objects. The spiritual powers of monks who perform rituals are often marketed by organisers to attract participants. Amulets and other ritual apparatuses are advertised as being consecrated by these monks;[84] hence they become authentic and contain spiritual power that can provide protection to the owners. A sociologist in tourism,

[83] My fieldwork notes, June 2012.
[84] Sometimes, these ritual objects are advertised as having been consecrated elsewhere by other more well-known monks prior to the rituals. These monks usually appear to be the masters of the monks who conduct the ritual. At Wat Noinai, the master of ceremonies announces that the chief monk in Parn Yak is a disciple of Luang Pu Tim whose spiritual abilities are widely famous in the country (my fieldnotes, 2nd December 2006).

Erik Cohen (1988: 378), states that despite the commodification, tourists can accept cultural products as authentic insofar as they are produced or performed by the local members. Cohen's statement on tourists' behaviour is similar to the participants' experience in Thai Buddhist rituals. As residents of the temple, the monks are regarded as natives to the site. Furthermore, they are considered as locals to the realm of ritual because of their role as ritual performers and their possession of virtuous and spiritual powers. The rituals and their objects that are processed by the monks are recognised as authentic.

According to Cohen (1988: 371), commercialisation is not necessarily a threat to the meaning of cultural products. The notion of *kamma* in Thai Buddhism also has influence in participants' acceptance of commercialised ritual. As discussed earlier, spending money on rituals is equal to making a donation to the temple.[85] This is viewed as bright *kamma*. Obeyesekere (1990: 123), in relation to Sri Lanka's Theravada Buddhist chanting ritual which is similar to Parn Yak in Thailand, states that attending and taking part in ritual activities can provide participants with protection in a 'worldly sphere', while the accumulation of bright *kamma* can help develop them on a spiritual level.[86] A female participant told me that it is necessary to spend money when attending the ritual, because the temple undertakes expenses in organising the events; otherwise it would constitute dark *kamma* for leaving the burden to the temple (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007).

One characteristic of Thai Buddhism is that tourists are not excluded from rituals. They are often encouraged to participate and observe the rituals (Levi and Kocher, 2010: 25). The temples, temple workers and the community also benefit economically from the event. Wyllie (1994: 80; 1968: 29), in his essay on the Aboakyer festival of Effutu people, notes that the visitors are regarded with a positive attitude, as local people understand the economic benefit that they can bring to the community. Van de Port (2005: 174) states in relation to the possession rituals in Bahian candomblé that "it can even be argued that the gaze of tourists and other outsiders is not—as one would think—a threat to the

[85] During my fieldwork, many participants told me that they do not mind spending money for good deeds if they can afford to do so (my fieldnotes, 1th and 7th April 2007).

[86] This may eventually lead to the *nibbāna* [Pali; Thai: Nipparn/นิพพาน], the ultimate goal in Theravada Buddhism.

authenticity of the spectacle, but a reinforcement of it" (Van de Port, 2005: 174). Although Parn Yak and *sak yant* are not ostensibly conducted to make a financial profit, attracting the onlookers and the media is important not only to the economic benefit, but also to the demonstration of the ritual authenticity. The temples and monks exposed to the media become well-known. Due to their reputations, they are usually seen as authentic.

Despite the fact that there are factors that can contribute to participants' acceptance of rituals, there is no single truth, because the perception of authenticity also depends on the individual's perspective (Wang, 1999: 355).Each individual defines the authenticity of ritual. This establishes the complexity of the rituals in a Thai contemporary context, as seen in the partial completion of Parn Yak due to the rain at Wat Jantaram, which was described earlier. Some participants left, while some participants continued with the ritual. A female participant told me that if the ritual is truly powerful, things would have gone smoothly. Being seen as an obstacle, the rain implies inauthenticity, and, thus, the ineffectuality of ritual. On the contrary, Mrs. M[87] and her family told me that the rain may have been a sign that the power of the ritual is authentic and powerful. She asserts that the rain is caused by ritual power and may function as consecrated water, which gives participants protection and cools their bodymind (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007).

Nevertheless, there is a complexity of the participants' experience of these contemporary rituals as the dichotomy between belief and unbelief is not apparent. During my fieldwork in Parn Yaks, most participants with whom I had conversations did not confirm complete belief in the authenticity of the practice; however, they still insisted that the power of the ritual existed. Several participants explained that they 'half believed and half disbelieved' (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007). This expression was often followed by a well-known phase in Thailand: 'If you don't believe it, do not insult it' [Thai: *maichueryaloblue/*ไม่เชื่ออย่าลบหลู่]. During Parn Yak at Wat Boonrod, a male participant stated, "I don't know if these things are true or not, but as it was done in the temple, the ritual will be enforced by the

[87] Mrs. M (age 44), personal communication, 7th April 2007.

virtuous powers of the Buddha through the chanting no matter what" (my fieldnotes, 1th April 2007)

Most participants and the monks did not explicitly express their certainty of the authenticity of trance-possession that occurred in rituals. For example, talking about possession in *sak yant*, Pra Narin[88] merely comments, "When a person highly focuses and totally immerses in the ritual practice, it is easy to be in trance". When I was involved in a group conversation at Luang Pi Peaw's residence about the 2012 *wai kru* ritual, a tattoo wearer told me that instead of using traditional ways to alleviate the symptoms of the possession,[89] some participants are beaten by volunteers who come from the army to provide security during the ritual. Most of them are possessed by the spirit in monkey tattoo. They jumped and clapped their hands to call other monkey tattoo wearers to join them. This makes the situation chaotic. He told me:

> It is ok if they are on their own, but they call for friends to join. So, some of them got beaten up. Then, they stayed quiet throughout the ritual. No one dared to be possessed again! [My translation].[90]

This was followed by loud laughter from him and other *sak yant* members. The people in this conversation were practicing members of *sak yant* who attended *wai kru* annually. They talked about their witnesses in trance-possession as if it is merely a theatrical performance; yet they told me that they completely believe in the power of *sak yant* and the possession by tattoos. Through participating and observing in a ritual, they embrace belief and make-believe, efficacy and entertainment. This ruptures the binary opposition between the truth and pretense. "It is important to realize that authenticity is a feeling, not a fact" (Ochs, 2007: 157), the experience of authenticity and inauthenticity in a ritual is a complex and fluid process as they can be nestled alongside each other and cannot be sustained by a polar opposition between belief and unbelief.

[88] Pra Narin, personal communication, 9th April 2009.
[89] Lift the legs of possessed person above the head and rubbing the ears.
[90] My fieldnotes, June 2012.

Relevant terms

Trance-possession

Although not regarded by monks and participants as a central focus of rituals, the widespread manifestations of trance-possession during the practice have made Parn Yak and *sak yant* well-known. The term 'trance-possession' in this thesis comes from my own attempt to explain the manifestations that occur in this type of ritual. This is, in part, because there is no Thai word that gives a definition of the English word 'trance'. English-Thai dictionaries[91] usually translate trance as a state of being 'inattentive' or 'absent-mindedness' [Thai: *pawang*/ภวังค์] or 'being confused' or 'stunned' [Thai: *ngonngun*/งงงัน]. Thais generally use the words *pawung* and *ngonngun* to describe one's inattention, distraction or forgetfulness in their everyday lives rather than relate the terms to a specific group of behaviours or psychopathological conditions, as in the case of trance. According to Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary (21st edition), trance is defined as:

> A sleeplike state, as in deep hypnosis, in which a person has limited awareness of his surroundings (Venes, 2009: 2353).

Similar to absent-mindedness, the two Thai words are regarded as pejorative terms for criticising one's lack of attention; therefore, they are rarely used in a ritual context. When describing the conditions that may be similar to what people in the West consider as a state of 'trance and possession', Thais use the term *khongkurn* [Thai: ของขึ้น] [92], which is specifically used in a contemporary Thai Buddhist ritual context, particularly in Parn Yak and *sak yant*. The notion of trance-possession, which is introduced in this thesis, is considered only in the context of those two rituals. Before moving on, *khongkurn* and its concept, the terms 'trance' and 'possession' will be discussed in order to explain how 'trance-possession' is employed in this thesis to denote the state of *khongkurn*.

[91] For example, the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC), 2009.The NECTEC is a government organisation under the Thai Ministry of Science and Technology, and their dictionary is widely used among Thai scholars.

[92] Thais also use the word *phikao* [Thai: ผีเข้า] specifically for the possessions by malevolent spirits. In Parn Yak and *sak yant*, they rather use the term *khongkurn* as the possessions can be from both benign and evil spirits. Both of these Thai terms will be discussed later.

Scholars from a variety of disciplines, for instance, psychology, anthropology and performance studies, suggest various definitions and approaches to the phenomenon of trance and possession. As they may be seen as having some similar features to disorders, such as hysteria and hallucination, trance and possession are treated as a pathological phenomenon by some scholars from medical and psychological studies, particularly in the past.

For example, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)* provide the criteria for the 'dissociative trance disorder' as "temporary marked alteration in the state of consciousness", "loss of customary sense of personal identity […]" and "[…] characterized by the replacement of customary sense of personal identity by a new identity (The American Psychiatric Association, 2000: 785). While describing the characteristics of the disorder as culturally determined, the *DSM-IV-TR* asserts that trance and possession in ritual practices are not considered to be a mental disorder (ibid). The universality of the criteria in *DSM-IV-TR* may be problematic, as the manual does not provide suggestions for distinguishing between pathological and cultural trances.

However, references to trance and possession as a form of 'dissociation' or 'displacement' as in psychology can cause confusion to those who are not familiar with the term as it is interpreted in psychology (Huskinson, 2010: 71). Morton Klass (2003: 79) notes that in Western psychopathological studies, the term generally connotes pathological conditions of a loss of consciousness. Using 'dissociation' as the description of trance or possession may be not the most appropriate for anthropologists, because it can reduce the concept to merely a category of illness (Klass, 2003: 69). Similar to Klass, Boddy (1988: 24) and Hollan (2000: 546), professors in medical anthropology, agree that because the term carries the implicit valuation from Western medicine, using 'dissociation' to refer to the phenomenon of possession can be problematic, as it may cause the overlooking the socio-cultural contexts that contribute to an individual's possession.

In his essay on psychological and cultural anthropology, Hollan (2000: 546) asserts,

> Possession behavior that is culturally normative, no matter how bizarre and irrational it appears from a Western point of view, should never be considered pathological or psychotic, at least as we use those terms normally (Hollan 2000: 546).

The term 'altered states of consciousness' (ASC) is used as an inclusive concept to refer to the experience that is seen as distinguishable from everyday life, and it is used among scholars across disciplines. The term was first introduced by a German psychiatrist, Ludwig (1968), and was brought into common usage by the works of Charles T. Tart who defined the experience of ASC as when a person feels a:

> qualitative shift in his pattern of mental functioning […] not just a quantitative shift […], but also that some quality or qualities of his mental processes are different. (Tart, 1969: 1)

With its descriptions (for example, Ludwig, 1969: 13-14; Tart, 1969: 1), ASC can refer to various states, whether they are religious trances, spirit possessions, hallucinations or drug-induced. Their phenomenon is often subsumed under the broad category of altered states of consciousness. Similarly, spirit possession is also referred as an ASC in the*Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005) (Crapanzano, 2005: 8687).

Bourguignon, an anthropologist who is well-known for her work in trance, possession and consciousness, used the term 'ASC' extensively (For example, Bourguignon, 1968).[93] She observes that ASC can be used conveniently as it does not have to engage with a particular theory or "the appropriateness of a language of psychopathology in general" (1973: 5). She also notes that 'ASC', 'trance' and 'possession' are used "widely, inconsistently, and often interchangeably" (Bourguignon, 1973: 4).

[93] Bourguignon, E. (1968) *A Cross-Cultural Study of Dissociational States.* Columbus: Research Foundation, Ohio State University.

Nevertheless, the term ‘ASC’ is sometimes criticised when used within a specific cultural context. Cardena (2011: 4) observes that Tart’s concept is “difficult to operationalize”; therefore, those who use the term “often fail to specify what they are talking about” (2011: 3-4). Although considering the term as a ‘psychiatrically neutral concept’, Rouget (1985: 16) in his study of music and trance, incisively remarks on the interchangeable uses of trance and ASC: “Why not simply content oneself with calling a trance a trance and leave it at that?” (Rouget, 1985: 17).

The confusing aspects of ASC have sprung from the terminological problem of consciousness. Klass (2003: 80) also proposes the same question. In his critique on the term ‘dissociation’, he states that if the term is regarded as a ‘loss of consciousness’, “What is exactly […] meant by *consciousness*?” (Klass, 2003: 80). Cardena (2011: 2) also asserts that concepts of consciousness are used differently among scholars; nonetheless, they often fail to make distinctions among them. Furthermore, if it can be labelled, as ‘altered’ or ‘unusual’ (as in Crapanzano, 2005: 8687), it implies that there is a ‘usual’ or normal state of consciousness. This raises another question: What is the ‘normal’ state of consciousness? Several scholars, including Blackmore (2005: 100-101), Chalmers (1995: 200-219), Dennett (1991: 21-42), Velmans (2009: 139-156), and Zinberg (1977: 1-36) also address these conceptual difficulties of the term.

Tart (1973: 164-165) also acknowledges that ASC are often used in a broad sense that mean ‘almost nothing in particular’. He addresses the complexities of the term:

> Many people now use the term, "state of consciousness" for example, simply to mean whatever is on their mind. So if I pick up a water tumbler and look at it, I am in water tumbler state of consciousness […] [t]hen an altered state of consciousness simply means that what you are thinking about or experiencing now is different or altered from what it was a moment ago(Tart, 1973: 164-165).

This led Tart (1973: 165,176) to introduce a precise term ‘discrete states of consciousness’ (d-SoC) to refer to the multiple states of consciousness that present an active and dynamic configuration of subsystems. As Tart states above, human’s consciousness is dynamic. It contains multiple dimensions as ‘different states of consciousness prevail at different times for different reasons’

(Zinberg, 1977: 1). In his book *Zen and the Brain*, Jame Austin, a neurologist, states that consciousness's "dynamic properties do not allow it to hold still long enough to be easily characterized" (Austin, 1999: 297). It is also difficult to find an objective way to characterise ASC, since the content of consciousness is an internal process; therefore, the experience differs individually (Austin, 1999: 297; Scheiffele, 2001: 180; Cardena, 2011: 10-11). Austin (1999: 306) observes that multiple states of consciousness have 'no fixed boundaries' but 'only edge' during their constant changes. (Austin, 1999: 306).

To denote the overlaps and multiplicity of states of consciousness, Zinberg (1977: 1) suggests using the adjective 'alternative' rather than 'altered' because 'Alternate states of consciousness is a plural, all-inclusive term, unlike usual state of consciousness, which is merely one specific state of ASC'(1977: 1). Agreeing with Zinberg, Austin also employs 'alternate' to Tart's more precise term 'd-SoC' in which Austin refers to each state as "temporal clustering of the content and organization of consciousness" (Austin, 1999: 306).

The term 'ASC' is still widely used in contemporary literature from various disciplines[94] including performance studies, for instance, Phillip Zarrilli (2011: 301-326),[95] Eberhard Scheiffele (2011: 179-191). Nonetheless, the conceptual difficulties are usually acknowledged at the outset of the work, and the term is primarily used for the reason of 'convenience' (For example, Bourguignon, 1973: 5; Cardena, 2011: 2). The phenomenon of 'trance' and 'possession' are still associated with the term, both as subcategories and interchangeable in the usage. Therefore, problematizing ASC as seen above may help shape the concept of 'trance-possession' for the purpose of this thesis. It is a clear indication that it is neither about being in a 'normal' or 'trance' state, but a shift that occurs over time. The processes of trance and possession are indeed an 'embodiment', a term that encompass both bodymind experience and socio-cultural aspects, and also carries with it connotations of the dynamic processes when a bodymind is embodied by powers of spirits. Strathern (1995: 117) notes that 'consciousness' has an undertone of being a 'mentalistic term'. In order to avoid

[94] For example, see Cardena and Winkelman (2011).
[95] Zarrilli also uses both term 'altered' and 'alternate' in his chapter (Zarrilli, 2011: 301).

a body-mind dualism, a growing number of anthropologists[96] prefer using the notion of embodiment to refer to the phenomenon of trance and possession (Stoller, 1992: 57; Strathern, 1995: 117-118; Malik, 2009: 82-83).

Referring to trance and possession as embodied phenomenon places bodymind at the centre of the process. Csordas (2002: 58), a theorist in embodiment, suggests that body (and mind) should be understood beyond 'the existential ground of culture'. Therefore, trance behaviour may not only be dependent upon the bodymind of people in a trance, but may also concern culture and social interaction in the context in which they exist (Rosette, 1980: 1). Every trance and possession is not the same in every culture (Winkelman, 1986: 174). Therefore, trance and possession, as a complex embodied phenomena, are best understood within they own cultural context. Nonetheless, the notion of bodymind in trance and possession ritual cannot be separated from the cultural aspects, as the authenticity "is rooted not just in cultural textuality but in processes of the mind/body from which embodied experience itself infuses cultural form" (Budden, 2003: 47).

Embodiment can be an appropriate term for describing the culturally-specific phenomenon of trance-possession known as '*khongkurn*' in Thai contemporary rituals. Instead of being a fixed state, *khongkurn*, particularly in Parn Yak and *sak yant*, is a process embodiment and can indicate the complexities of the dynamic interaction among a person, his/her cultural context and the spiritual power that resides in the body. Due to its embodied nature of socio-cultural beliefs and expressions, *khongkurn* cannot be referred as either a trance or possession. In the West, there are scholars who differentiate trance from possession, for example, Lewis (1971: 37-65) and Bourguinon and Rouget (1985: 3-63). However, a tidy and cross-cultural description, especially one with the distinction of belief-behaviour can often prove to be problematic and diffuse (McCreery, 1979a: 21). For example, trance is a psychological behaviour (ASC), while possession involves the belief in the presence of spirits (Bourguignon, 1976: 8). However, I would argue that as discussed above, both are culturally informed.

[96] For example, Stoller (1992: 53-68); Pratt (2007: xxxiv-xxxvii, 158); David (2008: 97) Malik (2009: 82-83).

By the very nature of *khongkurn*, it is difficult to distinguish the experience of trance from possession during the event of the rituals. Furthermore, it may not be suitable to only use the term 'possession' to refer to *khongkurn*. To some extent, possession has the general connotation of suffering from the intrusion of evil spirits (Huskinson and Schmidt, 2010: 7). Although a growing number of scholars argue that possession can come from both malevolent and benign spirits (Cardena et al., 2009: 174; Huskinson and Schmidt, 2010: 8), the term still indicates spirits as the occupiers or replacement of the bodymind. Rather than using the term *khongkurn*, Thais use the word *phikao* [Thai: ผีเข้า], which literally means 'to be possessed by evil spirits' to refer to this notion of 'possession'.[97] In such cases, although some possessed people also attend Parn Yak, the malevolent spirits are exorcised preferably though other specific rituals.

According to Thai belief, a person can be embodied by spirits, which can take many forms, from demons to human souls and animal spirits to celestial beings. While some people may be embodied by spirits from time to time, there are some who have indigenous spirits residing within their bodies, in many cases, since early childhood. In both cases, the spirits can dwell in the possessed person for such a long period of time that it may be impossible to completely exorcise them. Many people may never or rarely show any possession symptoms; therefore, it can be complicated to explain the manifestations as trance or possessions. Nonetheless, they and their acquaintances believe that there are spirits residing in their bodies, and it is necessary to attend trance-possession rituals such as Parn Yak to empower the good spirits or diminish the negative power of evil spirits within them. This 'long term possession' includes the practice of *sak yant* where a person voluntarily embodies spirits through the bodily experience of tattoo. The manifestation of this type of trance-possession in both *sak yant* and Parn Yak is usually referred to as *khongkurn*.

The word *khongkurn* in Thai literally means 'the thing is coming up'. For Thais, *khong* [Thai: ของ] can be interpreted in many ways. As a noun *khong* can be simply regarded as 'the thing' or 'something'. It is also used as a verb meaning 'to

[97] This is particularly true in the case of the possession that the spirit immediately enters the body of an individual who will suddenly behave as in an altered (alternate) personality to indicate that he/she is possessed.

possess' or 'belong to' (Thai Royal Institute, 1999). When Thais say someone has *khong*, it means that the person has something within him/her. To this extent, the word *khong* can also be interpreted as 'the (supernatural) power'. As the word *kurn* in Thai means 'to raise, to move upward, to develop or to happen' (Thai Royal Institute, 1999), the word *khongkurn* refers to the symptom showing how power is moved from residing unrecognised inside the body to demonstrating its existence. This power not only refers to the spirit, but also to the negativities within the bodymind. Therefore, the word *khongkurn* is applied only to the existing possession prior to the ritual, where an individual develops the trance-possession behaviours of the spiritual power that already resides within the body[98]. The phenomenon of *khongkurn* is the process of embodiment over time. The spirit's power is embodied during rituals and manifested through symptoms and behaviours, such as goosebumps and numbness[99], which may not be noticeable to observers, or obviously displayed in ways such as swaying, screaming and acting like animals. For the observers, it is not easy to ascertain whether or when the consciousness shifts or goes into altered or alternate states. Rituals play a significant role in the process of trance-possession. For example, the uses of sound and atmosphere can trigger and help to sustain trance behaviours (Rosette, 1980: 1; Rouget, 1985: 65).

A tattoo wearer at Wat Bangphra explains the embodied process of *khongkurn* in *sak yant* rituals as follows:

> The body is like water, the spirits of tattoos are like oil. When you put them together in a jar, of course they still look differently but they will stay together inside anyhow. The ritual is like fire that generates the heat to the water and oil making them blend and become more harmonious. At this point, the spirits have an opportunity to manifest their power. That's when *khongkurn* occurs (my fieldnotes, June 2012).

[98] As *khongkurn* refers to the symptom of possession, for many Thais, the term *khongkurn* is often used to refer to the symptom of insanity (NECTEC's Lexitron Dictionary, 2009) or the behaviours of a person in an enraged state. This is because, when people show their anger or when people are in a state of insanity or unconsciousness, their behaviour is very different from when they are in their normal state. These behaviours are considered to be similar to those which occur in trance-possession. When one says someone is *khongkurn*, it means that the person's actions are very strange or emotional compared to his/her acts in everyday life.

[99] From my fieldwork, in both *sak yant* and Parn Yak, most participants who believe they have spirits within their bodies have the feeling of goosebumps and numbness.

Due to the complexity of this phenomenon in a Thai context, I prefer to use the two terms together as 'trance-possession' to specifically refer to the phenomenon of *khongkurn, in* which trance and possession are experienced together.

Therapeutic

Explaining this term is not simple. In several publications, when the author uses the word 'therapeutic', surprisingly, I could not find one definition of this term in its own right. Despite the fact that many drama practitioners use the term 'therapeutic' in their works, for example, Jones (1996), Thompson (2006) and Somers (2008), little attention has been paid to what exactly the word means to the practices. For example, Somers states, 'The successful drama experience is implicitly therapeutic' (2008: 66), because it:

> provides experience that leads to **personal growth** through meaning-making in a complex, reflexive relationship between dramatic experience and personal identity (Somers, 2008: 66: my emphasis).

Nevertheless, Somers neither explains how the term 'therapeutic' is understood within his practices nor defines what he means by personal growth in relation to 'therapeutic experience'.

Looking closely at the term itself, according to the Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary (2011), 'therapeutic' is defined as causing someone to feel happier, more relaxed or healthier. The Oxford Dictionary (2012) defines 'therapeutic' as an adjective that relates to the healing of disease, administered or applied for reasons of health. It further adds, 'having a good effect on the body or mind; contributing to a sense of wellbeing'.

With regard to its etymology, the term 'therapeutic' derives from the Greek word 'therapeuein' which primarily means 'to treat, to serve or to attend' (Robertson, 2005). Like its predecessor, the term 'therapeutic' also has a notion of 'healing not curing'[100] (Van der Eijk, 2005: 114-115). Therapeutic practices are often regarded as ways to help subjects achieve a state of wellbeing rather than

[100] The definition of the term 'healing' will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

providing a one-off solution. Therapeutic could be a term that is very compatible with applied drama, as most practices are in part intended both directly and indirectly to help create a sense of wellbeing.

Despite the many uses of this term, I prefer to use 'therapeutic' in its simplest form, adopting the straightforward definition: "causing someone to feel happier [...]" (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2011). Throughout this thesis, I apply 'therapeutic' to those practices that involve the achievement of a state of wellbeing, establishing a sense of efficacy—in other words, feeling better. The term may also be used when one does not have an undesired condition but has been through the experience that made him/her feel better than their normal state.

When defining the term in this way, therapeutic efficacy depends on the participants or the practitioners who subjectively verify the feeling and the practice. Therefore, I will assess the term 'therapeutic' in this thesis mostly based on the expressions of my informants regarding how they feel and the socio-cultural factors that lead them to express that they feel a sense of efficacy.[101]

A Theoretical Framework

This section puts together the theoretical ideas underpinning the study. This research is based on the premise that a ritual is an embodied phenomenon. Therefore, methodologies and discourses from performance scholars concerned with the dynamic of lived experience used in the research, enable the understanding of the rituals' spatial and temporal dimensions, which contribute to the construction of participants' sense of efficacy. The study also specifically utilises perspectives from a field of discursive practices known as 'applied drama'.

[101]The concept of illness, mental health and healing of Thai people will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

‘Applied drama’[102] generally refers to disciplines and practices of performance activities that differentiate from those that are practiced in conventional theatre settings (Nicholson, 2005: 2). James Thompson, an applied drama scholar, notes that applied drama has the capacity to take theatre practices “out of the obscure black boxes and bring them to the ‘open air’”[103] (Thompson, 2006: 19). Applied drama practices are usually adapted to specific motives, goals, audiences and settings. This results in an extensive range of practices with new styles, techniques and categories continually emerging. Examples of well-known practices include drama/theatre in education (DIE, TIE), theatre in prisons, therapeutic drama, drama for development and community drama/theatre.

From my experience[104], the strength of applied drama is the theoretical awareness of the therapeutic potentiality of performance and the commitment to engage with participants’ embodied experiences to perceive the personal sense of efficacy. For this reason, this thesis aims to demonstrate how applied drama’s discourses and perspectives on the embodied process of transformation may offer a means to engage with the complex ways in which ritual efficacy is constructed in relation to the lived experience.

Nevertheless, I am also aware of the fact that there may be some potential problematic issues related to the methodological approach. Using the Western-developed discipline of performance studies, particularly applied drama, as a framework, may lead to the potential danger of constructing a general and universal model to examine culturally articulated practices. Throughout this research, cultural issues have been treated with care. Together with embodied experience, participants’ expressions depend on sociological, historical,

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[102] Although the terms ‘applied drama’ and ‘applied theatre’ are widely used, it is often difficult to decide exactly how a practice should be categorized. Most scholars do not distinguish clearly between the two terms. Some scholars, such as Nicholson (2005), prefer to use the term ‘applied drama’ to ‘applied theatre’ for the reason that in public perception, the term ‘theatre’ is associated with the buildings and objects in theatre production rather than the practices. Some scholars, for instance Taylor (2002: 88), see ‘applied theatre’ as being associated with performance-based practices, while ‘applied drama’ may refer to process-based learning. Although both terms are almost indistinguishable, the word ‘drama’ offers an inclusive concept and the idea of creating a performance, while ‘theatre’ may be solely associated with performance and the making process of it. For this reason, I prefer to refer to the discipline as ‘applied drama’ in this thesis.

[103] Some applied theatre can occur in a theatre space, although it is not conducted from the conventional context of theatre, but concentrates on the process of creating rather than the performance itself.

[104] From my education and practices in applied drama.

economic and cultural factors that contribute to the construction of their ritual experiences and beliefs. The specific nature of experience, particularly in relation to the ritual's potential efficacy, is examined through an analysis of these factors and their contexts in Thai culture. A consideration of the culturally-specific nature of rituals can also enhance an understanding of how ritual practices contribute to the embodiment of beliefs and cultural meaning.

While situating itself within the broad field of performance studies, this research incorporates the methodologies surrounding the issues of performance, beliefs, ritual and cultural practices found within the theoretical frameworks of a variety of academic areas in order to investigate the factors cited above. Due to its unique quality of being 'unfixed' and richly engaged with the notion of 'presence', the dynamics and fluidity of lived and embodied experiences of performers, and the discipline of performance studies is interdisciplinary in its nature. As Schechner asserts, "Performance studies is "inter"—in between. It is intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural—and therefore inherently unstable" (2006: 360).

This thesis argues that approaching ritual as a culturally informed practice can be achieved through analysis with reference to its own context, the Thai perspectives of bodymind, wellbeing, beliefs and Theravada Buddhism, all of which are necessarily featured throughout the research. This interdisciplinary study initially draws on concepts and discourses from areas such as anthropology, sociology, and Buddhist studies which encompass Thai historical and socio-cultural aspects. These areas can offer insights into the phenomena of ritual and its efficacy as well as broaden the understanding of the fieldwork investigation.

Key issues emerging in the research include the interrelationship of body and mind, embodiment, spatio-temporal dimensions of lived experience, and transformation, which reveals the complex ways the embodied phenomenon of rituals can contribute to participants' sense of transformation. In the rest of this chapter, theoretical perspectives from the disciplines cited above will be examined in relation to these key issues. These issues also become the fundamental points shaping the analysis of trance-possession rituals in a contemporary Thai context. The strategy underlying this examination is to establish a theoretical background to reveal the complexity of the two ritual

practices in the Thai contemporary context, which cannot be directly accessed through the field research. This will be applied to an investigation of the experiences of participants I encountered during my fieldwork, with a focus on the socio-cultural factors that contribute to their expressing a sense of efficacy. By addressing these issues, the thesis will be able to engage with the ways trance-possession rituals operate within Thai contemporary culture, particularly in relation to participants' articulation of ritual efficacy.

Bodymind

As an embodied process, the body of participants become the locus for ritual acts and experiences. There has been a growing amount of interest regarding the notion of body as an experiential and cultural site since Descartes' radical idea of the disembodied mind has become increasingly rejected in recent decades, especially from performance studies and anthropology. Descartes' idea (Descartes, 1968: 54) establishes not only the body-mind dualism, but also suggests that mind is more valuable than body, because only mind can construct the idea of self as found in his renown saying: *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). The body is seen as only a material object. Therefore, the problem of how mind and body interact occurs. In Merleau-Ponty's attempts through phenomenology to solve the problem, which later contributed to the development of the theories of embodiment, he asserts,

> The union between soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought together by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence (Merleau-Ponty: 1962: 89).

In a cultural context of eastern Asian countries such as Thailand,[105] the concept of mind and body as being interrelated is explicitly exemplified in performance practices where practitioners do not see the division between the body and mind, but rather see the body as representing "the mental, emotional, cosmological, and philosophical modes of existence"[106] (Zarrilli, 2002: 93). Therefore, they

[105] The Thai worldview on body and mind, particularly in relation to wellbeing, will be discussed in Chapter 3.
[106] This leads to the psychophysical training, for which Zarrilli is internationally known, as well as his use of various Asian martial arts to train performers.

usually focus on "how the mind-body relationship *becomes* or *changes* through training […]" (Yuasa, 1993: 62: original emphasis).

The notion of the interrelationship of body and mind is also grounded in the Theravada Buddhist culture. In his book, *In the Hope of Nibbana: An Essay on Theravada Buddhist Ethics*, Winston King emphasises,

> At any given moment of experience, body-mind represents an intimate organic unity. For though Buddhism recognizes a polarity between mental and physical constituents of sentient beings, it never sharply divides them but on the contrary strongly emphasizes the close relationship of all mental and physical states (King, 1964, p. 19).

A scholar in Buddhism and psychology, Johansson also defines the process of human life in the Theravada Buddhist worldview as 'psychophysical' (1979: 41, 217). This notion of a psychophysical state is sometimes referred to as 'bodymind.' David Edward Shaner, a professor in Asian studies and philosophy, describes this as the "presence of both aspects in all experience" (Shaner, 1985: 45). In Buddhism, the bodymind is known as *namarupa* [Pali; Thai: นามรูป/*Namarup*] (Buddhadasa, 1999). Buddhadasa (ibid), one of the most revered Thai monks and a Buddhist scholar, explains the notion of *namarupa* as one in which every human being requires these two elements in order to be in the cycle of existence [Pali: *sangsara*; Thai: สังสารวัฏ/*Sangsaravat*]. S.N. Goenka, a renowned Theravada Buddhist teacher, also explains,

> When the body experiences any sensation, it also experiences the perception or the feeling that occurs towards that sensation. Likewise, when any feeling, emotion or thought happens within the mind, there will always be a sensation which appears in response (Goenka, 2007: 76) [My translation].

From the Buddhist perspective, an understanding [of the world][107] cannot come from the analytic method, but rather, it comes from a synthesis of experiences (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987: 13). In this way, body and mind are seen by Buddhists as equally important, because they are both present during the experience. This notion of bodymind is revealed throughout my investigation of

[107] The notion of 'being-in-the-world' will be discussed later.

Thai perspectives on healthcare and wellbeing.[108] This concurs with Scheper-Hughes and Lock, scholars in medical anthropology, who assert, 'Mind and body are inseparable in the experiences of sickness, suffering, and healing […]' (1987: 30). Therefore, body and mind are seen as an inseparable crucial element in Thai cultural therapeutic approaches, for example, the Parn Yak and *sak yant* rituals. In this sense, this perspective also impacts the way in which these rituals and their efficacy are conceptualised and practiced.

Body as an active experiential site for transformation

Some scholars consider the body as a place for inscriptions that can reveal society and culture, viewing the body as "the inscribed surface of events" (Foucault, 1991: 148). Similarly, Mary Douglas, in her 1971 essay, *Do Dogs Laugh? A Cross-cultural Approach to Body Symbolism*, proposes the framework of studying the reflection of social situations on the human body. The basis of this idea is that the body is a vehicle that "communicates information for and from the social system in which it is a part" (Douglas, 2003: 165). Although the body can be a site of cultural expression, this notion offers the body as only a fixed passive state, or as Tim Ingold, a social anthropologist (1999), refers to it, a 'vessel' in which cultural content can be poured.

Instead of considering the body as passive, it should be regarded as active, pliable and in the process of becoming. A scholar in women's studies, Elizabeth Grosz refers to this concept as the 'plasticity' of the body, because it is "capable of being formed and organised" (1987: 3). In her book, *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy***,** Ellsworth notes that learning develops in embodiment as the body "[c]ontinuously and radically in relation with the world, with others, and with what we make of them" (Ellsworth 2005: 4). David George, in his essay, "Performance Epistemology*"*, similarly states, "Experience is also a form of knowledge gained as first hand, knowledge gained from praxis" (George, 1996: 23). Therefore, the body is not only a place for representation or expression of the culture in which it exists, it can also be regarded as an experiential site for transformation both in and of itself.

[108] Thai perspectives on health, illness and wellbeing will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3.

The dynamic process of the embodied actions is greatly emphasised in Theravada Buddhist practices. Malalasekera, a Sri Lankan scholar in Theravada Buddhism, writes:

> [I]n the Buddha's teaching, the individual's being is, in fact, a becoming, a coming-to-be, something that happens, i.e., an event, a process (1964: 146).

Professor Walpola Rahula, a Theravada Buddhist monk, also remarks on the interfusion of the bodymind actions.

> It is not correct to say that life is moving, but life is movement itself. Life and movement are not two different things (Rahula, 1974: 26).

Scholars within the field of performance studies also show a consensus on the transformable quality of the body. Schechner states, “The body is an organism of endless adaptability” (1973: 132). In dance ethnology, Deidre Sklar also opposes the idea of ‘body as a vessel’ stating,

> The body does not hold experience; rather, it *is* experience, a process rather than an object (Sklar, 2001: 194) [original emphasis].

The transformation in cultural performances, such as ritual, is also primarily grounded in and processed through the body. Participants do not merely attend and visualise a transformation; rather, the sense of efficacy is developed through the performing of tasks in the ritual and through the fact that participants are having a lived experience. Daboo states,

> It is the experience of the performance which acts as the agent in the process of transformation or efficacy within the bodymind of the performer, whether in something labelled a ‘ritual’ with an intentional focus on a culturally determined understanding of ‘healing’, or for a musician or dancer engaging in the process of performance in a range of social or professional contexts (Daboo, 2010: 38-39).

Likewise, Sklar asserts, “The potential for transformation lies in a property of *doing*: one does and feels oneself doing at the same time” (2001: 184: original emphasis).

Understanding the body (or more accurately, bodymind) as an active experiential site for transformation can offer my research the ground to draw upon the exploration of the sense of therapeutic transformation that happens within respondents' bodymind. Furthermore, I found that through the perspective of performance studies, the potential for transformation lies in the experience. It is particularly useful for examining how participants' manifestation of rituals and their relationships towards ritual objects and space can contribute to the process of efficacy.

Body as 'being-in-the-world'

As 'body' is a process, which can organise, apprehend and become (Sklar, 2001: 194), it also creates the notion of 'self' during its moments of becoming. Drawing on George (1996: 23) and Sklar (2001: 194) as cited above, the body is also a form of knowledge, a knowledge of self as being in the world. Through its existence and actions, the body becomes a locus of identity and culture. Using this concept, forms of socio-cultural knowledge are embodied, which then interpret, constitute and express the knowledge of self and culture. Due to the body's dynamic quality of being 'a state of becoming', this occurs constantly and simultaneously through lived experiences.

In his book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty discusses the body in relation to the context in which it exists.

> We are in the world through our body, and […] we perceive that world within our body […] by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall rediscover ourself, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 239).

Together with Bourdieu's concepts of '*habitus*'[109] and 'socially informed body' (1977: 124), Merleau-Ponty's perspective is examined and developed by a

[109] The term was introduced by Marcel Mauss in his 1934 essay "Les Techniques du Corps" [The body techniques]. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* refer to the "[s]ystems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them" (Bourdieu, 1972: 72).

cultural and medical anthropologist, Thomas Csordas, who suggests that embodiment can be a paradigm for studying self and culture.

> If embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience, then studies under the rubric of embodiment […] are about culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the-world (Csordas, 1999, p. 143).

Considering Merleau-Ponty and Csordas' statements, the 'world', in the form of a geographical and cultural context, can be an external force underlining the potential transformation that occurs in individuals. The experience cannot be examined as an isolated object, since the body is "always already in the world" (Csordas, 1993: 138). With this concept, I suggest, the examination of the world as it is perceived may reveal not only the specific nature of experience, but also how cultural knowledge is formed and articulated within a given culture, as it does in my research. Approaching embodied experience in this way may be matched with Csordas's notion of 'somatic modes of attention' which follow:

> [C]ulturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others (Csordas, 1993: 138).

In this sense, the presence and experience of others' bodies is also significant to the expression of one's experience. In relation to my field research in Parn Yak and *sak yant*, Csordas's concept of 'embodiment as a paradigm' and 'somatic modes of attention' are useful in understanding of the presence and the actions of the monks and of other participants and how this contributes to one's sense of transformation during their lived experience in ritual. Fischer-Lichte, in her book, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, states, "[t]he bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance" (2008: 32). The meanings of ritual are also embodied, conceptualised and generated through those who are attending the ritual, for example, participants, monks, onlookers, etc. Therefore, the perception of the world of the individual is super-fluid: it is constructing and creating itself concurrently.

The interpretation of the world

In his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), influenced by the sociologist Max Weber, Geertz states that man is a creature who lives suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun (1973: 5). The web that a human being is surrounded by is culture, which means not only the things, values or beliefs that people create, but, also the public and individual meanings that people learn and how they interpret the world around them. For Geertz, 'meaning' is the meaning of the symbols that humans create for interpreting, understanding and communication.

> In any case, the culture concept to which I adhere denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life (Geertz, 1973: 89).

Considering body as a fluid state of becoming in a given cultural and environmental context, I suggest that Geertz's notion of 'web of significance' is the product of embodied experience. In this sense, the 'web' is continually spun and the 'symbol' is a process in which the meanings are constantly being constructed by and through the body. Extending Geertz's cultural analysis to the theories of embodiment may enable us to gain a greater understanding of the means through which ritual participants 'communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitude' by examining the way in which the 'web' is spun by the lived experience in a particular cultural context, as it is addressed in this thesis.

It is worth noting that although being a seminal scholar, Geertz's interpretive approach has often drawn a great deal of criticism. For example, Geertz is often censured for being too interpretive (Ortner, 1999: 1). He seems to invest much of his ethnographic research in how to interpret and analyse symbols within the cultural context that he is studying in order to understand people in that culture, i.e., "seeing their experiences within the framework of their own idea of what selfhood is" (Geertz, 1983: 59). However, I suggest that the body as a state of becoming and experience is an issue in which Geertz seems to lack interest. This causes him to be criticised for the elusiveness of his symbolic approach.

According to Geertz, a symbol is anything that has a meaning for the individuals, 'a vehicle for a conception' (Geertz, 1973: 91). It can refer to any object, event, quality and relation that belong to people (ibid). Geertz asserts that the symbols should be examined in the same way as reading and interpreting a manuscript. The 'thick description' approach is employed to explain the meanings of symbols within the 'cultural web' (Geertz, 1973: 10). A cultural anthropologist, Sherry Ortner (1984: 129), argues that symbols should not be studied in themselves, but for how they shape the way that people see, feel and think about the world. This critique may lie in the fact that, although he acknowledges that symbols are socially and culturally constructed within their given culture (Geertz, 1973: 91), his theoretical approach to symbol as a 'text' cannot offer the understanding of the complexity of the embodied experience as a process. Focusing on the study of symbols, he fails to acknowledge the value of questions, such as why and how the meaning is embodied and expressed. As Martin (1993: 275) observes,

> A reader of a text might well ask not only what the text means but also why the text was produced in the first place […]. Just as a reader might want to know how the text developed, a social scientist might want to know how a culture developed. Just as he/she might wonder why one text has a particular form while a similar text has a different one, a social scientist might wonder why a culture has a particular form while another culture has a different one […] (Martin, 1993: 275).

From the perspective of embodiment, the explanation of why the text/culture was produced, developed and has a particular form that is distinguished from others may be revealed by the exploration of the embodiment that constitutes the particular form of culture. In my research, I found that the interpretive approach of a 'thick description' can provide a useful means to deal with the rich, comprehensive and complex information gathered from documents and fieldwork. This thick description of the elaborate details during ethnographic moments helped me to "clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement" (Geertz, 1973: 16), especially when my research position constantly shifted along the continuum of the outsider-insider. In this way, I suggest that Geertz's understanding of symbol can be extended to include the notion of embodiment. Symbols can be viewed as the meaning of the world where the body exists, experiences and performs. Therefore, symbols, as a vehicle of perception,

are grounded in and processed through the body. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, an interdisciplinary scholar, states:

> Any conception of man's relationship to the world must be based upon knowledge of his consciousness body in a *living* context to the world (Sheets-Johnstone, 1979: 12).

To explore the meanings of cultural symbols is to examine the body in relation to the world. In this sense, my own interpretation of Geertz's approach is that symbols are not a fixed object to be read as a text that signifies culture. Rather symbols should be interpreted as they are actively embodied, conceptualised and expressed through experiences. This is addressed in my research: symbols, i.e. ritual objects, events, space, time, and expressions of people are approached to question how they are embodied and conceptualised within the live phenomena of rituals. In this way, we can see the experience of others, as Geertz claims, "within the framework of their own idea of what selfhood is" (1983: 59).

Experiencing is believing

Being told by ten mouths is not equal to seeing with one's own eyes.
Having ten pairs of eyes to see is not equal to touching with one's own hand.
Thai proverb [My translation]
[Thai: สิบปากว่าไม่เท่าตาเห็น สิบตาเห็นไม่เท่ามือคลำ สิบมือคลำไม่เท่าลงมือทำเอง]

While beliefs are conceptualised and embodied through the acts in ritual, the ritual constitutes the belief. As discussed above, the sense of efficacy is developed through participants' experience and the world in which the body inhabits is embodied, conceptualised, and established through the experience. Being an experiential site, the body also holds "a critical place in the social construction of reality" (Bell, 1992: 95). Alva Noë, a professor of philosophy working on consciousness and perception, wrote,

> Experience has only content thanks to the established dynamics of interaction between perceiver and world (Noë, 2004: 216).

Belief and cultural knowledge are embodied and expressed through ritual experience. Simultaneously, the experience of an individual also constitutes his/her meanings of the ritual acts, hence the embodiment of belief. In this way,

‘doing’, as Bell states “is key to what make ritual, theater, and spectacle what they are” (1997: 160). In his essay on the performance reality of ritual, Schieffelin asserts, “Performativity is not only endemic to humans being-in-the-world but fundamental to the process of constructing a human reality” (1998: 205). In this sense, the phrase ‘seeing is believing’ may not refer to merely a visual perception, particularly in the embodied practices such as performances. I suggest that the acts and the presence as well as the sensations[110] of participants are crucial elements that cannot be separated. As Shaner states, “We think with our body and act with our mind and vice versa” (Shaner, 1985: 46). During the lived experience, seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling and tasting are the acts of the body that are required to be processed through the whole body. Hence, not only is seeing believing, but, as Myerhoff asserts, ‘Doing is believing’ (Myerhoff, 1977: 223). The embodiment happens through the body during a lived[111] experience. In this way, the well-known Thai proverb ‘Having ten pairs of eyes to see is not equal to touching with one’s own hand’, I would suggest, may actually indicate that ‘having ten pairs of eyes to see is not equal to being and doing. This notion is particularly exemplified in Thai Theravada Buddhist practices. Lee Dhammadharo[112] one of the most revered monks in Thailand, explains the embodied nature of Buddhist practices as follows:

> Nothing can help us unless we can rely on ourselves. Only when we realize this will we be on the right track. The Buddha attained all of the truths he taught before he put them into words. […] He was like the scientists who experiment and get results before writing textbooks. But people who simply read the textbooks know everything — for example, they may know every part in an airplane — but they can't produce one out of their own knowledge[113] (Dhammadharo, 2012).

Beneath this analysis lies the concept that the embodied experience is not only the expression of cultural belief, but it also contributes to the sense of authenticity

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[110] I mean to see, to hear, to smell, to feel, to touch (and to taste, if participants can taste) during the presence of the ritual.

[111] The notion of ‘liveness’ and ‘presence’ will be discussed later.

[112] His Thai honorific title is ‘Phra Suddhidhammaransi Gambhiramedhacariya’ Many monks in Thailand have honorific titles. Some monks are called by their title (for instance, Pra Kru Sanghavichai, with whom I conducted my field research), while some monks, such as Lee, are well-known by their names.

[113] This English translation is provided by the Metta Forest Monastery (Wat Mettavanaram) in the United States. The monastery is in the Thai forest tradition. The discourse was translated from Thai by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, an abbot of the monastery. As it is a direct quotation, any grammatical error belongs to the translator.

of the belief and its practices. In a similar vein, Schieffelin explains the embodied nature of ritual by stating that:

> [p]erformance does not construct a symbolic reality in the manner of presenting an argument, description, or commentary. Rather, it does so by socially constructing a situation in which the participants experience symbolic meanings as part of the process of what they are already doing (Schieffelin, 1985: 709).

As the meanings are acquired and generated by the influence of the dynamics of the experiential process (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 153), the authenticity and belief in ritual practices are also perceived, conceptualised, embodied and established by participants through their lived experience. In this way, the embodied experience can also contribute to the articulations of ritual participants' sense of efficacy

Now is the knowing: being and becoming here and now

'Yesterday is a memory
Tomorrow is the unknown
Now is the knowing'
Ven. Ajahn Sumedho[114]

Space and time take form when an individual attends to them. In other words, using Csordas's term, 'the somatic mode of attention' (1993: 138) is constructed. Grosz states,

> Space and time can no longer be understood as neutral or transparent media whose passivity enables the specificity of matter to reveal itself: rather they are active ingredients in the making of matter and thus in the constitution of objects and subjects (Grosz, 2002: 13).

The body exemplifies the sense of ritual space and time while it conceptualises and articulates the experience within that spatio-temporal frame; hence, this frame is a crucial factor to the articulation of efficacy. In his essay on the potentiality of 'liveness' in applied drama, Jacobs states that the intrinsic quality of a performance is "the notion of embodiment: the sensuality, the actuality (act,

[114] Ajahn Sumedho is a Westerner who is a Thai Buddhist monk. He is a renowned Buddhist scholar. He was an abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery at Hertfordshire, UK since its establishment until his retirement in 2010.

action, actor, actuality) of live performance" (2010: 2). Therefore, the definition of presence as 'the existing condition'[115] may not refer to the existing state of time/place, but inherently consists of act, action, actor, actuality—the active process of the embodied experience. The actuality of participants within a live space and time can create a sense of presence during ritual experience that contributes to the process of transformation. Schieffelin (1996: 59) refers to the process of 'performatively creating reality''. He further states that performance, namely ritual, can:

> alter moods, attitudes social states and states of mind […] They create their effects and then are gone, leaving their reverberations (fresh insight, reconstituted selves, new statues, altered realities) behind them (Schieffelin, 1996: 59: original brackets).

In the last few decades, scholars in dance anthropology and dance ethnography[116, 117]have begun to address the performative aspects of ritual. Embodiment as well as the notions of 'liveness' and 'presence' are topics of great interest among scholars in performance studies. Despite being contested terms within the discipline,[118] there is a tacit agreement that performance is richly engaged with the temporally and spatially dynamic of embodied experiences. In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elam (2002: 65) notes that the performer's actions are significant to the establishment of the relationship between the performer and the spatio-temporal dimension of the performance. Using a term from linguistics, Elam refers to this as 'deictic'.

> Deictic gesture […] is of decisive importance to theatrical performance, being the primary means whereby the presence and the spatial orientations of the body are established (Elam 2002: 65).

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[115] Oxford English Dictionary (2014: online)

[116] According to the outline of the postgraduate degree in dance anthropology at the University of Roehampton, dance anthropology is part of a field of research that studies dance within its socio-cultural settings (The University of Roehampton, 2014). Dance ethnography is the approach that aims to understand and communicate the perspectives of those who participated in a dance (Buckland, 2010: 235).

[117] For example, see Buckland (2006), Giurchescu (1999), Hughes-Freeland (1998) and Sklar (2001).

[118] There are ongoing debates over the concepts of 'presence' especially in relation to media performances. See, for example, Phelan (1993), Auslander (1999) and Power (2008). See also Connolly and Ralley (2010) and Giannachi, Kaye and Shanks (2012) for the notions of 'presence' within performance practices.

According to Elam (2002: 87), this deictic relationship, the sense of being here and now, is 'a zero point' of the performance. Nonetheless, Elam's deixis not only refer to the presence, but also the notion of absence that subtly emerges. Being here and now requires the subject 'I'. The notion of presence/absence is highly contested and continually debated within performance studies and practices. Stelarc**,** an Australian-based artist who is renowned for the exploring his body through performances, argues that the absence "is augmented by the fact that the body functions *habitually* and *automatically*" (Stelarc, 1998: 155: original emphasis). Although he does acknowledge the body as 'being-in-the-world' (ibid), it is worth noting that Stelarc's absent body is, to some degree, based on the attempt to reconfigure Cartesian dualism into the modern world.[119] Nevertheless, his statement above questions the paradigm of embodiment in performances. If 'I' refers to the experience/body that inhabits the moment of here and now, what if the sense of being here and now does not appear to be completed? For instance, what happens if a performer is seen as becoming submerged into another role? In relation to ritual, the question of presence/absence is also raised, particularly during trance-possession. Does the sense of absence occur, and if so, can this affect the embodiment and efficacy? The numerous debates around the questions of presence/absence may be beyond the scope of this thesis; nonetheless, I suggest that the notion of presence from a performance perspective can enable a greater understanding of the complexity of the spatio-temporal dimensions of ritual experience.

Hodge also states in relation to actor training, the heightened state of presence "enables the actor to operate on several levels of consciousness simultaneously" (Hodge, 2000: 8). The complexity of the state of presence probably lies within the non-linear multicity and complexity of the embodied, in other words, the becoming process. In her essay *Theatre as a Site of Passage*, Kirsten Hastrup calls this feature 'the double agency,' which enables the performer to "work on 'becoming' and 'being' at the same time" (Hastrup, 1998: 40). Being a double

[119] This led to his experimental performances, in which he explored the capabilities of the human body with technology. According to Stelarc, the human body is an object, obsolete and exposed to its environment (1998: 154); therefore, it can be prosthetic, designed and integrated with an external agency. For Stelarc, the bodymind is beyond the capacities of the biological body; hence other instruments can be integrated into the biological body as parts of bodymind. In this sense, I would argue that although he used the biological body as an object to be explored, the concept of bodymind also underpinned his work.

agent, the actor has to operate in two spaces: “the space of training and performative mastery and the space of the character” (ibid). Hastrup’s idea of the double agency of actors implies the notion of embodiment, the dynamic experience that is the state of becoming during the temporal and spatial landscape of their performance. Similarly to Hastrup’s analysis, I do not consider ‘being’ as a fixed condition of the actor’s self, but rather as a ground of experience, the actor’s active body that has been embodied throughout his/her living. ‘Becoming’ in this sense coincides with, in Jacobs’ words, the actuality of the live performance. Therefore, the powers of acting are established at the heart of the live moment of performance. In this way, Hastrup implicitly suggests that it may not be about the issue of absence, but the relationship between the socio-culturally informed body and the embodied phenomenon during lived experience when “the energy inherent in the actor’s shift to the extra-daily mode of acting” (Hastrup, 1998: 40).

Despite being in a broad agreement with Hastrup, I would argue that the body does not operate in merely two spaces; hence, it cannot be referred to as double. Entering performance’s spatio-temporal space, the body is neither neutral waiting to be the state of becoming, nor is it a being that only refers to a space that is fully occupied by socio-culturally inscriptions. The phenomenon of presence engages with the body and vice versa; the body is simultaneously embodying and an embodied presence. Becoming and being are intimately interwoven and cannot be separated; thus presence is complex and multi-faceted rather than linear and stable.

Each live moment[120] operates and changes continuously, containing many layers of presence. The continuous change in this sense coincides with the Buddhist fundamental concept of impermanence[121] [Pali: *anicca*; Thai: อนิจจัง/*anijjang*], which signifies that everything is constantly changing. In this sense, the presence also consists of the absence of continuity. This Buddhist perspective on impermanence also emphasises the presence and liveness. If the presence is in continual flux, the liveness of experience is fundamental to the embodied actions.

[120]If one could freeze the flow of time, divide it into segments and call them ‘live moments’.
[121] For a detailed description of this Buddhist concept, see Karunadasa (2011).

This is also exemplified in the Theravada Buddhist concept and practice of mindfulness [Pali: sati; Thai: สติ/sati], the sense of here-and-now. Ajahn Sumedho, a Westerner who is a Thai Buddhist monk living in the UK, explains *sanditthiko*, one of the qualities of the core Buddhist teachings [Pali; Thai: *Dhamma*]:

> So when we describe Dhamma […], we do it through words such as '*sanditthiko*', which means immanent, here-and-now. That brings us back into the present; we feel a sense of immediacy, of now. You may think that Dhamma is some kind of thing that is 'out there', something you have to find elsewhere, but *sanditthikodhamma* means that it is immanent, here-and-now' (Sumedho, 1989: 9-10).

Sumedho asserts that the Buddhist practice "is not 'to become enlightened', but to be in the knowing, now" (ibid). In Thai Buddhism, the term *sanditthiko* also widely refers to 'the practice and knowledge achieved only by direct experience' (Palapanyo, 2004: 102). In Buddhism, presence and liveness are understood as being interwoven and are fundamental to the transformation process and the sense of efficacy. This is exemplified in Sumedho's renowned statement: 'Yesterday is a memory, tomorrow is the unknown, *now is the knowing'* (Sumedho, 1989: 3: my emphasis). However, I would suggest that one cannot have a sense of here and now alone. The transformation process is not determined by only lived experience; the body also carries memory.[122] All aspects of everyday life (belief, cultural knowledge, identity, etc.) are manifested in and bound with spatio-temporal space of that particular experience. Merleau-Ponty described this interrelation as 'inhabitation': "I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them […]" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 162). Spatio-temporal dimension also includes the interaction with places, objects and the embodied presence of others.

Performance, by its very nature, gives the body the opportunity to directly engage with the sense of presence, and hence, the potential for efficacy. As Daboo states,

> In this sense, [performance] is a culturally determined and conditional event, but the actual transformation process, the nature of the efficacy, lies

[122] In this context, I refer to the term 'memory' as a flowing and active process rather than a fixed object that is gained from the past. Memory is continually created.

> within the actualising, the present-ing or presence-ing of an act of performance through the body (Daboo, 2010: 40).

The perspectives from the performance practices together with the Buddhist concept discussed above posit the presence of the body in performance as a non-linear and ever-shifting process. I found that this amalgamation of these two disciplines can help demystify the complexity and multi-facets of experience during trance-possession ritual by directly engaging with the temporal and spatial dynamic of its live moments, as it does in my research.

‘In-betweeness’ of performance

The spatial and temporal dimensions of performance place the ‘lived body’ in the location of ‘in-betweeness’ or in Peggy Phelan’s words, “a space we might call the tension of the present tense” (Phelan, 1999: 224). In *Embodiment and Presence*, Suzanne Jaeger explains how the potential for transformation in performance occurs within this condition:

> Presence is the possibility of transformation […]. The “on performance” or moment of stage presence is possible because of this capacity to be open to what is other than a mere repetition of a familiar ways of structuring experience. (Jaeger, 2006: 139)

In his essay *Theorizing Ritual as Performance*, Gavin Brown suggests that the possibilities of transformation are established from the dynamism of the ritual activities and the moment of being in-between:

> […] the very condition of indeterminacy lies at the heart of ritual form. It is only in performance—in those very moments when ritual actions unfold—that such a paradox becomes apparent, and it is only by recognizing this paradox that the real dynamism and transformative potential of ritual can be grasped and appreciated (Brown, 2003: 16).

Agreeing with the statements above, I suggest that the intrinsic quality of in-betweeness is a fertile ground for transformation in ritual performance and it is within this framework that efficacy can be contextualised and articulated. This theme also underpins the analysis of my research on trance-possession ritual and will be addressed in relation with applied drama perspectives in Chapter 5.

It is also worth noting that the active process of lived performance allows for all possibilities; it establishes a sense of freedom as well as, in Phelan's words, tension. As the lived body is in the spatio-temporal space of in-betweeness, borrowing from Ajahn Sumedho's earlier statement, "Tomorrow is the unknown" (1989: 3).

As Jaeger observes,

> The "on moment" occurs when a performer […] has a keen awareness of herself, the other performers and the audience in the immediacy of a live performance. […] a feeling of being fully alive to the audience and other performers, a feeling of supreme control and power, but also paradoxically an openness to the contingencies of a live performance (2006: 123).

The sense of freedom and tension during the lived experience is one of the key issues emerging from my fieldwork with trance-possession rituals. The 'openness to contingencies' can challenge the participants' sense of certainty and control over their experience. For example, many Parn Yak participants told me that they felt frighten during their participation in chanting (my fieldnotes, 2nd December 2006 and 1st April 2007). A female participant who sat near me at Wat Boonrod remarked that she felt a strong urge to move her body to the sound of chanting. She told me that she knew it was safe in this ritual to 'get up and dance'; nevertheless, she did not know if she should let herself do it (my fieldnotes, 1st April 2007). This issue is examined through the perspectives of applied drama, (discussed later in the chapter) which have the ability to engage with the intrinsic quality of in-betweeness in relation to a sense of therapeutic transformation.

The uses of the term 'liminality'

The 'in-betweeness' discussed above is understood in performance and ritual studies as 'liminality'. In his book *Perform or Else*, Jon McKenzie asserts that liminality is the key to the articulation of efficacy in cultural performances:

> [W]e have come to define the efficacy of performance and of our own research […] in terms of liminality—that is, a mode of activity whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic "in-betweeness" allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed (McKenzie, 2001: 50)

The term ‘liminal’ in ritual context was introduced by Victor Turner (1969), and is used among scholars in various fields, particularly performance studies. In “Liminality and Communitas,” Turner begins by defining liminal individuals or entities as “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (1969: 95). Drawing on Van Gennep’s idea of rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960), Turner explains that ritual often involves three stages:[123] separation, transition and incorporation. Turner primarily focuses his attention on the transitional or ‘liminal’ stage, when participants no longer belong to their old status and identity, but have yet to gain a new identity. Turner (1969: 94-96) observes that between the first and last phase the ritual subjects are often secluded from everyday life and have to spend some time in this liminal condition.

However, Turner’s concept seems to be problematic because of the inflexibility in its definition. He implicitly refers to the liminal phase as a fixed linear stage rather than as a dynamic process that keeps changing. Instead of considering liminality as a dynamic state of becoming during the embodied presence of the ritual participant, he addresses the notion of liminality mostly in relation to social status. In addition, he also has been criticised for overgeneralisation (Lewis, 2008: 49), as he tends to extend the concepts to embrace almost every kind of ritual and social transition (Bigger, 2009: 1: Deflem, 1991: 16).

Based on this inflexible and generalised concept, Turner introduces the notion of ‘communitas’, a social form of community, which he claims is the key component of liminality (1969: 94-97). During the liminal stage, participants are treated equally, since there are no longer characteristics of social structure; therefore, a sense of solidarity emerges, bringing people into "a community […] and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions" (Turner, 1967: 100). For Turner, the experience of ‘communitas’ can contribute to the transformation, particularly during collective practice of rituals. However, I argue, particularly in relation to my research, that there is actually no authentic condition of ‘communitas’ as

[123] The first stage is the symbolically significant removal of a person’s current status from the earlier fixed point in the social structure. The second stage is the liminal stage: an in-between or threshold stage, where a person is withdrawn from his/her old status, but has not yet achieved the new one. The last stage is completed when the person re-enters society with his/her new status and identity (Turner, 1969: 80-81).

participants' sense of identity actively and continually transforms during ritual. As an embodied person, the individual is not "without agency, or lacking the ability to think or feel for themselves" (Nicholson, 2005: 65). Due to the non-linear nature of the embodied experience, it is too complicated to determine at which point the identity of participants is, in Turner's term, 'betwixt and between'. When it comes to the issue of identity, I agree with Nicholson that self/identity is "continually created and recreated through interaction with others" (Nicholson, 2005: 65) The issue of identity and liminality in this sense will be discussed in Chapter 5, in relation to my research.

It is also worth noting that participants in Parn Yak and *sak yant* rituals still maintain their statuses and identities while in the ritual; therefore, their ritual moments cannot be referred to as the threshold between the old and new status. Participants in both Parn Yak and *sak yant* attend the ritual in order to purify or remove negativity and enhance their personal condition and existing identity rather than gaining a new social status. Moreover, in many cases, the individual identity of participant is also addressed during their participation.[124] In this sense, these trance-possession rituals may not be simply considered 'rites of passage'.

Due to the fact that the term is often associated with Turner's theoretical idea toward ritual, I argue that the term 'liminal'[125] may not be the most suitable word to describe the participants' condition in these two rituals. Yet, the word 'liminal' can indicate the specificity of location and time. In this way, I accept that Parn Yak and *sak yant* have the quality of being liminal only to the extent that they offer temporary seclusion from the familiarity of everyday surroundings so that the dynamics between body and extra-daily[126] space can expose participants to the transformation and possibilities. For the purpose of this research, however, I want to draw on the key concept of bewilderment, developed by applied drama scholars, which might better describe the participants' state during their embodied presence in ritual.

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[124] This will be discussed in detail in later chapters
[125] See the definition of the 'liminal' phase of ritual in Chapter 1.
[126] In this sentence, the term 'extra-daily' refers to the spatio-temporal dimension outside everyday life. Eugio Barba's notion of extra-daily quality in performance will be discussed in relation to ritual performance in Chapter 5.

Bewilderment: an in-between state in applied drama

When those in ritual move away from the familiar to the spatial and temporal frame of ritual, the circumstances may be similar to the indeterminate state that Turner (1969: 95) claims will occur during the liminal phase. However,I argue that the sense of freedom and tension in the trance-possession rituals (as discussed earlier) is somewhat different from those in Turner's liminality; rather, it is similar to a state of 'bewilderment', which is usually found in an applied drama context. The term was suggested by James Thompson who describes it as:

> [A]n emotional state that occurs negatively in dislocation and positively in a search for a place of comfort [which is caused by] the shock of the new and the loss of the familiar, or the constant, destructive and unsettling process of having opportunities restricted and denied (Thompson, 2006: 23).

According to Thompson, the transition between place and time creates moments of bewilderment (ibid). Performance experience contains "new physical and emotional demands that can dis-locate bodies and disrupt accustomed patterns of behaviour" (2006: 23). Although the term 'liminal' was not used, he does recognise the intrinsic quality of being in-between in applied drama practices. In the statement above, Thompson also addresses the dynamics of the spatio-temporal dimension as having the potential for efficacious transformation. Bewilderment in this sense is based on the concept that "[p]eople living through the debilitating effect of difficult situations are potentially very able to move beyond" (Thompson, 2006: 23). Although applied drama participants encounter a disruption from what is familiar to them, they are, at the same time, stimulated to search for a solution to the bewilderment they are experiencing.

The term 'bewilderment' also carries with it a particular set of connotations. It may not always refer to the positive changes that practitioners may have intended. In this sense, Sithamparanathan, [127][128] a Tamil practitioner, refers to the spatio-temporal dimension in drama practices as 'theatre of liberation' (Nicholson: 2005: 70). Thompson also acknowledges this issue:

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[127] Cited in Nicholson (2005: 70) as 'Sithmparanathan'.

[128] Sithamparanathan, K. (2003), Keynote lecture, International Community Theatre Conference Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, 26July 2003.

> Of course, while I am emphasising the potential of bewilderment to spur positive action, at the extremes it must be acknowledged that utter destruction or complete dislocation can lead to a paralysis and inaction (Thompson, 2006: 23).

In this sense, I suggest that 'bewilderment' may be a useful metaphor to describe the lived experience in ritual. The understanding of bewilderment in applied drama may potentially delineate the borders of what constitutes the psychophysical sense of transformation and how ritual process and elements can lead to participants' explanation of that sense. Aspects surrounding this concept in relation to in my research will be discussed in depth in later chapters.

For those using drama with an emphasis on efficacy, there is a common interest in the quality of bewilderment and its influence. Nicholson (2005: 59) asserts that as an embodied process, the understanding of boundaries and space is essential in applied drama practices in order to encourage the positive change from participants' bewildered moments; to offer them 'the break with certainty' (2005: 24). Employing the idea from ritual studies, Susana Pendzik, an Israeli practitioner, refers to spatial and temporal space during therapeutic drama as 'sacred space' in which "the distinction between sacred and profane territories constitutes not only a breach in spatial continuity, but also a rupture in ontological terms" (1994: 25). Writing on the therapeutic space, Pendzik (ibid) notes the resemblance between the therapeutic value of the space in drama sessions and healing rituals; nonetheless, she asserts that her use of the term 'sacred space' refers not only to religious experiences, but also to a wide range of performance practices' spatio-temporal locations in which the space is assigned meaning by individuals and their groups (Pendzik, 1994: 30).

Pendzik explains:

> A sacred space can be both a place of magic healing and a source of danger. On the one hand it appears to be the safest spot on earth; on the other, there is a fear of being lifted to a level of existence that is higher and beyond the human natural ontological state (Pendzik, 1994: 27).

This implies the notion of 'bewilderment'; however, unlike Thompson who introduces the concept and describes it only in relation to the experience, Pendzik

discusses how drama practitioners can benefit from understanding the therapeutic value of the space in which they work (1994: 33). She further states that the space in healing ritual is seen as consecrated in order to prevent evil forces from entering the site (1994: 29).

> By marking out a zone from which undesirable sources are excluded, the sacred space becomes a healing place par excellence: It acts as a consciously devised protective tool that temporarily eliminates anxieties and fears by preventing the shadow archetype from entering into the enclosed area (Pendzik, 1994: 29).

Pendzik claims that most of the space in which therapeutic activities are held (1994: 30) fall into this pattern. That is, the way to cope with the risk of 'bewildered moments'. She further suggests that drama practitioners and therapists can consider the use of their work space "[…] as a basis for deciding when, who or what needs to be amplified in order to further therapeutic goals" (Pendzik, 1994: 33).

Although Pendzik addresses the therapeutic potential of space in drama practices, she tends to consider spatial and temporal dimensions as a sustained state instead of a process that has an inherent potential for change. According to Pendzik, in both ritual and drama sessions, once participants have assigned a meaning to the space, the space becomes a fixed site that invites them to achieve therapeutic efficacy (ibid). Nonetheless, her explication of 'sacred space' suggests, at least implicitly, that a sense of protection is required for the prospects of transformation. This is the idea that this thesis attempts to put forth. Understanding the therapeutic value of space in applied drama, I suggest, reveals how the temporal and spatial aspects can affect the experience of therapeutic efficacy in the rituals of Parn Yak and *sak yant*. This takes place while examining the interaction between the embodied 'presence' of participants and the space as an ever-shifting process through aspects of the broad field of performance studies.

The issues of bewilderment and contingencies are perhaps exemplified in ritual practice under the term 'risk' which Leo Howe, a professor of anthropology, notes is the prominent feature of ritual:

> Most rituals are staged to achieve an end, so there is always something at stake in performances. Because the outcome cannot be known in advance, success and failure (however these may be measured: instrumentally, aesthetically, evocatively, morally, etc.) are contingent (Howe, 2000: 67).

Howe (2000: 63) suggests that a focus on the aspects of risk can enhance an understanding of ritual. Nonetheless, he argues that neither performance arts nor anthropology seem to pay adequate attention to this issue (Howe, 2000: 63, 69). For Howe, ritual tends to be rendered free of risk by anthropologists, as they focus specifically on ritual actions and consider rules as the most important means to ritual efficacy: "In this sense, rules insulate the participants from issues of accountability, success and failure" (Howe, 200: 69). The performance approach, with its ability to engage with psycho-physicality and liveness also

> [T]ends to treat specific rituals in isolation from others, giving the impression that they are unconnected to previous performance […]. But if what happens at one performance is linked to what has happened at others, then issues of creativity, spontaneity and uniqueness become relative, not absolute. (Howe, 2000: 66).

Although I agree with Howe that the elements of risk are of paramount importance, particularly when investigating the articulation of ritual efficacy, I argue that performance is inherently interdisciplinary. Performance, including applied drama, has the capacity to explore the notions of 'presence' and 'liveness'; hence the quality of being open to contingencies is apparent. Furthermore, scholars in performance studies incorporate the aspects of other disciplines (e.g. anthropology, history, sociology and cultural studies) in their work. Therefore, I would argue with Howe's statement above that those using performance to approach rituals do not neglect the historical and socio-cultural issues.

As previously mentioned, the issue of risk intrinsically occurs during the state of bewilderment in applied drama sessions. Applied drama scholars and practitioners, for example, Pendzik (1994: 29-33), Nicholson (2005: 24) and Thompson (2006: 23), have addressed the openness to contingencies as a contributory factor in the efficacy of their workshops. In this way, the applied drama concept of bewilderment enables this research to engage in the

relationship between the complexities of embodied phenomenon and the articulation of the sense of efficacy.

Applied drama's notion of a facilitator

The blurred lines and dynamism between the 'real' and 'fictional' within the liminal space of performance practices can be a key element of efficacy. This view is commonly held among applied drama practitioners, particularly in relation a spatio-temporal sense. For example, an applied drama practitioner, John Somers, notes the principles of applied drama workshops:

> By entering the fictional world created in the drama, we may gain greater understanding of our own, personal narrative […] By knowing that the dramatic experience is not real we can release ourselves safely into it. We are 'in' it enough to care about it, but 'out' of it enough not to fear it and to be able to recognise its distance from reality. This is also a key factor in […] change (Somers, 2008: 63).

Nicholson further states,

> This means that the divisions between fiction and reality are deliberately blurred in order to provide a safe space for participants to transform experiences into a dramatic metaphor […] (Nicholson, 2005: 66).

While addressing the duality between reality and fiction in applied drama as an important mechanism for transformation, Somers and Nicholson also designate the notion of safe space as a spatio-temporal framework in which a sense of efficacy can be established. This may concur with Victor Turner's notion of a'ludic' quality of ritual in which participants are encouraged to explore their "capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc." (1982: 44) beyond the restricted frame of their everyday lives (1982: 11). Baz Kershaw asserts that this ludic space is the key to performance efficacy (1992: 24). The notion of safe space is also described in Turner's idea. Although they have adopted the world of performance as a part of their reality, the space still provides participants enough distance to feel safe. This idea of ludic quality can help to explain the transformation that occurs through the inherent duality of performance, which provides both 'real' and 'fictional' aspects to the experience. I further suggest that an applied drama perspective on the construction of 'safe' space may also be useful in providing

insights into how the conception of space is constructed to make the therapeutic transformation possible in Parn Yak and *sak yant*.[129]

The task of drama practitioners is to provide a sense of safety for participants to deal with their bewilderment during the lived experience. In his essay *Therapeutic Transformation in Ritual, Therapy, and Human Development*, Canda notes that the practitioners in rituals and other therapeutic practices often act as the protectors and advocates of those in attendance. For many practitioners, this task is often set as an overriding concern when developing their work. For example, John Sullivan (2004: 23) suggests that an applied drama facilitator:

> […] must be able to sense and serve the need of the audience, and create a safe container for individual self-expression […] (2004: 23).

Nicholson notes that the space within an applied drama workshop is where "people feel safe enough to take risks and to allow themselves and others to experience vulnerability" (2005: 129). She also asserts that an understanding of how authority and power are constructed within space is essential for facilitators (ibid). In their book on the role of the applied drama facilitator, Prendergast and Saxton emphasise the authority of the facilitator within the space of the work (2013: 7). For these scholars and practitioners, the facilitator must (re)construct the way in which space is conceived by their participants. The skilled facilitator possesses the spatial authority of the practice. As Prendergast and Saxton state, they know what, when, and how to perform their job and how to make it effective (2009: 18).

In their book, *Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice*, Prendergast and Saxton, in relation to forum theatre practices, suggest that the key role of facilitator is:

> bridging the two worlds of the play (the fictional world) and audience (the real world) […] [the facilitator] is the "all-important door-opener of these two worlds" (2009: 70).

[129] The way in which the sense of protection can contribute to the transformation process in ritual will be discussed in details in Chapter 5.

This is similar to the role of the monks in Parn Yak and *sak yant*. As they maintain authority over the ritual space, the monks can bridge the spiritual realm of ritual and the everyday world of participants through their presence and actions. Similar to the skilled facilitator in applied drama, the ability to construct the way in which ritual space is conceived by their participants is a necessary aspect for authenticity and efficacy.

In his essay *Problematizing Performance*, Schieffelin asserts that the issue of trust and safety in ritual is essential (1998: 198, 200-204). According to Schieffelin, the ritual authenticity and efficacy depends on "the *relationship* between central performers and others in the situation" (Schieffelin, 1998: 198, original emphasis). In regard to Parn Yak and *sak* yant, the relationship between the monks, as central performers, and ritual participants is also critical to the efficacy. As ritual facilitators, they have authority in the spatio-temporal frame of the ceremony. Regarded as 'mana-filled objects' (Kirsch, 1977: 248) and 'sacred actors' (Jerryson, 2001: 55) by Thai Buddhists, monks can simultaneously provide a sense of ritual authenticity and protection. In this way, the monks can enable those who attend rituals to adopt the spiritual world of ritual as a part of their reality, while assuring them that their experience can bring no harm to their everyday life.

Providing those who attend Parn Yak and *sak yant* with a sense of safety is important. During their embodied presence in ritual, the transition between their everyday world and the spiritual world may lead to a state of bewilderment, and the concurrent feeling of uncertainty and being unprotected. This was evidenced by those who reported to me that they felt frightened and apprehensive during their ritual experiences.[130] Some described a fear that the spirits would take control of their body or that the evil spirits from others would attack them (my fieldnotes, 7th, April 2007). This feeling of losing control over their experience may impede the achievement of the sense of efficacy. For example, those who attend Parn Yak and *sak yant* may feel that their ritual participation might be harmful instead of helpful in achieving a sense of transformation. However, these informants also asserted that they felt safe to participate because of the ritual

[130] My fieldnotes, 7th, and 15th April2007 and April 2009.

space[131] and the presence of the monks. The role of the monks as protectors and their contribution to the construction of safe space will be discussed in depth in Chapter 5.

In this way, an applied drama perspective on the role of facilitators as protectors and bridges between the worlds is a useful conceptual frame for my research to investigate how the monks, as facilitators, can be the key contributory factor to the conception and articulation of the sense of therapeutic transformation.

'Embodied narrative'

Although Nicholson proposes the idea that applied drama practice can potentially contribute to the embodied transformation of the experience, she also expresses her concern over the way in which cultural assumptions exist in the workshops. She observes that the expression in the sessions is usually complicated by the issue of power and social context (ibid). Influenced by Goffman's idea in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and the Foucauldian analysis of performance,[132] Nicholson states, "All interactions and social identities are built on a negotiation of power, which includes people's perception of themselves in relation to others" (2005: 81). Within this frame, people also act and interact in embodied activities according to their expectations of others (and also others' expectations of them) in a manner that Nicholson calls 'embodied narrative' (2005: 80).

The notion of 'embodied narrative' from applied drama may be useful in the examination of the socio-cultural factors to the ritual efficacy, particularly the aspects of cultural expectation in Parn Yak and *sak yant* where a potential force contributes to the expression of a sense of efficacy in the ritual. In *sak* yant, many tattoo wearers regard the trance-possession in *wai kru* as a means of releasing and re-empowering the spirits within their tattoos, hence trying to make themselves be in trance-possession.[133] Apart from the monks, fellow participants are also significant in the construction of the meaning and articulation of one's

[131] As discussed earlier, Buddhist temples are regarded as 'sacred space' which is continually consecrated; hence, they can provide protection to those who are inside.
[132] For instance, Phelan, P. (1993) *Unmasked: The Politics of Performance*, London: Routledge.
[133] Pra Narin, personal communication, 9th April 2009.

experience. For example, in his interview with a journalist (Kraingu, 2012), Pra Apinya, a *sak yant* master at Wat Bang Phra, states that some participants even pretended to be in trance-possession when they saw others were in this state, because they believed that if they were not in trance-possession, their tattoos were not powerful enough.In relation to Nicholson's analysis, I am suggesting thatexamining the way in which the world of participants are embodied and conceptualised may offer possibilities for demystifying the complexity of the experiential phenomena and socio-cultural contexts that contribute to the nature of ritual performance.

Applied drama and Thai Buddhist rituals: Methodological challenge

As previously addressed, this thesis does not propose an analogy between applied drama and Thai Buddhist rituals, but rather applies the framework of transformation from applied drama to the data from the fieldwork. Nevertheless, the implication of applied drama to support the need to create contexts for exploring Thai Buddhist rituals may inevitably raise the particular challenge of the assumptive equivalence of these two different practices. Employing the perspective from applied drama to a specific context, namely Thai Buddhist ritual, raises the questions of generalisation, authenticity and reductionism. Firstly, terms from the discipline of performance may become problematic when used in the context of religious practices. Terms such as 'fiction', 'imaginative', 'creative', and 'make-believe' are found extensively in the theoretical concepts and practices of applied drama; however, they do not fit easily within a Thai Theravada Buddhist context. For example, 'fiction' may be taken to be synonymous with deception and fabrication, which are seen as a violation of the basic Buddhist precept[134] [Pali: *sila*; Thai: ศีล/*sil*] of truthfulness. Using terminology found in drama practices without considering ritual could lead to a reductionist statement that efficacy is not caused by spiritual power and the process in rituals is, in fact, intentionally and secularly designed.

[134] The concept of Buddhist precepts will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Applied drama and Buddhist ritual are viewed in different dimensions, each with their own language and approach to describe their practices. With regard to the research's theoretical underpinnings, I have been cognizant of this issue throughout my research, both in fieldwork and writing. Another significant issue is that culture is a powerful force that significantly impacts ritual. Despite the fact that the culture of the applied drama participants is often acknowledged in the discipline,[135] the nature of ritual experience, particularly its efficacy and authenticity, is very culturally determined. Rituals studied in this thesis are performed and accepted in a specific location and context. Although there is an interrelationship between the two practices, using disciplines of applied drama and performance, which have been developed in the West to examine complexities of Thai Buddhist ritual, requires a strong element of sensitivity and consideration.

For this reason, a multidisciplinary approach has been chosen to reconcile these discrepancies. The selected perspectives, literature and discourses from anthropological, social, historical, cultural and Buddhist studies that are particularly relevant to Thai trance-possession rituals are offered to delineate the cultural nuances required for the understanding the context of the two specific rituals.

These relevant aspects will be presented in the next two chapters to offer a cultural structure for understanding the articulation of ritual efficacy. Chapter 2 sets out to provide a background of how Thai people, particularly Buddhists, have culturally shaped beliefs that can affect their worldview on spiritual activities. The Thai concept of health, wellbeing and healing is explored in Chapter 3 in order to investigate how the therapeutic potential of cultural practices is perceived and expressed in Thailand.

[135] For example, Nicholson, 2005: 83-106; Ackroyd, 2000: 11; Skeiker, 2011.

Chapter 2

Thailand: its Buddhist beliefs and culture

This chapter offers an overview of how Thai Buddhism is culturally determined. It provides background on how the two trance-possession rituals are situated firmly in a Thai Buddhist cultural context, which also contains elements of other beliefs. To discuss the diversity and complexity of Thai culture and religions, understanding the history and geography of the country is of paramount importance. Hence, the chapter begins with a brief history of Thailand and how the elements of three beliefs, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, and Animism contribute to the development of the current form of Thai Buddhism that differs from the traditional Theravada Buddhist practices in other cultures. This is followed by the exploration of several aspects of Thai Buddhist culture and selected ideas from the Buddhist philosophy that underpins contemporary Thai Buddhist beliefs and practices. It suggests, through this exploration, how the contemporary Thai Buddhist culture of 'all-inclusive worship'[136] and selected ideas from Theravada Buddhism are embodied and manifested directly in the practices of Buddhist trance-possession rituals such as Parn Yak and *sak yant*.

This chapter set out to contextualise the way in which performances of ritual and its efficacy have been understood and expressed within a Thai Buddhist cultural context.

In addition, although Sanskrit is used in some Buddhist contexts, Pali is the language that is predominantly used within Theravada scriptures, including Thai Buddhist texts (Pasanno and Amaro, 2012: 50). For this reason, when referring to terminology used in Theravada Buddhism, Pali words will be used throughout this thesis.

[136] This will be discussed later in the chapter

A brief overview of Thailand

Thailand is a country geographically located in mainland Southeast Asia, which consists of 6 countries: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Thailand, Vietnam, and also some parts of Malaysia[137]. Although several religions are practiced in Thailand, Buddhism has significant influence. Theravada Buddhism[138] is predominant in the areas of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Southern Vietnam (Hayashi, 2003: 4), while most other areas in Vietnam practice Mahayana Buddhism due to their proximity to China (Robinson and Johnson, 1982: 111).

Figure 1: Map of Southeast Asia (today) [credit: National Online Project[139]]

In Southeast Asian countries, Buddhism may be different from the aspects of Western religious thought, in which the religious-secular dichotomy may be applied extensively (Lester, 1973: 3). In *Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia*, Robert Lester observes:

> The Theravada Buddhist [...] thinks of his whole way of life as Buddhist-his individual, family, village and national cultural identity is established with reference to Buddhist values (1973: 3).

[137] The rest of Malaysia is in Maritime Southeast Asia, along with other island countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and East Timor.
[138] The term 'Thai Buddhism' in this thesis refers only to the Theravada Buddhism beliefs that have been widely practiced in contemporary Thailand.
[139] http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map_of_southeast_asia.htm

In addition, each country has its own characteristics of Buddhism. The current form of Thai Buddhism has been developed according to its geographical, historical, and cultural aspects, which make it different from Buddhism in other countries.

A diversity of religions in Thailand nowadays

While the monarch is required by law to be a Buddhist, the citizens of Thailand are allowed to practice religions according to their beliefs. Nonetheless, the current Thai constitution (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2007: chapter 2 section 9) states that the Thai monarch is required to act as a patron of other religions. The current number of Buddhists in Thailand is approximately 95% of the population (Hayashi: 2003:3; Thailand Board of Investment, 2007). Islam shares 3.8% of the population[140]. Christians and Hindus number 0.5% and 0.1% of the population, respectively. The rest of the population (0.6%) believes in other religions, such as Sikh or Bahá'í Faith (Thailand Board of Investment, 2007).

Despite a diversity of religions, Theravada Buddhism has dominated aspects of the cultural, political, and social life of Thai people (Hayashi, 2003: 3)[141]; therefore, it is widely considered to be the national religion.

A brief history of Thailand

Evidence of inhabitants in the area of present-day Thailand can be traced back to the Bronze Age Civilisation around 4000 years ago (The Foreign News Division of the Public Relation Department, 1990: 10). In this early period, communities

[140] At the present, there is a conflict between separatist Muslim insurgents and the Thai government, particularly in the three southernmost provinces in Thailand. The violence has been escalating since 2004 (Pongsudhirak, 2007: 266). From 2004-2011, approximately 5000 people were killed in the conflict, both Islamic militants and Buddhists (particularly monks and those who work in the government sectors, for example, military and educational services) (Jitpiromsri, 2012). Although this appears to be caused by tension between two religions, as Buddhism is the dominant belief in Thailand, this insurgency is mainly political. It is a very complex issue, which, in fact, began at the end of the 18th Century (Pongsudhirak, 2007: 267). As it will be beyond the scope of this research, the details of this insurgency are not examined in this thesis.

[141]Mahayana Buddhist tradition is also practised, particularly among those who have Chinese heritage. In addition, there are some Mahayana temples across the country. Nonetheless, as there is no restriction between these two traditions in Thailand, Thai Buddhists may practice in both traditions according to their own consideration. As the two trance-possession rituals that I studied were developed within the Theravada tradition, I will discuss only Theravada Buddhism in this thesis.

clustered to form kingdom-like states (Wongthes, 2004: 34). In the 6th -13th Century CE[142], some Theravada Buddhist states were established.

After 1157 CE, the Khmer Empire (later, Cambodia) had an influence over these areas. Their Hindu belief and court ceremony gradually integrated into the original cultures. Mon, a Theravada Buddhist Kingdom in Myanmar, also flourished at this time (ibid). Around 1240-1438 CE, Sukhothai was established as the first Thai kingdom. The word Siam, the former name of Thailand, first appeared in this period[143].

During the decline of Sukhothai in 1351, a major Thai Kingdom called Ayutthaya emerged and endured for 417 years. Theravada Buddhism was declared the state religion (Federal Research Division- Library of Congress, 2007: 2). Due to their close location to other Hindu kingdoms, the people in Ayutthaya integrated Hinduism into Buddhism and their traditional customs. As a result, the court customs and legal codes were developed through a combination of Thai traditional customs and the compilation of Dharmaśāstra, the text of law and Kings' duty in both religious and secular aspects. The people in Ayuttaya adapted this text from the Mon people, who in turn had taken it from the Indians (Pongsabud, 2001:24).

Although Ayuttaya retained Buddhism as the main belief, the king was considered a god-like person (Thai: เทวราชา/*Tevaraja*; Sankrit: *Devaraja*), as in nearby Hindu kingdoms (ibid). Several rituals that were developed during this period continue to be practiced, and the concept of a god-like king is still found in the perspectives of most Thai people today.

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[142] The years in Thailand are normally designated according to the Buddhist Era [Thai: พ.ศ. / *por sor*]; nonetheless, for reasons of convenience, I have converted all the years from the Buddhist Era to the Common Era throughout this thesis. According to Thai belief, the Buddhist Era began in the year of the death of the Buddha (Pali: *Parinibbana*), which is 543 years before the Common Era. In addition, Thais began to use the same day and month as in the Gregorian calendar in 1941 CE. Before 1941, Thai New Year started in April; thus, the years may not be accurate but at least can provide an approximate timeline

[143] In fact, Siam was the word that foreigners called people who live in the west of Chaopraya valley, the area of Sukhothai in this period (Wyatt, 2003: 52).

After the fall of the Ayutthaya in 1767, the city of Thonburi was the capital for 15 years until Chakri, a former military leader, was elevated to the throne as King Rama I[144], and the capital was moved to its present location of Bangkok (Wyatt, 2003: 129). King Rama I tried to bring back the prosperity of Ayutthaya to this new capital. The elegant royal palace complex and many Buddhist temples were built, and court ceremonies and Buddhist ritual practices were restored, reminiscent of those in Ayutthaya (Church, 2003: 165). Siam was an absolute monarchy until 1932, when there was a political reformation. Since then, Thailand has been a democratic country with a hereditary monarch who acts as the head of state. The country's name was changed to Thailand in 1939.

Mid/late 13th Century CE	Clusters of kingdom states across northeast Myanmar, Central and Northern Thailand, and Laos
1240-1438 CE	Sukhothai Kingdom
1351-1767 CE	Ayutthaya Kingdom
1767 CE	New capital at Thonburi established
1782 CE	New capital at Bangkok (Rattanakosin)
1868-1910 CE	Modernisation under King Rama V such as electricity, rail network, and abolition of slavery
24th June 1932 CE	Political reform, eclipse of the role of the monarchy in King Rama VII's reign.
1932-1973 CE	Military government
6th May 1950 CE	The coronation of King Rama IX, the present king
1973-1992 CE	Between autocracy and democracy (Church, 2003: 159)
1992 CE- present	Move toward democracy

Figure 2: Chronological timeline of Thai history

[144]Bhumibol Adulyadej, the present king, is known as King Rama IX.

Figure 3: Map showing the location of Thai historic kingdoms. [Credit: Thailand Map[145] with my adjustment]

The development of Thai Buddhism

The current form of Thai Buddhism was developed and integrated with elements of indigenous belief, i.e. Animism and Hinduism.

Animism

Generally, Animism is a term that embraces a wide range of beliefs that share a fundamental belief that all things, such as plants, animals, objects, and natural phenomenon, have spirits (Bailey, 2009: 142).Prior to the introduction of Buddhism and Hinduism, people in the area of the present Thailand shared a belief in Animism with their own belief system for each community. Elements of Animism later became a part of Buddhism and still have a great influence on Thai contemporary belief systems (Stratton, 2004: 8). Many Thais believe that there

[145] www.thailandmap.net

are spiritual powers that reside in places such as large trees or the pillars of buildings (Kriengkraipetch, 2004:170). These spirits can be either benign or hostile towards humans. Thai people call spiritual powers *Phi* [Thai: ผี], which means 'ghost'. Nonetheless, Thai people refer to spirits who have strong powers that can affect human lives as 'deities' [Thai: เจ้า, เทพเจ้า/ *chao*, *thepachao*]. The possessed objects must be treated with respect and given offerings, especially when Thais ask these spirits to grant their wishes.

In Thailand, animistic beliefs lead to the usage of talismans, amulets, and statues, even in a Buddhist context (Assavaviroonhakarn, 2001:65). There are consecrating rituals that bring spiritual powers into the objects when they are made. The two rituals discussed in this thesis are also heavily influenced by this belief. The ritual of making amulets sometimes becomes a part of the Parn Yak ritual, while in the practices of *sak* yant, it is believed that the animal patterns of the tattoo can bring spiritual powers according to the characteristics of those animals (this will be described in Chapter 4).

The animistic belief is exemplified in Parn Yak when sachets of rice become one of the ritual objects (as mentioned in Chapter 1). As rice is the staple diet of Thai people, it has to be treated with gratitude and respect[146], hence there is a belief in a rice goddess [Thai: แม่โพสพ/ *Mae Phosob*]. Most Thai fertility rites also concern the cultivation of rice (Kriengkraipetch, 2004:181).

The influence of Indian culture and Hinduism

As mentioned earlier, it is believed that Theravada Buddhism and Hinduism[147]

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[146] As many Thais, when I was young, I was taught to treat rice with respect. I was told that the rice goddess will not be pleased if I step on rice or spill rice when eating.

[147] In Thailand, the Hindu belief, which is integrated with Buddhism, is sometimes referred to as 'Brahmanism'. In fact, Buddhism originated in Hindu/Brahmin society; therefore, Buddhism already has influences from Hinduism/Brahmanism prior to its arrival in Southeast Asia. Brahmanism was a belief and tradition during the time of the historical Buddha (around 500BCE) and is believed to be the historical predecessor of modern Hinduism. However, I cannot find a difference between the elements of Brahmanism and Hinduism in Thai Buddhism, particularly in the early period of Thailand. This may be because Thai people refer to the Hindu priests who conduct rituals for Thai Buddhist people as 'Brahmins', thus they also call the belief of this people Brahmanism. Wong states that the term 'Brahmanism' is often used by Thais to refer to various kinds of non-Buddhist ritual practice; therefore, it is "a slippery category of ritual in Thailand" (Wong, 2001: 82). The rituals that these Brahmins practice are also, to some degree, different from the Hindu rituals and practices of Indian communities that live in contemporary Thailand. In this section, I will refer to the belief in this chapter as Hinduism.

were both first introduced to the area by Buddhist missionary monks and Indian merchants around 500 BCE. According to Valipodom (1996: 81-82), a well-known Thai archaeologist, due to the diversity of ethnic groups in the area, the leaders of communities absorbed aspects of Indian civilization and applied them to their existing cultures in order to unite people and expand their political power. Most areas were gradually Indianised (Robinson and Johnson, 1982: 115). Debera Wong (2001: 83), a scholar of Thai cultural performance, also states that by the 8th or 9th CE many Brahmins (Hindu priests) were recruited in royal courts for performing rituals and also as consultants, teachers, and astrologists; therefore, their cultures greatly influenced the local people. The descendants of these court Brahmins have continued to serve in most royal rituals to today.

The belief of Hinduism was first established only in the courts, while the commoners retained belief in animism (Wongthes, 2004: 42-43).Due to the proximity of the Hindu communities, the beliefs and customs in most areas of Thailand also became Indianised in the Ayutthaya kingdom in 1351-1767 CE when the Buddhist kings adapted Hindu culture into their tradition and laws. In this way, Hinduism profoundly contributed to the development of Thai Buddhist belief since the early period.

Nowadays, Hinduism, particularly its concept of gods, continues to influence contemporary Thai Buddhist culture (Swearer, 1995: 19). An example of this is the Trimurti, which consists of the three Hindu deities: Brahma, Vishu, and Siva. These deities are among the most popular deities [148] worshipped by Thai Buddhists. There are many statues of them, either separately or in the body of the Trimurti, with the three deities depicted as three faces in one head. This trinity of deities is personified by the forms of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer or the transformer (Zimmer, 1972: 124).

[148]Other deities that are popularly worshiped in Thailand include Ganesha, the elephant-head deity who is regarded as the god of Arts and accomplishments; he is worshipped particularly among those who work within the Arts field.

Figure 4: A statue of Trimurti[149] in front of Central World Plaza, a shopping centre in the city centre of Bangkok. [Credit: palungdham[150]]

Although these deities are widely worshipped by Thai Buddhists, these practices can be very different from Hinduism in other areas, such as the Indian subcontinent. For instance, there is a belief that the statue of Trimurti (pictured above) can bring good luck in love; hence, it must be offered only red roses on Thursday. This belief is so popular that the shrine is often filled with red roses; however, I cannot find any evidence of this belief linked with the belief of Trimurti in Hinduism or any Thai beliefs. The phenomenon of Trimurti worship seems to have emerged only in the last decade. This is perhaps a recent example of, in Hobsbawm's term (2012), 'invented tradition' in Thai contemporary cultures.

Some of the characters in Hindu mythology have also become integrated with Buddhist beliefs (Swearer, 1995: 19); they are also found within several rituals such as Parn Yak (which will be described in Chapter 4). Ritual objects, for instance, sacred threads in Thai Buddhist rituals such as Parn Yak, may contain elements from Hinduism.Thread is considered an important item in both Hinduism and Thai Buddhism. In Thailand, Buddhists use cotton thread to transfer spiritual powers from the Buddha's statues and monks to the participants or consecrated objects during rituals and also wear them as consecrated amulets for protection. The similar use of threads as a medium for spiritual powers during ceremonies is also found in Hinduism. Hindus also use cotton threads as *yajnopavitam* [English:

[149] I would suggest that it is likely that the belief has become established from rumours during the last decade.
[150] www.palungdham.com

sacred thread[151]], which are worn by upper-caste men after their initiation rituals [Sanskrit: *upanayana samskara*] (Muesse, 2011: 105). Hindus wear these threads as symbols of gods, parents and teachers [Sanskrit: *guru*] (ibid)[152].

Although Buddhism is dominant in Thai contemporary culture, it is actually a form of integrated beliefs with Hinduism, while animism still exists. The religious expression of Thais is influenced by these three beliefs, and their elements can be found in many contemporary Buddhist practices such as Parn Yak and *sak yant*.

In this way, Animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism have been deeply interwoven to constitute the current Thai Buddhist belief system. Although some contemporary scholars[153] of Buddhism would suggest a need to 'extract' Buddhism from the elements of Hinduism and animism, I would argue that purification is not achievable due to the historical reasons explained above. Attempts to 'purify' Buddhism in the contemporary period (as discussed in Chapter 1) are never proved to be completely successful and often lead to controversy; for instance, Parn Yak and *sak yant* are labeled as 'contaminated' practices. Instead of a segregated approach, attempting to apply the concept of 'authentic or pure Buddhism' to the study of Parn Yak and *sak yant* as is often found in the work of some Thai scholars (for example, the literature reviewed in Chapter 1), the study of Thai contemporary Buddhist practices requires a holistic understanding of how the belief system of Thai Buddhism is developed within the context of other beliefs.

Thai Buddhist belief in the Contemporary Period

The worship of spiritual beings such as deities in Buddhist and Hindu mythologies is also widely found in Thai Buddhism. This is not only because of the integration

[151] The notion of thread is also found in Tantric Buddhism (which also has influences from Hinduism). The Sanskrit term *Tantra* means "the warp of a loom; the strings of the loom that you would weave these threads on" (Berzin, 2003). Therefore, the thread is used metaphorically to imply that Tantric Buddhists have to interweave the teachings and practices in order to make their mind become the 'everlasting continuum': the state of continual clear, which can enable enlightenment (Berzin, 2010).
[152] Unlike the Hindus, wearing the threads in Thai Buddhism does not signify the social class of the wearers.
[153] As discussed, examples in Chapter 1.

of the three belief as discussed above but also due to the fact that belief in spiritual beings is not explicitly prohibited in Theravada Buddhist teaching, although it is not encouraged. Similarly, although he denied that he was divine, the Buddha is regarded as having spiritual power to protect his followers and thus his statues and amulets are also worshipped. In fact, there are stories about spiritual beings in Buddhist canonical texts (Keown, 1996: 4). However, Buddhism does not acknowledge that humans are responsible to these beings; hence, no worship is required. Nonetheless, some Thai Buddhists believe that these beings have the ability to help and protect them. Therefore, worship is practiced. This results in the complexities of Thai Buddhism, and many Thais seem to embrace all practices that exist in their cultures (to be discussed in detail later). Apart from the three beliefs discussed above, the elements of Chinese folk belief and the worship of the monarchs as sacred entities are also found within the 'all-inclusive' belief of Thai Buddhist cultures.

Chinese Mahayana Buddhist culture in Thailand

Due to the fact that 14% of the Thai population is made up of people of Chinese ethnicity (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012), Mahayana Buddhism and Chinese folk beliefs alsoexist along with Thai Theravada Buddhism[154]. For example, Thais of Chinese descent[155]attend rituals in Theravada Buddhist temples, while they still worship their ancestors and Chinese deities (Morita, 2007: 125).

Figure 5: An example of a Chinese domestic deity's shrine commonly found in the residences and shops of Chinese ethnics in Thailand. [Credit: Paveena Chamchoy]

[154] Unlike Hinduism, their belief is not fully integrated with Theravada Buddhism as the majority of them immigrated to Thailand only after the late 19th Century CE.

[155] Nowadays, Thais with Chinese ancestors (also known as 'sino-Thai') have become 'culturally more Thai' so that it is difficult to adequately distinguish their cultural practices from those of Thai people (Basham, 2001: 110).

The monarch as an object of worship in Thailand

Thai monarchs have been portrayed as 'semi-divine' due to the Hindu concept of 'god-king' [Sankrit: *devaraja*; Thai: เทวราชา/*tevaraja*].Although the tradition is no longer strongly observed, the monarch has become the symbol of Thailand and an important part of Thais' everyday lives(Khanthong, 2012). Bhumibol Adulyadej[156], the present king, is seen as the most revered person[157]. He is regarded asa spiritual leader (Head, 2007). Since, to some degree, he is regarded as a 'sacred entity' (Hani, 2011: 28-29), several Thai people believe that his virtues can provide protection to his citizens. His pictures are hung on the walls of many residences and shops (Stengs, 1999: 41). Many people wait to have an audience with him during his public appearance.

Figure 6: King Rama IX's Birthday celebration. Hundreds of thousands of Thai people, all dressed in yellow (the colour associated with the king), gather to celebrate and witness the king's public appearance on his birthday, the 5th December 2012[158]. [Credit: the Nation[159]]

Chulalongkorn[160], his grandfather, was also much beloved and respected. His statues and pictures are widely worshiped because his spirit is regarded as having power to protect and bring prosperity[161]. Although previous monarchs are also worshipped by Thais, King Chulalongkorn is very well-known as his worship

[156] Also known as King Rama IX.
[157]This is rather due to the image portrayed by the media and his long service to the country.
[158] Nevertheless, some people argue that they did not come to see the king but to show the king their love and respect.
[159]http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/A-rare-moment-of-joy-and-unity-30195689.html
[160] King Rama V.
[161]An example of these amulets will be described in the following section.

is often regarded by scholars [162] as a religious and personality cult in Thai contemporary culture.

All-inclusive worship

The open-mindedness of Thais when it comes to spiritual beliefs, as discussed above, can be best exemplified in a picture of a shrine in a market in the Phahurat[163], Bangkok. Shrines similar to this can be commonly found in every part of Thailand.

The statues of the Hindu/Buddhist goddess of the earth is situated next to statues of Chinese gods and animistic spirits in the front row, while in the back, the Buddha's statue is next to the statue of Budai, the Laughing Buddha in the Mahayana tradition. The back row displays statues of King Rama V, who is beloved and revered in Thailand and is often regarded as a deity[164]. It can be seen that all deities are put 'under the one roof' for the convenience of the Thai people for worshiping and that other beliefs can exist concurrently within the Theravada Buddhist culture in Thailand.

Figure 7: An all-inclusive shrine in the Phahurat district, Bangkok. [Credit: Paveena Chamchoy]

[162] Irene Stengs, an anthropologist of Modern Thai religiosity, calls King Chulalongkorn 'a Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class' (2009). For more example, see Kamkrueng (1999), Auesriwongse (2003), Stengs (2009) and Taylor (2008).

[163] Also known as 'Little India'. Phahurat is well known for being the district where several Indian communities are located.

[164] As mentioned in the previous section (See footnote 160 for more details).

The aspects of Buddhist culture in contemporary Thailand

Buddhism has a significant influence on Thais' everyday lives. For Thais, a temple (Thai: วัด/*wat*) is not only a religious site but also signifies a spiritual, educational, and social institution. Monks have roles as supporters of education as well as helping develop and maintain communities.

Temple and education

Prior to the establishment of formal education around the 1900s, people often sent their children to receive a primary education in temples (Kusalasaya, 2001:32). Although monks have a less important role in the education system nowadays, many schools are still located in temples, and students are taught Buddhism by monks in school classes (Cummings, 1981:80). Temples are still considered to be places where local people come for consultation and support from revered monks for religious and secular issues.

Welfare and social aspects of the temple

Thai temples have been widely used as multipurpose centres, providing both Buddhists and non-Buddhists in the communitya space for social and recreational activities (Cummings, 1981:88).Both Buddhist and secular festivals are usually held periodically in the temple compounds. The temples can also be temporary shelters for both locals and travellers. For example, during my fieldtrips, several tattoo wearers told me they often stayed overnight at the temple to avoid traveling long distances when they come for *sak yant*.

When people have personal problems, they may come to stay in the temple for a short period for a retreat, wherethey can always get advice from monks and perform religious practices. Thai people regard personal problems as a condition of *dukkha* (which will be discussed later in this chapter), which can be alleviated through Buddhist practices; hence temples are the best accessible location.

Regardless of their beliefs, the Thai way of life is surrounded by Buddhism in this way. For Thais, temples are not merely monks' residences or sites for religious ceremonies; rather, they are important for the functions of their community. The use of temples as community centres and the role of monks as community

consultants become a socio-cultural force that informs Thai culture and national identity and perhaps contributed to the way Buddhism become a dominant religion in the country. This also contributes to the fact that monks are the most respected people in Thai cultures.

Life as a Thai Buddhist layman/laywoman[165]

A Buddhist layperson has a duty to observe precepts, meditate, and study Buddhist teachings. The life of a Thai Buddhist involves religious practices. Laypeople have a significant role in maintaining the temple and Buddhism in Thailand. For example, they give alms and offer food to monks, as monks are not allowed to earn a living. Laypeople can also offer labour and donations as well as participate in temple activities, particularly on Buddhist days[166]. Monks are also frequently invited to people's homes for lunch, preaching[167] and performing rituals in order to bring protection and prosperity to the residents. All the duties above are considered to be bright *kamma*s [Pali; Thai: กรรม/*kam*] (to be discussed in detail later), which can brings good effects to them.

Buddhism concepts in Thailand

There are a selection of the Buddhist concepts that are widely believed among Thai Buddhists to have a profound influence on the Thai way of life. They signify cultural perspectives, especially on wellbeing, and intimately engage with the way Thais view the therapeutic potentiality of religious and healing practices. These concepts are explored through the examination of the trance-possession rituals studied in this thesis. The exploration of these concepts and its effects on the way in which Thai Buddhists practise rituals can offer the potential for a broadening understanding of howritual efficacy is articulated.

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[165] According to the Buddhist Pali canon, Buddhists are divided into four groups known as 'the four assemblies' (Thai: พุทธบริษัทสี่/*Buddhabarisat see*): *Sangha* or monks (Thai: พระสงฆ์/*Prasong*; Pali: *Bhikkhu*), female monks (Pali: *Bhikkhuni*), Laymen (Pali: *Upasaka*; Thai: อุบาสก/*Ubasok*), and laywomen (Pali: *Upasaka*, Thai: อุบาสิกา/*Ubasika*) (Nyanaponika, Hecker and Bodhi, 2003: 16-17).

[166]Each year, there are many religious festivals in Thailand. These festivals are regulated as public holidays. While most secular public holidays are fixed in the Gregorian calendar, most Buddhist days are calculated according to the Thai lunar calendar [Thai: ปฏิทินจันทรคติ/*Pa ti thin Chan tha ra kha ti*]. In Buddhist days, it is a tradition that Thai Buddhists will go to temples to make donations or offerings to monks. Attending temple activities in Buddhist days is regarded as a very bright *kamma* for some Thai Buddhists.

[167] The notion of preaching in a Thai Buddhist context will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Spiritual power

The Thai Buddhist idea of spiritual power directly engages with the practice of rituals, which affects how their efficacy is understood. In his book *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, Donald Swearer states that in Southeast Asia, "Theravada ritual often seems calculated to gain access to a wide spectrum of beneficent and malevolent powers" (1995: 18). These spiritual powers are found in individuals, ritual objects, and chanting. These are significant symbols that are held to be efficacious (*efficiens*, as mentioned in Chapter 1) in Thai Buddhist rituals. The chanting text may be incomprehensible, as most people cannot read Pali texts; however, the efficacy of a chanting ritual is not understood through the words but rather depends on the question of who is chanting, and how and where the chanting are performed. The role of the monks as well as the space and time of the ritual, as discussed in previous chapter, are powerful forces that shape how participants conceptualise ritual efficacy. As Swearer points out,

> The charismatic power ascribed to individual monks derive [*sic*], in part, from the power represented by the Buddha because monks follow his *dhamma* (the Buddha's teaching); even more so, monks' charisma stems from their reputed abilities […]. Consequently, images, relics, and amulets of famous monks are venerated for their own sake (1995: 18).

The notion of *dukkha* as 'unsatisfactoriness'

The ultimate goal in Buddhism is to attain *nibbana* [Pali; Thai: นิพพาน/*nibharn*; Sanskrit: *nirvana*]: the peaceful state of being free from unsatisfactoriness [Pali: *dukkha*, Thai: ทุกข์/*tuk*] (to be discussed below),[168] and craving and afflictions (Pali: *kilesa*, Thai: กิเลส/*kiles*). *Dukkha* is the fundamental concepts of Buddhist thought. According to the first recorded teaching of the Buddha[169], the state of *dukkha* exists in every aspects of life:

Jati pi dukkha, jara pi dukkha, vyadhi pi dukkha, maranam pi dukkham
(Birth, aging, death is dukkha)

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[168] In Theravada tradition, it is believed that practices such as *vipassana* (one approach of Buddhist meditation) [Pali; Thai: วิปัสสนา] leads to enlightenment and ultimately liberation [Pali: *nibbāna*; Thai: นิพพาน/*nibharn*; Sanskrit: *nirvana*] of the cycle of existence or rebirth [Pali: *sangsara*; Thai: สังสารวัฏ/*sangsanrawat*], which is the supreme goal of Theravada Buddhism.

[169] *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* [Thai:ธัมมจักกัปปวัตนสูตร; English: The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dharma]

Sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupayasapi dukkha
(Sorrow, lamentation, distress and discomfort is dukkha)
Appiyehi sampayogo dukkho, piyehi vippayogo dukkho
(Association with what is not loved or separation from what is loved is dukkha.)
Yampiccham na labhati tampi dukkham
(Not getting what is wanted is dukkha.)[170]

Although the word 'suffering' is conventionally used to refer to *dukkha*, suffering in a Buddhist concept may not only mean 'unhappiness' and 'pain'. *Dukkha* is also defined as 'discontentment' and 'stressfulness'[171]. Nevertheless, several Buddhist scholars[172] agree that the term is understood by Theravada Buddhists in a wider and deeper sense so that it cannot be cannot be adequately translated into an English word.Karunadasa (2011), a Buddhist scholar, states that the Buddhist term *dukkha* should be understood as the deeper idea of imperfection, unrest, and conflict.

In this sense, I suggest that unsatisfactoriness is perhaps the closest English term to define the concept of *dukkha,* as it is understood in Thai contemporary Buddhism. The translation of the Pali texts above is widely known among Thais as it is usually recited and used in preaching. For Buddhists, the state of *dukkha* appears when one has unsatisfactoriness towards their conditions in life.

In Buddhism, *dukkha* is produced by change [Pali: *viparinama-dukkha*]. Buddhists believe in the concept of impermanence; everything is constantly changing. As discussed in Chapter 1, the bodymind experience is always the process of becoming; hence, *dukkha* profoundly engages with every aspect of life so that it is extremely difficult to be removed. The applied drama concept of bewilderment, discussed in Chapter 1, may also directly relate to Buddhist ideas of *dukkha*: when bodymind experience changes, the familiar conditions of one's bodymind are disrupted; hence, the state of bewilderment occurs. In this way, the

[170] Tipitaka, SN 56.11.
[171] For example, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, whose several translations of Buddhist Pali texts were used by this thesis.
[172] See for example, Rahula (1974: 17), Piyadassi (1974: 37).

sense of bewilderment can lead to *dukkha,* and one is stimulated to find a solution for this condition.

In Buddhism, the 'the Four Noble Truths' [Pali: *Cattari Ariyasaccani*; Thai: อริยสัจสี่ /*ariyasajsii*], which are considered to be the essence of the doctrine (Rahula, 1974:16), provide a way to deal with *dukkha*. It explains the nature, cause [Pali: *samudaya*; Thai: สมุทัย/*samuthai*], and the end [Pali: *nirodha*, Thai: นิโรธ/*nirod*] of *dukkha*[173]. The last noble truth suggests the eightfold paths for ending *dukkha* [Pali: *marga*, Thai: มรรค/*muk*[174]].

In brief, the ways to end *dukkha*, as suggested in the eightfold path, is to commit bright *kammas*[175]. As mentioned in the previous section on Thai Buddhists' duties, the examples of bright *kammas* are religious practices such as *vipassana*[176]meditation [Pali; Thai: วิปัสสนา], attending rituals, and observing precepts [Pali: *sila*; Thai: ศีล/*sil*] (to be discussed later). Nonetheless, being completely free from *dukkha* can only happen in *nibbana,* which is considered to be extremely difficult and take time[177] to achieve.

In this way, Thai Buddhists view *dukkha* as a common condition. Personal problems (as unsatisfactoriness) are regarded as *dukkha,* which cannot be completely eliminated (unless one achieves *nibbana*) but can be gradually alleviated. Put simply, to compare it to a condition of illness[178], *dukkha* cannot be completely cured in a single practice but rather can be healed through committing *bright kamma* (in order to mitigate *dark kamma*). The notion of *dukkha*

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[173] Pasanno, Ajahn and Amaro (2012: 52), Buddhist scholars, point out that the four noble truths are formulated similarly to medical examinations: the symptoms (*dukkha*), the causes (*samudaya*), the prognoses (*nirodha*), and the treatments (*marga*).

[174]These are grouped into three sections: precepts [Pali: *sila*; Thai: ศีล/*sil*], meditation [Pali: *Samadhi*; Thai: สมาธิ/*samathi*], and wisdom [Pali: *panna*; Thai: ปัญญา/*panya*] (Sumedho, 1992: 51).

[175]This lead to liberation [*nibbana*] from of the cycle of existence or rebirth [Pali: *sangsara*; Thai: สังสารวัฏ/*sangsanrawat*].

[176] *Vipassana* is one approach of meditation in Theravada Buddhism. It is believed that *vipassana* is the main method to lead to the state of *nibbana*. Nonetheless, other bright *kammas* are also considered significant elements for the removal of *dukkha*.

[177] For Buddhists, time in this sense is conceived of in a larger scale than a human life span. It is believed that it may take many rebirths until *nibbana* can be reached. For Thai Buddhists, one can be born not only as human beings but also as animals and spirits; therefore, it can take extremely considerable amount of time and efforts during the journey to *nibbana*.

[178] The notion of illness and healing in Thailand will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

is fundamentally embedded in Thai Buddhist perspectives on the bodymind and wellbeing.

Precepts [Pali: sila; Thai: ศีล/sil]

Among the sections of the fourth noble truths, precepts are a fundamental step towards the end of *dukkha*. Buddhism is practiced through the embodied experience, and this is primarily exemplified in the observance of precepts. There are 227 precepts that monks must strictly observe, while ideally, non-monks follow five precepts [Pali: *panca sila*; Thai: ศีลห้า/*silha*] in their daily lives. The five precepts include the following:

1. To refrain from killing creatures.
2. To refrain from taking that which is not given.
3. To refrain from sexual misconduct such as marital/sexual infidelity.
4. To refrain from false speech such as lying.
5. To refrain from intoxication such as drinking and drugs, which lead to carelessness. (Bullitt, 2010)

In addition, some Buddhists may choose to observe eight precepts [Pali: *atthasila*; Thai: ศีลแปด/*sil pad*][179] which three additional precepts is added to the usual five precepts.

Thai Buddhist laypeople are expected to practice at least five precepts, as these are part of the Buddhist moral standards. Thanissaro[180], a Buddhist monk and scholar, states that observing the precepts can be seen as a 'therapeutic' tool for the 'wounded mind', which fails to maintain the moral standards of behaviour:

> These reactions [to the failure] are like wounds in the mind. […] When the mind is wounded in these ways, it can't settle down comfortably in the present, for it finds itself resting on raw, exposed flesh or calcified knots. Even when it's forced to stay in the present, it's there only in a tensed,

[179] The additional three precepts are as follows: to refrain from eating after noon, to refrain from attending any entertainment such as performances, music, and dance (this includes using cosmetics, wearing perfume, and decorating the body), and to refrain from a luxurious sleeping place (Bullitt, 2010). In addition to the third precept, a person must refrain from any sexual activities if he/she observe these eight precepts.

[180] An American who is a monk in Thai Buddhism. He is known for being an English translator of the *Pali* canon.

> contorted and partial way, and so the insights it gains tend to be contorted and partial as well. Only if the mind is free of wounds and scars can it be expected to settle down comfortably and freely in the present, and to give rise to undistorted discernment. This is where the five precepts come in: They are designed to heal these wounds and scars. Healthy self-esteem comes from living up to a set of standards that are practical, clear-cut, humane, and worthy of respect; the five precepts are formulated in such a way that they provide just such a set of standards. (Thanissaro, 2011)

In this sense, for Buddhists, offending the precepts can result in the distorted embodied sense of 'here and now' [Pali: *sanditthikodhamma*] that is essential in Buddhist teaching (as discussed in Chapter 1). In addition, the offending is considered as committing 'dark' [181] *kamma*, which will result in unfortunate circumstances. To the contrary, to strictly observe the precepts, as the essential duty of being a Buddhist, provides a 'bright' *kamma* that can lead to good fortune and peace and may eventually lead to the cessation of *dukkha*.

The concept of *kamma*

Phenomena are preceded by the heart, ruled by the heart, made of the heart.
If you speak or act with a corrupted heart, then suffering follows you
—as the wheel of the cart, the track of the ox that pulls it […]
If you speak or act with a calm, bright heart,
then happiness follows you, like a shadow that never leaves
From the Dhammapada ['Yamakavagga: Pairs']

(Translated version of Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2012).

Kamma [Pali; Sanskrit: karma], or *kam* in Thai, is one of the basic ideas of 'cause' and 'effect'. *Kamma* etymologically means 'actions' that can cause effects (Pali: v*ipaka*; Thai: วิบากกรรม/*vibak-kam*) after they have been committed. The word *vibak* in Thai also means 'hardship' or 'path full of difficulty' (Thai Royal Institute, 1999); hence, for many Thais, the term *vibak-kam* is usually perceived as having a negative connotation: the bad result(s) from bad *kamma* in the past. This also means that the terms *kam* and *kamma* are frequently used in Thailand when people speak of immoral behaviours.[182] However, the term *kamma* in Theravada Buddhism refers to either positive or negative actions (also known as bright and

[181] The concept of 'dark' and 'bright' *kamma* will be discussed in the next section and in Chapter 5.
[182] According to the Buddhist belief.

dark *kamma*). *Kamma* can be present in three channels: through physical means [Pali: *kaya-kamma*; Thai: กายกรรม/*kayakam*], through verbal acts [Pali: *vaci-kamma*; Thai: วจีกรรม/*vageekam*][183], and through the mind [Pali: *mano-kamma*; Thai: มโนกรรม/*manokam* (Sucitto, 2010: 25). For Theravada Buddhists, *kamma* usually refers only to actions that spring from intention [Pali: *cetana*; Thai: เจตนา/*jetana*] [184](Ghose, 2007: 259; Sucitto, 2010: 7).

The basic concept of the law of *kamma* [Pali: *kamaniyama*; Thai: กฎแห่งกรรม/*kot haeng kam*] is widely known among Thai Buddhists through the simple saying 'do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil' [Thai: ทำดีได้ดีทำชั่วได้ชั่ว/*tham dee dai dee*; *tham chua dai chau*] (Kayes, 1983: 263).In addition, due to Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation[185], *kamma* not only exists in the current life but *kamma* from past lives are also carried over to present[186] lives. In Thai Buddhism, *Kamma* is usually considered to be the main contribution to a person's present condition (Ghose, 2007: 259).

Thanissaro, a Buddhist scholar, argues that *kamma* works in a non-linear process, or 'multiple feedback loops'. This concurs with the Buddhists idea of 'embodied presence' discussed in Chapter 1. The presence is in continual flux, hence:

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[183] According to *Ajahn* Sucitto (2010: 25), this verbal action includes 'internal speech' or 'thinking', while only the feeling, or 'the sense of being affected and responding' is categorised as an act of mind. Nonetheless, some Buddhists prefer to refer to verbal acts as 'speech' and acts through the mind as 'thought'. There are many opinions regarding this topic, but I have chosen to disregard this issue as it is beyond the scope of my thesis.

[184] There are some arguments over the use of the word 'volition' to describe the Pali term *cetana* among scholars, especially in Buddhist psychology. (See Guenther, 1976, McDermott, 1980) However, I concur with *Ajahn* Sucitto, a monk in Thai Buddhist forest tradition, that *cetana* (or *jetana* in Thai) can include "a carefully considered intention or a compulsive drive or a psychological reflex" (Sucitto, 2010: 7). This is also an appropriate definition of the Thai word *jetana*, which is slightly different from the word *Tung Jai* [Thai: ตั้งใจ], which means only 'intention'. Both words are widely used in other contexts apart from Buddhism.

[185] I use the English word 'reincarnation' here only for the reason of convenience, as there is no exact English equivalent. In my opinion, the Buddhist belief about the repeating cycle of birth, death, and rebirth indicates that every life is equally important as it forms part of a continuous cycle [Pali: *samsara*; Thai สังสารวัฏ/*Sangsaravatt*]. The term 'reincarnation' emphasises the importance of current life as it is usually used to refer to the process by which the soul/spirit or consciousness of the deceased transfers to the newborn's body.

[186] And also future lives.

> The present moment being shaped both by past and by present actions; present actions shape not only the future but also the present […]" (Thanissaro, 2000: 8).

Unlike notions in fatalistic theory that emphasise the role of destiny, the idea of *kamma* does not signify powerlessness towards fate but rather emphasises the individual's responsibility for his/her current life despite any past lives (ibid). In this way, the notion of 'free will' still existsas a person designs his/her own present/future condition simultaneously while performing current *kamma* (Sucitto, 2010: 1, 7, 8, 25); hence, he/she is in control of his/her destiny (Obeyesekere, 1968: 21).

Although *kamma* in Buddhism does not indicate the inability to control life circumstances, many Thais generally believe that *kamma* is an inevitable controlling force that bounds with every aspect of a person's life. Steven Carlisle (2012: 326), an anthropologist in Thai Buddhism, notes that Thais regard *kamma* as 'the power that brings balance to the universe'. Thai concepts of life are embedded by the belief that every situation, particularly in which *dukkha* exists, is the result of *kamma*s regardless if they can recall their past actions or not.

This leads to the practices that I call 'Thai Buddhist style of *kamma* purification', to be discussed in detail in Chapter 5, in which participants perform bright *kammas* in order to mitigate dark *kamma*s. This acts of purification is exemplified in rituals such as Parn Yak[187] and *sak yant,* where the Buddhist concepts of *dukkha* and *kamma* are intimately interwoven with the Thai idea of spiritual powers. Spirits can provide help; nevertheless, participants are responsible for their destinies by committing the bright *kammas* through embodied practices. I suggest this is the way in which the therapeutic potentiality of rituals has been conceptualized in contemporary Thai Buddhist culture. The notion of *kamma* and the Buddhist concepts for a solution to the condition of *dukkha* can directly relate to the concept of embodiment found in performance practices and applied drama, as discussed in Chapter 1. Because of this, the socio-cultural aspects of Buddhist belief and the performance perspectives together offer a means, in this thesis, to engage with the complexity of ritual practices in Thai contemporary context.

[187] One of the explicit examples is Parn Yak at Wat Noinai, which I described in Chapter 1.

Chapter 3

The notions of health and wellbeing in Thai culture

This chapter aims to further investigate how socio-cultural factors can contribute to expressions of participants' sense of efficacy in which they state that they 'feel better[188]' from their experience in ritual. To investigate what 'feel better' means in this context, the notions of health, wellbeing, and healing in Thai Buddhist culture are examined in relation to the person's sense of therapeutic transformation. Furthermore, the perspectives on healthcare and its related practices that are prevalent among Thais are explored in order to explore how cultural concepts of healing are perceived in contemporary Thailand and situated along with the Western model of allopathic medicine. Despite the existence of biomedicine, some Thais choose specific cultural practices such as rituals as their approach to healing, and this discussion may shed light on this approach.

An understanding of the cultural conception of the efficacy of therapeutic practices can provide a response to one of my research questions: how rituals, for example trance-possession rituals, are conceptualised by Thai people as having therapeutic potential.

The chapter begins with the overview of the history of medical practices in Thailand in order to establish the context for the current form of the Thai healthcare system. This system includes both the Western model of medicine and Thai traditional practices. It then moves on to explore the concepts and practices mentioned above.

[188] As I mentioned in Chapter 1, during my fieldwork, many participants stated that they feel better after participating in rituals of Parn Yak and *sak yant*.

The development of medical practices in Thailand

Apart from contemporary biomedicine, several different forms of healing are currently in practice. Most of these practices, for instance, herbal medicine[189], massage, and rituals[190], are referred to as 'traditional[191]'. Thai traditional medicine derives from various concepts such as *Ayuraveda*, the medicine native to India (Archanuparb, 1987: 15), astrology, animism, and Hinduism. Around 1200-1337 CE, when Theravada Buddhism began to flourish in the region and Buddhist temples became the centre of the community, monks took on the role of medicine men (Subchareon, 1995:13). During the Ayutthaya Kingdom (1350-1767 CE), Chinese medicine became integrated within the system of medical practices that were already commonly practiced and amalgamated with animistic and astrological beliefs (Ramkhamhaeng University, 2011; Kerunpong, 1982: 18-19; Subchareon, 1995: 15).

Western medicine as a modern practice came to the country during this period. It began to be practiced widely during the period of King Rama IV (1851-1868 CE) (Ministry of Public Health, 2011) when two American doctors, Dr. Dan Beach Bradley and Dr. Samuel Reynolds House, came to Bangkok and gained their medical reputation among Thai people, especially in the royal court. The doctors also opened a free clinic, which resulted in the rising popularity of Western medicine. Siriraj Hospital, the first modern medical institution, was established in 1887 (Charulukananan and Sueblinvong, 2003: 123-128).Subsequently, the Ministry of Public Health was founded in 1942, contributing towards a public health system for the nation (Ministry of Public Health, 1997: 115-21).

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[189] The types of Thai traditional herbal medicine are categorised by their form and method of preparation: for example, liquid medicine that can be prepared by decoction, which is the boiling of plant material until it releases its active constituents [Thai: ยาต้ม/*ya tom*]; infusion, which is similar to making a cup of tea but uses herbs instead of tea leaves [Thai: ยาชง/*ya shong*]; and tincture, which is the soaking of raw materials such as herbs or animal parts in alcohol [Thai: ยาดอง/*ya dong*] (Center of Applied Thai Traditional Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Siriraj Hospital, 2009: 1). Some medicines are in the form of a soft tablet [Thai: ยาลูกกลอน/*ya luk korn*], which is prepared by mixing honey or sugar syrup with herbs and molding the mixture into a tablet. Nowadays, some Thai traditional medicines are also in the form of capsules or hard tablets, similar to pills in modern medicine (ibid).

[190] The concept of ritual as a healing treatment will be discussed later in the chapter.

[191] In fact, some of them have been influenced by other cultures because of the geography of the country and the fact that Thailand has been in contact with other countries, as explained in the previous chapter.

The downturn and revival of Thai traditional medicine

During the early intervention of Western medicine, Thai traditional practices were still being conducted and became more systematic. For example, herbal medicine recipes, Thai yoga postures[192], and traditional healing massage techniques have been officially recorded. The most explicit examples of these records are several statues depicting Thai yoga postures in Wat Phra Chetupon Wimonmanklaram Temple (internationally known as Wat Pho), which is currently well known among Thais and foreigners as a renowned centre for Thai traditional healing.

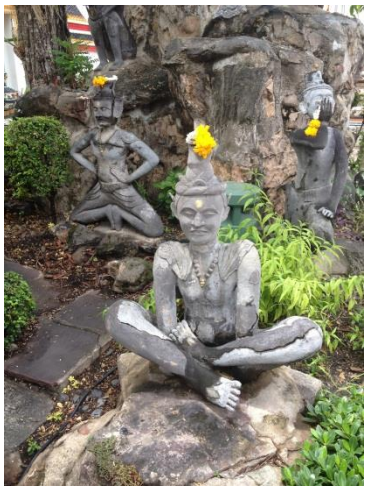

Figure 8, 9: Statues of Thai yoga in Wat Phra Chetupon Wimonmanklaram temple [Credit: Paveena Chamchoy]

However, it is worth noting that traditional medicine temporarily declined when King Rama VI[193] ordered Siriraj Medical School to cease teaching traditional medicine. In 1923, King Rama VI passed the Medical Practice Act, which contains regulations that control traditional doctors and the traditional medical service (Pornsiripong and Usuparat, 1994: 29). Due to this restrictive law and fewer practitioners, traditional medical practices gradually disappeared. Moreover, a ministerial regulation was introduced that distinguishes between traditional and Western medicine by referring to the latter as a contemporary medical practice [Thai: แพทย์แผนปัจจุบัน/*pad pan pajuban*] and the former as an ancient medical practice

[192] The postures are fundamentally different from the yoga practiced in India and are integrated with self-massage. Nowadays, Thai yoga is not often practiced alone but rather is commonly practiced alongside a traditional massage session. In these sessions, patients are put into Thai yoga-like postures by massagers in order to stretch the muscles (Deeviset et al., 1999: 8).
[193] Reigned 1910-1925 CE.

[Thai: แพทย์แผนโบราณ/*pad pan boran*]. As a result, Western medicine is regarded as a mainstream practice, whereas traditional practice is seen as an outdated and unverified form of treatment.

Traditional medicine began to become accepted again when there was a shortage of modern medicine during the Second World War. In 1962, by permission of the Ministry of Public Health, a school was established for teaching traditional medicine and traditional massage at Wat Phra Chetupon Wimonmanklaram Temple (Thai Royal Institute, 1999). Since then, several traditional medical schools have been established and are still in operation. Recently, traditional healing practices have become increasingly popular, and the government authorities accept most practices. This attitude change led to the establishment of the Department for Development of Thai Traditional and Alternative Medicine in 2002 (The Department for Development of Thai Traditional and Alternative Medicine, 2011).

The intervention of a biomedical approach on the issues of mental health

As discussed in previous chapters, Buddhist culture has a holistic view of the bodymind, which is different from the Western perspective that they can be separately treated. Even in Thai culture today, mental health is not recognized as a separate healthcare issue. Nonetheless, the model of Western mental healthcare has also been established in the country along with the intervention of biomedicine to treat physical illness. This began with the establishment of a mental hospital in 1889 called 'the Hospital for Mentally Impaired People' [My translation] [Thai: โรงพยาบาลคนเสียจริต/ *Rong Payabarn Khon Sia Jarit*]. In its early stages, the hospital focused on confining patients rather than treating illnesses (Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health of Thailand). When the Western concept of moral treatment[194] flourished in Thailand around 1925-

[194] Moral treatment is the term used to describe humane approaches for caring for patients with mental disorders. The tradition of moral treatment started around 1792-1796, when Williams Tuke, an English businessman, founded the York Retreat, a mental health care institution. The patients in the York Retreat were treated as individuals with sympathy, respect, and dignity (York Retreat, 2011). Later, Samuel Tuke, William Tuke's grandson, began to use the term 'moral treatment' (taken from Phillipe Pinel, a French physician's term '*traitement moral*') to describe the work of the retreat. So, moral treatment refers to therapeutic practices that aim to heal the patients rather than confine them (Dunkel, 1983:274).

1931[195], a more humane approach was applied, and the name of the asylum was changed to Thonburi, the Hospital for Mental Disorders [My translation] [Thai: โรงพยาบาลโรคจิตธนบุรี/Rong Payabarn Rok Jit Thonburi] to make the name more attractive (Department of Mental Health, 2011)[196]. Psychiatry became a subject of study offered in medical schools, and several mental hospitals were established in many parts of the country (ibid).

It is worth noting that although the Western-based model of medicine has been widely accepted in the Thai healthcare system until today, the Western model of psychiatric treatment is still not very popular, evidenced in the low number of patients in mental healthcare in Thailand[197] (World Health Organization, 2006). The following factors may contribute to this situation: limited access to mental healthcare facilities; the perspective of Thai people on health; and the social stigma of mental health disorders. Thai perspectives on health-related issues and the public attitude of stigmatising people with mental health illness, I suggest, may be potentially reinforced by Thai Buddhist beliefs, for instance, the notion of bodymind, *dukkha,* and *kamma*, and the ideas of spiritual powers. Aspects of these beliefs will be discussed later to investigate how the practices of Western psychiatry cannot be seen as successful within Thai culture and how Thais seek cultural approaches as their primary means to deal with crisis that may be seen as mental health-related in a Western biomedical context.

In this way, the perception and positions of healthcare practices in Thailand are impacted by political force. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of Parn Yak and *sak yant*, as will be discussed in the section on contemporary healthcare. Nonetheless, participants still retain the power to make decisions in response to their experience of 'suffering'. In his study on clinical practices in Thailand, medical anthropologist Daniel Weisberg explains that Thai physicians have to adjust their practices to deal with patients' preferences in treatment (Weisberg and Long, 1984: 119). The divergence of perception towards illness and healing

[195] Led by Dr. Hugh Campbell Highet, a British physician who was appointed as a director of this hospital at that time.

[196] The hospital has relocated to its present site and changed its name to 'Somdej Chaopraya Hospital' [Thai: โรงพยาบาลสมเด็จเจ้าพระยา].

[197] As in the report of WHO, for example, the outpatient visits were 1.433% of population in 2004 (World Health Organization, 2006: 10).

efficacy led to collaborations between contemporary practitioners and practitioners of traditional medicine.

Healthcare in contemporary Thailand

Traditional practices within the context of contemporary biomedicine, the practices of Thai contemporary healthcare, are based on a pluralistic system. Many cultural approaches to wellbeing, for instance, traditional medicine, massage, and rituals, are acknowledged in the context of the dominant Western model of biomedicine. For example, they are provided in many hospitals across the country; some Thai people use traditional practices as a complementary and alternative treatment [198] to contemporary medical practices. Western style medicine has become incorporated into the healthcare system with culturally specific (generally called 'traditional') practices that are widely found in Asian cultures (Weisberg and Long, 1984: 117). In their article on the variations of biomedicine in Asia, Weisberg and Long note that biomedicine has never stood alone in Asian countries but rather has become "one among a number of therapeutic styles in pluralistic environments" (ibid).

The cultural approaches of traditional medicine are still widely employed due to their ability to offer a greater understanding of patients' psychological needs and to coordinate with their community. In their research on Thai traditional medicine, Jungsatiensab and Tantipidok (2007: 198) claim that modern biomedical practice cannot fulfil all of the needs of the patients, because it emphasises the pathology of illness rather than the feelings of patients. Weisberg (1984: 182-183) also asserts that the socio-cultural constraints force biomedical practitioners to absorb cultural notions of the therapeutic process into their practices. This in turn informs the way in which biomedicine is practiced within the Thai contemporary

[198] In contemporary Thailand, Thai traditional healing practices seem to be more popular, especially as a result of the New Age movement among foreigners and Thais. Nonetheless, the New Age is regarded as a Western spiritual movement with most of its concepts based on Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism. Therefore, it is a somewhat ridiculous fallacy when it is mentioned that the New Age movement is popular among Thai people, as they are already from the East. This may be because of the influence of Western countries in Thailand, especially in urban areas. Nowadays, Thai people seem to be returning to their roots by appreciating traditional philosophy and spirituality as well as adopting a traditional lifestyle. In this sense, some people, particularly in the media, sarcastically refer to this movement of Thai people in city areas as a New Age trend.

healthcare system. I suggest that the cultural perspective on health-related issues is encompassed by Thai Buddhist ideas of bodymind, which makes it differ greatly from the Western model of contemporary medicine. This results in a conflict between interpretation of illness from the model of allopathic medicine and the cultural/humanities-based healthcare system in Thailand, which will be discussed later in the chapter. This directly affects the way in which Thais choose specific approaches to achieve a sense of wellbeing.

Applied drama as a Western-based therapeutic practices outside a biomedical environment

Despite the fact that drama and theatre[199][200] have been used as tools for therapeutic efficacy in Thailand since the 1980s, [201]there are few applied drama practices in the country at the present. One reason is, perhaps, due to its development from the Western style of performance practices. Applied drama has a particular set of ideas and practices that have been established within a Western environment; therefore, there may be an unfamiliarity with theatre/drama in the way that applied drama is used.[202]This may be a contributory factor to the fact that applied drama has not become popular in Thailand.

In contemporary Thailand, many people opt to observe the cultural approaches, i.e. rituals, as therapeutic. With their ability to address the cultural aspects of healing and wellbeing, these practices engage with the people's views of suffering in health-related issues, as well as with the experiences of their families and communities. Hence, these cultural approaches are extensively practiced. Nevertheless, given that there is limited access to applied drama sessions, I cannot assume that Thai people prefer rituals. Furthermore, it would be inappropriate and beyond the scope of this study to try to verify whether applied drama or the culturally established practice is the better approach to therapeutic efficacy.

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[199] As understood in the West. See also Chapter 1 for a description of applied drama.

[200] This does not include drama therapy, which seems to be located fully in the Western biomedical healthcare service and is rarely practiced in contemporary Thailand.

[201] For example, there are the early establishment of the Makhampom Theatre Troupe in 1980 (Sompiboon, 2012: 13) and Maya: The Art and Cultural Institute for Development in 1981 (Nualsri, 2009: 5). At the present, these two theatre companies are organisations that are using drama as a tool for education and social development in Thailand.

The Thai notions of health and illness are different from those in a Western-centric biomedical context. Therefore, I would suggest that, when used in a specific context, such as Thai Buddhist culture, it is possible that applied drama can encounter a similar challenge as other practices of biomedical mental healthcare,[203] due to its profound engagement with the Western view of mental health and therapeutic efficacy. The Thai cultural perspectives towards bodymind, healing and wellbeing will be discussed later in this chapter.

The position of trance-possession rituals in the Thai healthcare system: the exclusion of Parn Yak and *sak yant*

Rituals are generally regarded in Thailand as a cultural approach that helps people cope with distress. Trance-possession rituals are also particularly considered as a traditional healing practice and have often been the focus of study by scholars in medical studies. Instances of this include the ritual dance of Nora Rong Kru in southern Thailand (for example, Vanarungsikul, 2001; Galieng, 2010). Some are highly approved by the government authorities as an alternative or complementary medical practice (Chamchoy, 2006: 33). For example, the Thai Ministry of Public Health encourages the practice of the Phi Fa ritual[204] in hospitals (Chinwanitjaroen, 2012).

Nonetheless, Parn Yak and *sak yant* are not acknowledged by the Thai authorities as cultural healing practices. Moreover, they are often treated with skepticism for being 'superstitious nonsense' and trickery. This, perhaps, relates to the issue of 'authenticity' in the widespread idea of 'pure and contaminated' Buddhism in contemporary Thailand. As discussed in Chapter 1, those who are in a position of social and political power, for instance, the Department of Religious Affairs and Buddhists scholars,[205] do not recognise these ceremonies as authentic and traditional rituals. The issue of power and authority, I suggest, is a potential force that contributes to the exclusion of Parn Yak and *sak yant* in the contemporary Thai pluralistic healthcare system.

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[203] Although the cultural aspect is usually addressed within the discipline (as discussed in Chapter 1).
[204] A type of shamanic healing ritual specifically found in northeastern Thailand.
[205] As mentioned in Chapter 1.

However, in the context of ritual, the evidence from my fieldwork has revealed that Parn Yak and *sak yant* observers consider these rituals to be efficacious means of dealing with the frustrations that arise from particular circumstances that are beyond their individual control. Anthropologist John McCreery asserts that the meaning of a ritual "depends not only on the character of the ritual itself but also on the perspective from which it is viewed" (McCreery, 1979b: 53). This was exemplified in some informants' stories that were related during my fieldwork. These accounts indicated how personal problems were resolved or relieved after taking part in rituals.[206] Those who took part in the rituals often repeated the phrase that they 'feel better' during and after their ritual experience.[207] The examination of the notion of 'feel better' as being culturally constituted in a Thai context may offer a means of understanding how the efficacy of Parn Yak and *sak yant* is articulated.

Thai concepts of the body and mind

The Thai concepts of body and mind are fundamentally the consolidation of Buddhist ideas that body and mind are inseparable (as discussed in Chapter 1): the mind impacts the body, which in turn affects the mind. This is best exemplified by the Buddhist principle of practicing meditation. For example, Pra Thepvethee (cited in Nuntavisarn, 1997: 33), a monk and a scholar in Buddhism, notes that a person who is likely to succeed in meditation will have a relaxed body so that their mind can be focused. This holistic understanding of bodymind, Thai Buddhist ideas on meditation and belief in spiritual power, as well as elements from traditional practices found in countries such as India and China, also influence the practices of Thai traditional medicine (Chockevivat and Chuthaputti, 2005:1; Subchareon, 2001:7). Generally, the Thai notion of health and wellbeing is based on two basic concepts: *kwan* [ขวัญ] and *tard* [ธาตุ], which encompass the idea of vitality.

Kwan

Thais believe that each person has *kwan*, which is the force of life or a spirit of mind that resides in a person's body. When a person is in a state of shock or

[206] Some of these stories will be discussed in Chapter 5.
[207] Some examples of my ethnographic experience with this issue are described in Chapter 1.

distress, the *kwan* departs the body, causing an imbalance of both mind and body. The person can fall ill physically and psychologically, and, if order cannot be restored, death may be the final outcome. *Kwan*is generally perceived as having the form of an insect or tiny bird (Satienkoset, 1963: 17-19); therefore, it can fly away from the body and get lost. Thus, some Thai people believe that the loss of *kwan* is considered a crucial factor in most health-related problems.

In this way, many events of life involve *kwan* rituals. When a person falls ill or is in distress from his/her personal problems, rituals are performed to call *kwan* back to the body and to find a *kwan* that got lost in order to restore it to the body.

Figure 10: A *kwan* doctor calling *kwan* back to the patient's body [credit: Thaopasert][208]

Kwan rituals are also performed to maintain a state of wellbeing for a non-ill person. These rituals are usually conducted to mark milestones of life such as birth, ordination, and marriage (Satienkoset, 1963: 19-23). *Kwan* rituals also have a social aspect; for instance, they may be conducted to welcome a new person who moves into a community. In addition, the concept of *kwan* as a life force can also be used to enhance understanding in the operation of bodymind in other contexts apart from wellbeing, particularly in relation to Thai culture. For example, in his approach to performance training with Thai performers, Punpeng (2012: 35) states that the concept of *kwan* can represent a subtle energy in the body of a performer that enables him/her to work effectively; therefore, he/she has to maintain this energy through practice and training. The notion of *kwan* in relation

[208] http://lib.payap.ac.th/webin/ntic/index_eng.htm.

to the practices of trance-possession rituals will also be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Tard

For Thais, there are four elements [Thai: ธาตุ/*tard*] that function together as a life system: earth, water, wind, and fire. This concept of the elements of life[209] has been found in many ancient beliefs[210]. It is believed that the Thai concept derived from Buddhist beliefs regarding these elements [Pali: *Mahabhutani*] and gradually became the main principle of Thai traditional medicine.

It is believed that each person has his/her own base element [Thai: ธาตุเจ้าเรือน/*tard Chaoreon*], which can be any one of these four elements (The Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine, 2011). The base element can indicate the strength and weakness of a person's health condition[211]. An imbalance of the four elements may result from internal factors of the base element as well as external factors such as diet, lifestyle, and environment.

In Thai perspectives on health, the good conditions of both *Kwan* and *tard* are indicators of wellbeing. Although they are often understood as independently existing as mind-related (*kwan*) and body-related (*tard*s), they cannot be appropriately examined through the lens of the Western perspective, which has its root in the idea of human beings as consisting of body, soul, and spirit[212]. In fact, *Kwan* functions as a life force, while *tard*s is mainly responsible for the life system; they must operate together to create a state of wellbeing. In this sense, the Thai holistic understanding of health and illness cannot be simply contextualized within the Western model of healing in which body, mind, and spirit can independently have specific treatments. In order to understand the Thai

[209] Often referred to as the classical elements.
[210] Such as in Greece (Wilson, 2006: 456), Egypt (Clark, 2004: 41-42) and China (Tong, 2003: 127). According to the Chinese beliefs, there are five elements [Chinese: *wuxing*]: Earth, Fire, Water, Metal, and Wood.
[211] For example, people who have earth as a base element have a dark complexion and a strong body and bones, but they are likely to suffer from tumors or heart disease, while people whose base element is wind tend to have dry skin, a thin figure, and loose joints, so they are intolerant of cold weather and are likely to have problems with blood circulation (Subchareon, 1997: 24-25).
[212] The concept of body (Greek: *soma*), soul/mind (Greek: *psyche*), and spirit (Greek: *pneuma*) is believed to originate in the religious context of Christianity, as seen in 1 Thessalonian 5:23 (Roussou, 2011: 135).

notion of health, *kwan* and *tard* have to be considered as being intimately interrelated instead of a body-mind dualism.

The Thai notion of illness

Cultural and biomedical perspectives

In his study on the meaning of therapeutic ritual, McCreery addresses the importance of ritual participants' perception of the notion of efficacy (McCreery, 1979b: 54). As they are conceptualised differently across cultures, culturally-specific meanings regarding illness and healing are important to the study of efficacy. This has become a focus in the field of medical anthropology, which is fundamentally interested in how cultural and social aspects are potential forces that affect the way in which the notion of health is understood within a specific culture.

Not only the social and cultural milieu in which illness occurs, but also the perspectives of practitioners, participants, and people in the community are essential to the understanding of health. Waldram, a medical anthropologist, suggests that "the evaluation of efficacy can only be properly undertaken by combining all the perspectives of the actors in the sickness episode" (Waldram, 2000: 604). In the pluralistic environment of contemporary Thailand where both biomedical and Thai cultural models of healing operate, approaching a health-related issue may involve Western biomedical and traditional medicine as well as Thai Buddhists beliefs and socio-cultural aspects. To understand the efficacy of contemporary rituals, for instance, Parn Yak and *sak yant*, the notion of illness should be examined from both a biomedical and a Thai cultural perspective.

As stated earlier, the conflict between the interpretation of illness from the model of allopathic medicine and the cultural/humanities-based healthcare system in Thailand may result in a Thai preference for a particular practice in response to the experience of suffering. Arthur Kleinman, a psychiatrist who specializes in medical anthropology, discusses this conflict in several of his writings, which may explain the factors that contribute to these preferences. According to Kleinman, biomedicine differs from other practices "by its extreme insistence on materialism as a ground of knowledge, and its discomfort with dialectical modes of thought"

(1995:29). The main interest of biomedicine is not in the individual person or general wellbeing but rather in the disease (Hahn and Kleinman, 1983: 312). Perhaps due to its roots in the Western view of health, the suffering experience is likely to be devalued as a problem stemming from defective organs or cells rather than being addressed as a socio-cultural embodied phenomenon. Therefore, while patients experience suffering from illness, physicians treat 'disease' (Kleinman et al., 1978: 251-258).

> […] the doctor is taught to regard experience […] as fugitive, fungible, and therefore invalid. Yet by denying the patients' and family's experience, the practitioners of biomedicine is also led to discount the moral reality of suffering --- the experience of bearing and enduring pain […]. (Kleinman, 1995: 32)

Due to biomedicine's tendency to resist affirming experiences, practitioners may struggle to deal with patients with chronic illness (Kleinman, 1995: 31).This may be the reason why other practices that explicitly focus on patients' experience and consider illness to be meaningful, such as ritual, can be seen as efficacious in their culture. McCreey states, "Rituals […] do not heal by physical action on human bodies; their power lies in making illness meaningful to human beings" (1979b: 70). In this way, rituals cannot be merely considered as a response to the emotional impact of illness. It is the experiences of patients, their families, and communities in which rituals have the ability to engage in relation to the illness.

'Suffering' as understood in Thai Buddhist culture

In investigating the meaning of illness in a Thai context, it may be useful to consider the starting premise of medical anthropology or as Cecil Helman, a renowned scholar in this field, explains, to study "human suffering and the steps that people take to explain and relieve that suffering" (Helman, 2007: 1). The notion of 'suffering' in Thai Buddhist culture can be perceived as intimately interwoven with the wider notion of *dukkha*. As discussed in the previous chapter, Thai Buddhists regard *dukkha* as a universal and unavoidable condition: suffering arises as a dissatisfied response to life circumstances; therefore, the more circumstances that are addressed as unbearable, the more suffering is experienced. Put simply, to relieve suffering does not mean to escape the condition of suffering but rather to learn to accept suffering as it really exists.

Venerable Sumedho, a Westerner who is a Thai Buddhist monk, articulately explains:

> We tend to interpret our suffering as 'I'm really suffering. I suffer a lot—and I don't want to suffer […]. To let go of suffering, we have to admit it into consciousness. But the admission is not from a position of: 'I am suffering' but rather, 'There is the presence of suffering', because we are not trying to identify with the problem but simply acknowledge that there is one…So do not grasp these things as personal faults but keep contemplating these conditions as impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self (Sumedho, 1992:16-17).

The Thai perception of illness and healing is encompassed by the Buddhist idea of *dukkha*. Suffering is common and universal: it certainly happens many times in everyone's life. The experience of illness is suffering; hence, there is no way to completely remove it. Nonetheless, for Thai Buddhists, suffering can be relieved through various means[213]. Thus, Thai Buddhists regard illness in a deeper and wider sense than as the malfunction of the body, as seen in biomedical discourse. Thai monk Phramaha[214] Thanee Nuntavisarn (1997: 31) points out that illness, in the Buddhist sense, does not only mean pathological conditions but also includes any kind of dissatisfaction towards conditions in life. Drawing on Nuntavisarn's statement, as it can simultaneously impact all aspects of life, the suffering experienced during an illness episode is not only experienced by an individual, but also by those around him/her. The experience of illness, particularly in a Thai context, could be treated with the holistic understanding that it is a socially and culturally embodied phenomenon. This, perhaps, is the aspect in which Western-based biomedical models lack the ability to fully engage. This is exemplified in the biomedical concept of acute and chronic illness, which will now be discussed in relation to the Thai Buddhist idea of illness and *kamma*.

The view on acute and chronic illness in biomedicine

In biomedicine, illness is distinctively divided into two categories: acute and chronic conditions. As they are generally understood, acute illness occurs abruptly and worsens from onset, while chronic illness is a condition that has

[213] I suggest that this may be related to the ideas of spiritual power and *kamma*. The aspects of these will be discussed later in the chapter.
[214] A title of monks. See Footnote 12 for more details.

formed and existed over a long period. The Western-based model of biomedicine, as discussed earlier, focuses on the biological pathology of disease and the mechanism for treatment. Hence, the objective of biomedicine is, according to Sally Wellard, a scholar in health science, to 'reverse' the course of illness in order to resume the normal state of health (1998: 49). This creates a view that the illness, as well as the suffering related to it, will be eliminated if the disease is identified and treated. This is obviously compatible with the approach to acute illness that supposes the cause can usually be identified and the results of treatment are explicitly visible. On the contrary, chronic illness cannot be fully located within this model. By its nature, the condition of chronic illness is long-term and the prognosis is uncertain (Murrow and Oglesby, 1996: 47); therefore, as Wellard notes, biomedicine, "with a curative intent, fails to acknowledge a reality beyond the physical body of chronically ill people for whom cure [*sic*] is not attainable" (1998: 50).

Furthermore, while patients with acute episodes of illnesses survive because of the technological advances of biomedicine, their health may not always be 'reversed' to its previous condition; hence, the conditions are seen as chronic (Larkin, 1987 cited in Murrow and Oglesby, 1996: 47). However, the culture of biomedicine, at its extreme, leads to the demand that every experience of suffering must be treatable; patients' previous health and lifestyles can be resumed. As a result, patients with chronic illness often expect their suffering to be completely removed through biomedical practices. This, in part, leads to conflict between practitioners and patients and the challenge of caring for chronically ill patients, as discussed earlier. This conflict may be founded in the culture in which the biomedical healthcare exists,[215] for instance, in Thailand, where some people prefer other approaches when dealing with chronic conditions.

Dark *kamma*-related disease: Thai notion of chronic illness

Thais refer to long-term health-related issues, which may be understood in the Western context of chronic illness, as a bad *kamma* disease [Thai: โรคเวรโรคกรรม/*rok*

[215] It is also founded in the Western culture where biomedicine is developed (see for example: Murrow and Oglesby, 1996).

wen rok kam]. The long-term experience of suffering is the result of dark *kamma*(s), which may be from past lives or one's current life. In his research on the methods of healthcare as depicted in Tipitaka,[216] Kittisaro[217] (2011: 26) stated that despite any advanced treatments, there are no cures for these bad *kamma* diseases. According to Buddhist belief, patients with these illnesses will have to live with their conditions until the effects[218] of their dark *kamma* have run their course (ibid). In this sense, biomedicine may not be the most suitable approach for this type of illness. The more suitable means is to mitigate the impact of dark *kamma*s, as discussed in Chapter 2.

However, I am not positioning these cultural practices as a better treatment for chronic illness or suggesting that acute illnesses respond best to biomedical treatment. A biomedical dichotomy between acute and chronic illness, I suggest, is not simply transferable to adequately explain the Thai Buddhist perspective on illness. As stated above, Thai notions of suffering are intimately interwoven with the concept of *dukkha*. Acute or chronic illness, while requiring treatment, might be seen as common and not able to be completely and immediately eliminated. In their study on Buddhist perspectives on health, Sringernyuang and Paonil state that in Buddhism, every circumstance:

> originated from many causes that are governed by the natural law [of *kamma*]. […] Each cause or determinant relates to others while all are interdependent. The results of those interrelated create a variety of effect (2002: 94).

Accordingly, they suggest that health is understood in Buddhism beyond the physical or mental aspects; hence, an illness[219] or death may be "only one part of our diseases or sufferings" (Sringernyuang and Paonil, 2002: 99). Based on this view, and drawing on the Buddhist ideas of *kamma* and reincarnation, a condition that is viewed in a Western-centric biomedical context as an acute illness is, perhaps, merely a part of the episodes of an illness that are related to a single dark *kamma*; an illness in this life may have been previously experienced

[216] The Theravada Buddhist Pali canon.
[217] He is a monk; therefore, he is also referred as 'Phra Khru Prasitkittisan', which is his name during monkhood.
[218] Pali: *vipaka*; Thai: วิบากกรรม/*vibak-kam*. The notion of *vipaka* is described in Chapter 2.
[219] The illness as understood in the context of biomedicine.

in past lives and may be exacerbated in future lives. Simply stated, any health-related issues might be considered chronic in the Thai Buddhist context. For this reason, purification practices[220] are performed to prevent and control[221] the overall effect of kamma.[222]

The Thai concept of *kamma* as having a long-term impact may also be useful in approaching the way in which Parn Yak and *sak yant* are regularly attended by some participants. Data from my fieldwork has revealed that these rituals are viewed as an opportunity to 'reinforce' the bright *kamma* and 'mitigate' the impact of dark *kamma*(s), as well as 'preventing' them from continuing or reoccurring both in current and future lives. A *yant* tattoo wearer[223] told me that despite strictly observed precepts, the power of tattoos could be unknowingly lessened by the dark *kamma* in everyday life. This may also result in the heightened impact of past *kamma*. Hence, annually attending *wai kru* is essential. He described: "It is like recharging power, like fueling up the car. You need to keep coming back to maintain the good condition of your life and to ensure the protection from your tattoos." He further noted, "Once you attend *sak yant*, you may have a level ten of protection and good luck. After a period of time, the level may gradually decrease. You can re-attend the rituals to maintain and level up. However, the level cannot go down to zero as it was before you received the tattoo" (my fieldnotes, June 2012).

This understanding of the Thai perspective of illness can offer a means to understand the way in which those who attend the ritual express that they 'feel better'. Approaching the notion of 'feel-better' as being culturally conditioned can also help engage with the perception of Parn Yak and sak yant as having

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[220] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to describe other cultural healing practices with which Buddhist concepts are also integrated. However, it is worth noting that the concept of *kamma* also engages with Thai traditional healing practices other than only ritual practitioners. For example, practitioners may ask their patients to strictly observe Buddhist precepts when being treated by herbal medicine.

[221] In this sense, biomedical intervention can also be used to control acute symptoms that may be regarded as one of the impacts of illness.

[222] Interconnected with the concepts of *kamma* and *dukkha*, one may consider dissatisfaction towards conditions in life the same way as they view illness (Nuntavisarn, 1997: 31).

[223]Mr. Jong (age 40), personal communication, June 2012.

therapeutic efficacy without putting participants' personal problems in the context of a biomedical model of health and disease.[224]

The impacts of Dark *kamma* towards spiritual powers

In addition, apart from the Thai Buddhist concept of *kamma*, spirits in animistic belief are also able to determine circumstances in life (Satha-anand cited in Ekachai, 1991). For Thais, 'the external powers and supernatural forces' include the spirits in the spiritual world, ancestors' spirits and spirits that possess objects and places. It is necessary not to disparage them. Many Thai people believe that the illness can be caused by a spirit, for example, as a punishment for not paying respect. Nonetheless, as *Kamma* is seen as a natural law of cause and effects influence every conditions of life (Payutto, 1995: 146), it is believed that the illness may not directly caused by spirits' actions but rather by the impacts of a dark *kamma* that a person have done to the spirits (either in their current life or previous lives). The spirits is regarded as creditors[225], while a person is a debtor; therefore, the payback is enforced by the law of *kamma*. Apart from practices of *kamma* purification, more specific rituals that involve worshipping, offering gifts to the spirits are also performed to ask spirits for forgiveness.

The attitude towards people with mental health problems in relation to Thai Buddhist views on illness.

It is worth noting that there is an issue of stigma when mentioning mental health issues among Thais. Sanseeha et al. (2009: 306-311), in their study of Thai patients, report that discrimination against are mental health patients is common in Thailand. I suggest that this situation may be partly related to the Thai Buddhist idea of dark *kamma,* discussed above. Similar to the perspective towards illness, mental health problems (as in a Western diagnosis of mental health) result from dark *kamma*. A person with mental health issues, particularly with severe conditions that are regarded as untreatable, often are assumed to have

[224] Approaching this notion of 'feel-better' as being culturally conditioned may also help explain the exclusion of Parn Yak and *sak yant* from the Thai contemporary healthcare system discussed above. These rituals are viewed from the dominant Western model of medicine as 'superstitious nonsense' because the therapeutic experience is not physically manifested in these practices. Along with political factors, this may lead to the exclusion of these rituals by government authorities.

[225] Thai people refer to their *kamma*-creditors as *chao kam nai wen*[Thai: เจ้ากรรมนายเวร]

previously committed very dark *kamma* and hence are immoral and deserve to suffer. This is exemplified in the way in which Thais refer to people with severe mental illness[226] as *phee-bha* (Sanseeha et al, 2009: 309). *Phee* or *phi* [Thai: ผี] literally means 'ghost', while *bha* [Thai: บ้า] means 'mad.' For Thais to call someone *phi* is an insult. It implies that a person is no longer a human being, since according to Buddhist belief, *phis* or ghosts are widely seen as being of a lower status than human.[227]Hence, people with mental illnesses are often not accepted or treated as human beings. The evidence of this has been revealed in several studies on Thai psychiatric healthcare[228]. Furthermore, according to a report on the mental health system in Thailand by the World Health Organization (WHO), even having contact with staff who work in mental healthcare is regarded as a stigma for patients. This, in part, results in the low number of patients in contemporary mental healthcare clinics in Thailand, as discussed earlier.

[226] In a contemporary biomedical sense.
[227] These lower class *phi*(s) are often referred to as hungry ghosts [Pali: preta, Thai: เปรต/*pret*] (Salguero, 2006: 78). They are constantly starving and cannot have merit or do good deeds in order to reincarnate to a better class of being (ibid).
[228] For example, Kaewprom et al. (2011: 326) ;Sanseeha et al. (2009: 306-311)

Chapter 4

History, tradition, and practice of Parn Yak and *sak yant*

Following an overview of the socio-cultural aspects of Thai contemporary Buddhist ritual in the previous chapters, this chapter focuses on the practice of Parn Yak and *sak yant*. The chapter begins with an examination of the history and a summary of how these rituals developed across time and environments. It then moves on to examine the performativity of these rituals. In this chapter, evidence from my fieldwork[229] carried out in Bangkok and its vicinity are presented in detail. This chapter aims to enhance the understanding of the way in which trance-possession rituals of Parn Yak and *sak yant* tattooing operate and how they are conceptualised and situated within a contemporary Thai cultural context.

Parn Yak ritual

The ritual performance of Parn Yak is popular among Thai Buddhists and is seen as bringing protection, wealth, prosperity, and good health to those who attend (Paunil, 2003: 119).Nowadays, Parn Yak is widely practiced in Thailand, despite the fact that fewer monks are trained to chant for the ritual. As I observed during my field research, monks who are skilled in Parn Yak chanting are invited to perform the rituals in temples other than where they normally reside, as not every temple has monks who can chant Parn Yak. This is, perhaps, due to political factors. As discussed in previous chapter, Parn Yak is considered an 'impure' and 'superstitious nonsense' Buddhist practice by the authorities and some contemporary Buddhist scholars; hence the monks or the temples that are involved with its performances are often viewed negatively. Evidence of this has been explicitly revealed in my field research with the lead Parn Yak chanter Pra Kru Sanghavichai. His temple, Wat Pho, benefits from royal patronage and is regarded as one of the most important temples in the country. The monks residing in this temple are generally considered to be highly educated scholars in Buddhist

[229] In addition to some of the fieldwork materials, which are presented in Chapter 1.

studies. Pra Kru Sanghavichai told[230] me that he was trained to chant Parn Yak as a novice monk. Nonetheless, chanting is not explicitly taught in his temple but is rather passed down privately through generations of monks. The monk indicated that since this chanting is no longer taught in his temple,[231] only he and his team are able to perform Parn Yak. He stated, "Some people view the chanting as an inappropriate act and even offending to the code of monastic disciplines. They may report it to the government authorities[232] to investigate. It could be worse if the media is involved" [My translation].[233] In this way, the dominant contemporary view of 'authentic' Buddhism impacts the practices and training of Parn Yak.

Paritta sutta(s) and their chanting traditions

The main practice of the Parn Yak ritual is the recital of Atanatiya *sutta*, one of the *paritta suttas*. The Buddhist *sutta* is a compilation of Buddha's discourses recorded in the Tipitaka [Sanskrit: Tripitaka][234] or the Pali Canon, a sacred text in Theravada Buddhism (Greene, 2004: 46). Before the written record, all the teachings and texts including chants were learned and transmitted orally. It is assumed that not only the content of the *suttas* but also the musical features of the chanting such as tone and rhythm have been passed down since the time of the historic Buddha (ibid). However, it cannot be confirmed that the style of chanting Parn Yak that is found in Thailand is derived from that period, nor, to the best of my knowledge, is there any other similar chanting style like Parn Yak in Thailand.

The *paritta* is perhaps the best known of the *sutta* collections because it is the collection that is used in most rituals. The name '*paritta'* [Pali; Sanskrit: *Paritran*a; Sinhala: *pirit*] is derived from the Sanskrit words meaning 'to protect': hence it is the verse of protection (de Silva, 2001: 139). According to de Silva, a scholar in

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[230] My fieldwork notes, April 2007.
[231] Wat Phra Chettuphon Wimon Mangkhlaram Ratchaworamahawihan, commonly known as Wat Pho, a temple mentioned in Chapter 3, is the temple that plays an important part in Thai traditional healing.
[232] Department of Religious Affairs.
[233] Pra Kru Sanghavichai, personal communication, April 2007.
[234] Tipitaka are divided into 3 categories: Vinaya Pitaka (rules of the discipline), *Suttapitaka* (the discourse), and Abhidhamma *pitaka* (analytical texts of teachings) (Hazen, 2003: 22-24). While they recognise the importance of Tipitaka, Mahayana Buddhist tradition also added their own texts called 'Mahayana Sutras' (Ganeri, 2003: 8-25).

Pali and Buddhist studies, the *paritta* ritual can be described as "a prophylactic ceremony performed for banishing evil and ushering in good luck" (2001: 139). The protection that *paritta suttas* provide is both a safeguard from external forces, such as demons, fierce or poisonous animals, and criminals, and from internal factors such as illness[235] (Kantasarapiwongs, 1998: 7). Chanhorm (2000: 21-22), who conducted research on Theravada chanting ceremonies, stated that the *paritta* is regarded as having power to help those who chant become successful, because it is believed that the verses contain power from the three gems of Buddhism.[236] Therefore, the *paritta* can provide protection as well as prosperity and good health to those who regularly recite it. Apart from being chanted by monks, many Thai Buddhists[237] usually chant the *paritta sutta(s)* at home in private. This chanting is done before going to bed or when waking up in the morning with the belief that the *suttas* can protect them and remind them to commit bright *kamma*(s).

There are many *suttas* identified as *paritta* in Theravada Buddhism. The *paritta suttas* might not only come from the Tipitaka but can also be written by monks. Thus, there are a number of collections of *paritta* from various locations, which were written at different times.[238] It is believed that each *paritta sutta* provides different effects for those who chant or attendees of the rituals, and some *suttas* originated from the story of the Buddha in the Tipitaka. For instance, the Angulimala *sutta* is recited in order to resolve a difficult childbirth (Swearer, 1995: 27). According to the Tipitaka, this *sutta* was first recited by Angulimala,[239] one of Buddha's devout disciples who met a pregnant woman having trouble with childbirth along the way (Wickremeratne, 2006: 75-76). The monk asked the Buddha how to help her, and the Buddha advised him to recite this *sutta* to bless the mother and her child.

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[235] The Buddhist notion of illness as discussed in Chapter 3.
[236] The Buddha, the Dharma or Buddha's discourses, and the *sangha*(s).
[237] This includes myself.
[238]For example, according to Chanhorm (2000: 52-53), 27 *paritta suttas* are found in several Thai Buddhist writings that were gathered by monks, scholars, and members of the royal family; however, only two sets of 12 *suttas* and 7 *suttas* are considered to be *paritta* in Thailand, as in the Tipitaka (Prince Damrongrajanupab, 1971: 7).
[239] Angulimala himself is a famous disciple of Buddha. He was a fierce murderer who wore as a necklace 999 fingers from the 999 people he killed (Deegalle, 1961: 89-91). It is believed that he tried to get his 1000th victim by murdering the Buddha; however, after talking with the Buddha, he converted to Buddhism, was ordained, and became one of the most famous monks (ibid).

Atanatiya sutta: the chant of Parn Yak

Other *paritta suttas* began in a similar pattern: some problematic circumstance occurred within the *sangha* orders[240] and the Buddha gave *suttas* to recite in order to relieve each problem. This is also exemplified in 'Atanatiya *sutta',* which is the official Pali name of Parn Yak. This *sutta* was designed specifically for protection from evil spirits such as evil demons[241] [Pali: *yakkha*; Sanskrit *yaksa*; Thai: *yaksa*]. The legend of Atanatiya is slightly different from other *paritta suttas* in that it was not composed by the Buddha himself but was given to him by one of the four heavenly kings named Vessavana [Pali; Sanskrit: Vaiśravaṇa; Thai: เวสสุวัณ, เวสสุวรรณ/Vessuwan], who himself is also a demon [*yak*] (Yindee, 2000: 26).

According to Buddhist mythology, the duty of these four heavenly kings is to protect the world with each of them patrolling in one direction: North, South, East, and West (ibid). King Vessavana is the guardian of the Northern quarter and, as he himself is a *yak*, he also becomes the chief of *yaks* and thus has power over them all. In Thailand, the demons or *yaks* are generally regarded as beings similar to ogres due to their size and fierce physical appearance in Thai literature[242]. However, not all *yaks* have demonic personalities; in fact, several *yaks* are benevolent, and some of them are strict Buddhists. In Buddhist mythology, *yaks* are often regarded as a kind of deity because their main realm is in heaven, though they reside in the lower levels of heaven (Shah, 1987: 205-206). In Thailand, benevolent and Buddhist *yaks* such as King Vessavana are worshipped. It is also Thai tradition to build statues of yaks in front of temples to guard them; therefore, they are treated with a lot of respect.

[240] Monks and Buddhist lay people. See detail in chapter 2.
[241] Although all demons or Yaks have a frightening physical appearance, according to Thai literature and Tipitaka, some demons are benign, and some of them are even Buddhists. Hence, I use the word 'evil' here to indicate the demons that are not benign.
[242]The word '*yak'* in Thai also means 'giant'.

Figure 11: Yak statue at the Emerald Buddha temple, the Grand Royal Palace, Bangkok. [Credit: Paveena Chamchoy]

According to the Tipitaka (Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidalaya University, 1996: 219-220), the story of the Atanatiya *sutta* began when the four heavenly kings had an audience with the Buddha when he was staying on the hilltop called Vulture Peak, near Rajagaha city in India. King Vessavana gave this *sutta* to the Buddha and asked him to pass the *sutta* to his disciples so they could recite it when disturbed by evil *yaks* while practising meditation in the forests (ibid). Since then, Atanatiya has been considered a powerful *sutta* that is used to cast away negative forces that reside in places or human bodies. Because of its origin, Atanatiya *sutta* is also call 'Parn Yak'. According to the Royal Institute's Thai dictionary (Thai Royal Institute, 1999), which is the standard Thai dictionary, the term 'Parn' means 'discourse' or 'chant', and Parn Yak means 'the discourse or chant of *yak*'[243]; hence the name of the ritual.

The content of Atanatiya *sutta* is a recapitulation of the names of non-human beings such as deities and *yaks* who possess power over all evil. It is said in the *sutta* that, despite being powerful, these deities also revere the Buddha and pay respect to him, admiring his supreme virtues. Therefore, if any non-human beings commit acts of malevolence towards the Buddha's followers, such as monks and lay people, those evil beings will also be regarded as the enemies of these

[243] As the *sutta* is about a conversation between the Buddha and yaks, the first part of Atanatiya *sutta* is called 'Parn Pra'. It is the *sutta* that was spoken by the Buddha at the time when the four heavenly kings had an audience with him; hence, it is called Parn Pra, which means the discourse of the Buddha. The rest of the *sutta* is called Parn Yak because it is spoken by a yak, Vessavana. This part is used in Parn Yak chanting.

powerful deities (Mahachulalongkorn University, 1996: 219-246; Piyadassi, 1999).

According to de Silva (2001: 139) and Yupho (1994: 22), the contents of each *paritta sutta*, such as the Atanatiya *sutta*, are generally based on two core themes of loving kindness [Pali: *metta*; Thai: เมตตา/*metta*] and truth [Pali: *sacca*; Thai: สัจจะ/*sajja*]. These two themes form the efficacy of the recitations of *paritta suttas*, as explained in the following passage:

> Truth when uttered with deep unswerving sincerity and conviction is considered to possess great miraculous power. Similarly, loving kindness when cultivated towards all beings, without any reservation, acts as a protective cover against all types of harm (de Silva, 2001: 139-140).

In fact, the contents of *paritta suttas* do not contain any mantras[244] but only texts that contain the Buddha's teachings about loving kindness towards all sentient beings and the truth of the infallible virtues of Buddha and his Dharma[245]. For example, the short *sutta* of Angulimala *paritta* is only an assertion of the monk Angulimala's personal purity:

> Sister, from the moment I entered this noble life of a recluse, I reckon not having deprived any living being of its life. By the Truth of this, may there be happiness and wellbeing to you and your unborn baby (Kumarasiri, 2004).

It can be seen that the *sutta* contains only the assertion that Angulimala, a fierce murderer[246], refrained from killing once he became a monk. His assertion is an avowal of the unvarnished truth (Pali: *saccakiriya*; Thai: สัจจะกิริยา/*saccakiriya*), which is believed to be a very powerful utterance and hence can provide protection. While the content of Angulimala has truth as its central theme, the Atanatiya *sutta* is infused with both themes of truth and loving kindness. The pronouncement of deities' names and the affirmation of their deep respect for the Buddha represent the truth, while the commendation of the Buddha's virtues and his teachings on compassion towards other beings signify the importance of

[244] Magical spells or words that are believed to have spiritual powers such as providing protection.
[245] The Buddhist teachings.
[246] See footnote 6 in this chapter.

loving kindness. The Atanatiya *sutta* not only has efficacy as it provides a sense of protection but also contains the teaching in Buddhist doctrines for those who recite or listen to the recitation.

It is worth noting that there are no such texts as 'casting out evil' in all the *paritta suttas*. Nonetheless, it is popularly believed that the texts in the *sutta* are about exorcism (Obeyesekere, 1990: 121). This is perhaps because, as mentioned in Chapter 2, very few of Thais are able to understand the content of the Pali *suttas*. Furthermore, due to the unique rhythm and loud tone of the Parn Yak ritual, it is very difficult to hear the words.

The traditions of *paritta* chanting rituals in various cultures

Paritta chanting rituals are practiced variously throughout Theravada Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and several countries in Southeast Asia. *Paritta* rituals are considered the most important and popular rituals for Theravada Buddhist followers (Dharmeswar, 2010). Several rituals are renowned for their performativity and dramatic features. As a result, scholars in the areas of anthropology and performance studies[247] have demonstrated an interest in studying *paritta* rituals in various cultures. De Silva (2001: 139) observed that the rituals could be carried out with varying degrees of complexity:

> Paritta can be performed with dignified simplicity as well as artistic grandeur on all important occasions, be they private and secular, social and religious [...] Occasions such as birth, marriage, illness and death, all can be blessed with paritta […] Significant events and achievements in the life of an individual […] or outstanding success are blessed by this ceremony. Religious festivals are often celebrated with an all-night paritta ceremony (de Silva, 2001: 139).

Although the chanting is similar, details of the rituals vary depending on the cultures where they are performed. For instance, Obeyesekere (1990: 122) describes as simple and non-dramatic one of the *pirit* [Pali: *paritta*] rituals of Sri Lanka, which contains the chanting of Atanatiya *sutta*, the same *sutta* as in Parn

[247] For example, Greene, 2004; Obeyesekere in Schechner, 1990: 118-130; Perera, 2000; Saddhatissa, 2001: 125-138 and de Silva, 1987: 139-150 in Kalupahana; Swearer, 2004.

Yak. According to Obeyesekere, the only dramatic element of the *pirit*ritual can be found in the chanting of the Atanatiya *sutta*, which is described as follows:

> […] the only [Atanatiya sutta] text that is rendered rhetorically, in loud tones. But, here, too, the entire text is chanted without distinction between passages, commentary and dialogue. In consequence, any intrinsic dramatic possibilities do not surface. (Obeyesekere, 1990: 127)

Although unfamiliar with Sri Lanka's *pirit*, I would argue that the volume and tone of the chanting of this *sutta* and the fact that it is believed that the texts have a magical power to eliminate demons, cannot be the only theatrical features of the ritual. The other components, such as the participation of those who attend, the organisation of the ritual, the story in the *sutta,* and the symbolic elements found in the ritual, should not be overlooked as these components, which contribute to the participants' experiences, may be culturally determined. As stated in Chapter 1, a lack of cultural understanding may hinder scholars from investigating the performance aspects of ritual practices as perceived by those who take part in the ceremonies.

Nonetheless, following Obeyesekere's consideration, Atanatiya chanting in the Parn Yak ritual in Thailand contains several 'intrinsic dramatic possibilities'. The vigorous sound and energetic rhythm of the chanting, the settings of ritual space, the collective acts of possession, and the exorcism by the monks—these manifestations are sufficiently dramatic to provide both 'efficacy' and 'entertainment'.[248] The Parn Yak ritual, therefore, deserves to be examined through the lens of both performance studies, including applied drama, and cultural/anthropological studies.

The evolution of Parn Yak ritual in Thailand: A historical record

As stated in Chapter 1, existing research from various disciplines claims that Parn Yak originates from two similar Atanatiya chanting rituals in the Thai royal court. These ceremonies are documented thoroughly in relation to both process and description. Despite several features in common, it cannot be confirmed that the Parn Yak rituals currently performed in Thailand are taken from such *paritta* rituals found in the Thai royal court. The rituals in and around the court may have

[248] See further information in Schechner's discussion of 'efficacy' and 'entertainment' (2006:71).

developed concurrently over a similar time period. Nonetheless, these historical rituals, I suggest, need to be examined as they may have contributed to the development of contemporary Parn Yak.

From court and commoners' practices to the mainstream exorcism

Most historical documents that are available now are records of royal ritual ceremonies written from people who lived in the royal court. In Bangkok, there are records of two similar royal rituals being used as exorcism: the 'Arpartpinart' royal ritual [อาพาธพินาศ] and the 'Sumpajchorachin' [สัมพัจฉรฉินทร์] royal ritual[249].

The Arpartpinat royal ritual was performed occasionally when there was a disaster such as a natural calamity or epidemic in the country. Being a royal ritual organized by order of the king, it was always a big event involving not only royalty and government officials but also commoners from all over the city. According to Thai belief, evil spirits can cause illness[250]; therefore, in order to overcome the illness, rituals should be conducted in the area of the illness to exorcise any kind of negative force. If the disaster occurred over an extensive area such as over the city, the ritual had to be performed on a large scale. Arpartpinart is the specific ritual performed during an epidemic; in Thai, '*arpart'* means 'illness' and '*pinart'* means 'destruction'. The process of the ritual is similar to the current practice of Parn Yak but on a larger scale and with a longer process. Nonetheless, there is a record of Apartpinart performed in the period of King Rama II[251] (Sinbumrung, 2012). In the summer of 1820, there was a cholera epidemic in Thailand[252], particularly in Rattanakosin (now known as Bangkok), in which around 30,000 people died (Hays, 2005: 193). In the Arpartpinart ritual, the Atanatiya *sutta* was chanted over many nights, and cannons and firearms were fired all night around the city in order to scare the evil spirits away. There was also a procession led by the highest-ranked Theravada Buddhist monk and 500 other monks who chanted

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[249] When mentioning rituals conducted by the king or in court, I constantly refer to these rituals as 'royal rituals' because in the Thai language and culture, the term 'royal ritual' [Thai: พระราชพิธี/ Pra Rajapitee] is always used in such cases. This also serves to distinguish rituals performed in/by the royal court from other rituals in the country.

[250] It is believed that the evil spirits/negative powers come from the impact of dark *kamma* committed by people in the city.

[251]Reigned between 1809 and1824.

[252] Internationally known as the Thai Cholera Epidemic of 1820. The pandemic is a part of the First Cholera Pandemic in Asia (Hays, 2005: 193).

paritta suttas and sprinkled consecrated water along the way throughout the city (Roeder, 1999). The emerald Buddha, considered the most important Buddha statue, was carried along with the procession with the belief that this Buddha statue has the power to ward off evil spirits that cause the disease (Damrongrajanupab, 1971: 73; Roeder, 1999). In this way, the Arpartpinart ritual also has a social function for relieving public anxiety caused by the outbreak of cholera in the city.

Another ritual was performed in different circumstances, despite having similar practices to the ritual described above. The Sumpajchorachin royal rituals were practiced in the city of Bangkok annually at the celebration of the Thai New Year. The purpose was to dispel negativity from last year[253] and ensure only a peaceful new year. This ritual was organized by the royal government as it was forbidden to conduct this ritual elsewhere (Yindee, 2000: 66). In his research on Thai rituals, King Chulalongkorn (1999: 111) notes that Sumpajchorachin is the most complicated among royal rituals that involve Buddhism. The ritual was a large-scale event with more processes than the Arpapinart ritual. It lasted many days, starting from the last days of the Thai year until several days after New Year. Similar to Apartpinart, the Atanatiya *sutta* is recited throughout the night accompanied by firings of guns and cannons around the city after each round of recital. The water is consecrated during the chanting and is given away and sprinkled around the city after the chanting ritual (King Chulalongkorn, 1999: 111-113). King Chulalongkorn (1999, 113) states that it is widely believed that the texts and sound of Atanatiya chanting threaten the spirits, and the sound of firearms can scare them and drive them from the city[254].

People who attended the chanting ritual also received a consecrated headband [Thai: มงคลพิศมัย/Monkol Pissamai] and a palm leaf inscribed with Buddhist

[253] This is also related to the Thai notion of *kamma*. The impacts of the dark *kamma* from last year may be carried over to the next year unless the rituals, i.e. chanting or making the offerings to monks, are conducted to mitigate the impacts.

[254] King Chulalongkorn (1999, 113) states that it is widely believed that the texts and sound of Atanatiya chanting threaten the spirits, and the sound of firearms can scare them and drive them from the city. However, people worry that the spirits of their deceased family members or the spirits that dwelled in their area will be also affected, and so they put herbal medicine around their home and hang packs of food and drink on trees so that, if any spirits feel tired, hungry, or collapse when fleeing in panic, they can eat, drink, and use the medicine (ibid).

scriptures [Thai: กระบองเพชร/Kabongpetch][255] (The Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture, 2005: 16). It is believed that both the headband and palm leaf served as amulets for protection from demons during the day of the ritual. King Chulalongkorn (1999: 115-117), on the other hand, argues that the two objects are a symbol of participation in the ritual. He also related the tradition of wearing this headband with the tradition of wearing a sacred thread during other chanting rituals (King Chulalongkorn, 1999: 16). The tradition of wearing a sacred thread is, perhaps, still widely practiced in several Thai rituals such as Parn Yak and Buddhist weddings[256]. The King (Chulalongkorn, 1999: 115) suggests that sacred thread is used similarly to telephone wires, which transfer communication signals. Although mere attendance at the chanting is considered sufficient, wearing a sacred thread attached to the Buddha statues or monks is more powerful as it can ensure that the power of the chanting will be delivered directly to participants by using the sacred thread as a medium.

Sumpajchorachin was finally cancelled in in 1937 (Roungrong, 2003) shortly before Phibul Songkhram, the military dictator of Thailand at the time, changed Thai New Year from April to January so that it would be observed on the same date as in Western cultures (Stowe, 1991: 164).

The emergence of Parn Yak

The surrounding socio-cultural and political factors contribute to the emergence of Parn Yak (with trance-possession, as practiced nowadays). As stated in Chapter 1, attempts to modernise Thailand have led to the decline of the two royal rituals described above. In addition, the absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932,[257] resulting in no royal activities. Due to the instability of the new political system and World War II, many royal rituals gradually diminished, including those of Atanatiya chantings. Yindee (2000:88) states, however, that there were performances of the Atanatiya ritual held outside the royal court since 1937, and these ceremonies, which were organised by local people, were known as ‘Parn Yak. Nevertheless, there is no record of trance-possession Parn Yak rituals (in

[255] The tradition of these two objects no longer exists in Thailand. I myself have never seen either artifact or any picture of them.
[256] Brides and grooms wear the thread, which also connects them together.
[257] King Rama VII (reign 1925-1935).

their current form) until around 1994 (Yindee, 2000: 86-92). These rituals have been conducted not only during Thai New Year but also throughout the year, especially on weekends and during temple festivals. Parn Yak is often performed either in the afternoon or in the late evening (ibid); they are rarely performed in the morning. This is perhaps due to economic and convenience factors as the monks who do the chanting are usually not residents and hence need time for travelling and preparation.

The contemporary form of Parn Yak

Field Trips

I attended the first of four Parn Yak rituals as a full participant, while I acted as a participant-observer[258] in the other three. In my first experience with Parn Yak, I did not contact the organisers or the monks beforehand.[259] Consequently, I had to fully take part in the rituals and pay for the suggested ritual materials, although the organisers later became aware of the reason for my visit. The initial experience allowed me to understand the ritual from an inclusive point of view, a first-hand experience that I would have never acquired as a researcher/observer.

To take part in the other three Parn Yak rituals, I followed Pra Kru Sanghavichai and his team when they performed around the central region of Thailand. Due to my acquaintance with Pra Kru Sanghavichai, who was the invited guest, I was occasionally allowed to enter the monks' living quarters, such as the abbots' living room where all the monks involved with the Parn Yak ritual rested. It was a privilege to be allowed in the area that is usually regarded as a very private space reserved only for the monks with higher rank in the temples and the men who took care of them. Thus, I had opportunities to talk with the abbots, monks, and lay people who prepared the ritual. I was also able to see the atmosphere of the ritual from the perspective not only of a participant but also an organiser. For example, when the monks walked from this room into the temple hall at the beginning of the ritual, I could see how their behaviour changed from the social space to the ritual space and how people perceived them during the ritual.[260] It is

[258] My positions during fieldwork are discussed in Chapter 1.
[259] After that, I notified the organisers about my purpose and asked their permission to carry out my research, including taking photographs and talking to people who were in the ritual.
[260] The role of the monk will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

a quite rare and unique experience for a female researcher to gain entry into the monks' quarters, an area that is normally regarded as inaccessible to women.

The location of Parn Yak

Modern day Parn Yak rituals take place during various and complex occasions and locations, and are usually performed around the city of Bangkok. However, they are seldom conducted in central Bangkok in either the historical or business development areas.[261]

Figure 12: Map of each area in central Bangkok. The old quarter or the Rattanakosin is situated to the west of Bangkok, while the business area of Sukhumvit is to the east. [Credit: Wikitravel].[262]

Although there are several temples in both areas, I did not find Parn Yak being performed in any of them. I assume that there are two major reasons. Most Theravada Buddhist temples in central Bangkok, especially in the area around Rattanakosin Island, come under royal patronage and are thus endowed and supported by members of the royal family. Therefore, it is inappropriate to perform Parn Yak, which is very similar to the historic royal Atanatiya chanting, in temples that are widely regarded as royal temples.

[261]The historical quarter of Bangkok, known as Rattanakosin Island, is where several important government sectors are situated and is near to historical buildings, including royal palaces such as The Grand Palace. The business development areas, also in the centre of the city, are located further away from the historical quarter and contain many business complexes and shopping areas; this area is regarded as forming the city centre by most Thais.
[262]http://wikitravel.org/upload/shared//thumb/b/b6/Bangkok_regions.png/400px-Bangkok_regions.png.

Another reason that Parn Yak is rarely organised in these two central areas is financial. Parn Yak is usually conducted on a large scale, often with more than 500 attendees, as was the case in all the rituals that I attended during my field research. The rituals may bring great financial benefits to the temples, as all people attending must purchase the offerings and ritual kits used during the ceremony. As Parn Yak can attract many people, it is usually performed concurrently with other rituals or as a part of other events in that temple. Most Thai Buddhist temples survive financially from providing funeral services[263] or from donations and the sale of offerings and amulets. The royal temples receive some financial support from the government (Ratchakitchanubeksa, 1915: 284). Furthermore, temples in central Bangkok, especially in the city centre, can make a profit from renting properties such as land or parking spaces and from conducting funerals. For those temples that do not benefit from royal patronage or are not situated in the city centre but rather in residential areas, getting community support is a practical way to make an income to cover the expenses and community services of the temples. In order to raise funding, most temples organise events such as rituals and temple fairs to encourage local people to make donations and buy the offerings or amulets. In addition, Parn Yak is usually performed with a large number of people, with the result that most city centre temples are unable to provide sufficient space to hold this ritual.

Most Parn Yak rituals are performed twice in the same day in order to cater to the large number of attendees. Occasionally, Parn Yak can be performed during the same event as another ritual (Yindee, 2000: 71). The most well-known examples of Thai Buddhist ritual events that include Parn Yak are the offerings of monk robes,[264] the celebration of the establishment of a new temple hall, and the burial of spherical stones underneath a temple hall.[265]

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[263] There are no companies specialising in funerals in Thailand. For Thai Buddhists, bodies of the deceased are kept in the temples for a funeral chanting service before being buried or cremated in the same temples. Funeral services are, therefore, provided by temples.

[264] Buddhist monks are forbidden to buy or weave fabric for their own robes; therefore, people in communities have to offer them robes (Findly, 2003: 121). The annual robe offering ritual is called Kathina [Thai: *Thot Kathin*] and is conducted only once a year, while the occasional robe offering ritual is call *Par pa* [Thai: ทอดผ้าป่า/*Thot Par Pa*].

[265] In Thailand, it is a tradition that nine stones in cannon ball shape [Thai: ลูกนิมิต/Luk Nimit] are buried underneath the main halls of every temple in order to demarcate between sacred and profane ground.

Frequently, rituals with strong elements of Hinduism and animism are also performed in the temple along with Parn Yak and the rituals mentioned above. An example of this is the chanting ritual for offerings to the *navagrahas* [Sanskrit; Thai: นพเคราะห์/*nopakroh*], the deities of the nine planets. These rituals are usually conducted on festive occasions such as the New Year,[266] the Thai New Year,[267] and, occasionally, the Chinese New Year.[268] These rituals can last for many days, thus bringing considerable income to the temples and those who work in them.

Figure 13: A banner advertising the burial of spherical stones [Thai: ลูกนิมิต/*Luk nimit*] event on the 20th -29th January 2012 at Patheepaleepol temple in suburban Bangkok. The picture of *Luk Nimit* is situated on the top left of the banner to attract participants and on the bottom of the banner, it is stated that there will be films, music, and Likay (a Thai traditional performance) at this event. [Credit: Wat Patheepaleepol[269]]

Figure 14: An example of a temple advertisement banner, often seen along main roads in Thailand. This banner is advertising the Parn Yak ritual, the ritual of the offerings of monk robes, the Navagraha chanting ritual, and Dharma talks, which are conducted inclusively at an event on the 3rd-5th Febuary 2012 in Nonthaburi province, one of the satellite towns of Bangkok. The advertisement states that music and Likay will also be performed during the event. [Credit: Pan Ror Mor Torbor 11[270]]

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266 In the beginning of January.
267 In April.
268 Around January-March.
269 http://watthaiblog.blogspot.co.uk
270 http://www.bp.or.th/webboard/index.php?topic=26241

The popularity of the Jatukarm amulet in 2007-2008 and its effect on the Parn Yak rituals

Thai Buddhist amulets can take any form, ranging from Buddha statuettes to pieces of cloth and paper inscribed with Buddhist scriptures.[271] They may be given away free or cost up to millions of Thai Baht[272] for highly desired types (Salguero, 2006: 98). The power of the amulets comes from the fact that they are consecrated [Thai: ปลุกเสก/*pluksaek*] by the chanting ritual performed by monks and from the material of which they are made (Salguero, 2006: 100). The consecration of the amulet may occur during manufacturing, in the temple, or afterwards for amulets manufactured elsewhere, and many people attend these rituals in order to buy them.

The consecrations were frequently observed during my fieldwork. This is particularly true in the case of a type of amulet called 'Jatukam Ramathep,[273] which became phenomenally popular between 2006 and 2008.

According to Thai belief, Jatukam and Ramathep are two deities who guard the Great Stupa of Nakhon Si Thammarat in the southern province of Thailand. Michael Wright (2007), an English scholar of Thai history and culture, notes that there is no other record of these two deities in any literature (Wright, 2007). However, in 2006-2007, there seemed to be a 'Jatukam fever' with great media interest. Many Thai people sought to possess Jatukam amulets to wear them around their necks. Some limited types of Jatukam can be very expensive among amulet collectors.[274]

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[271]The most popular form is a small image or figurine, worn around the neck on a chain (Salguero, 2006: 97). The images can be of Buddha, of revered Thai monks, Hindu gods/goddesses, or other folk deities in Thai beliefs (Hoare, 2004: 145).

[272] 48.38 Thai baht per a British pound according to Bangkok Bank's foreign exchange rates on 17th January 2013 (Bangkok Bank, 2013).

[273]Often referred to merely as 'Jatukam'.

[274] By the time of this thesis submission in 2013, the Jatukam fever had faded and the amulets were no longer popular. It is now rarely mentioned by the media.

Figure 15: a typical Jatukam amulet that I acquired during my field trip in Thailand in 2007 [Credit: Paveena Chamchoy]

Unable to identify the origin of Jatukam, except from shamans who claim they are the mediums of these deities, the emergence of the commercial aspect of this Jatukam phenomenon has become a controversial issue. Wright (2007) points out that the amulet "seems to be the invention of a confused imagination, and most intelligent commentators condemn this new cult as indicating a corruption of both Buddhist morality and Thai animistic spirituality" (Wright, 2007).

Two of the rituals in my fieldwork are part of Jatukam's consecration. These field trips revealed that Parn Yak can serve a double function: as a practice of *kamma* purification and of consecration. Apart from paying for packages of ritual apparatuses, those who attended were encouraged to buy Jatukam amulets in order to bring them to the Parn Yak for consecration. At the same time, Parn Yak as a chanting ritual for eliminating negativity was also performed.

The setting of Parn Yak

Parn Yak is usually performed in one of the temple halls; however, if there are too many visitors, outside seating is also provided, as well as additional amplifiers to deliver the sound of chanting. Most of the rituals that I attended were performed in this way, though one ritual was conducted in the temple courtyard due to the large number of those who attended.

The setting of the ritual is prepared prior to the start of the ritual. As in all temple halls in Thailand, the main statue of the Buddha is situated at the front of the hall

together with shrines of various statuettes of the Buddha and revered monks. Near the shrines are the lines of seats for the monks on duty for the ritual. The chanting is generally performed by four monks, who are called '*pramahanark'* [Thai: พระมหานาค] (Jansongsang, 2004; Yindee, 2000: 98). Nevertheless, in the rituals conducted by Pra Kru Sanghavichai, there were five monks present: himself as the leader and four others. Apart from the chanting monks, there will generally be one or two other monks in charge during the Parn Yak ritual. These monks are *Pra nuangprok* [*Thai:* พระนั่งปรก], and they are regarded as the most important monks for the therapeutic aspect of Parn Yak (Yindee, 2000: 98). They are seated apart from the chanting monks. Their main duty is to use their spiritual power to consecrate amulets and eliminate evil spirits and all negativity. They use their spiritual power to drive away evil spirits and bad luck through their meditation or invocations during the rituals (ibid). As they are considered to be the most important figures in the spiritual context, *pra nuangprok*(s*)* are often renowned for their strong spiritual power [Thai: เกจิอาจารย์/*kegi ajarn*] (Yindee, 2000: 98). This monk was not evident in the rituals that I observed with Pra Kru Sanghavichai, but in the ritual that I participated in at the Wat Noinai Temple, there was a monk performing a duty similar to *pra nuangprok*. Those who were in the hall did not seem to recognise this monk as being famous, although the master of ceremonies attempted to draw attention to his strong spiritual power.

My field experience revealed that the ritual spaces were often very quiet apart from the sound of chanting, and sometimes noise from the possessed participants when they entered into a trance. To the contrary, the atmosphere in the monks' rooms was more casual, with the sound of chatting and laughter from those who were inside. However, when the monks who do the chanting came to the ritual grounds, their demeanor became serious, quite different from when they were socialising with others. Those monks who did not have a role in the rituals often stayed in the resting room and continued their conversations with each other and with the lay people. The moment when the monks enter the ritual space reminded me of the theatre experience when the actors enter the stage and take on their roles.[275] Although the chanting was very vigorous and serious, the monks remained relaxed and calm throughout, even those monks who on occasion had

[275] My fieldnotes, April 2007.

to individually treat trance-possessed participants by reciting and sprinkling consecrated water over them.

Those who attend can either be seated in chairs or provided floor space. Often, webs of sacred thread are on the ceiling. When entering the ritual ground, attendees often attach personal sacred threads to the webs of ceiling thread above their seats from the package of ritual apparatus they have purchased prior to coming into the ritual space. This sacred thread is suspended to the seat of each participant and they either put it in their hand or roll the thread and place it around their head like the sacred thread headband in the royal ritual mentioned in an earlier section. All the monks in Parn Yak hold the other end of the sacred threads in their hands while chanting. It is believed that the spiritual power from the chanting and from the *pra nuangprok*s are transferred to participants though the threads. One of the rituals that I attended outside Bangkok was performed outdoors with more than 1000 people in attendance.[276] Despite being outdoors with no ceiling to attach the thread, webs of sacred thread were still set up and attached to poles; the participants were, therefore, still able to attach their personal threads with the webs of thread above their heads as in an indoor Parn Yak ritual.

Figure 16: an example of the webs of sacred thread in Parn Yak rituals [Credit: Eumhing[277]]

At the entrance of ritual spaces, there are stalls selling amulets, flowers, and garlands for offerings, and the most important objects of the Parn Yak ritual: the

[276] Wat Juntaram, 7th April 2007.
[277] http://www2.sarakadee.com/web/modules.php?name=Sections&op=viewarticle&artid=170

ritual apparatus. While amulets and offerings are not compulsory, each person has to buy a ritual package, referred to as *kan kru* [Thai: ขันครู] and consisting of various objects[278]. The composition of the package may be different depending on each Parn Yak ritual. For every ritual that I participated in, the bowl contained only a yarn of sacred thread, a sachet of unhusked rice, a sachet of husked rice, a piece of red cloth, and a small amulet made from clay[279]. As number 9 is regarded as a lucky number in Thailand, these ritual kits are often on sale for either 99 or 199 Thai Baht.

Figure 17: examples of *kan kru* or ritual kits from a Parn Yak ritual [Credit: Saeheng, 2004]

The objects that are actually used in the ritual are the sacred thread and the image of King Vessavana, which is attached to the thread above each seat. Rice, sand, clay, and the amulet are put in front of each person during the ritual. As they are believed to be consecrated during the chanting, participants will take these objects home after the ritual as charms to bring protection and prosperity. During my Parn Yak attendances, I asked my informants about these objects and some of them advised me to plant the unhusked rice or to mix the husked rice with rice that will be cooked in order to bring good luck and provide protection. I was also advised to scatter the sand in my garden[280].

[278] Mostly, *kan kru* consists of a bowl containing a yarn of thread, a sachet of unhusked or husked rice, a sachet of sand, chunks of white clay, a small coin amulet, a flower, incense sticks, a candle, and a piece of red cloth bearing Pali or Khmer scriptures and the image of King Vessavana (Jansongsang, 2004, Yindee, 2000: 103).
[279] My fieldwork notes, December 2006-April 2007.
[280] My fieldwork notes, 2nd December 2006 and 7th April 2007.

The pieces of cloth containing images of deities, the Buddha, or revered monks are called *yant* [Thai: ยันต์, Sanskrit: *yantra*] and are commonly used in Thailand as amulets for protection. The *yant* in the Parn Yak ritual contain the image of King Vessavana, the composer of the Parn Yak *sutta* in Thai Buddhist belief. It is believed that participants should frame this *yant* after the ritual and place it in their home to protect their family from evil spirits and illness.

Figure 18: the yant of King Vessavana from one of the Parn Yak rituals. At the bottom, there is a suggestion that it should be put in a frame and placed over the bed to ward off evil spirits [Credit: Sirithavorn[281]].

In several temples, there were stalls with donation boxes and many ritual staff to persuade people to make a donation or to fundraising projects. For example, at one of the temples in Bangkok where I attended a Parn Yak ritual, a temporary cowshed had been erected in the temple courtyard to encourage people to make a donation towards the purchase of cows from slaughterhouses as part of a temple charity project.[282 , 283] In Thai Buddhist belief, to make a donation to those in needs is also regarded as a 'bright' *kamma* that can later bring about improved life conditions.

[281] http://www.jramulet.com/product.detail_415522_th_2838477
[282] My fieldnotes, Wat Boonrod, 1st April 2007.
[283] This practice is to buy cows that were due to be slaughtered in order to save them. As one of the five precepts is 'not to kill', this practice is regarded as an act of 'bright *kamma*' (as it is conducted to 'save life') and has become popular among Buddhists in Thailand today.

The process

The processes of the Parn Yak chanting rituals in Thailand are typically similar. These practices may differ slightly depending on the temple, the ritual organisers, or the events in which Parn Yak is included. For example, Yindee (2000, 105) describes some Parn Yak rituals in Bangkok studied for her research in 1999 in which the offering ceremony was performed privately by monks and ritual organisers in order to worship the four heavenly kings in the morning on the day of the ritual. However, I did not see any such ceremony occur during my own research with Pra Kru Sanghavichai. Although I was not in attendance many hours before the chanting began, I assume that this preliminary ceremony was not included, as there was no evidence of a shrine for the offering ceremony and my arrival coincided with that of the monks.[284]

In some Parn Yak rituals, there are often other chanting rituals held before the main ceremony. One of the most popular is a chant worshiping *navagrahas* or the deities of the nine planets [Thai: นพเคราะห์/*noprakroh*]. This ritual is performed to ask permission to use the spiritual power of these deities to eliminate all negativity and to protect all participants during the Parn Yak ritual (Yindee: 2000, 112). Yindee states that the other chanting rituals that occur before Parn Yak are the responsibility of *pra mahanark* (the four chanting monks) who will perform the chanting later (ibid). However, during my field trips with Pra Kru Sanghavichai in 2006-2008, every temple used a different set of monks to perform chants other than Parn Yak. The monks who conduct other chanting rituals are often the resident monks in the temples. In my field research, Pra Kru Sanghavichai and his team often arrived at the ritual only a few minutes before the Parn Yak chanting started. Because the monks have to travel by invitation to perform this chanting, they cannot be at the ritual for the whole process.

Parn Yak chanting is regarded as the culmination of the overall ritual event. Other chanting rituals, e.g. *noprakroh*, are performed a few hours before Parn Yak to gather more people for Parn Yak. These rituals also serve as preparation for the Parn Yak ceremony. It is believed that people will be ready to participate in the

[284] My fieldwork notes, 17th April 2007.

Parn Yak chanting and malignant spirits will be more easily eliminated if the impurities are removed during the preliminary rituals.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, a *Bangsukul Pen*[285] ritual is sometimes performed prior to Parn Yak. *Bangsukul*[286] is actually a ritual within the Thai Buddhist funeral rites. As *pen* means alive in Thai, *Bangsukul Pen* refers to the death ritual for people who are still 'alive'. Put simply, it is the simulation of Thai Buddhist death ritual. For example, ritual observers lie down in an (empty) coffin in the Thai burial pose,[287] and the monks chant the *sutta* that is commonly used only in the actual funeral. After chanting, those who attend will get up as if they just had come back from death. The ritual can be considered a rite of passage, as it is believed to transform a person's life. Pra Suthasrilo (Komchadluek, 2005), the abbot of Wat Pasitthiwech temples where the *Bangsukul Pen* rituals are often performed, suggests in his interview in a Komchadluek newspaper[288] that this ritual can make the attendees feel that every negative past experience has terminated and they are reborn without any negativity such as bad luck or illness. It is worth noting that the law of *kamma* still operates in such cases; the impact of past *kamma*s will still occur. When I asked about this issue, a female informant told me that since she is considered a new-born after *Bangsukul Pen*, this may provide her more opportunities and time to commit bright *kamma*s, or in her words, "to have a fresh start" [My translation] (my fieldnotes, 2nd December 2006).

Figure 19: A Bangsukul Pen ritual in Nakhon Ratchasima province, Northeast of Thailand [Credit: Mariah[289]]

[285] Sometimes this ritual is referred as *Bangsukul Pen*/*Bangsukul Tai* [Thai: บังสุกุลเป็นบังสุกุลตาย] in order to mark that it is a ritual of the matter of life and death. *Tai* [Thai: ตาย] in Thai means 'death'.
[286] Literally, *bangsukul* [Thai: บังสุกุล] means the cloths that are put on the coffin for monks to take as offerings from the deceased. Nowadays, the term *bangsukul* refers to the ritual where monks take these clothes before the cremation.
[287] Lying flat, hands are kept together upon the chest in a praying posture with flowers, incense sticks, and a candle placed between hands.
[288] On 3rd March 2005.
[289] http://www.pixpros.net/forums/showthread.php?t=21105

When *Bangsukul Pen* is conducted as a part of the Parn Yak ritual, several characteristics of the death ritual are often diminished due to limited space for a lot of participants[290]. Symbolic objects such as coffins, shrouds, and offerings do not exist when *Bangsukul Pen* is integrated with Parn Yak. In several cases, the trace of *Bangsukul Pen* existed only in the form of chanting of a short verse from the *sutta,* which is normally chanted during Thai Buddhist funerals (Yindee, 2000: 113). This short verse is often chanted between the *noprakroh* chanting and Parn Yark (ibid).

In some Parn Yaks, the display of magical power is also demonstrated in order to convince participants to believe in the spiritual power of the ritual. Jansongsang (2004) describes his experience of Parn Yak in August, 2004 at the Wat Parinayok temple in Bangkok:

> Before the Parn Yak begins, the master of ceremony asked for two male volunteers. A young man and a middle-aged man came to kneel down in front of *Pra Nuangprok,* who wore a big amulet made from a string of beads around his neck. The monk recited a spell and whispered something to the two volunteers. Then, he ordered them to take off their shirts, lie down on their backs, and put their hands in a prayer position upon their chests with amulets, which are given by the monk, in between their palms. After that, *Pra Nuangprok* used a long sword to prune the petals from a lotus flower to show the sharpness of the sword. Then, he struck that sword harshly on the abdomens of each volunteered twice. The sound of the metal hit on the human flesh sounds like a sound of knocking rather than slashing. There was no wound on these men's bodies. After finishing this demonstration of spiritual power of protection, the monk went back to his seat, while many participants queued up to buy amulets […] [My translation] (Jansongsang, 2004).

[290] Nevertheless, the longer version of *Bangsukul Pen* was revealed in one of my field trips. This was described in Chapter 1.

Figure 20: The Pra Nuangprok demonstates his spiritual ability of protection. [Credit: Saeheng, 2004[291]]

There are often periods of other activities, such as other rituals to promote the sale of the amulets and donations, before the actual Parn Yak chanting begins. Sometimes demonstrations of magical powers, for instance, the performance which I described above, are used both to make participants believe in the spiritual power that the rituals deliver and to raise funds for the temples.

From my experiences with several ceremonies, there is often a brief period of preaching [Thai: เทศน์/*tate*[292]] before the chanting of Parn Yak starts. It is mostly a talk that is given by a monk about the legend of the ritual and its traditions. This preaching time can also be an opportunity to raise funds by promoting donations, selling amulets, and informing participants about any upcoming temple events. For example, at some temples I visited where Parn Yak is integrated with the consecration of *Jatukam*, the preachers often talked about the power of *Jatukam* amulets and the importance of consecrating them. The selling of amulets to participants by the master of ceremonies usually follows this process[293].

The Parn Yak chanting will be conducted as the last chanting ritual. In my field experiences, participants were prepared for Parn Yak with several chanting activities, preaching, and the ritual performance. Also, sitting in the ritual setting for hours can cause participants to feel the solemn and intense atmosphere of

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[291] http://www2.sarakadee.com/web/modules.php?name=Sections&op=viewarticle&artid=170

[292] *Tate* is the term referring to the orations that are given by Thai Theravada Buddhist monks about Buddhist-related topics (Thongprasert, 1985: 55-56). The subjects may be various, for example, telling stories in the Tipitaka, giving moral support, and teaching Buddhist discourse. Although the term 'preaching' is often used in a Christian context, I use this word only to describe the public speaking of Thai monks on religious topics, without referring to any practice in other religions.

[293] My fieldnotes, 7th and 15th April 2007.

the ritual. The assumption that the ritual process prior to the Parn Yak chanting can contribute to trance-possession in the rituals may explain why external factors such as rain or malfunctioning loudspeakers, as observed during some of my field trips, can result in no trance-possession of participants.

The Atanatiya chanting in Parn Yak

Before the Parn Yak chanting begins, the master of ceremonies advised participants to roll and place on their head the sacred thread that they attached to the ceiling thread earlier. In some rituals, the sacred threads were already placed over the heads of participants as they sat in the ritual hall. The four (or sometimes five) *pra* mahanark(s*)* started to chant *Atanatiya/*Parn Yak *sutta*. In the rituals I attended with Pra Kru Sanghavichai, the monks chanted a short *sutta*, which Thais call *chumnoom thevada*[294][Thai: ชุมนุมเทวดา]. This *sutta* is typically recited before the chanting of *paritta suttas* in order to invite benign spirits to join and listen to the chanting. Without pause, *pra* mahanark(s*)* chanted Parn Yak after finishing the chanting of *chunoom thevada*. This process was repeated in all of my field experiences except my first Parn Yak ritual held at Wat Noinai, where I described in detail in Chapter 1. The following section will explain the different styles of Parn Yak.

Wat Boonrod Temple, Bangkok

This Parn Yak was performed on 1st April 2007. Brief descriptions of the ritual space, temple location, and gender and ages of those in attendance are described in Chapter 1 in the section on fieldwork.

Wat Boonrod is a large temple situated in the city centre in the middle of a densely populated area bordering the opulent Sukhumvit district. However, the surrounding area also includes many tenement houses and narrow streets. Most people who live in this area are working class. The temple itself is well supported by neighbouring communities. Approximately 1,300 people attended the ceremony. The attendees were mixed in gender and age. The youngest person (who came with his parents) was around 5 years old and the oldest was around 80, while the majority were estimated to be 25-40 years old.

[294] Literally, this means ‘the gathering of the deities’ in Thai.

Given such a large number of people, the temple hall was so cramped that some attendees had to sit on the terrace. I first situated myself in the middle of the room. I was free to observe the chanting around the hall as allowed by the abbot; however, after the ritual began, I could not move from my initial spot because of limited space. After chanting the *chumnoom thevada sutta*, the monks, including Pra Kru Sanghavichai, continued to chant the Parn Yak *sutta*. The rhythm and tune of chanting was somewhat different from the ritual at Wat Noinai, described above. The chanting was clearly expressed, making it easier to recognise the words in the Atanatiya *sutta*. The chanting tune was relatively musical, whereas the chanting at Wat Noinai temple was similar to a humming sound. In this case, the lead vocal monk (Pra Kru Sanghavichai) recited a verse of *sutta,* and then the chorus monks repeated the last syllable or shouted it to make the melodic sound of the chanting stronger. I found that the sound of chanting was similar to rapping in rap music where the vocalist talks in a rhythmic style instead of singing (my fieldnotes, 1st April 2007). The monks chanted the *sutta* twice, drawing it out the second time, which made it longer and slower.

According to my fieldnotes on this ritual, although the chanting was not as alarming as it was at the Wat Noinai temple, the tune was very powerful and energetic. I also noticed that the monks tried to rouse and induce the audience members into a trance by increasing the volume and expressing their voices more rigorously as they went along. As the monks knew that I was observing Parn Yak as a trance-possession ritual, I personally felt that I may have contributed to this incident. In the abbot's living room prior to the ritual, Pra Kru Sanghavichai had briefly introduced me to the abbot and other monks who would be performing the chanting. He also told them that it would be good if I could see the trance-possession so that I could record it with my camera (my fieldnotes, 1st April 2007). In this way, they may have attempted to create an environment conducive to a trance-inducing state so that I would be able to observe the Parn Yak trance-possession. The evidence of my presumption is explicitly indicated in other ceremonies[295] of Parn Yak where I sat in the front seat near the monks. In these rituals, I often saw Pra Kru Sanghavichai look at me, especially when he increased the volume of his voice into the microphone, which he held in his hands

[295] Wat Jantaram, 7th April, 2007 and Wat Nongkodsiriwat, 15th April 2007.

(my fieldnotes, 7th and 15th April 2007).[296] In the case of Wat Boonrod, there were external circumstances that intervened with the ceremony such as malfunctioning loudspeakers. The monk told me after rituals that he expected more people to be in a trance-possession state so that I could further experience the trance-possession incident.[297] In this sense, the monks and the attendees constantly exchanged roles between audience and performer, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Unlike Parn Yak at Wat Noinai, firecrackers were not lit at the Wat Boonrod temple. Furthermore, only a few trance-possessions explicitly occurred despite the great number of people. One man who sat near me appeared to be in trance-possession. While still in a praying position, his arms and hands were trembling. I also saw a man on the terrace stand up and start dancing. Unlike the aggressive trance-possession that I had seen at Wat Noinai and also in several Thai trance-possession rituals, his body was slowly and gently swaying. There was no *Pra Nuangprok* to individually treat those who were in an entranced state. *Pra Mahanark* monks were continually chanting, and the people returned to a normal state on their own after the chanting was finished.

Figure 21: a man in trance-possession at the Parn Yak ritual, Wat Boonrod temple [Credit: Paveena Chamchoy].

[296] I also personally felt that the monk may have increased the volume of his chanting when he noticed that I was observing him.
[297] Pra Kru Sanghavichai, personal communication, 7 April 2007. He also told me similar things during Parn Yak at Wat Jantaram where there was a heavy rain during the ritual (my fieldnotes, 15th April 2007).

After the ritual, participants picked up their thread and ritual kits and left the hall. This is a larger-scale version of Parn Yak, and the hall and its terrace were packed with people. I had no opportunity to converse with participants due to the crowds.

Sak yant: its tradition, practices, and rituals

Traditions of spiritual tattooing[298] are broadly observed today, especially in areas of Southeast Asia where Buddhism is a dominant religion such as Thailand, Myanmar, Lao, and Cambodia (Vater, 2011: 7). According to Scheinfeld (2007: 364), Burmese and Cambodian soldiers have tattoos that are believed to make their bodies impervious to bullets and other weapons during war. This is similar to a tradition in Thailand where spiritual tattoos are renowned for their protective power. In his study on the aspects of tourism in Thai *sak yant* practices, Erik Cohen states that Thailand is currently the most popular destination in Asia for spiritual tattooing (2013: 187).

The spiritual tattoo practice seen among Thai Buddhists is called *sak yant* [299] [Thai: สักยันต์]. In Thai, *sak* [Thai: สัก] means 'to write or draw by using a sharp metal instrument to put ink colours or oil under the skin'. *Yant* [Sanskrit: *yantra*, Thai: ยันต์] means letters, numbers, symbols, or geometric figures (drawn on clothes, skin, wood, or metal) that are believed to contain spiritual power (Thai Royal institute, 1999).

For the method of tattooing, manual pricking is used in Southeast Asia, including Thailand (Rush, 2005: 88). Generally, Thai spiritual tattoo masters often use needles of different sizes and lengths for their practices. Nonetheless, I recently found that a few *Sak yant* masters in Thailand use the contemporary method of electrical tattoo machines instead of the conservative method of manual pricking. *Sak yant* was originally conducted with black ink made from several herbs or

[298] I define the term 'spiritual tattoo practice' in this thesis as the tattoo rituals that are practised in Thailand for the purpose of pursuing spiritual (sometimes regarded as magical) powers such as protection, attraction of good luck and love. Some authors' books about this kind of practice may refer to this practice as spirit tattooing (Vater, 2011) or sacred tattooing (Cummings, 2011), nonetheless, I will refer to the tradition as 'spiritual tattooing' to imply the spiritual powers and protection that is attributed to these tattoos.
[299] This may also be spelled '*Sak yan*'.

ashes. It is believed that apart from the spiritual power of the tattoo masters, these chemical substances can contribute to the tattoos' abilities (Mahakhan, 1996: 37). However, most tattoo masters, for example the monks at the Wat Bang Phra temple, now use ordinary black inks that can be purchased from many stationary shops.

Figure 22: the freehand technique of *sak yant*. It is performed by a monk called Luang Pi Peaw at Wat Bang Phra, which I observed during my fieldtrip. [Credit: Spenser][300]

Oil is also used for tattooing instead of ink so that the wearer can have the spiritual efficacy of the tattoo[301] without having a visible tattoo on his/her skin. As mentioned in Chapter 1, there is no difference between the efficacy of oil and ink tattoos. According to my conversation with Luang Pi Peaw[302], this decision is made mostly for cosmetic reasons and the choice is up to tattoo recipients.

Regardless of method, tattoo masters still perform rituals when tattooing in order to consecrate the tattoo with their spiritual power. There are various patterns of *Yant* tattoo. In Thailand, *Yant*s are generally divided into two categories according to their purpose: protection [Thai: อยู่ยงคงกระพัน/*yuyongkongkaparn*[303]] and compassion [Thai: เมตตามหานิยม/*mettamahaniyom*]. The *yuyongkongkaparn yants* are the tattoos that are believed to deliver protection, while *mettamahaniyom* make the wearer become attractive and bring prosperity. Examples of these patterns are mystical creatures, numbers, and Pali incantations, which are usually written in ancient Khmer (Cambodian) scripts. Each *sak yant* master has their

[300] http://sakyant-tattoo.blogspot.co.uk/2010/07/yant-paed-tidt-lp-phaew.html
[301] A picture of *yant* tattoo made with oil can be found in Chapter 5.
[302] My fieldwork notes, January 2011.
[303] Also known as *kongkaparnchatree* [Thai: คงกระพันชาตรี].

own unique style; nonetheless, patterns are very similar with only style varying between each master (Wat Bang Phra, 2008). The patterns that are believed to stimulate trance-possession include images of animals both real and mythical, especially those with a *yuyong kongkaparn* (physical and protective) purpose. Each pattern can bring different powers to the wearer. For example, animal patterns in different postures, such as 'leaping tiger' [Thai: เสือเผ่น/*sua pen*] or the mythical *singha*[304], are believed to bring great strength and endurance (ibid).

Figure 23: the leaping tiger tattoo [Credit: Rachundum[305]]

Various patterns of monkeys, such as the mythical 'Hanuman'[306] and other monkeys in different postures, are believed to provide the wearer with the ability to escape danger.[307] For a *mettamahaniyom* purpose, myna birds[308] are popular for people who work in the trade business, while house lizards (sometimes known as common house geckos) and 'looking back' stags/does [Thai: กวางเหลียวหลัง/*kwangleawlung*][309] are renowned for their powers of attractiveness and charm.

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[304] A mythical creature in Thai literature, such as *singha*, a character similar to a lion.
[305]http://thaimisc.pukpik.com/freewebboard/php/vreply.php?user=prakruang&topic=14906&page=2
[306] A character from the Ramayana. Hanuman is also a character in Thai mythology called 'Ramakien', which is a story adapted from the Hindu Ramayana. He is a monkey soldier who helps the protagonists in the story. In Thailand, Hanuman is often regarded as a superhero.
[307] However, the Thai practice of tattooing an image of Hanuman is different from that of Hindu people. Scheinfeld states, "Hindus use a tattoo of Hanuman to alleviate them from pain and disease" (Scheinfeld, 2007: 264).
[308] The Myna is a breed of bird typically found in Southeast Asia, including Thailand. Myna birds are regarded for their ability to sing or imitate human voices, therefore symbolize talking and negotiating abilities for Thais.
[309] The origin of deer tattoos also derived from the story of Ramakien (the Thai adaptation of the Ramayana). When Sita, one of the protagonists, saw a golden deer walk past and look back at her, she became very fond of it. Therefore, the deer is a symbol of attractiveness.

The location of the tattoo on the body is also considered when having *sak yant*. The images of deities and Buddhism-related patterns such as the scripts from Pali canon are highly respected and will therefore not be located lower than the waist[310] (Mahakhan, 1996: 48). According to the website of the Wat Bang Phra temple[311], the most popular tattoo spots for practicing members of this temple are on the back, chest, neck, head, shoulders, arms, face, hands, and knees (Wat Bang Phra, 2008). Most people who have tattoos from *sak yant* usually come back to get further tattoo patterns on their bodies in order to possess increased spiritual powers. For this reason, the bodies of some practicing members of *sak yant* have almost no visible space left. During my fieldwork at Wat Bang Phra, I met several *yant* wearers whose bodies appear covered with such tattoos. For example, the man in the in the picture below told me it took him many years to acquire his tattoos. He told me that he became successful in his business after he began receiving tattoos from Luang Pi Peaw. With almost no space left on his back, he is considering getting new tattoos on the front of his body.[312]

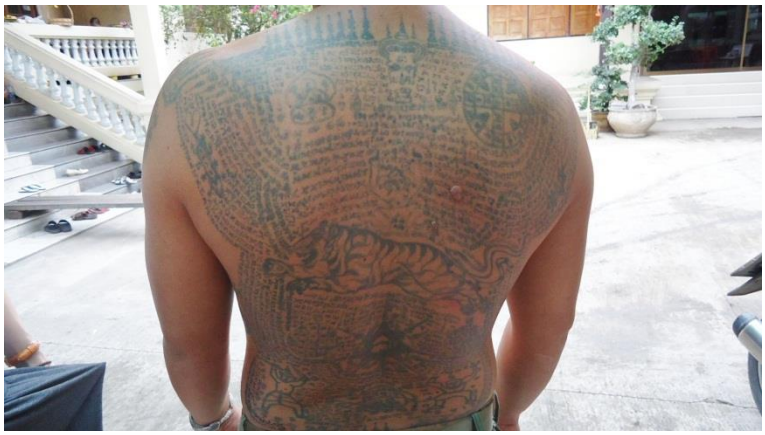

Figure 24: A man whose body is covered with *yant.* People with a similar appearance are commonly seen among practising members of *sak yant*. [Credit: Paveena Chamchoy]

It is believed that the characteristics of the creatures of their tattoos are also sealed within their body. These characteristics are believed to cause the state of trance-possession, which may be activated by attending specific rituals such as

[310] Body parts below waist are considered impolite for Thais
[311] I also conducted field research and an interview with a monk who is the website webmaster and the author of its content. However, he wrote on the website as the representative of the temple, therefore my reference will be 'Wat Bang Phra temple'.
[312] My fieldnotes, June 2012.

Parn Yak and the annual *wai kru* ritual[313]. Trance-possession also occurs when the person's master recites his or her own incantations [Thai: คาถา/*kata*] after tattooing is finished in order to install the spiritual power in the wearer's bodymind.[314]

The culture of *sak yant*

The practices of *sak yant* can be considered a form of culture within Thai Buddhist society. The tattoo wearers have their own traditions and specific codes of conduct, which may vary according to their leaders. The *sak yant* masters can be either monks or lay people. Members of each tattoo master form a community, and social and ritual events are arranged for each group, often at the leader's[315] residence. The large events are the annual *wai kru* rituals. Although people can have tattoos from different people, most wearers usually have a particular master to whom they are devoted. Some devotees become tattoo masters themselves after a long period of learning to achieve the signature style of *yant* and once they are named an 'official' disciple (Thaewchatturat, 2011). Regardless of which master actually tattooed them, people who have the same style of tattoo are considered to come from the same school as they have the same original leader and hence belong to the same community. Mahakhan (1996: 13) states that spiritual tattoo(s) can serve as group symbols. For example, Wat Bang Phra is also known as 'the temple of the leaping tiger' because of its trademark leaping tiger tattoo. When the wearers meet others who have the same master as they, they will not do any harm and treat them like the members of their family (Mahakhan, 1996: 14; Ratanavechean, 1998: 10). Furthermore, the codes of conduct that each master requires their devotees to observe can make the tattoo wearers feel that they are members of a particular community. These codes influence their moral beliefs and way of living. For example, most tattoo masters will require that people who have their tattoo(s) observe the five precepts[316], devotees of some masters are not permitted to eat certain kinds of fruits or

[313] An annual ritual specifically conducted for the tattoo wearers. I will explain this ritual practice in the next section.
[314] Trance-possession can also sometimes occur on random occasions.
[315] With current technology, websites sometimes serve as online communities for each master's disciples.
[316] See Chapter 2

vegetables[317], and some are even forbidden to walk under the stairs[318]. It is believed that if one does not follow these rules, then the power of the tattoo can be lessened or lost (Ellsworth, 2010: 139).

Apart from the news of annual large trance-possession rituals at several famous sites of *sak yant*, the culture of *sak yant* is not usually exposed to people who are not members. In his research on the perceptions of tattoos among Thai people, Kamonsantiroj (2005: 74) found that although the practising members of *sak yant* are of mixed genders, the number of male members is considerable higher than female. Women often seek tattoo(s) that attract a good partner, while most men choose the tattoo(s) that is believed to have protective power (Vater, 2011: 7).

I first chose to examine two of the most famous places for *sak yant*, the Wat Bang Phra temple and the home of another master, a layperson, in order to explore these practices both inside and outside the temple. Being very popular spots for *sak yant*, I faced difficulty with both places to different degrees. For instance, I was asked to leave the office of a famous master. He is regarded as the most popular *sak yant* master in Thailand as he tattoos many Thai and international celebrities. This has made him famous among Westerners as well. I went to his office in Bangkok and although very spacious, the room was crowded with many people who were waiting to be tattooed. After a long wait, I managed to speak to one of his assistants and presented a letter from the University. He replied that this establishment does not have a policy to support any educational projects and asked one of the guards to guide me to the exit. Nonetheless, I was inside the hall long enough to briefly witness the practice. There were different prices for each *Yant,* and the visitors could choose the tattoo(s) that they like. The price for each tattoo is considerably high, especially for foreigners (Salmons, 2011; Talen, 2011). There is no fixed price or a price list available; nevertheless, to my knowledge, the price for a *yant* from this master starts at 1000 U.S. dollars. His

[317] In my interview with the monks and the community representative, they explained that in the past, tattoo masters used herbs as ink for their practices and therefore some kinds of vegetables and fruits can interact with these herbs, which may lead to the changing or fading colours of the tattoo. As a result, consumption of some vegetables and fruits are forbidden.
[318] Thais consider the head to be the highest spiritual and most respected part of the body, while the feet are the lowest. Therefore, walking under the stairs means disrespecting the spirits in the tattoo.

popularity and expensive rates may be due to the fact that he tattooed a well-known American actress.

During my first trip to Wat Bang Phra, I met the abbot who allowed me to observe as long as the masters consented. He referred me to his secretary, who was able to talk about the practice of *sak yant* in the temple. Taking photos is not permitted, but I was granted permission to use pictures from the temple's official website. I went to the temple six times from 2009 to 2012, both observing and assisting the monks and staff for practices involved with *sak yant*. I also discussed *sak yant* with a monk who is the abbot's secretary and also Mr. Pathum Bodhisawan, who is *Prach Chaobaan* [Thai: ปราชญ์ชาวบ้าน], a position regarded as the head and the most respected member of the community.[319] Unfortunately, I could not attend the *wai kru* ritual at this temple as I was in the UK at the time.

Wat Bang Phra temple

The tradition of *sak yant* at this temple began with the practice of Pra Udomprachanart[320], the first master. After his death in 2002, some of his assistant monks become tattoo masters and have carried on the tradition in the temple (Wat Bang Phra, 2008). During my fieldtrips in 2009, there were around 4-5 monks practising *sak yant*. As described in Chapter 1, I observed the practice of Luang Pi Peaw who allowed me to sit near him and observe. I sometimes assisted his practices, for example, by stretching the skin of women who came to have *sak yant*. This seemed to be a privileged opportunity for me and also benefited the monk. As monks cannot touch women's bodies and all his assistants are men, my presence seemed to make the women feel more comfortable (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2009).

Unlike places such as the one described above, people who come to Wat Bang Phra cannot usually choose the pattern of tattoo that they would like. This choice is completely at the discretion of the masters. Several *sak yant* devotees told me that through conversations prior to the tattoo process, the monks learn the

[319] As Thai Buddhist temples have important roles in their local communities, *Prach Chaobaan* is a very significant figure both in the community and the temple.
[320] Known as Luang Por Pern among Thais.

strengths and weaknesses of each person's personality, his/her career, and any particular requirements.

Swearer (2004: 69), who has examined the ritual of image consecration in Thai Buddhism, asserts that the power of *sak yant* acts like a kind of 'medicine' that may help the recipient if in danger. Although the effectiveness of *sak yant* cannot be examined within the context of biomedicine, I would suggest that the practice of the masters at Wat Bang Phra was, to some extent, therapeutic. Kamonsantiroj (2005: 81) pointed out that the Thai spiritual tattoo wearers use the tattoo to empower themselves and fulfil their emotional needs. This was also observed in my fieldwork: the recipients have the opportunity to discuss their needs during their conversation with the master, while the master can diagnose if recipients' bodyminds are in an unbalanced state, e.g., if certain qualities are lacking or in excess. The master will then choose a pattern based on this consideration. For example, a person who has a problem in communication may receive a myna bird tattoo, which may make them believe that they have some qualities of the bird (e.g. singing and speaking). The therapeutic efficacy of *sak yant* can also perceived in this way.

Nevertheless, those who have had tattoo(s) from Wat Bang Phra before may be able to request a tattoo that they particularly want. Although the pattern of the leaping tiger is the signature of the temple, the masters do not usually give this pattern to the recipients as it is considered the most powerful pattern. The master has to first make sure the recipient has a strong mental state and is a firm devotee of the temple. Most practising members have to receive tattoo(s) several times before they finally are given the tattoo(s) that they want. Some recipients live far away from the temple; therefore, they stay at the temple for several days to have as many tattoos as possible. I have talked with a devotee of Luang Pi Peaw; Mr. L.[321] is a construction worker[322] who lives on his construction site in Bangkok. He usually came to the temple by public transportation. His journey took many hours from Bangkok as the temple is situated far away from main roads. Therefore, he

[321] Mr. L. (age 25 years), personal communication, 20thMarch 2009.
[322] Construction workers in Thailand generally live in temporary residences (typically, shacks) at their working site. They will move to the next construction site where they will be working, after their current job is done.

often stayed at the temple for around a week to receive *sak yant* from Luang Pi Peaw[323].

Rituals in *sak yant*

There are two types of rituals in the *sak yant* tradition: *sak yant* and the annual *wai kru* ritual. The first category involves the tattooing process, which is divided into three stages. The first phase is *yok kru*[324][Thai: ยกครู]. The term *kru* in Thai literally means teacher or master. According to Thai belief, teachers have to be treated with the highest respect and gratefulness second only to parents. *Yok kru* is the initiation ritual to show that a person surrenders him/herself to the master's care and is devoted to both the master and the tradition (Mahakhan, 1996: 49).[325]

In the tattooing process, although patterns are chosen according to purpose, the power of the tattoo may not actually come from the tattoo itself. Tannenbaum, in his research on tattoos in various Buddhist cultures, also explains that the power of a spiritual tattoo is believed to be instilled by the master through the process of receiving the tattoo (1987: 699). This was also revealed during my fieldwork, as one of the wearers told me that the spiritual powers would be sealed within the tattoos by the incantation that Luang Pi Peaw usually muttered while he was tattooing. The incantation is barely discernible. I asked some participants about his incantation, and they all informed me that each master in this temple has their own incantation, which can be powerful only when it is recited by them (my fieldnotes, June 2012). Jason Ellsworth, in his article *Transcending cultural borders via the Sak Yant* on the process of tattooing, explains, "The Pali verses that are chanted, the breath from the monk, and the ceremony itself are what imbue the tattoo with power" (2010: 39).

[323] As stated in Chapter 2, the temple also provides accommodation for those who want to stay during their tattooing episodes.
[324] *Yok* in Thai literally means 'to raise', 'to lift up', or 'to give'.
[325] I have described my experience of *yok kru* in Chapter 1.

Figure 25: Luang Pi Peaw performs sak yant on the back of a participant. [Credit: Derbyrock][326]

After completing a tattoo, the master performs a finishing ritual called *pruk sek* [ปลุกเสก] on the recipient's body in order to 'instill' his spiritual power into the tattoo. According to Mahakhan (1996: 49), most masters perform *pruk sek* by jabbing a tattoo needle or pressing their hands on the tattoo while reciting their own incantations [Thai: เรียกสูตรเรียกนาม/*reaksutt reaknaam*]. They then blow with their breath onto the tattoo and then pour consecrated water over the tattoo to finish the process. However, the masters at Wat Bang Phra skip the water pouring process for reasons of convenience. The *pruk sek* ritual at Wat Bang Phra finishes when the masters blow their breath sharply upon the tattoo, an act known as *pao krob* [เป่าครอบ] in Thai (my fieldnotes, March 2009). The trance-possession may occur at this stage, as described in Chapter 1.

Wai kru: the trance-possession ritual

Wai kru[327] is a trance-possession ritual that gives an opportunity for every practising member of the same master[328] to gather once a year at the master's residence in order to pay homage to their master and his predecessors. Although there is no vigorous sound of chanting to stimulate trances as in Parn Yak,[329] trance-possession typically occurs at every *wai kru sak yant* ritual.

[326] http://www.bp.or.th/webboard/index.php?topic=9628
[327] *Wai kru* is also performed in other Thai traditional disciplines such as Thai dance and Thai traditional medicine. The process and details vary between disciplines. However, when I refer to the term *wai kru*, I refer to *wai kru* only in relation to *Sak Yant*.
[328] In the case of Wat Bang Phra, Pra Udomprachanart is regarded as the master of all masters in the temple.
[329] My fieldnotes from a discussion with Pra Narin, the secretary of the abbot, 9th April 2009.

Generally, *wai kru* is performed by the masters in the *sak yant* tradition to worship the spirits of their masters and also the spirits of the tattoos. Apart from the same offerings as found in *yok kru*, the offerings in *wai kru* may consist of food such as a pig's head, hardboiled eggs, or raw meat (Narakorn, 2005: 113). The details of this process may be different in each place. According to Narakorn (2005: 113), who researched the evolution and culture of tattoos in Thailand, after the offering to the spirits, the *sak yant* master may *pao krob* on the tattoos of each devotee to re-activate the tattoos' power. However, it is impossible for popular masters such as in Wat Bang Phra to perform an individual ritual when there are large numbers of practising members.

From my discussion with Pra Narin[330], most of the ritual processes here are performed in a calm and quiet atmosphere with no rigorous chanting involved, though trance-possession still widely occurs among participants. In his article on *wai kru* at Wat Bang Phra, Chenaphun (2012) suggests that trance-possession is considered by some wearers to be a sign that 'their tattoos are being recharged.

The mass of people that attend a trance-possession in the *wai kru* ritual has caused the temple to become famous, especially among foreigners. Instead of referring to *wai kru* at Wat Bang Phra as a ritual, it is called the 'Thai Tattoo festival' in many sources written by foreigners, i.e., international news agencies and travel guidebooks[331]. However, I have never heard any Thai person call the *wai kru* ritual a 'festival'. Enekwe, a scholar in ritual and drama literature, points out, "A ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency" (Enekwe, 1981: 155). Although cultural differences may contribute to its attraction to many tourists who do not belong to the Thai cultural context, I would argue that the boundary between entertainment and efficacy is not sustainable. The aspects of entertainment in ritual should not be considered as a fixed condition but rather a dynamic changing process as it also directly engages with the embodied experience, since entertainment and efficacy are, taken from Schechner's statement, "in continuous

[330] Pra Narin, personal communication, 9th April 2009.
[331] I do not mention the examples here as there are many sources. For further information on the *wai kru* ritual in English, an internet search using the keyword 'Thai Tattoo festival' can lead to more information than using '*wai kru*' or 'Thai tattoo ritual'.

active relations" (2006: 80).The unfixed boundary between the experience of efficacy and entertainment was also observed during my fieldwork in Parn Yak, illustrated in an informant's statement that was discussed in Chapter 1[332].

Wai kru will be conducted at this temple around February-March, with more than ten thousand participants attending the ritual each year (Wat Bang Phra, 2008). The shrines of Pra Udomprachanart, the founder of the temple, and other tattoo masters are located to the front of the ritual ground at the temple courtyard. Those who attend sit on the ground, which is encircled by sacred thread. Many of them do not wear shirts in order to show their tattoo(s).

Figure 26: participants are waiting for the *wai kru* ritual to begin. The picture was taken at the ritual in 2011. [Credit: K jang-Sanae Lanna][333]

The process begins in the early morning when the masters perform a ceremony worshiping the spirits of their masters (ibid). After that, the masters sit on the platform and practice deep meditation in remembrance of their masters. Every person in the ritual remains in silence in order to pay respect and gratitude to all of their masters. However, the serenity of the ritual is usually destroyed as trance-possession incidents often occur at this silent stage. Spooner, a reporter for the Guardian Newspaper who witnessed the ritual in 2009, reports his experience:

[332] In the section on ritual and performance.
[333] http://www.bp.or.th/webboard/index.php?topic=22164

> This serenity doesn't last long. Eerie cries begin to ring out from within the crowd and a few of the devotees begin to contort their faces and bodies. They leap to their feet, clench fists and let out long screams, clawing at the ground and air. It is a frightening and bizarre spectacle to a Westerner but many Thais will sit giggling or remain indifferent. The devotees are in fact undergoing what they believe to be a form of possession by the animal spirits inculcated into their tattoos (Spooner, 2009).

Pra Narin[334]told me that from his point of view, these acts of possession occur during meditation in the ritual. He also insisted that being in trance-possession during the ritual is not an indication of the power of the tattoos. However, according to him, participants may easily fall into trance states due to focusing on their tattoo during these silent moments. Pra Apinya, one of the masters at Wat Bang Phra, asserts in his interview with journalist Kraingu (2012) that some peoples even pretended to be in a trance-possession when they saw that others were in this state because they believe that if they aren't in trance-possession, it means that their tattoos are not powerful enough. This may, in part, result from the image of *wai kru* portrayed by the media as an event of a mass trance-possession. Participants come to the ritual with an expectation and belief that trance-possession should occur; hence, it is likely to happen. In addition, with many observers[335] coming to witness the ritual, it becomes (implicitly) expected that participants will enter a state of trance-possession during *wai kru*. This, perhaps, has led to a presumption among many practising members of *sak yant* that trance-possession is the indication of ritual efficacy. This presumption was also revealed in my fieldwork investigation. During my conversation with Mr. Jong, a *yant* wearer who told me about his trance-possession during *wai kru* every year, he explained:

> Everything [the trace-possession] happens unexpectedly, and I cannot control it. The spirit inside them wants to pay homage to Luang Por Pern [the grand master of this temple]. Why do I have to resist it? This may be a sign that the tattoo spirits are satisfied that they can take control over me and use my body to show respect to the master. If I let them possess me, they receive more power from the master [My translation].[336]

[334] Pra Narin, personal communication, 9th April 2009. When I visited the temple in 2012, I was told that Pra Narin left his monkhood to pursue a doctoral degree at the end of 2011.
[335] For instance, tourists.
[336] Mr. Jong (age 40), personal communication, June 2012

In addition, Mr. Jong also refers to *wai kru* as an event to charge [Thai: เติมพลัง/*turm palang*] the power within tattoos; therefore, as his tattoos are full of power from the ritual, they need to be unleashed. In this way, the expectations held by tattoo wearers and people in their culture can impact the perception of the ritual's efficacy.

The acts of trance-possession found in the *wai kru* ritual occur in various forms. Some participants may remain in their seats with their bodies trembling, while many participants, particularly the animal tattoo wearers, seem[337] to be deeply possessed. Symptoms of possession include hissing, growling, howling, and crawling, and depend on the characteristics of the creatures tattooed on the wearers' bodies (Mahakhan, 1996: 50; Spooner, 2009; Kraingu, 2012).

Figure 27: A Monkey-tattoo wearer. From his actions, this participant has assumedly become possessed by the monkey tattoo (Spooner, 2009). The picture was taken at the ritual at Wat Bang Phra in 2009. [Credit: Spooner][338]

Figure 28: A participant is crawling during his trance-possession in the Wai Kru ritual at Wat Bang Phra, March 2012. [Credit: Kaolamtud][339]

[337] I will not confirm if participants are fully or partially in trance possession as in my opinion, the degrees of trance possession depend on the experience of each participant rather than the observer.

[338]http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/gallery/2009/mar/05/thailand-tattoo-festival-cultural-trips#/?picture=344135689&index=10

[339] http://www.bp.or.th/webboard/index.php?topic=22178

Pra Apinya (Kraingu, 2012) described the trance-possession in *wai kru*, which he performs every year along with other masters in the temple:

> While the worshiping ritual is performed, those with tiger tattoos spread their claws and leaped to the shrine of the original master. Those with Hanuman tattoos danced and performed acrobatic handsprings. Wild boar tattoo bearers roared loudly while running towards the shrine. Some participants were gliding on the floor like eels." [My translation] (Kraingu, 2012).

Figure 29: A participant leaping towards the front of the ritual shrine in a 2009 ritual. [Credit: Paula Bronstein][340]

Figure 30: The atmosphere during the occurrence of trance-possession in *Wai Kru* ritual in 2012 [Credit: Bangkokbiz news[341]]

Trance-possession among participants mostly begins in the participants' fit of rage. After that, they will run uncontrollably towards the shrine of Pra Udomprachanart, the founder of the temple (Wat Bang phra, 2008; Spooner, 2009). These acts

[340] http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/thai-devotee-in-a-state-of-trance-violently-races-towards-news-photo/85286777
[341] http://daily.bangkokbiznews.com/gallery/20120304#3

usually lead to chaotic moments because all trance-possessed participants are enraged and not in their normal consciousness. Every year, soldiers and paramedic volunteers patrol the ritual ground in order to restrain the trance-possessed participants for the safety of other participants. It is believed that for their and other participants' safety, the trance-possessed participants have to be lifted off the ground and rubbed on the ears in order to alleviate the symptoms of possession (Spooner, 2009; Kraingu, 2012). Some tattoo wearers told me that trance-possessed participants have to be lifted off the ground so that the four elements inside their bodies cannot work properly and thus their body energy during trance-possession will lessen, while the rubbing their ears can help them regain consciousness.

Figure 31: volunteers are trying to calm a trance-possessed participant in the traditional way of rubbing his ears and lifting his body above the ground [Credit: Paula Bronstein[342]]

It is believed that those who are trance-possessed run towards the shrine because the spirits within their tattoos are unleashed; they run to pay homage to the original master of the temple at his shrine. Although the ritual ground is full of those who are experiencing trance-possession, the masters remain in a state of meditation. After meditation, the process of the ritual finishes as the master sprinkles consecrated water over the attendees.

However, instead of sprinkling the consecrated water in the traditional manner of using tree leaves, the masters distribute the water through hoses because of the

[342] http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/thai-devotee-in-a-state-of-trance-is-controlled-by-guards-news-photo/85286824

great number of people. Attendees gather to reach the water, and many hold up bottles to capture the consecrated water to take home.

Figure 32, 33: The masters distribute consecrated water to participants at the end of the *wai kru* ritual, 3rd March 2012 [Credit: Khaolamtud[343]]

The *wai kru* ritual is an annual opportunity for the practising members of *sak yant* to gather and meet with people who have the same belief, to pay homage to their masters, and to empower their spiritual tattoo or to re-empower it if they had violated any of their masters' codes of conduct over the past year. The transgressors usually believe that the power of their tattoo can lessen or lose power because of their violations (Ellsworth, 2010: 139). For this reason and the findings of my field research, I suggest that *wai kru* is one of the practices of *kamma* purification that can lead to the articulation of a sense of therapeutic efficacy from the experience of rituals, described as 'feel better'.

Trance-possession within Parn Yak and the traditions of sak yant

It is complicated to describe the differences in trance-possessions between Parn Yak and *sak yant*. Trance-possession is essentially an activity that is manifested at both rituals. It is likely that in *wai kru*, it may occur at a higher level of rage than in Parn Yak. Those who participate in *wai kru* are only the firm devotees of the *sak yant* tradition and have tattoos from the same school, whereas the attendees at Parn Yak rituals are more diverse, for instance, with regard to both gender and age.

[343] http://www.bp.or.th/webboard/index.php?topic=22178

Participants in Parn Yak are encouraged to enter a trance state via several stimulations; for instance, the dynamic sound and rhythm of chanting and the noise of firecrackers being lit are all conducive to trance. Although these seem to be common factors to induce a trance, external stimuli can also affect the occurrences of trance-possession, as was seen in the case of a broken amplifier at Wat Boonrod described in Chapter 1. However, external factors or technical problem do not always impact the perception of efficacy, which is also contributed to by the surrounding socio-cultural factors. In addition, a Parn Yak ritual may be seen as both a success and a failure based on different perspectives because its success depends on how the sense of efficacy is perceived, by whom, and in what context (as discussed in Chapter 1).

While many external stimuli are used in Parn Yak, the monks in the *wai kru* ritual do not explicitly encourage participants to enter into a trance. In contrast to Parn Yak, trance-possessions in the ritual result from the internal processes occurring within each person while they are sitting in silence rather than from the conducted ritual activities. As stated earlier, the monks at Wat Bang Phra do not attempt to stimulate participants into trance-possession either during the tattooing process or the *wai kru* rituals. In fact, on the temple's website (Wat Bang Phra, 2008), it is stated that the participants are advised not to close their eyes and overly focus on tattoos during the ritual meditation in order to prevent themselves from entering into such a state. However, there is a discrepancy of perception towards trance-possession in ritual between many devotees and their masters. For the monks, it is neither an objective nor a significant element of the tradition of *sak yant*. Put simply, they view trance-possession as a by-product of the whole ritual process. However, some people may see their manifestation of trance-possession as an indication of ritual efficacy. This may, in part, be due to cultural expectation as discussed above, and many ritual participants still seek to fall into trance.

Apart from the annual ritual, *sak yant* devotees also seek other opportunities to sustain the power of their tattoos by attending Parn Yak. The chanting is believed to remove any negativity[344]. Although Parn Yak is not performed with the intention

[344] Such as bad luck, evil spirits, and illness, which may result from the impact of dark *kamma*.

of empowering the spirits, it can be considered as a ritual to purify the spiritual power within the participant and hence is a 'mini-recharging' for *sak yant* devotees. Devotees of *sak yant* may also see this ritual as an opportunity to reveal their beliefs and demonstrate the spiritual power that they acquire in the social sphere. Hewitt explains the ritual practices among those who have body modifications, i.e. tattoos, as follows: "Individuals may create public rituals to commemorate their passage from one state to another and gain recognition of their transformation" (Hewitt, 1997: 4). By revealing their trance-possession during the Parn Yak chanting, people with spiritual tattoos gain public recognition of their achievement in having protective and magical powers, which may also result in a sense of efficacy[345]. Nonetheless, they still utilize Parn Yak as a way of empowering their tattoos. I concur with Ellsworth's statement (2010: 141) that the 'authentic' nature of the ritual is not necessarily weakened by the fact that it is presented in the social sphere. The therapeutic efficacy of the ritual is not diluted with this public manifestation but rather the ritual may gain a social efficacy as participants try to establish their identities within the cultural realm of the ritual.

Types of trance-possession

I suggest that the states of trance-possession in Parn Yak can be grouped into three categories according to their characteristics: voluntary, involuntary, and partial-voluntary.

The first category is voluntary; however, this does not actually refer to states of trance caused by the attempt of a person to be in trance, for example, those within shamanic experiences. This is because these trances occur via various induction techniques, which are mostly practiced by shamans themselves, while the trance that I mention is not the result of the ritual observers intentionally stimulating themselves to be possessed by spiritual forces or desiring to enter a visionary state. Moreover, in this voluntary trance-possession, the participants neither master nor have the ability to control these forces and their entrancement unlike shamans or spiritual mediums, whom Landy (1977: 417) identifies as people involved in contact and manipulation of spirits. The voluntary trance-possession

[345] The contribution of communal experience to personal experiences of efficacy will be discussed in Chapter 5.

referred to in this thesis involves those who have spiritual tattoos. The moment of 'voluntary' trance-possession is first established when they allow spiritual powers to enter and reside within them at the time when the tattoos are marked upon their bodies. Although they do not attempt to induce themselves, they allow the phenomenon of trance-possession to happen in their bodymind during the ritual. In other words, they do not invite the spirits to possess them, but they do consent to be dominated by them. However, they are unable to contact the spirits or control their bodies although they are sometimes partially conscious[346]. Tattoo wearer Akkaporn Silom, referring to his frequent experiences of trance-possession, describes them as 'out-of-body experiences' and has accompanying feelings of 'numbness' and 'goosebumps' (Chenaphun, 2012). While these wearers are being possessed, the trance-possession is mostly presented in forms similar to the patterns of their tattoos, such as animals. As Jennings asserts, "Trance behavior usually responds to the expectations of a particular culture" (Jennings, 1995: 106). In Thailand, there are cultural perceptions towards characteristics and behaviours of each animal; for example, the monkey is hyperactive, likes climbing, and can escape harm easily. Manifestations of this type of possession are likely to be in accordance with these perceptions so that *sak yant* members often have similar trance behaviours due to their cultural embodiments.

Although it is found in the same ritual as above, involuntary trance-possession is very different. As discussed earlier, Parn Yak can be considered to be a ritual that aims to eliminate evil spirits and illness. When Thai people feel ill or experience frequent incidents of bad luck, they tend to blame this on evil spirits. They believe that evil spiritual forces possess and weaken their bodymind, resulting in illness or bad luck. A common symptom of this type of illness is described as a change in the appearance of the sufferer. It is widely believed that a person's complexion can become dull and darker. This unhealthy look is as if fortune and life-essence, called *rasri* [Thai: ราศี] in Thai, have been taken away from the person. Kapferer asserts the significance of healing rituals for spirit-caused illness within a cultural context:

[346] Again, I cannot identify levels of full or partial consciousness. I use the term 'partially conscious' in this sentence just to describe the experience of participants who informed me that they still feel their existence but cannot know their exact behaviours during the ritual.

> The definition and diagnosis of demonic attack, while constituted in context, is also constitutive of context. Illness, its demonic comprehension and the meaning of illness in relation to a wider social world, emerge together in a dialectical process, and take shape within exorcist diagnostic categories. Herein lies some of the power and potential efficacy of exorcism ritual, for it addresses and acts upon that which it defines and encompasses (Kapferer, 1991: 123).

According to Kapferer, these undesirable conditions caused by spiritual power are constructed within the cultural context, and therefore they need to be addressed and treated through culturally established approaches. In Thai culture, rituals are vital therapeutic tools, and it is believed that one of the solutions for this spiritual-caused illness is participation in Parn Yak (Wat Sriboonreung, 2012).

The virtuous power of the Atanatiya *sutta* and the monks can cast away the malignant forces. When people fall into trance states during the chanting, the possession of these evil powers can be manifested explicitly so that they can be exorcised and leave the bodies of possessed persons. The trance-possession of these participants is often portrayed in their behaviour as being in pain and frightened. The well-known monk Pra Lek Suthamapunyo made the following statement in his monthly Dharma talk in February 2003:

> Once the chanting starts, spirits who possessed participants' bodies will not be able to stay any longer. They will be punished by the four heavenly kings if they continue their possession. They have to flee but before they do, they usually mourn their departure, so they scream and squirm to show their dissatisfaction. Therefore, it is believed that after attending Parn Yak, people with evil spirits within their bodies will be healed of and protected from any dangers and illness caused by spirits (Suthamapunyo, 2003: 1).

Parn Yak can be performed as an exorcism for those who are possessed involuntarily. When they are in a state of trance-possession during the chanting, the *Pra nuangprok* will treat these ritual participants individually[347]. For these involuntary trance-possessions, Parn Yak can be seen as an exorcism and healing ritual. Yindee (2000), who conducted quantitative research on 202 Parn Yak participants during 1999-2000, found that 68.8% of those who attended believe that the ritual can eliminate evil spiritual powers and 59.9% believe that their participation can provide protection from evil spirits and danger. This

[347] By sprinkling consecrated water and reciting invocations

research also shows that 85.1% stated they felt ‘better’ after attending the ritual. Within this type of trance-possession, the therapeutic aspect seems to be strong and explicit.

The final category of trance-possession in the Parn Yak ritual is partial-voluntary. The nature of this trance-possession is complicated. The function of trance-possession rituals for these partial-voluntary participants is similar to that experienced by spiritual tattooed wearers in Parn Yak. However, these partial-voluntary participants in no way invite the spirits to possess them, nor do they give consent to the spirits to manipulate their bodies (such as in the *sak yant* ritual); also, no attempt to exorcise the spirits is made as they finally accept their role as hosts for the spirits. The spirits in this category are not considered to be dangerous, and some of them are even regarded as deities.

The well-known term in Thai for people who have these spirits residing within them is *khon mee ong* [Thai: คนมีองค์].[348]*Ong* [Thai: องค์] is a noun referring to anything that is worshiped, such as deities (The Royal Thai Institute, 1999). When people are diagnosed as having *ong*, they are regarded as having benign spirits residing in their bodies. It is believed that these spirits live within *mee ong* people from birth as their guardian spirits (Sahapatibat Foundation, 2010). Therefore, people possessed with these spirits are regarded as having spiritual power to protect them and bring good luck. As the spirits are not evil, exorcism is not necessary. The difference between a spiritual medium, i.e. shaman, and a *mee ong* person is that *mee ong* people have more passive roles, as they cannot manipulate the spirits, and these spirits can protect only the people in whom they live. Similar to people with spiritual tattoos, some believe that the chanting of Parn Yak can empower the spirits who reside within their bodies (Yindee, 2000: 159). During the chanting, trance-possession behaviours such as swaying, shivering, and dancing are signs of the spirits’ acknowledgment that they are empowered. According to Yindee (2000: 133), the majority of her informants believe that people who have benign spirits residing within their bodies will experience trance-possession during every Parn Yak they attend. Through trance-possession, these people have an opportunity to release the other beings that they believe

[348] Literally, *Khon* [Thai: คน] means a person. *Mee* [Thai: มี] is a verb ‘to have’.

live within their body. Jennings (1995: 107) emphasises that trance can also be perceived physically with changes in temperature, pulse, and heart rate. Although unable to control themselves during trance-possession, *mee ong* participants can feel the spirits inside them coming to join their reality. As Sue Jennings, an anthropologist/ethnographer, asserts:

> It involves a partial letting go of conscious control in order for the experienced 'other' to emerge. It is in enactment that the trance allows the experienced 'other' to be made manifest (Jennings, 1995: 107).

By the manifestation of other beings[349], the spirits and their hosts join together during the *Parn Yak* chanting though trance-possession; these people also allow themselves to be empowered along with the benign spirit within them. Although they are very different practices, this reminds me of the Tantric visualization meditation method, which George describes as "being [able] to see oneself as the deity in order to become the qualities which that deity represents […]" (1998: 11). Beyer writes, in a similar vein:

> He vividly visualizes himself as the deity and grasps the divine pride of ego: he directs the power of the deity into himself and becomes, in effect, the transformer through which the divine power can pass out of the realm of knowledge and into the world of events (Beyer, 1973: 66).

In Thailand, the partial-voluntary trance-possession is considered to cause no harm to people who are trance-possessed. Although they did not start out seeking to be possessed, to have benign spirit possession is not an acute problem but a continuing state that they must live with. For these people, the ritual is regarded as empowering rather than an apotropaic goal.

I have discussed the trance-possession rituals and their characteristics and processes, as well as trance behaviours. Nonetheless, I would like to emphasise that I cannot identify between full or partial trance-possession. My fieldwork experiences have revealed that the degree of trance-possession is not always obvious to the observer. Some informants report that they 'feel' the power of chanting in their bodies and fall into a trance state although they do not display explicit behaviours of trance-possession. As experiences of rituals are culturally

[349] In this case, the benign spirits or deities that reside in the bodies.

articulated phenomena, trance-possession and the efficacy of its ritual cannot be assessed by the manifestation but rather by surrounding socio-cultural factors and the embodied experiences of the ritual participants.

Conclusion: The operation of Parn Yak and *sak yant* in a contemporary Thai context

This chapter examines the way in which Parn Yak and *sak yant* exist in a contemporary Thai context and reveals how these two trance-possession rituals operate across time and settings. Through data gathered from various publications and fieldwork experience, the changing nature of these rituals has been examined. It is evident that the way in which Parn Yak and *sak yant* are constantly and creatively modified by those who organise them, contributes to ritual participants' engagement in the ritual process that can lead to the construction of their sense of efficacy.

Parn Yak has typically been promoted as a traditional practice that has linearly evolved through centuries from the historical chanting rituals in the Thai royal court. Many features found in these historical rituals, e.g., the firing of guns, have been used to establish the connection to the past. The history becomes, as Hobsbawm describes "a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion" (2012: 12), which can contribute to the authenticity of ritual. The notion of tradition can also be seen in the *sak yant* practice where the tattoo masters are often valued by their devotees through the reputation of their predecessors. Nonetheless, the way that Parn Yak and *sak yant* are continually adjusted to inherently changeable environments can also be considered as a potential force to the feeling of ritual authenticity. The transformation of these two rituals is complex and contingent: they are modified to suit the contemporary context, while historical references affirm the sense of belonging to the culture.

Fieldwork carried out during 2007-2012 revealed that the varying forms of Parn Yak and *sak yant* depend on geographical and socio-economic aspects as well as the popular beliefs that exist during the time of ritual. Marketing concerns are also a significant factor in the way that rituals are performed, for instance, the integration of other rituals to Parn Yak and the popularity of amulets. However,

the commercial aspects may enable the perception of efficacy. For example, the commodification of monks' abilities can contribute to the belief in the authenticity and efficacious power of ritual. This is particularly true in the case of tight-knit communities of *sak yant* where there is a close and long-term relationship between the masters and their devotees.

The commercialisation of rituals may also help evoke the embodied process of therapeutic transformation. The way in which the organizers encourage people to participate in ritual, for example, giving offerings to the monks and making donations, can bring financial benefits to the temples, while also providing opportunities for those who attend to commit bright *kamma,* which is thought to lead to enhanced life conditions. Therefore, performing acts of bright *kamma* during the rituals is conducive to the sense of therapeutic transformation, which may be described as 'feeling better'. In this way, the reformulation and modification of Parn Yak and *sak yant* can establish congruence between culturally articulated bodies of ritual participants and their embodied experience during the lived moments of ritual. Hence, the sense of efficacy can be embodied and articulated.

Having examined details of the practice of Parn Yak and *sak yant* and my fieldwork in this chapter, the next and final chapter will consider the framework constructed from the theoretical concepts and perspectives discussed in Chapter 1 in analysing the mechanisms that facilitate the embodiment of the efficacies of these two rituals.

Chapter 5
The transformation: A consideration of the efficacies of trance-possession rituals

The surrounding sociological, historical, and cultural factors, which have been explored in previous chapters, form the basis for further analysis of Parn Yak and *sak yant* as culturally articulated embodied practices. This chapter reflects the information gathered from my field experience of these two rituals in order to examine the context that contributes to the construction of participants' conceptions and expressions of the sense of efficacy. As previously discussed, many Thai Buddhists view trance-possession rituals, namely Parn Yak and *sak yant*, as therapeutic, stating that they 'feel better' from their experience in rituals[350]. Through this research, I investigate the way in which trance-possession ritual efficacy is conceived and understood in relation to the experience of participants in rituals. Within the context of exploring these two rituals as processes of live embodiment, this chapter will use the perspectives in the discipline that engage lived experiences, namely performance studies. In particular, it relates to applied drama as a 'lens' to examine these ritual performances, especially in regard to their efficacy. The perspectives from performance scholarship can enhance the understanding of the way in which ritual is experienced through participants' bodymind, while applied drama enables me to particularly engage with its aspect of efficacy. As discussed in Chapter 1, I found that both applied drama and these specific trance-possession rituals share the characteristic of being practices that are conducted for efficacious purposes. Applied drama, by its very nature, has therapeutic potentiality, because its practices are, according to Nicholson, "specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities and societies" (2005: 2).

Nonetheless, it would not be appropriate to use applied drama perspectives alone to explore the therapeutic process of Thai rituals. As argued in Chapter 1, although cultural aspects are often recognised within the field, understanding their related practices within the specific cultural context may be difficult. The

[350] As the observation from my fieldwork has revealed.

discipline of applied drama was originally established and developed within Western cultures, which are very different from the Thai cultural context. Cultural performance as ritual is absolutely culturally specific; hence the cultural context and cultural embodiment of the participants is also highly significant. The analysis of Thai Buddhist rituals, I suggest, can be achieved with reference to their own context. In this way, the concepts and ideas from other disciplines, such as anthropology and some aspects of Theravada Buddhist philosophy, are also employed to approach participants' experience in ritual as being conditioned by culture.

Using the framework constructed in Chapter 1, this final chapter sets out to provide evidence as to how Parn Yak and *sak yant* operate as therapeutic practices within a Thai contemporary context and how the efficacy of these rituals are conceptualised and expressed by their participants. This chapter has two main sections. The first part explores the personal experiences of participants in both the Parn Yak and *sak yant* ritual practices; the second section considers which elements in collective and communal experience contribute to these personal experiences of efficacy. From the perspective of the disciplines described above, the first part begins with a further investigation of the related issues[351] of data from my fieldwork. These include:

- The experience as embodied process
- The notion of transformation and bewilderment
- The aspects of location, space and time
- The concepts of the ritual facilitator

This will be followed by a discussion of how the concept of *kamma* [Pali; Sanskrit: *Karma*; Thai: กรรม/*Kam*] found in Thai Buddhist belief effects the Thai perspective on the sense of wellbeing, which results in trance-possession ritual as being seen as a therapeutic medium that suits the Thai cultural context.

The second, shorter, section focuses on several aspects in Parn Yak and *sak* yant, such as social manifestation and sense of community, community narrative

[351]These are discussed in Chapter 1.

and identity, in order to examine how ritual as collective experience can enable participants to achieve their therapeutic transformation.

Personal efficacies

In this part the experiences in the practices of Parn Yak and s*ak yant* are discussed. It is important to clarify that the discussion is not only from the accounts of ritual participants and other sources, but it also comes from my perspectives and interpretation. Geertz (1973: 14) asserts that the works of ethnographers "begin with our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematizes those" (1973:15). Therefore, the reflections on my own experience and interpretations are also necessarily included.

Although these two trance-possession rituals can be considered as rituals with therapeutic efficacies, I found it is difficult to discuss the aspects of their efficacy. The two rituals are not explicitly referred to as healing rituals that are intentionally performed to make participants recover from illness. I concur with Robert Desjarlais who, in his anthropological research on Tibetan Buddhist rituals (1996: 152), suggests the importance of studying how participants feel better after the ritual. Most participants in Parn Yak and *sak yant* are likely to fully experience the efficacy in the aftermath of the ritual rather than merely feeling better when they are participating in the ritual. This is explicitly indicated in the evidence from my fieldwork.[352] Most informants insisted that although they actually felt better at the moment of their attendances, they were rather looking forward to seeing the positive effects of the ritual in the aftermath, e.g. protection, success in business trading, and charisma, characteristics that would enable them to completely recognise that they feel better. In this way, the efficacy of ritual is attained and conceived as a process rather than an immediate response to a particular problem.

It is clear that the rituals do not produce the same experience or efficacy for everyone. Therefore, within this section, I will explore the ways in which Parn Yak and *sak yant* practices can be constructed to produce the sense of efficacy after

[352] My fieldnotes, 2006-2012.

the rituals amongst the participants. Similar to research in applied drama practices, this research attributes ritual efficacy to a variety of factors, such as space, time, facilitator, community, cultural and religious beliefs. The following sections will examine these factors in more detail.

Moving towards transformation through embodied process

Rituals, by their nature, aim to stimulate change within participants (Halpin with Kaplan, 1995: 100 cited in Worth and Poyner, 2004: 141).Parn Yak and *sak yant* are clearly rituals that are full of personal efficacy of transformation,[353] for example, from the experience of *dukkha* to wellbeing, from an ordinary person to a person who is equipped with spiritual powers and from an individual to a person who belongs in a certain community.

Canda, a scholar in religious and social work studies, points out a common underlying element in the process of transformation in ritual and healing:

> Transformation is a process involving a period of de-structuring of a stable condition, a period of extreme fluidity and openness to new possibilities […] (Canda, 1988: 206).

Using Canda's concept, participants in Parn Yak and *sak yant* enter the particular environment that encourages the therapeutic transformation process. Participants' environments are shifted from their normal world to another universe in which spirits are authorities who can interact with human beings, and spiritual power is regarded as the most important source of healing. In rituals of Parn Yak and those within *sak yant,* the periods of 'unstable condition' and 'extreme fluidity' are, I suggest, begun at the arrival at the entrance of the ritual space. For example, this occurs when buying of ritual packages[354] or performing an act of worship at the entrance of the ritual space. These activities, perhaps, act as a temporal marker for participants to perceive that they are about to expose themselves to new possibilities.

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[353]I use the term 'transformation' in this thesis only to refer to the state of change that happens to ritual participants. Within this chapter, the term is used to indicate only the positive change within participants and their communities. The notion of transformation in relation to ritual and performance practices is discussed in Chapter 1.

[354]*Kan kru* in Parn Yak or the offerings for the master in *sak yant*.

This is exemplified in some cases of Parn Yak, where participants are required to attend the ritual of *bucha kru/bucha kan kru* [Thai: บูชาครู/บูชาขันครู] at the space outside the Parn Yak ritual ground. This worshiping ritual space is prepared with seven different small Buddha statues, a small alms bowl in front of each statue, a lamp for lighting the offering candles and incense sticks (Yindee, 2000: 104-105). Participants worship and give offerings[355]to the statues of Buddha that represent their birthdays,[356] and put money in the alms bowl in front of the statues as donations. Yindee (2000: 104), in her research, asserts that these rituals are performed to eliminate negativity and to attract good luck before attending the actual Parn Yak.

I do not agree with this statement. The idea that considers the *bucha kru* ritual as 'first aid' prior to Parn Yak lessens the importance of the therapeutic aspect of the Parn Yak chanting ritual. I consider this preliminary ritual as a part of the process of efficacy, rather than a separate event. When participants make offerings to the statues of Buddha, they indicate that they accept the Buddha's teaching, virtue and power as their supreme protection and support and that they promise to existentially engage throughout the ritual. By placing money in the alms bowl in front of the Buddha statues of their birthday, they recognise their identity[357] and surrender it, along with their fate[358] in order to receive Buddha's protection during the ritual.

I argue that the sense of efficacy is developed through the lived experience in ritual. This is also articulated by Sklar's statement quoted previously in Chapter 1,[359] "The potential for transformation lies in a property of *doing*: one does and feels oneself doing at the same time" (2001: 184).In the case of Parn Yak, this 'property' is exemplified in the actions and relationships of individuals towards ritual objects, for example the offerings, the alms bowls and the Buddha statues,

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[355] As described in Chapter 1, a set of offerings in Thai Buddhist ritual consists of a candle, three incense sticks and flowers.
[356] Each statue is considered to represent one day in a week.
[357] Through acknowledging their day of birth.
[358] Thais, especially Buddhists, believe that date and time of birth can indicate the life of a person [Thai: ดวงชะตา/*Duang Chata*]. This is more important than a horoscope, as the date of birth is regarded as a person's spiritual identity. It is also a Thai tradition for Thais to write their date of birth as a *yant* and put them beneath the Buddha statues so that they can have the protection from the Buddha (Songsiri, 2008).
[359] Page 95.

along with their manifestation of worshiping ritual such as bowing to the statues etc. In this way, 'the actions, the presence, and the state of being in a centrality of the activities' can contribute to the process of efficacy. This sense of performing in ritual may be what Ann David (2008: 94) has called, in relation to ethnographic research within British Tamil Hindu practice, 'choreography of a temple'.

> Not only are the bodies in this space performing an unconscious choreography, but an inner rhythm is created, focusing the attention and transforming secular time and space into a ritual, sacralized locale (David, 2008: 94).

The embodied experience in ritual can also contribute to the transformation of space and time, which, in turn, can help participants achieve a sense of transformation.[360]

By performing and being in the ritual, participants' bodyminds go through the embodiment process towards therapeutic transformation with the result that they express as 'feel better'. In this way, I claim that it is appropriate to consider the ritual experience as a journey that each participant has to go through, take part in and participate in to achieve this sense of efficacy.

In relation to my fieldwork investigation, considering Parn Yak and *sak yant* through the perspective of embodiment is useful in understanding how non-trance-possessed participants can also experience the sense of therapeutic transformation by reporting that they 'feel better'. Being an embodied experience, the presence as well as the sensations[361] of participants in the trance-possession rituals are the crucial elements for the transformation. With this reason, the sense of efficacy may also result from the fact that they experience other participants being in a trance-possession. However, this is not to imply that participants who are not in a trance will achieve the same/different level of transformation as trance-possessed participants or vice versa. Participants transform and develop the sense of efficacy individually; the efficacy is subjective and, therefore, cannot be simply evaluated.

[360] The notion of ritual space and time will be discussed further later.
[361] I mean 'to see', 'to hear', 'to smell', 'to feel', 'to touch' (and 'to taste', if participants can taste) during the presence in the ritual.

Participants have to participate and perform tasks in the ritual by themselves so that the sense of efficacy can be established. The use of individual embodied experience is also the fundamental approach in Theravada Buddhism.[362] The experiential practices leading towards the cessation of *Dukkha* need to be absorbed individually; it cannot be done on someone's behalf, as indicated in the verse of the Buddha[363]: *Atta hi attano natho, meaning* 'make yourself a refuge unto yourself' [364][Thai: ตนเป็นที่พึ่งแห่งตน/*thon pen thi puang hang ton*] (Chah, 1999: 104), which has also become a well-known motivational phrase in Thailand.

Similar to Buddhist practices, Parn Yak and *sak yant* require the lived experience of participants. The sense of transformation develops within the body and through the body. As mentioned in Chapter 1 and 3, the 'body' refers to the body according to a Buddhist perspective that there is no distinction between mental and physical phenomena (George, 1999: 54).

The concept of bodymind is used as the embodied process in Buddhist practices. For example, S.N. Goenka, explicitly uses the psychophysical nature of embodied experience in his *vipassana* meditation discipline[365]by emphasising the importance of the experiential practice of moving the attention through the body in order to observe the body sensation [Pali: *vedanā*; Thai: เวทนา/*vettana*] and the perception [Pali: *saññ*a; Thai:สัญญา/*sanya*] of that sensation. During the daily evening Dharma discourse on day 3, he states that the following:

> Outside of the framework of the body, truth cannot be experienced; it can only be intellectualized. Therefore you must develop the ability to experience truth ['] within yourself ['], from the grossest to the subtlest

[362] As Parn Yak and *sak yant* are both practiced in Thai Theravada Buddhist practices, when mentioning Buddhism in this chapter, I refer only to Theravada Buddhism, which is the main Buddhist tradition in Thailand.
[363] The *Dhammapada* [Pali]
[364] There are many English translations of these Pali texts. However, I chose the version that is translated from the discourse of Ajarn Chah, one of the most reverend monks in Thailand and an important figure in teaching Thai Theravada Buddhism to people in the Western culture. His teachings are published in English by direct disciples who are English native speakers. Although the translations are mostly done anonymously, they have been approved by many of his direct disciples who are also Theravada monks (for example, Ajarn Sumedho in the UK). Furthermore, due to the fact that the verse in this English version is translated from the Thai version (which is renowned in Thailand), I believe this English translation is the most suitable for the Thai context.
[365] Which I also have been practising.

levels, in order to emerge from all illusions, all bondages (Goenka, 2010).[366]

From the Buddhist perspective of embodiment, the bodymind of participants is not merely an object in the rituals, but may also be seen as a process or journey towards efficacy. In this way, the process of transformation starts from the first ritual procedure (for instance, the preliminary rituals described above) with the embodied practices of individual devotees.

Since the embodied experience is vital to the process of efficacy, body-marking also contributes to participants' therapeutic transformation. According to Thompson (2006: 61), the external marks from body modifications can result in an internal marking process. Therefore, I use the term 'body-marking' not only to refer to visible body modifications, such as tattooing, but also to refer to the sense that the body has been marked as a symbol of transformation. The process of this marking can establish a sense of efficacy and can help participants to affirm that they are transformed. Furthermore, the objects employed in the ritual, such as ritual kits and sacred threads, which are used afterwards as amulets, can also function as a certificate confirming that participants have been through the ritual. For instance, an informant, Mrs. M.,[367] states that, like many other participants, she made sure to take the thread home, explaining that the evil spirits would not attack her as long as she possessed the objects from the ritual that she attended. She notes that she cannot prove whether the ritual can eliminate evil spirits; however, by taking these objects, she 'feels better', because she is "better safe than sorry" (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007).

Body tattoos can remind participants that they hold spiritual power sealed within their body and, therefore, they are always protected. This notion also applies to the invisible tattoos made with oil. Although they cannot be seen, this tattoo experience is the same as being tattooed with black ink.[368]

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[366] I also have direct embodied experiences of S.N. Goenka's approach, as I have taken part in the 10-day course of S.N. Goenka. I listened to this discourse both in Thai and English as a part of this lived experience. This English quotation is taken from the summaries of Goenka's discourse. The summaries are on the website of the Vipassana Research Institute. Nevertheless, I also acquired the Thai translation of the complete discourses.

[367] Mrs. M. (age 44), personal communication, April 2007.

[368] The sense of efficacy is the same; however, several participants report that being oil-tattooed is less painful than being ink-tattooed, which might be because the master does not jab the tattoo needle into the skin as hard with oil as he does with ink.

The sense of having spiritual power inhabiting the body is also established as a result of and through the tattooing process. Similarly, Thompson (2006: 61) observes that acts of performance can also mark the body. For example, Miss S., a theatre practitioner who is a follower of the tattoo master(s) at Wat Bang Phra, states that she felt the power of the master transfer into her body as soon as she experienced the process of tattooing. When the monk[369] first pierced her skin with a needle, she felt an invisible force penetrate her body. After the tattooing, she visited the abbot so that he could blow on her new tattoos[370] to empower them. This experience gave her 'goose bumps' (my fieldnotes, June 2012).

Despite having several *yant* on her body from different masters, Miss S. asserts that she never experienced any of these symptoms after being tattooed by masters outside Wat Bang Phra. She firmly believes that the tattoos from the masters at this temple can provide protection and good luck; hence, she asserts that she 'feels better' after having tattoos from here, and that this is the reason she usually returns to Wat Bang Phra for a new tattoo when she feels down. Apart from the lived experience, the notion of belief as being culturally conditioned is also seen as a significant factor in the psychophysical process towards therapeutic efficacy. When people who share similar cultures report that the ritual practice is effective, an individual can believe that it will also be effective in his/her case. Alcock, a scholar in psychology, states, "The social support resulting from a sharing of belief is important" (1995). Therefore, if any positive circumstances occur, they can assume that it is a result of the effectiveness of the rituals that they attended.As in this case, the belief in the power of *sak yant* exists in Thai Buddhist culture, with which Miss S. is familiar.

This is exemplified in one compelling example from Miss S.'s account of the significance of her tattoos:

> One time, I was on my way home to Bangkok after I had had a tattoo from Luang Pi Nun [at Wat Bang Phra]. I had just driven out of the temple gate when I received a phone call. The caller was asking me to run a theatre project. It was a one time job, and that project paid 200,000 baht. This might look like a coincidence, but I somehow believe that my new tattoo

[369] Miss S. has never been tattooed by Luang Pi Peaw, whom I observed during my field research; nonetheless, all the masters at this temple still regard her as a practising member.
[370] It is a tradition that, after being tattooed by any of the masters, the tattoo wearers should have the abbot blow on their tattoos in order to enact the power of their tattoos.

can eliminate negativity and give me good opportunities. Good things always happen after I have a new *yant* [My translation].[371]

Figure 34: The 5 lines of Khmer scripts *yant* [Thai: ห้าแถว/Ha-taew], One of Miss S's tattoos from Wat Bang Phra.[372] This is the *yant* which she mentioned above. The Kanesha tattoo on her body is not a *yant* and is only for aesthetic purposes. [Credit: Paveena Chamchoy]

Figure 35: Miss S's oil tattoo. It is to the right of the dark ink tattoo, and actually initially resembles a rash. The picture was taken a few hours after she had been tattooed. The rash-like marks, sustained from the needle, disappear after several days, and therefore the oil tattoo becomes invisible. [Credit: Miss S.].

The process of tattooing inevitably involves pain; however, I would like to note that the pain is not an essential part of the ritual experience in *sak yant*. Although the sensation that participants have while being tattooed can make them feel that they are transformed, the pain per se does not mark the transformation. In fact, inflicting pain is not intended in *sak yant*, and the tattoo masters even try to alleviate the pain during the process. During my field research, I frequently

[371] Miss S. (age 33), personal communication, June 2012.
[372] The *ha-teaw* is a new pattern, which was created by another well-known master outside Wat Bang Phra. The pattern became popular among Thais between 2005 and 2007. Although it did not originate in the Wat Bang Phra tradition, some masters in this temple gave this pattern to their followers.

observed two or three people helping to tighten the skin of a participant while Luang Pi Peaw performed his practice, because it is believed that the pain will lessen if the skin is taut. As described in the previous chapter, the monk also asked me to help when he tattooed female participants.

Furthermore, the *yant* tattoo is not evidence of the bravado of overcoming pain. After witnessing the tattoo process, most participants explained that they felt a slight burning sensation. According to most testimonials, the fresh tattoos felt similar to insect bites. Some of them reported that they felt a higher amount of pain, but insisted that it was still within the level that most people can endure without difficulty. When I directed questions about pain to participants who had several *yant*s, some of them could not even recall their feelings of pain during their past experiences.[373] It seems that the ability to conquer pain is not greatly valued in the community of *sak yant*. Instead, what is more important to the practising members is the spiritual power that resides in the tattoos and that the masters instil their own power into the tattoos.

In addition, Desjarlais (1996: 158-160) described the concept of 'healing touch', a concept also found in Parn Yak and *sak yant*. The monk touches the participants with the ritual objects as a form of empowerment and as a sign that their spirits have returned to their body. Understanding Desjarlais' concept of healing touch might shed light on the concept of *kwan*, discussed in Chapter 3. At Parn Yak I attended at Wat Noinai, *pra nuangpok* touches participants with a bunch of twigs[374] while the participants are in a trance-possession. As in one of the examples:

> The monk and his assistants walked slowly towards a male participant. His body was obviously shaking, and his hand was moving in a circular direction. A deep hissing sound came from his mouth. The assistants held his body still, while the monk touched his head with twigs. The participant seemed to calm down at once. There was no sign of struggle despite that he was being held tightly by three men. After less than a minute, he seemed to be unconscious. The monk then recited his incantation before sprinkling consecrated water on him. The participant sat down quietly and participated in ritual without any more trance-possession. No one in the hall paid attention to him any longer (my fieldnotes, 2nd December 2006).

[373] My fieldnotes, June 2012.
[374] These are later used as the tool for sprinkling consecrated water.

During the trance-possession, it is believed that participants' bodymind are in a state of imbalance, so their *kwans* 'fly away'. Although Parn Yak is not specifically a *kwan* ritual, the acts in which the monks touch the head of each participant can symbolically mark the restoration of *kwan* to the body, since it is believed that *kwan* leaves the body via the person's head. As described in Chapter 4, Luang Pi Peaw seems to be performing a similar act whenhe puts his hand or the offerings that the participants give him on the head of every participant after tattooing. He also performs this act after the *yok kru* ritual, which is for participants like myself who choose not to be tattooed but have devoted themselves as his followers. These 'touches' on the body mark the transformation of participants. The participants also experience the physicality of the touch as a moment of embodiment which transforms them psychophysically through the action of the master touching them.

Breakdown for breakthrough

In his study on the Theravada healing rituals, Bruce Kapferer, points out that by moving participants towards transformation, the embodied process within ritual also changes the sense of self as 'being-in-the-world', which is discussed in Chapter 1, are perceived and conceptualised:

> Rituals act practically upon the world […] […] Rituals can also transform action and experience; this they do by attacking and restructuring the idea in terms of which action and experience are comprehended (Kapferer, 1991:325-326).

The 'attacking and restructuring', I suggests, may mean taking participants out of their everyday life. This is exemplified in the preliminary process of Parn Yak which are described above, that they have left their everyday reality[375] behind and accepted the new possibility to be in the realm where spiritual power generally exists. This is also applied to *sak yant* when a person perform *yok kru* to his/her master as a way of agreeing to be the master's disciple before receiving tattoo(s). This tradition indicates that the tattoo wearer has made unconditional surrender and devotion to the master, is willing to allow the master to take care of them throughout the tattooing process, and that they will observe their master's

[375] Their daily and normal life outside ritual.

codes of conduct. The wearers leave their present conditions, enter the spiritual world of *sak yant* through the tattooing process and their participation in the *wai kru* ritual, and, by observing the codes of conduct, transform themselves into disciples who are the followers of their masters' tradition. *Yok kru* acts as a sign of commitment and this is often taken seriously. One of the tattoo wearers told me that it is an obligation to observe the codes of conduct[376] for the rest of their lives. In the case of Luang Pi Peaw's devotees, observing the five precepts is necessary. This tattoo wearer remarked to me that "If we break the codes that we promised to observe, it is equal to lying to the master[377]. Moreover, He is a monk. Lying to a virtuous person [a monk] whom we owe a debt of gratitude [for teaching and protecting us] is the 'double' severely dark *kamma*. No one would dare to do it" (my fieldnotes, January 2011).

From this process, participants leave their sense of present condition and diminish their selfness/personal identity[378] while in the ritual so that they can place their 'old everyday-self' in the spiritual world which they have entered. This is in line with Canda's suggestion that "The benefits of transformation […] may depend upon a preliminary ordeal of breaking down the old self and social pattern" (1988: 206).

The ordeal of breaking down the pattern, which participants are accustomed to, may provide room for the therapeutic process as participants are enabled to see, think and learn differently from their own familiarities. The way to make an individual recognise the efficacy of the ritual is, perhaps, through the understanding of selves through their bodily experience. This is relevant to experiential training in the context of performance arts, in which connection Yoshi Oida suggests the following:

> Through doing these movements, you start to understand something that cannot be explained in logical terms. This is a kind of understanding that you don't find in a book, or through conversation: only through the body.

[376] In the case of Luang Pi Peaw's devotees, observing the five precepts.
[377] It is believed that teachers are people we should pay highest respects and owe a debt of gratitude for teaching and protecting us. Thais often consider their teachers (generally, in every type of education) to be the most respected people after their parents.
[378] I use the term 'self' and 'identity' in this chapter to refer to the uniqueness of a person which makes him/her distinct from other human beings.

> Perhaps it is the understanding of what you are as a basic human being (Oida and Marshall, 1997: 46).

As Csordas asserts, “the locus of efficacy is not symptoms, psychiatric disorders, symbolic meaning or social relationships, but the ‘self’ in which all of these are encompassed” (Csordas, 1997: 3). Carrying forward Csordas’s idea above, the sense of efficacy, I suggest, requires the self to be flexible. To do so, participants’ everyday-selves/identity may be (re)structured in order to be ready for the transformation, or, as the name of this section suggests, breakdown may lead to breakthrough.

It is worth noting that the (re)structuring of ‘self’ in this sense does not affect the individual identity of participants in Parn Yak and *sak yant*. Although the creating of ‘the shared lived experience’, which scholar in theatre studiesMax Herrman (cited in Fischer-Lichte, 2005: 26[379]) regards as the most important feature in performance, is also revealed in the performativity of Parn Yak and *sak yant*. In order to enact the ‘shared experience’ between participants, a sense of solidary and community is often established, as indicated in the evidence from my fieldwork. For example, all participants are linked together with a web of sacred thread which is worn over their head, they sit at the same level and adopt similar gestures on the floor. In *sak yant*, the sense of community is more intensive since participants are the disciples of the same master, so they are under the same care and are all submissive to the same master, who requires unquestioning obedience from them (my fieldnotes, March 2009).

However, I would argue that, despite several features demonstrating that every participant is treated equally, participants in both rituals do not completely break down their ‘old self’ or totally lose their identity to create the experience of, in Victor Turner’s term, ‘communitas’[380], described in Chapter 1 as the social form of community that brings people into “a community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions” (Turner, 1967:100). From my fieldwork experience, each participant, particularly those who are in the trance, will be treated individually by *pra nuangprok,* either to exorcise the evil spirit or to

[379] Translation from German by Fischer-Lichte (2005)
[380] I have briefly explained Victor Turner’s ideas on ritual including the term ‘communitas’ in Chapter 1.

relieve the symptoms of possession during the Parn Yak. Although it is regarded as a ritual in which trance-possession usually occurs, participants may experience it in different ways for various reasons[381]. The *sak yant* participants are also addressed individually by their masters. This happens, for example, when Luang Pi Peaw has a conversation with each person in order to understand his/her personal requirement before giving a tattoo(s). This process of 'getting to know participants', I suggests, is a way to acknowledge and accept each participant's identity. Although the pattern of the tattoo will depend on the master's decision, participants will be 'tailor- made' tattooed according to their individual weakness and strength (as I explained in Chapter 4). In this way, participants' identity and notion of 'self' is acknowledged and remembered through the tattoo(s) on the bodies.

As seen from the examples above, these trance-possession rituals do not require participants to completely give up their own identities. In fact, to break down the sense of identity or uniqueness in the ritual may have a negative impact on the therapeutic aspects of the ritual. Carlton-Ford (1992: 368), a scholar in the field of sociology, suggests that ritual should involve the focusing on participants' selves because the rituals that attempt to entirely break down 'self-ness' and 'self-pride' may also destroy self-esteem (ibid). Despite being collective ritual events, I would claim that in Parn Yak and *sak yant,* participants do not completely destroy their identity but open themselves to the therapeutic experience by merely lessening their ego-sense or, taken from Helen Nicholson's statement, the active participation that "dislodge(s) fixed and uneven boundaries between 'self' and 'other' " (Nicholson, 2005: 24). In addition, through taking part in these rituals, participants can have opportunities to explore the relationship between their own identities and the identities of the spirits which (according to their beliefs) are residing in their bodies. This is similar to the process of applied drama practices where participants can, as Nicholson asserts:

> […] extend their horizon of experience, recognising how their own identities have been shaped and formulated and, by playing new roles and inhabiting different subject positions, finding different points of identification with others (Nicholson, 2005: 24).

[381] See Chapter 4.

The way that these identities are intimately interwoven during trance-possession ritual may establish the sense of efficacy. A tattoo wearer at Wat Bang Phra, Mr. J,[382] told me about his relationship with the spirit of his tiger tattoo during his participation in *wai kru*. He told me he felt a burning sensation at his tattoo and this feeling began to spread all over his body. He described this feeling as "a powerful force which was about to unleash". He said that he felt that "there was a tiger groaning from inside my body. I feel like his sound is coming though my mouth, but at first I tried not to groan". Mr. J then explained that normally he is a very shy, quiet person so he did not want 'any attention'. Nonetheless, he stated, "I suddenly felt more confidence, more powerful and strong. This is quite different from who I normally am, but somehow I like this feeling". He then asserted that he is still a quiet person but he feels stronger and more confident every time he returns from this temple. Mr. J described how his own identity was shaped after he became a *sak yant* practicing member that "In every *wai kru*, the tiger comes out to remind me that I have a spirit of the tiger living together with my spirit. He also described how his tattoo also reminds him of his 'tiger self' in his everyday world. Mr. J pointed at a tiger tattoo on his chest and told me, "I can feel it right here". "Whenever I feel weak, it will help me be stronger" (my fieldnotes, January, 2011).The lived experience in *wai kru*, helped Mr. J to dislodge his 'everyday self' in order to embody the 'self' of the tiger spirit.

The notion of '(re)structuring the self' also interests scholars in performance studies, particularly in relation to performance training. For example, for Eugenio Barba, Canda's term of 'the old self' may be referred to as 'the body's daily techniques' that he described as "the way we use our bodies[383] in daily life [which] is substantially different from the way we use them in performance" (Barba and Savarese, 2006: 7).

[382] Mr. J (age 38), personal communication, January, 2011.
[383]For Barba, the bodies in this sense refer to both body and mind (1995: 9).

In this way, the daily techniques are also culturally determined, which Barba suggest that humans are usually not conscious of these techniques because they become familiar with using their body in their everyday life (ibid).[384]

'Extra-daily' is the term used by Barba to refer to those practices which are not part of our normal every-day life[385, 386](Barba and Savarese, 2006: 7). Based on this concept, Barba also develops his training discipline and the phenomenon of pre-expressive condition, in which the performer can

> [...] produce physical pre-expressive tensions. These new tensions generate an extra-daily energy quality which renders the body theatrically 'decided', 'alive', 'believable' […]. (Barba, 1995: 9)

While most daily body techniques may require less energy for doing daily activities, for Barba, the extra-daily techniques "distort this normal equilibrium, calling on the performer to engage additional energy in order to move, remain still or even merely to retain balance" (Watson, 1993: 33).

It is important to stress here that participants in trance-possession rituals are definitely not performers, and Barba did not explicitly mention the extra-daily techniques in the ritual context. Nonetheless, Barba's concept of the daily/extra-daily body may illuminate the process of bodymind during trance-possession ritual. Throughout the ritual, participants' states of bodymind move away from the daily sphere, which contains their habitual use of bodymind. Put simply, their bodyminds are allowed to be in an 'extra-daily' condition, which, perhaps, is the starting point of being stimulated to be in a trance. Their actions are still culturally determined, thus connected to their everyday-self. Nevertheless, they are not restricted to the expectations of their daily-living circumstances, such as social

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[384] Although he asserts that the body technique is culturally determined, Barba's works have often been criticised for taking insufficiently cultural specificities into consideration. Thus, there is tendency of 'universal' approach towards his ideas of body techniques. For example, according to Schechner, the fundamental concept of Barba's ideas is "there are movements, stances, and rhythms employed by the most accomplished in all cultures" (2006: 298-299).
[385] The extra-daily techniques are not restricted to the "habitual conditionings" of the body as they still connect with the body of one's everyday life; therefore, they are also somehow shaped by culture.
[386] Barba (Barba and Savarese, 2006: 8) also acknowledges that the extra-daily body is essentially different from the virtuoso body which seems to 'lose all contact with the daily body' due to its techniques that focus only on the physical transformation of the body for the purpose of 'amazement' such as in acrobatic movements.

identity and norms. This ‘extra-daily’ environment, which is created through the ritual process, encourages participants to see, hear and feel the extra-daily incidents and perform extra-daily acts in the ritual. Therefore, the ways in which they use their bodymind[387] in the ritual space can also be referred to as ‘extra-daily’.

Unlike in Barba’s training, the extra-daily body process in ritual may not always be explicitly manifested in the physical level; nonetheless, bodymind of the ritual participants are engaged with the ‘extra-daily energy’ that makes their bodymind become ‘alive’ and ‘believable’ while being in trance or being present in the spiritual realm of ritual. Some participants can explicitly experience the ritual energy, albeit in various forms and manifestations. Several participants in *sak yant* practices told me that during the tattooing process and *wai kru* ritual, they actually felt a stream of energy running through their body, as in the case of Mr. J, which is described above.[388] This also occurs in the Parn Yak ritual. Participants in both ritual practices report that the feeling will occur only when they are in the ritual environment, even when the rituals have not even started. At Wat Juntaram, a female participant told me that she feel “simultaneously warm and cool” when she entered the ritual ground. When I asked her to explain, she laughed and told me “I don’t know”. She then added “It is just different from other times. When there’s no ritual, this place is a temple’s parking lot. I often parked my car here and I felt nothing then” (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007). Similarly, many participants in several Parn Yaks report that they feel ‘there is something’ in the ritual space or in the air, but they cannot explain what that something is (my fieldnotes, April 2007). This something, I suggest, may refer to the ‘extra-daily energy’ that existed within ritual. This extra-daily energy, perhaps, can create the spatial and temporal dimensions that enact the sense of being in the spiritual realm, and help establish participants’ openness and capability of believing in the ritual efficacy.

Through their trainings, actors become ‘distilled’ with the “internal patterns of energy” which finally have an impact on “the way of conceiving or composing a dramatic action […]” (Barba and Savarese, 2006:54). Drawing on this idea, it

[387] In other words, body techniques.
[388] My fieldnotes, January 2011.

might be possible to enhance the understanding of how ritual experience can shape the way in which participants perceive the everyday life outside the ritual sphere. The ritual's quality of providing extra-daily space may directly engage with the way participants construct and sustain their belief in ritual; hence it plays an important part in their articulation of the ritual efficacy.

For Barba, the extra-daily body of performers requires shifts in balance to develop the extra-daily energy quality (Meyer-Dinkgrafe, 1997: 36). Although Barba, in this context, directly refers to the performer's physical body, I suggest that ritual participants also need shifts in balance in order to generate the extra-daily energy in ritual. The term 'balance' in ritual does not refer to merely physical balance but also to the normal equilibrium of everyday conditions; therefore, this shift may not be visible. Grotowski, who influenced Barba's ideas, uses the term 'disarmament' to describe the condition in which performers are stripped of their habitual dimensions of everyday circumstances. The concept of 'disarmament' refers to "a removal of the protective clothing of habit; a readiness to explore and indeed become what is unfamiliar or scary" (Yarrow, 1997:29). Although both Barba and Grotowski directly suggest these ideas for use in actors' training, I consider them relevant to the practices of Parn Yak and in *sak yant*. Participants in trance-possession rituals also experience shifts in balance, which encourage them to disarm the armour of the familiar in order to be ready for the transformation.

Thompson (2006: 96) metaphorically describes these shifts in balance and disarmament in applied drama practices as the melting of ice that is heated and reformed. Metaphorically, the melting is the process in which the balance is shifted; according to Thompson (ibid), this happens through the 'heat-inducing' elements of applied drama workshops. As in trance-possession ritual, the participant's everyday self is melted through the intervention of the ritual. Participants' senses of identities are still present through the ritual, just as water still remains after the melting process.

However, the process of a 'shift in balance' may make participants feel dislocated from their everyday-selves as they step out into the unknown and unpredictable environment. This is particularly evident in my fieldwork. Some participants, especially those who attend for the first time, reported that they felt frightened

[Thai: กลัว/glua] or anxious [Thai: กังวล/*kangwon* or หวั่น/*wan*]. In *sak yant*, new devotees often had a worried look on their faces. When asked what made them most anxious, most replied that they were afraid of the pain from the tattooing and that they were frightened by the thought that the spirits of their tattoos would enter their bodies (my fieldnotes, March-April 2009). One informant stated that her anxiety started at the terrace when she crawled[389] towards Luang Pi Peaw, but it heightened when he was about to jab his needle into her skin. She told me "At first my thoughts concerned the oncoming pain, and then I wondered what I would do if the spirit took control of me. Could I change my mind after the tattooing started? I didn't dare ask. Everyone who was stretching my back[390] appeared serious". She further remarked that the monk was calm and relaxed. She told me she believed that nothing could go wrong with her tattoo, as she believed that a temple is the safest place she could be (my fieldnotes, April2009). This mixed feeling of fear and safety was also present in Parn Yak. A male participant[391] even told me that he did not want to attend at first, because he had no idea of what would happen during the chanting; however, he insisted that during his participation, his fear diminished (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007). The process of a 'shift in balance' and the quality of providing a 'comfortable' environment in both rituals are evidenced in the participant's account above. In this way, the spatial and temporal aspects in ritual become, perhaps, a potential source for the participants' perception and articulation of the sense of efficacy. The dynamics of lived experience and the notions of 'here and now' and 'in-betweeness' were explored in relation to the therapeutic potentiality of performance in Chapter 1. I suggest that perspectives from applied drama are particularly applicable in engaging with the complex ways in which spatial and temporal aspects in ritual are contextualised by the participants.

[389] In Thailand, it is considered rude if a person stands or walks when a person whom they respect (for instance, those who are older or monks) sit. Therefore, Thais usually crawl on their knees when they want to move near that person.
[390] The skin of her back.
[391] Mr. M (age 44), personal communication, 7th April 2007.

Bewilderment in the context of Parn Yak and *sak yant*

The condition, which is expressed by participants as 'frightening' or 'scary'[392], may be usefully examined through applied drama's notion of bewilderment. Returning to Thompson's description of this term in Chapter 1, the state of bewilderment is the sense of 'dislocation' or 'the shock of the new and the loss of the familiar' which is often created during the transition of place and time (Thompson, 2006: 23). Thompson acknowledges this concept only in an applied drama context where the state of bewilderment can be the potential source for participants' therapeutic transformation, as discussed in Chapter 1. In addition, he discusses how participants and their community can also experience the state of bewilderment during circumstances such as war, entering/leaving prison, or migrations (ibid); nonetheless, 'bewilderment' in ritual context has never been mentioned.

The findings in my fieldwork, however, argue that the understanding of 'bewilderment' can be extended to include the conditions that occur during the lived experience in ritual. Participants, to some extent, have secluded themselves from everyday life in order to spend time in the ritual; hence, there is a transition of place and time between their 'everyday world' (with which they are accustomed) and the spiritual realm of ritual. This transition creates the 'extra-daily energy'[393], which in turn creates a sense of 'dislocation'. For instance, fearing that the unexpected may happen may be articulated by participants as 'feeling scared' or, as in the case of the *sak yant* informant above, 'not knowing what to do'[394]. The intrinsic potential of bewilderment to the construction of the sense of efficacy may suggest possibilities for understanding the complexity of lived experience in Parn Yak and *sak yant*.

In the environment of Parn Yak and *sak yant*, many circumstances that do not normally occur in everyday life[395] can become possible; for example, people can be possessed by spirits in a clearly expressed way. The world with which they

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[392] As in the examples above and in the case of N described in Chapter 1. N (age 11), personal communication, 7th April 2007)
[393]This is discussed in the previous section.
[394] Fieldnotes, April, 2009
[395] I attempt not to use the term 'reality' here. Being Thai, I feel uncomfortable referring to what is real or unreal in the Thai cultural and spiritual context.

are familiar is shattered by exposure to these possibilities. This may create the sense of bewilderment: a feeling of uncertainty and being unprotected during the ritual. From my discussion of Geertz's 'web of significance' (1973: 5) in Chapter 1, human beings create a web of significance through their cultural embodiments and they live in this web. This web, perhaps, can be damaged during the transitional stage of space and time in several performance practices, such as applied drama and ritual. Thompson considered this damage in applied drama practices as 'tears' that are "exhibited in groups and individuals struggling to find meaning in their actions and their wider lives" (Thompson, 2006: 23). Nevertheless, during the intervention of drama or ritual practices, a new 'web of significance' is established through the experiences of the participants, so these 'tears' are mended and the transformation is developed (Thompson: 2006: 70). As discussed in Chapter 1, Thompson asserts that the dislocation from the familiar can positively encourage applied drama participants to develop strategies to tackle their bewilderment (2006: 23). Despite his emphasis on the state of 'bewilderment' as having the potential to spur positive action, Thompson does not explicitly explain how participants, in his words, 'search for a place of comfort' when they are in a state of bewildermentduring an applied drama session.

However, Thompson's idea of bewilderment does emphasise that in performance practices, the state of bewilderment can be an entry point into transformation. Through this concept, the dynamic nexus between the state of bewilderment and sense of efficacy may be driven by a powerful force of embodied presence of participants. The sense of spatio-temporal space in ritual experience, I suggest, is a mechanism underlying the participants' perception of efficacy in ritual. The temporal and spatial landscape of ritual can establish a state of bewilderment; nonetheless, they also offer the possibility of a spatio-temporal framework in which the sense of efficacy can be established. This also reflects evidence found in my fieldwork that some participants believe that they are protected from the power of ritual although they felt frightened during their embodied experience in ritual (my fieldnotes, April 2007 and April 2009).

This notion of bewilderment is exemplified in my conversation with Mr. O[396], a Parn Yak participant at Wat Juntaram. He recounted his trance-possession in Parn Yak:

> The chanting was loud but everything seemed too quiet. I looked around and thought this is very strange. Suddenly, I lost the control of my body. It may have been only a second or two, but I was very scared. I felt like I was lost [My translation].

Although Mr. O did not explicitly acknowledge that his feelings were a result of the ritual environment, his statement above does indicate that the sense of ritual's spatial and temporal dimensions had an impact on his experience. He also told me that prior to this Parn Yak, he usually thought that the trance-possession occurred only because of the stimulation from the sound of chanting; however, it was different in his case. He admitted that the sounds were frightening to him but he insisted that it was actually 'something'[397] in the temple hall that made him feel 'strange'. I suggest it may be possible to approach understanding the experience of trance-possession through the perspectives on the spatio-temporal aspects of performance practices, including applied drama. In Mr. O's case, it is perhaps, the dynamics of the lived experience in Parn Yak that created the sense of 'extra-daily energy', which may be described by him as 'something' or a 'force'[Thai: พลัง/*palang*]. He added that he believed that the chanting brought out all negativity from his dark past *kamma*, or in his words, 'his dark side' that he thought was struggling not to leave his body and this frightened him. He told me he thought he should not suppress his symptoms[398] but manifest them "so that the monk can see me and come to help". He reached out for the monk and tried to get the sprinkles of consecrated water to alleviate the fear and he felt 'better'. He stated, "the power of the chanting and the monks really helped to eliminate these 'bad things' and from now, a lot of good things are coming" (my fieldnotes, 15th April 2007).

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[396] Mr. O (age 29), personal communication, 15th April 2007. Mr. O was not in a trance-possession during this ritual. He recounted his experience with another Parn Yak that he had attended around three years prior.

[397] He also further explained that this 'something' was moving in the air inside the ritual hall. However, he could not explain exactly what it was.

[398] Mr. O also described that there was a slight trembling inside his body andhe felt suddenly frightened by something that he insisted he could not explain. (my fieldnotes, 15th April 2007).

His experience during the embodied process of ritual, as seen through the applied drama perspectives on bewilderment, demonstrates that he was stimulated to find a solution to his bewildered experience by seeking help from the monk (*pra nuangprok*). Mr. O told me he felt that the monks would help him no matter what circumstances occurred during ritual; therefore, he feel safe to "express that I was in fear".

Similar comments from participants that they could freely express their trance-possession were also found in my fieldwork in both Parn Yak and *sak yant*, for example, "You'll be safe", "No one will think it abnormal" and "Anything can happen inside ritual" (my fieldnotes, April 2007 and June 2012). These comments, perhaps, indicate the intrinsic quality of ritual to offer a fertile ground for transformation[399]. In this way, the ritual space acts as "a consciously devised protective tool that temporarily eliminates anxieties and fears […]"[400] (Pendzik, 1994: 29).

The dynamic of lived experience can establish the state of bewilderment; however, it also has the inherent quality of providing a sense of being 'safe' for participants to deal with their bewilderment. The understanding of the therapeutic value of the space in performance practices is also emphasised in the work of several applied drama scholars and practitioners, for example, Nicholson (2005:59) and Pendzik (1994: 33). The applied drama perspectives on 'safe space' can offer a useful mechanism for investigating the context that contributes to participants' expressions of their sense of therapeutic efficacy in ritual. I suggest that the location and the process of the rituals as well as the role of the monks, which will be discussed in the following sections, can provide a 'safe space' that can make participants feel secure and enable them to move towards therapeutic transformation.

Monks as protectors in ritual

Canda (1988: 207) notes that during practices that are performed for transformation purposes, such as ritual and applied drama, the practitioner's task

[399] As discussed in Chapter 1.
[400] Pendzik's notion of therapeutic space in applied drama context is discussed in Chapter 1.

is to “assist the successful and beneficial resolution of [the] transformation process so that it is truly therapeutic” (Canda, 1988: 207); I suggest, this would include providing a sense of safety to participants during their lived experience .

As ritual facilitators, Thai Buddhist monks act as protectors for participants and assist them in going through their perplexed moments during the rituals. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Buddhist view of monks as ‘mana-filled objects’ (Kirsch, 1977: 248) and ‘sacred actors’ in ritual space (Jerryson, 2001: 55) can influence participants’ perceptions of ritual authenticity. This view can also be seen as a contributory factor to the sense of protection. In a Thai Buddhist context, being in the presence of a religious authority figure makes people feel safe, as it is believed that people who are near monks will also not be at risk from the evil doings of spirits. This is believed so extensively in Thailand that it is frequently presented in pop culture media such as films or soap operas[401].

Furthermore, the monks in both Parn Yak and *sak yant* are believed to offer protection through their spiritual power, which is seen as ‘qualifying’ them as protectors through their ability to eliminate negativity and bring luck. Each *pra nuangprok,* as the chief of Parn Yak, is usually renowned for his spiritual power. If a *pra nuangprok* is not well-known, several procedures are carried out to ensure participants that they will be protected by the ‘professional’. The procedure may be simply ‘publicity’, e.g. putting up advertisements about the monk’s profile or having an announcement made by the master of ceremonies before the Parn Yak chanting. During my field experience at Wat Noinai Temple[402], the master of ceremonies spent considerable time describing how *pra nuangprok* (whom most participants, including myself, seemed not to recognise) possessed spiritual power. He claimed that this monk was the direct disciple of a monk who is revered and well known for his power, and, thereby, had similar spiritual power (my fieldnotes, 2nd December 2006). Other more spectacular methods include demonstrations of the *pra nuangprok*’s spiritual powers of protection with the use of the sword. In the *sak yant* tradition, the participants’ masters conduct both the

[401] Nonetheless, it is also often portrayed for humour, e.g. when a media character sees a ghost, runs hastily to the monk to hide behind him or embrace him, but it turns out that, being human, the monk is also scared, for instance, in the 1999 romantic-horror film, *Nang Nak,* and the comedy film, *Gouy Ter Yom,* in 2006.
[402] I have described my ethnographical experience at this temple in Chapter 1.

wai kru ritual and the tattooing process; therefore, a strong sense of trust has already been established. This is particularly true in the case of *wai kru* at Wat Bang Phra where all the masters are present in the ritual space. Participants can feel safe and protected by their own masters, to whom they are devoted. By believing that they are treated by skilled monks, participants can gain a sense of relief and protection in the chaotic environment of the ritual, since they are in 'safe hands'.

The shared cultural background of the monks and participants may also contribute to the safe environment and ritual efficacy, a situation somewhat different from other therapeutic settings such as applied drama. Nicholson (2005: 28) recognises the contribution of the drama practitioner's value and that cultural embodiment to efficacy can impact significantly on their working process, particularly when working in cultural contexts with which they are unfamiliar. In the case of trance-possession rituals, there is less of an interpretive and cultural gap between the participants and the monks. The role of the monks is similar to that of 'folk healers', who, as Sue Jennings (1995: 20), a drama practitioner, explains, because of their common cultural background with the patient, understand the cultural context of the illness. Similarly, medical anthropology scholars Kleinman and Sung write of how cultural healing practices can be seen as successful to people in their culture, stating, "To the extent indigenous[403] practitioners provide culturally legitimated treatment of illness, they must heal" (1979: 24). This is a form of culturally articulated embodied practices, which originates from the same cultural sphere as the participants; thus the monks' therapeutic practices in ritual are usually validated as acceptable. In this way, participants in both trance-possession rituals are able to trust the monks and feel safe during the ritual process due to their belief that the monks' ritual practice must be effective. This belief was evident during my fieldwork, for example, in the account of Mr. O's discussed above. He put his trust in the monk believing that the spiritual power and the actions of the monks could help to eliminate the 'bad things' inside his body that made him feel frightened.

[403] I accept the term 'indigenous' in this sentence only as 'the cultural insiders'.

In addition, the monks' manifestations during the ritual can also contribute to participants' sense of trust and security. As mentioned when describing my experience in Parn Yak with Pra Kru Sanghavichai in Chapter 4, the monks who perform rituals must transform their characteristics and actions as soon as they enter the ritual space. The transformation contrasts with the laid-back atmosphere in the moment prior to the ritual, when they are gathered in the abbot's office. In the ritual environment, they become, in my opinion, 'an ideal version of Thai monks'.

According to the Theravada Buddhist chanting, *Sangha Vandana* [Pali; Thai: สังฆคุณ/*Sanghakhun*][404], there are descriptions of the virtues of the Sangha (monks). For example, *Sâmici-patipanno* refers to monks who act properly (according to the *vinaya* or monks' codes of conduct) and respectably, and are therefore, *añjalikaraniyo* or worthy of homage and reverence (Muthita, 2005). Thai Buddhists consider these qualities ideal behaviours of monks. During my Parn Yak ritual experiences, I witnessed the monks attempting to 'act properly and respectably' throughout the ritual process to be seen as the 'mana-filled objects'. The monks were solemn and mindful during the ritual moment in order to encourage the belief that they were in control in the spiritual realm. In Parn Yak, the monks sat straight and chanted confidently in loud voices. They did not speak with one another, and their faces remained calm throughout the ritual moment, so their focus was confined to their chanting and the participants. As described in previous chapters[405] regarding my role in relationship to the performance of rituals during fieldwork, Pra Kru Sanghavichai sat up even straighter and chanted louder, with more confidence when he saw me looking at the chanting monks. These extraneous behaviours contribute to the safe atmosphere. The chief monk, *pra nuangprok* walked around quietly to treat the trance-possessed participants individually. Although the monks have no explicit extraneous gestures to follow, the actions of the *pra nuangproks*, such as moving their hands to sprinkle consecrated water on trance-possessed participants, appear very determined, confident and precisely executed. The *pra nuangproks* sometimes touch the heads of trance-possessed participants with the leaves of Cogon grass before using these leaves to sprinkle the consecrated water. They perform this action

[404] Which is the widely known chant for paying homage to Buddha's disciples[404] in the Pali canon.
[405] Chapters 1 and 4.

while reciting an incantation to each participant to relieve his or her symptoms of possession. This, perhaps, relates to the concept of 'healing touch' (Desjarlais, 1996:158-160). Through the touch of the monks who have great spiritual power, they can believe that the ritual is efficacious.

Similar to the monks conducting the *sak yant* practices, the monks who are tattoo masters are also very confident and calm. However, the atmosphere during the tattoo sessions seems to be more informal due to the size and privacy of the rituals. From my experience, the tattoo master Luang Pi Peaw is usually quiet and focused only during the initiation and the end of the tattoo process. Several participants told me that during these important moments, the monk tried to conjure his own spiritual power to start the tattoo and to seal the tattoo. I explicitly observed this intent when he cited his own incantations before tattooing, when he touched the finished tattoo with his hand and when he blew on it sharply to complete the process. Nevertheless, he often talks to visitors (including myself) or to the tattoo receiver while he is making the tattoo. Rather than think that the monk is not focused on his practice, many participants believe that Luang Pi Peaw has such strong spiritual power that he is capable of multitasking[406] (my fieldnotes, April 2009).

Monks also explicitly differentiate themselves from participants who are not in monkhood whenever they enact the characteristics of the ideal monk (e.g., being solemn and focused). The personality of practitioners as an expert in their practices is also considered in applied drama practices as an essential factor to the efficacy. Prendergast and Saxton assert that a skilled facilitator "[…] knows how to do something, knows why it is appropriate, when it needs to be done and how to do it in the most effective ways" (2009: 18). The confident behavior of the monks who are regarded as having the spatial authority contrasts with the bewilderment of the participants, whose 'balance' shifts during the ritual. In this way, the sense of protection within the ritual space can be constructed.

[406] For example, he can remain internally concentrated on tattooing while talking (my fieldnotes, April 2009).

The location of safe space

The location of the ritual can also help to create a secure environment that may reinforce the perceptions of therapeutic efficacy. Being a religious practice, Parn Yak is conducted at the Thai Buddhist temple. Temples as ritual spaces can emit a sense of protection to participants. As stated in Chapter 1, they are regarded in Thai Buddhism as a 'sacred space',[407] particularly the main temple hall which is regarded as the most protected area. In Thai tradition, the boundary around the main hall of each temple is marked by *Seema* stones [Thai: พัทธสีมา/pattaseema] (Dhammakittiwong, 2012). The stones were originally placed for marking the space for the ritual practices, which only monks can attend. They also signify the protected space for the people who come to the temple, as it is believed that no evil spirit can harm them as long as they are in the area.[408] In this sense, Buddhist temples, perhaps, are seen as a 'sanctuary'[409] in Thailand.

Figure 36: Seema Boundary marking stone at Wat Partun, Chiang Mai.[410]

[407] Due to the fact that temples are also the places that religious rituals are constantly practiced, they are regularly consecrated. In addition, the temples house monks and many consecrated Buddha statues, which are regarded as have ability to provide protection.
[408] Although in many Thai horror movies, the spirits usually appear in the temple area, they cannot actually attack.
[409] I do not refer to the tradition of the church sanctuary such as during medieval time. In Thailand, people are not immune to arrest by government authorities while in the temple. However, there were several cases that criminals attempted to hide their identity by pretending to be monks (in most cases, as the abbots often did not know of the crimes prior to the criminals' monkhood, they were actually ordained to be monks).
[410] http://www.bloggang.com/viewdiary.php?id=moonfleet&group=113&month=10-2009&date=15.

Mr. M, an informant who attended Parn Yak for the first time,[411] describes how he eliminated his fear during the beginning of the ritual:

> At first, I did not want to attend because I was scared. I had never participated in Parn Yak before. I feared that there would be Yak spirits in the ritual and they would possess people, but when I attended, I felt good and safe because the monks are there. I also have a Buddha amulet from the rituals. It is very beautiful and it is consecrated. I like it very much [My translation].[412]

Mr. M explained that the temple organised Parn Yak for the first time. As a local person, he usually participated in every ritual in this temple so he attended this Parn Yak. He also added that he felt protected, because this was his local temple, which he has been attending since his childhood, and he believed it to be a very spiritually-safe place. Considering the low price for a Parn Yak ritual package, he believes that the committees of the temple did not arrange ritual activities for commercial purposes, but only for helping local people, for example, helping them to eliminate bad luck by organizing Parn Yak (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007). In Mr. M's case, attending the rituals in the local temple established a sense of security by two means. He felt safe because the temple was regarded as protected by the virtuous power of the Buddha and because cultural-specifically, he felt that this was his local temple where he had a sense of belonging and familiarity with the environment.

Other features found in the ritual space of Parn Yak and *sak yant* may contribute to participants' sense of protection. For example, several Buddha statues, which are usually located at the front of the ritual space,[413] can create the feeling of being safe. In Parn Yak, the protection is demonstrated by attaching the participants' sacred threads to the hands of chanting monks and then to the main statue. The sacred thread can transfer power both passively, for instance, in the case of Parn Yak (participants receive power from the chanting and from consecrated objects) and actively in consecration rituals (giving power to objects such as amulets and statues). King Chulalongkorn (1999:115) states that the thread works similarly to telephone wire.[414] The method that every sacred thread

[411] At Wat Jantaram temple, Rachaburi Province, west of Bangkok.
[412] Mr. M (age 44), personal communication, March 2007.
[413] In both ritual practices.
[414] See Chapter 4.

is linked to form a web on the ceiling,[415] perhaps, can help participants to visualize that they will be safe since they all have a web of sacred thread above them as a protective shield from negativities. Chayan Nuntawong (2012) describes his experience in the Parn Yak ritual at Nakhon Sawan Province. He states that as he rode his motorcycle into the ritual, he was asked to park it near the ritual hall so that the sacred thread could also link to his motorcycle during the chanting. Thus, his vehicle was also protected from accidents and attacks from evil spirits. While used as a medium during the chanting, the thread can also become consecrated, thus having protective power in its own right. A female participant told me that I should take the sacred thread and wear it as an amulet so that I could be doubly protected (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007).

The red *yant*s intensify the protective power. This is similar to the Thai tradition in which Thai people put the Buddhist *yant* above the door of each house to protect the dwellers from incoming evil spirits. Similarly, the spot where each participant is sitting can be regarded as their personal ritual space. Having King Vessavaṇa's picture attached to each participant's sacred thread above their head can also provide individual protection since he is a chief of all Yaks and the guardian of the Thai Buddhist underworld.

Figure 37: (left) the yants of King Vessavaṇa are attached to the sacred thread above each participant. Apart from King Vessavaṇa's yant, the additional white yants are attached on each participant's head in this ritual at Nakhon Sawan province. (right) The yant is said to be the yant of diamond shield, hence fortifying the protection although the use of other yant in Parn Yak is rare. [Credit: Chayan Nuntawong][416]

[415] See Figure 16 in Chapter 4.
[416] http://dew55.blogspot.co.uk/2009/03/057.html.

The ritual spatial dimensions and the roles of monks, I suggest, are significant contributory factors to the notion of safe space perceived by participants during their embodied experience in Parn Yak and *sak yant*. These trance-possession rituals create participants' state of bewilderment; however, by their nature, they also have the capacity to reassure participants that they are protected and are always at the centre of the process.

Safe space and transformation

The rituals of Parn Yak and *sak yant* create participants' state of bewilderment; however, by their nature, they also have the capacity to reassure participants that they are protected and are always at the centre of the process, as exemplified in the participants' accounts of their experience described above. In this way, rituals' intrinsic quality of establishing safe space, through the spatial dimensions and the roles of monks, can offer the potential for therapeutic transformation, which may be articulated as 'feel better'. When seen through a perspective of applied drama scholarship, it might be possible to engage with the complex ways in which the sense of efficacy can be perceived by participants during their embodied experience.

The location and facilitator may help create a safe space, but the state of bewilderment may also contribute significantly to the sense of safe space. As discussed in Chapter 1, the dynamic of lived experience creates an openness to contingencies, which in turn creates a sense of freedom. Put simply, the unique quality of ritual can allow the space to 'open' for participants to explore, release and interact independently with the embodied therapeutic process. Nicholson (2005: 125) recognises the significance of space in performance practices, and asserts that due to its temporary isolation from daily life, this 'open' space is ideally created in order to

> [L]iberate the soul and the imagination by insulating actors and audiences from the restrictions of history, the regulations of place and the materiality of everyday life (Nicholson, 2005: 125).

In this way, actors and audience (as well as participants in other practices) are in a safe space that "insulates" them from their everyday self. In this way, participants can feel secure enough to move beyond the restriction of daily life,

take risks and experience vulnerability (Nicholson, 2005: 129). I would suggest that while participants are performing Thai trance-possession rituals, they are placed in the realm in which the spiritual power of the Buddha (through the monks) has the highest authority. Evidence from my own fieldwork demonstrates that participants in these rituals feel safe when they are within ritual space because the temple is 'the safest place' (my fieldnotes, April 2009). This notion of being safe within the realm of ritual is, perhaps explicitly exemplified in the account of Mr. M, described above, that the presence of the monks can successfully diminish his sense of fright. When finding shelter during the rain in Parn Yak at Wat Juntaram, his wife[417] kindly advised me not to stay too far from the monk, saying "otherwise, the monks' power cannot reach to you" and adding that "as long as you can hear the chanting and see the ritual, it's fine" (my fieldnotes, 7th April 2007).

In this way, the sense of freedom created by this 'open' space becomes intimately interwoven with a sense of certainty and control. Within their secular sphere, participants are familiar with this sense of freedom, but have no control over it. However, being in ritual allows participants a sense of control as they are protected by the spiritual power of the monks. Despite the fact that the monks are in charge and have authority, participants can still feel free to liberate themselves during the ritual moment, for example, by being in trance and manifesting trance behaviors, and by being open to the embodied experience of the transformation process without fearing that they will break the rules, lose face, or be harmed by evil spirits. From my fieldwork, this view is clearly held by many participants, with some stating that "no one will think it abnormal" and "anything can happen inside ritual" (my fieldnotes, 1st and 7th April 2007).

In this way, the quality of ritual to provide protection can directly contribute to the participants' dynamic process of therapeutic transformation. Due to this quality of openness, the embodied process that happens within the safe space liberates participants and allows them to experience transformation. Nonetheless, this transformational space also has an inherent potential for fluidity. Edwards and Usher claim that the sense of dislocation can influence the learning process, and

[417] Mrs. M (age 44), personal communication, 7th April 2007. The account of Mrs. M on her experience at Wat Juntaram also described in Chapter 1. She is Mr. M's wife.

that "[…] what is central [in the state of dislocation] is not the fixed position (a state of being) but the active and open state of becoming" (2008: 141, original brackets). Similarly, Hunter suggests that the 'safe space' can be used as "a euphemism for the processual act of ever-becoming […]" (2008:16). Therefore, the notion of safe space should not be only considered as an 'insulation' from risk and danger, but also can be a process of transformation itself (ibid).

Expanding on the ideas above, I would argue that if the safe space is regarded only as a familiar and comfortable zone, it may become an obstacle. It is vital for the embodied experience for the participant to understand this safe space as an active state of becoming. In his chapter in *The Applied Theatre Reader*, Tim Prentki (2009: 251) asserts that this notion of safe space can also be a hindrance for participants' adventurous attempts to transform themselves, i.e., to discover their capabilities and adopt new identities during applied drama practices. In daily life outside the ritual realm, social identities and expectations can easily limit this attempt at transformation, making the safe space secure and fixed instead of safe and open. According to Prentki (2009:51-52), the participants need to cross the border of their 'protective shell' by negotiating their way beyond their 'safe territory' which is established by their external world. However, to be successful in therapeutic transformation, the safe space in ritual must be a supportive, active and encouraging environment in which participants are able go beyond the secured and fixed territory of familiarity. This is particularly clear in the ritual space of *sak yant,* where participants report a sense of calm assuredness, feeling safe in the knowledge that the spirits of their tattoos were taking control of their bodies as participants. After I witnessed the trance-possession of Mr. Jong[418] during his *sak yant*, I asked if he felt frightened during his trance, to which he responded "a master is near us, what we have to afraid of?" (my fieldnotes, June 2012).

Furthermore, as applied drama offers the fictional and imaginative world to its participants in an open space, trance-possession rituals provide participants an alternative world of spirituality[419] during the ritual process. As discussed in Chapter 1, in applied drama practice, the boundary between reality and fiction

[418] Mr. Jong (age 40), personal communication, June 2012.
[419] Again, it is not my duty to determine whether the spiritual world of these rituals is fictional or unreal; therefore I avoid using the term 'fiction' when referring to rituals.

may become deliberately blurred in order to create a safe space for the participants' transformation (Nicholson, 2005: 66). The issue of the blurred edge between reality and fiction within the safe and open space is similar to those found in my fieldwork investigation. Desjarlais (1996: 156) states that nature of the 'ambiguity' found in a ritual setting often attracts people to ritual performance. In Parn Yak and *sak yant*, this ambiguity may refer to what is real or fictional. Through the experience of these rituals, participants can 'suspend their disbeliefs' (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1847),[420] and independently immerse themselves in the spiritual sphere of rituals. This may offer the possibility of a spatio-temporal framework in which a sense of protection and freedom can be established. The state of this suspension, perhaps, present in the ritual of offerings[421] at the beginning of both Parn Yak and *sak yant*, signifies that participants voluntarily enroll themselves in the rituals.

In both rituals, participants who have spiritual tattoos are also allowed to exhibit the power of their tattoos[422] through the acts of possession.[423] Their aggressive behaviours during trance-possession can be regarded as an acceptable act within the spiritual world of ritual. By contrast, outside the ritual realm, such behaviour would be seen as showing no respect to the monks or religious sites. During Parn Yak, possessed participants are able to express their experiences of transformation, for instance, relieving the symptoms of possession after they are treated by *pra nuangprok*. This, in turn, may also be an affirmation of the sense of efficacy that they are actually healed by the ritual. As the participants' disbelief is suspended during the extra-daily experience, the acts of possession manifested can be regarded as real within the ritual space.

The performative nature of therapeutic practices can allow participants to project feelings during these practices (Seymour, 2009: 32). Schieffelin (1985: 721) states that the ritual theatrically established the ambiguity that forces participants to make sense of the ritual performance, and they construct a new reality within

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[420] Coleridge, S.T. (1847) Biographia Literaria: The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life & Opinions, Vol.2, New York: Wiley and Putnum, p.442
[421] *Bucha kru* ritual at the beginning of a Parn Yak event or the offerings of *kan kru* to the master before receiving tattoos.
[422] As they believe.
[423] Some manifestations of the possession by spirits of tattoos are described in the previous chapter.

the ritual context. As discussed in Chapter 1, the embodied presence of others is significant in the conceptualizing of ritual experiences. Participants who are not in a trance can feel that they are in a particular sphere of ritual as they begin to "arrive at a meaningful account of what is happening" (Schieffelin, 1985: 721) through witnessing others' trance-possession. In this sense, they are also open to perceiving the possibilities in the ritual and achieving a sense of efficacy. Anna Seymour, a drama therapist, states that the exploring between realities in daily life and the realities that are created by performance practices can give participants "freedom to move between sense of self, to experience comfort and to take risks through moving from everyday reality into believable fictional reality" (Seymour, 2009: 32).

Nonetheless, I argue that the blurring between the notion of reality in everyday life and the reality in ritual realm is a fluid process. Although they have adopted a spiritual realm of ritual as a part of their reality, the space still provides distance for participants to feel safe. Through the negotiation between these two realities, participants are encouraged to express and share their experience independently and securely within the spiritual sphere. Those who attend ritual can see themselves within the space of therapeutic practices as 'a projected part of me' but still regard it as 'not me' (Seymour, 2009: 32).Put simply, participants feel that what happens in the rituals is both real and not real. In this way, they feel safe within the ritual realm, because, although they believe in the element of rituals as their alternative reality, they still have some metaphorical distance as their actions in ritual will not affect the space in their daily life.[424] This ludic quality of ritual space can be the potential force to the efficacy (Kershaw, 1992: 24).

An example is inherent in the style of Parn Yak chanting. The musical aspects, i.e. the use of tune and rhythm, in Parn Yak chanting may be regarded as inappropriate in a Theravada Buddhist cultural context. Paul D. Greene (2004), a scholar in music studies, expresses this concern in his studies of the sonic aspects of the *paritta* chanting, since he feels reluctant to refer to the sound of chanting as 'musical' (2004: 45). Engaging in any performance is seen as a taboo for monks; thus, most Theravada monks in various countries, such as Thailand,

[424] Or in other word, their 'real life'.

definitely deny that their paritta chanting carries any sense of, music or singing (ibid). Due to his concern, Greene (2004: 45) claims that he does not deal directly with musical aspects of the chanting but explores the chanting as a cultural practice of 'organising sounds'. I also encounter a similar problem of regarding the Buddhist rituals as performance.[425]

As discussed above, the ways in which participants conceive the ritual space can affect the way that they believe in the possibilities that happen in the ritual. Thus, for participants, it is approved for monks within the spatial spiritual world of Parn Yak to chant in tune and rhythm which ties into a style of presentation that differs from what they normally do in other spaces. In this way, participants believe that they will experience the efficacy of ritual because their embodied experience occurs within the safe and open space of rituals. In addition, the reconstruction of how space is conceived can also contribute to the sense of transformation (Nicholson, 2005: 129). Parn Yak often encounters ethical issues indicating that the ritual organisers may hire people to go into a trance in order to make the ritual more believable. Despite this, experiencing other participants in trance-possession, may be a contributory factor to the establishment of the efficacy due to participants' belief in the space of the ritual.

The Thai Buddhist style of kamma purification

As discussed in previous chapters, *Kamma* is usually considered to be the main contribution to a person's present condition and this concept is firmly situated in the Thai Buddhist belief that it affects Thai cultural perspectives.[426]

The term is often used to refer colloquially to the destiny or fate of an individual (Sucitto, 2010:1); this is especially the case in Thailand, where the term *vibak-kam* and *kam* are often used when referring to difficulties. In this sense, the notion

[425] This issue is discussed in Chapter 1 in the section on the problematic nature of research.
[426] According to Thai belief, *Kamma* is inescapable and impossible to remove (McDermott, 1980: 175); it is always impersonal and just in that it cannot have bias, play favourites, nor can it be merciful (Carlisle, 2008:203). One cannot ask for forgiveness of their *kamma*. In addition, in Theravada Buddhist belief, a person's *kamma* cannot be transferred to other people. It is worth noting that the belief in the transference of one's karma [Sanskrit] exists in the practices of Tibetan Buddhism. To my knowledge, this belief cannot be found in Theravada, particularly in Thailand. There is also a belief of merit transference in Thailand; however, this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

of bad luck from a Thai Buddhist' perspective is usually connected with the concept of *kamma*. This is because in Theravada Buddhist belief, every circumstance that happens always has a cause. There is actually no concept of uncontrollable force, or 'luck', in Buddhism. Every incident, either good or bad, is the result of 'dark' or 'bright' *kamma* in the past.[427] The creation of one's own destiny begins with one's past lives.[428]Therefore, the terms good and bad luck in the Thai belief are used to describe the good or bad circumstances that happen to an individual; he/she cannot identify the cause of it, hence it may result from past lives' kamma or this life's kamma, which the person cannot remember. As a result, Thai Buddhists often feel that they are bound with the effect of their past *kamma*, whether or not they can recall their actions. According to a Buddhist scripture in Dhammapada[429] [Thai: พุทธวัจนะ/Buddhavagana; Sanskrit: Dharmapada],

> When doing evil deeds, the fool is oblivious. The dullard ['] is tormented by his own deeds ['], as if burned by a fire ('Dandavagga: The Rod', translated version of Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2012).

Hence, Thais deal with the fear of the result of their *kamma* by various means, including cultural approaches, such as rituals. As suggested in previous chapters, these approaches are understood in Thai context as the 'purification' (of 'dark' *kamma*) and 'empowerment' (of 'bright' *kamma*[430]).[431] These notions were also evident during my fieldwork investigation of Parn Yak and *sak yant* (to be discussed later).

Due to the belief that the result of *kamma* continues to follow them, like 'the wheel of the cart, the track of the ox that pulls it' ('Yamakavagga: Pairs', 2012), Buddhists can be tormented by what they believe to be their 'own deed'. If the bad/dark *kamma* from the past can be recalled, the feeling of guilt cannot be

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[427] Both in present life and past lives.
[428] And the past of one's current life
[429] A collection of the verse of the Buddha.
[430] According to the concept of good or evil deeds in the Buddhist belief.
[431] Some people may link the experience in the two trance possession rituals to the term 'catharsis', as 'catharsis' is generally used to refer to 'bringing relief to emotional tension and anxiety through the release of emotions'. Although this definition shares some of the features of the Parn Yak and *sak yant* rituals, I argue that 'catharsis' is not the most appropriate word. According to Thai Buddhist belief, *kamma* cannot be cleansed. This contrasts with the term 'catharsis', which etymologically means 'cleanse' or 'purge'. In addition, the term 'catharsis' originates from and is often used in other religions and in Western environments; therefore it is not suitable for Thai Buddhist contexts.

easily removed. Furthermore, *kamma* is also used as the ultimate explanation for inexplicable circumstances. When the cause of a misfortune cannot be identified, many Thais would say 'this is caused by the old *kamma* [Thai: บุพกรรม; กรรมเก่า/ *buppakam*; *kam kao*]'. This also influences the Thai perspective on health and illness[432]. The notion of past life *kamma* also affects Thai people's views on the future. Due to the fact that they have no memory of their past life's *kamma* the fear associated with uncertainty and lack of control is established: what will happen both in their current life and later lives. An anthropologist in Thai Buddhism, Steven Carlisle, explains how this kind of uncertainty is caused by the notion of *kamma*:

> Because of the existential firewall that exists between incarnations, allowing karma[*kamma*] to carry over from one lifetime to the next while blocking out memories of the past, there is no way of harnessing knowledge about an individual's karma for practical effect. No one can say with any certainty what will happen, and, except in cases where one's karma returns during the same lifetime, why something will happen (Carlisle, 2008: 196-197).

To some extent, I agree with Malinowski's idea (2004: 70) on the function of rituals: human beings relieve the anxiety towards the feeling of uncertainty in their life circumstances through ritual. This reason helps to explain the fact that Thai Buddhists attend rituals, such as Parn Yak and *sak yant*, in order to gain a sense of control; in other words, they feel that they can purify their past *kamma*. *Kamma* is created by embodied processes; hence, it must also be solved by embodied actions. This refers back to what I suggested earlier: the efficacy of the ritual needs to be developed through the embodied experience. For example, in their research on Thai perspectives on mental health, Burnard, et al. (2006: 745) state that some Thais also believe that their bad *kamma* can be reduced though the act of having consecrated water sprinkled on their bodies. One informant, Miss K,[433] also spoke of her belief that these symptoms are evidence that consecrated water has the power to eliminate the negativity caused by spirits to whom she had committed 'dark' *kamma* towards in her previous lives. Although she never experienced trance-possession, she insists that she has a feeling of goose bumps and a chill down her spine every time she is sprinkled with consecrated

[432] As discussed in Chapter 3.
[433] Miss K (age 30), personal communication, August 2012.

water (my fieldnotes, August 2012). The water, which is a cleansing substance, seems to have the symbolic function of purifying *kamma,* although the word 'cleansing' (which will be explained later) is not used to described this experience.

The lived embodied experience in ritual may contribute to the sense of therapeutic efficacy (which some participants expressed as 'feeling better') since it is an affirmation of their attempts to alleviate the result of their past *kamma*. An explicit example is the *Bangsakul Pen* ritual where participants imitate their death and are revived by the chanting. This ritual is widely regarded in Thailand as the ritual specifically conducted to eliminate the traces of past *kamma* [Thai: แก้กรรม/*kae kam*; English: solving the *kamma*]. In Parn Yak at Wat Noinai where *Bangsakul Pen* was performed prior to Parn Yak, the master of ceremonies advised participants to resume their sitting position. He stated that the 'old kamma' had been solved, adding, 'Hence, we have more time to commit bright *kamma*s' (my fieldnotes, 2nd December, 2006).

The word 'cleanse' [Thai: ชำระ, ล้าง/ *shamla, larng*] is not commonly used in the context of kamma transformation, because it is believed that *kamma* cannot be completely removed. The majority of Thais rather refer to the approach of dealing with kamma as 'solving' [Thai: แก้/*kae*] or sometimes, 'cutting' [Thai: ตัด/*tat*]. Since their *kamma* is solved, dark *kamma* is rendered less harmful rather than simply being cleansed.[434] The Thai word *tat* indicates that the effect of dark *kamma* has been cut, and, consequently, it will not be prolonged. However, even the use of the words 'solve' and 'cut' is still greatly debated, because, according to some, the result of *kamma* is unchangeable. To avoid controversy, these words are rarely used by monks when performing rituals. Notwithstanding, in my ethnographic experience at Wat Noinai, the master of ceremonies continued to use the word 'solve' *kamma* to explain to participants during the *Bangsakul Pen* ritual prior to Parn Yak (my fieldnotes, 2nd December, 2006). Despite the fact that the *kamma* cannot be actually waived after *Bangsakul Pen*, it is still widely believed that being treated by the monks and being in the protected space of the

[434] This is consistent with the Thai saying that a consequence of *kamma* is fruit: we cannot change the kind of fruit but can transform its quality.

temple may alleviate the negativity of dark *kamma* of the past and refresh and support participants in moving towards bright *kamma* in the future.

Thais also believe that the dark *kamma* can be diluted as long as they maintain their bright *kamma,* as in the story of the monk, Angulimala, who was a murderer prior to his monkhood, but became a devout Buddhist.[435] This belief, perhaps, enables Thai Buddhists to release the sense of guilt for their past actions, as through their participation in rituals such as Parn Yak or *sak yant*, which are regarded as good deeds. During my field study, this was best exemplified in the account of Miss K who metaphorically explained her belief that dark *kamma* is like salt, while the bright *kamma* is like fresh water: if we continue pouring water into salted water, the salt itself remains, but the salty taste will gradually disappear (my fieldnotes, August 2012). Having religious authorities such as monks affirm their good *kamma* can also help people feel alleviated of their past dark *kamma*. In *sak yant*, tattoo wearers have to observe their masters' codes of conduct, which usually relates to moral beliefs, for instance, in the case of Wat Bang Phra, the five Buddhist precepts; therefore, they are obliged to perform bright *kamma*.

In addition, the annual *wai kru* ritual is not only the occasion to pay homage to the masters, but also seen as a means to purify the dark *kamma* for violating the codes in the past year. Mr. Jong,[436] a firm devotee of Wat Bang Phra, told me that coming to the *wai kru* ritual once a year is like 'recharging the power of his tattoos'. He believes that if he breaks any of his master's codes of conduct, the spiritual power of his tattoos will be affected and, therefore, he needs to be purified by attending the annual *wai kru* ritual (my fieldnotes, June 2012).

Although I rarely observed moments of trance-possession in *sak yant* practices, some participants explained their experience of release from guilt as a result of their karma in the *wai kru* ritual. This notion of release was exemplified during my conversation with a devout follower of a *sak yant* master, Mr. Jamrong, who has

[435] Angulimala cannot escape his kamma for murdering; nevertheless, the *kamma-vipaka* is seen as very minimal compare to his past actions. It is believe that during the monkhood, Angulmala faced difficulties, i.e. nobody offered him food, and he appeared to have been attacked by stone throwers. Nonetheless, his story is widely known in Thai Buddhism as an example that dark *kamma* can be diluted.
[436] Mr. Jong (age 40), personal communication, June 2012.

a spiritual tattoo of *rishi.*[437] He believes that the spirit of a rishi resides within his tattoo; therefore, as well as following his master's codes, he must observe the additional rules specific for his tattoo pattern. These rules include refraining from consuming beef and alcohol, and on every *Uposatha* [Sanskrit: *Upavasatha*; Thai: วันธรรมสวนะ/ *thammasavana*] day,[438] he must prepare an offering[439] to the rishi who resides in his tattoo. He normally strictly obeys the codes of conduct; however, sometimes he mistakenly eats beef or does not have enough money to buy the offerings (my fieldnotes, July 2012). He states that he sees these bad incidents as the punishment and the results of his evil *kamma*:

> I sometimes don't know whether a dish I eat contains beef, so I eat it by mistake. After that, I suffer from diarrhea that will happen until I pass all the beef out of my body. I know that I have broken the rules and have paid no respect to the rishi, so I have to pay for it [My translation].[440]

> The one time that I could not give the offering to the rishi on a Buddhist day, I felt very guilty, but I really could not afford to buy the materials for offerings. That night, my neighbour knocked on my door to tell me that he had seen a rishi standing outside my room. I was very scared, and feared that the spirit of the rishi would leave my tattoo. If this happened, I would no longer have spiritual protection, which could result in my dark kamma from the past attacking me. That feeling was with me until the next wai kru ritual that I attended the following year [My translation].

It is compulsory for every follower of the master of Mr Jamrong's tattoo to annually participate in the *wai kru* ritual in order to solve the *kamma* of breaking the codes of conduct and to 'recharge' the power of their tattoos. He asserts that in *wai kru* he was always in trance-possession, which he saw as the way to solve the result of his evil deeds (disobeying the master) and which he interpreted as evidence that he still had the spiritual power of his tattoo.

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[437] Thai: ฤาษี/*ruesi*; English: hermit sage. I met Mr. Jamrong during my last visit in Wat Bang Phra. Nonetheless, He received this tattoo from a master at Wat Laokwan, Kanchanaburi province, 129 kilometres west of Bangkok.

[438] The Buddhist observance days. The day is generally known in Thailand as 'Buddhist Day' or *wan pra*. There are around four *uposatha* days per month according to Thai Buddhist lunar calendar. It is believed that *uposatha* days are sacred days; therefore, the benign spiritual powers are at their highest level on these days. In addition, it is a tradition that Thai Buddhists often observe three precepts in addition to the five precepts, and go to the temple to offer a meal or requisites to the monks on the *uposatha* days.

[439] A set of Areca nuts and betel leaves and 18 incense sticks.

[440] Mr. Jamrong (age 19), personal communication, July 2012.

> While in a trance, I still sat on the floor but my breath became faster, my neck stiffened and my eye lids were dropping, so my vision was like that of an old person. After that, I lost consciousness and woke again when the ritual had ended. I knew from this trance moment that my *kam* [*kamma*] of disobeying was purified and the rishi's power was still completely within me [My translation].

Figure 38: Mr. Jamrong and the spiritual tattoo of the rishi on his arm [Credit: Paveena Chamchoy][441]

Further evidence that makes participants believe that their *kamma* has been purified may involve their physical appearance. Several participants told me that their complexions looked brighter after attending Parn Yak. For example, Miss K described her experience with Parn Yak as a feeling that her heart became 'very light', in contrast to before Parn Yak, when she felt that her heart was very heavy. She continued:

> When I met my grandmother, she suddenly noticed something and asked me what I had done to my face because my complexion looked so bright and fresh. I ran to check in the mirror and found that it was actually bright. I believe that this is the power of the ritual - that it removes the negativities - and also partly because, during ritual, I had an opportunity to spend time alone, far from the worrying of my everyday life. I did not have to think about anything else during the ritual [My translation].[442]

K believes that her dark complexion prior to the ritual was evidence of the negativity of her past *kamma*. After the chanting, the negativities were removed and her bodymind felt light. Although the result of the dark *kamma* cannot be totally removed, she was prepared to commit bright *kamma* to dilute the trace of it (my fieldnotes, August 2012). Similarly, after ritual several participants in Parn

[441] With Mr. Jamrong's permission to show his face in this thesis.
[442] Miss K (age 30) personal communication, 2012.

Yak reported that they felt better because they believe that the bad circumstances, which were due to happen to them in the future, were postponed or transformed into less harmful conditions, and many good incidents would continually occur if they keep doing bright *kamma* (my fieldnotes, 7th and 17th April 2007). These participants also asserted their bodymind became, according to testimonial, 'fresh' and 'cool'.[443] For example, N.,[444] my youngest informant, cheerfully told me that she had always felt restless; however, after the chanting, she felt that her mind became 'cooler'.

In addition, Parn Yak is often surrounded in controversy for being 'faith marketing' (discussed in Chapter 1). I insist that I am not in a position to give an opinion on the commercialisation of this ritual; nonetheless, I found that ritual efficacy can still be developed. The obviously commercialised version of Parn Yak was observed during my fieldwork at Wat Noinai. The master of ceremonies strongly encouraged participants to make an offering to the monks[445] by stating that the chanting would not begin until enough participants bought the offering. However, many participants insist that they consider such payments an act of 'bright' *kamma*[446] (my fieldnotes, 2nd December 2006).[447] As described earlier, Mr. M. explained that the Parn Yak that he attended was organised by the temple committee; therefore, he believed that the money would go directly to the temple. Mr. M. believes that purchasing a ritual kit is the same as donating money to the temple (my fieldnotes, 17th April 2007). While showing me each item[448] in his ritual kit, he also said that he thought that the price[449] for a kit was reasonable.

> It is worth it, because as the money goes directly to the temple, you also have a chance to earn big merits [My translation].[450]

As seen from the participants' accounts, the experiences of releasing the sense of guilt and uncertainty through the commitment to the belief in *kamma* can be

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[443] For example, Mrs. M (personal communication, April 2007) told me that she always had a short temper, but after Parn Yak, she felt her mind 'cooling'; therefore, she feels happier in her everyday life.
[444] N (age 11), personal communication, April 2007.
[445] As well as trying to sell amulets.
[446] Thai: ทำบุญ/*Tum Boon*.
[447] Many participants in other Parn Yaks in my fieldwork reported in a similar vein.
[448] In this Parn Yak, an amulet, a *yant*, a sachet of consecrated rice and a sacred thread.
[449] In this case, 99 baht. Most Parn Yaks sell the kit at this price.
[450] Mr. M. (age 44), personal communication, April 2007.

expressed through the embodied processes in rituals. In this way, the unique characteristics of Parn Yak and *sak yant* are, perhaps, the releasing and empowering processes that usually occur alongside each other within a 'bewilderment' landscape that can only be understood in the context of these rituals. This notion of releasing and empowering the impact of *kamma*, I suggest, is the central focus of the performances of *kamma* purification in contemporary Thai Buddhism.

Communal experience

Although I acknowledge the inherent quality of ritual is "to transform both experience and social relations" (Csordas, 1996: 92). However, the key purpose of this research is, by drawing on the aspects of performance studies, to focus on personal experiences in order to investigate the surrounding factors that contribute to participants' expression of their sense of efficacy. As public rituals, the collective experience in Parn Yak and *sak yant* also has the capacity to enable participants to achieve a sense of therapeutic transformation. Therefore, in this section, I will further discuss the significance of the communal experiences to personal efficacy.

Social manifestation and sense of community

Participation in public performances involve actions "which interact in a complex way with our existing embodied histories, and bring us into contact with a particular network of human activity" (Thompson, 2006: 73). In Parn Yak and *sak yant*, the sense of community established through participants' interaction can contribute to the experience and the articulation of the efficacy of ritual. Danbolt and Stifoss-Hanssen, (2011: 32), scholars of ritual studies, assert that it is essential that participants have the opportunity to fully participate and feel that they are part of the ritual. In this way, they can contribute to the dynamic of a ritual. The authors suggest that the embodied experience of ritual actions, such as handling the ritual objects, carry existential significance for establishing ritual identity among participants. This is also exemplified in the practices of Parn Yak and *sak yant*, where each participant uses the same ritual objects in the ritual space. Participants affirm their sense of belonging in the ritual community through the embodied process that every participant in Parn Yak is connected by the

sacred thread or in *wai kru* at Wat Bang Phra, sprinkled with consecrated water at the end of the ritual. These acts of affiliation, I suggest, contribute to the perception that every member has equal potentiality to experience the transformation.

This is especially true in *sak yant* practices, where the sense of community is so intense that each group, such as the group at Wat Bang Phra, becomes a close-knit fraternity. Although I do not have any ethnographic experience in the *wai kru* ritual, I found that Luang Pi Peaw's followers are particularly close to one another. During my field research, I noticed that participants, who gathered in the terrace of the monk's residence, seemed to know each other well. Luang Pi Peaw also knows the participants who had previously visited him, and seems to remember their names.

During my fieldwork, I saw some participants brought their small children to pay homage to the master. The parents told me that the monk recites incantations to ensure that their children will have a good life (my fieldnotes, June 2012). Mr. Bodhisawan and Pra Narin[451] informed me that nowadays[452] many people, both monks and laymen, come to Wat Bang Phra in order to learn how to be tattoo masters. In addition to the tattoo wearers, these aspirants also become a part of the temple's community. Furthermore, it is tradition that these 'junior' tattoo masters come during the weekend or the night before the annual *wai kru* ritual to help give tattoos at the temple as an act of gratitude:

> To be a tattoo master means that you have to be a teacher, a role model for your followers. Becoming a member of Wat Bang Phra, you have to be a good person and commit moral acts in order to make people believe in the power of our tattooing [My translation].[453]

From an applied drama perspective, the sense of community during performance practices is established by 'the shared lived experience':

> A deeper sense of belonging to a community, however, derives from shared interpretations of experience. Developing this theme, communities

[451] Pra Narin and Mr. Pathum Bodhisawan, personal communication, 9 April 2009.
[452] As of 2009.
[453] Pra Narin, personal communication, 9 April 2009.

> of identity are constructed when people recognise their own experiences in others, and share an understanding of each other's values or stories (Nicholson, 2005: 94).

Considering this notion of shared embodied experience, participants who are not in a trance also have the potential to achieve a sense of efficacy. A tattoo wearer, Mr. Wei,[454] told me about his experience in *wai kru*:

> The power of the master here [at Wat Bang Phra] is really sacred. Thousands of people became possessed. The scene was chaotic but also a spectacle. I, myself, have never been in trance, but when I was in the actual *wai kru* and saw many people being in trance-possession, I know that, surely, my tattoos have also been empowered, because I was in the same ritual as they were [My translation].

Another tattoo wearer, Mr. B,[455] recounted his experience in the *wai kru* of 2012 at Wat Bang Phra. He stated that some participants, for example those who were possessed by spirits inside monkey tattoos, clapped their hands, danced and howled to encourage other participants to be in a trance. He told me that after all participants are sprinkled by consecrated water at the end of the ritual, most of the participants who were in the trance looked 'happier'. He added that they 'felt better'[456] because they were, in his words, in ritual with their 'monkey friends' (my fieldnotes, June 2012).

The communal effect also applies to Parn Yak, despite the fact that most participants do not have such close relationships with each other as they do in *sak yant*. Similarly to the shared experience in *wai kru*, Parn Yak participants who are not in a trance-possession can also feel that they are in the process of transformation. During my Parn Yak experience at Wat Boonrod, while witnessing a trance-possessed participant being treated by a monk, a participant near me exclaimed, "The power of chanting is so true" [My translation] (my fieldnotes, 1st April 2007).To put it simply, if their fellow participants are healed, then they must also be healed.

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[454] Mr. Wei (age 36), personal communication during June, 2012.
[455] Mr. B (age 40), personal communication, 2012.
[456] Mr. B also points out that most of these participants could not remember much of their experience during their trance.

Furthermore, the communal experience can generate a sense of transformation that can affect participants' everyday life outside the realm of the performance. Thompson asserted during an applied drama session,

> The heightened pleasure of applause might leave an imprint of pride that will be both accidentally and explicitly performed in future action…[or] [the] energy of theatre games could instill a confidence that will be seen in a person's comfort in working with others (Thompson, 2006: 74).

Similarly, informant accounts revealed that the reactions from others provide potential resources for therapeutic transformation in Parn Yak and *sak yant*. Participating in a public space shared with others is an important affirmation of personal sense in therapeutic transformation. For example, Mrs. M. told me that she felt calmer after attending the Parn Yak chanting, even though she characteristically had a short temper prior to the ritual. Her husband and daughter, who stood next to her during our conversation, both agreed, prompting Mrs. M. to smile. She told me confidently that she thought she would remain calm and 'cool'[457] after the ritual.

Furthermore, trance-possession in *sak yant* can also establish confidence and a sense of pride when the other participants and the masters witness the power of the tattoos. This was evident when I observed Mr. Jong in a trance-possession during his tattoo session. On that day, there were about 20 participants on the terrace with Luang Pi Peaw. He told me that although he was only partly conscious, he was aware of every moment of his trance-possession and did not try to stop it:

> I always know everything [the incidents around him] when I *khongkurn*[458] [am in trance-possession]. Actually, if I want to control myself, I can, but I never do. It is better to let the spirits within the tattoos show their power so that I can also reap benefits. This [trance-possession] occurs every time I have a new *yant* or attend a *wai kru* ritual [My translation].[459]

Mr. Jong stated that sometimes the spirits need to express themselves so that their host and onlookers can pay respect to them. He also told me that the trance-possession is personally important to him, because it is a way that he can check

[457] 'For a while', she added.
[458] See Chapter 1 for my explanation of the term '*khongkurn*.
[459] Mr. Jong (age 40), personal communication, June 2012.

if the power is still retained (my fieldnotes, June, 2012). In this way, the display of trance-possession, I suggest, can gain affirmations from the ritual community. This, in turn, may lead to a sense of efficacy.

Community narratives

The tattoos of *sak yant* often present the identity of the community in addition to being a mark of transformation, because every participant is the follower of the same master. For example, the style of tattoos from Wat Bang Phra, particularly those of Luang Pi Peaw, is unique in combination and arrangement. His works have a unique design that differentiates them from the tattoos from other masters. As exemplified in Mr. Wei's tattoos below, all of Luang Pi Peaw's followers will eventually have a similar combination of patterns when their backs are full of tattoos.

Figure 39: Mr. Wei's tattoos from Luang Pi Peaw's creation. It took him 6 years and much perseverance in order to have all these *yants* on his back. Mr. Wei is on his way to having a front torso full of *yants* and now, he is in the process of having tattoos on his left arm [Credit: Paveena Chamchoy].

The process of collecting tattoos on one's body could be characterised as acts of affirmation of personal identity within the group; they can symbolise being a member of a community. As Derrida suggests, the marks on the body can narrate a person's membership of a specific community (Oliver, 1997: 70). The case of a *yant* tattoo wearer can refer to the notion of body as 'being-in-the-world', discussed in Chapter 1. Fischer-Lichte (2008: 32) states that performance is constituted by the co-presence of performers and audiences; similarly, the co-presence of ritual participants enables and constructs the community narratives

of ritual. Nicholson observes that the individuals formulate their identity through the relationship between their body and communitarian narratives (2005: 98). In this way, the identity of *sak yant* wearers' community is engraved on participants' bodies through their tattooing process, during which their bodies become "a site of cultural inscription" (Nicholson, 2005: 102). The tattoos become evidence of their involvement in ritual community, and act as a 'seal of approval' for participants to be a part of community narratives. They are contractually obliged to observe their master's codes of conduct and consider their fellow tattoo wearers as their 'brothers'. During my early fieldwork visit, I sat on Luang Pi Peaw's terrace for many hours and I saw some tattoo recipients usually let other participants receive tattoos before them.[460] I was surprised by this scene as I observed that they had been waiting for a long time for their turn. After I asked them, one of them replied that he was not in hurry as he would stay at the temple that night. Another participant told me that he usually let women and those who live far from temple go before him, adding that "we are all students of the same master, so it is important to take care of your fellows" (my fieldnotes, March 2009). The group affiliation is also apparent in the way that the monk treated every member of the *sak yant* community equally. In this way, shared experiences are enacted within the spatio-temporal frame of ritual. This, in turn, can lead to a sense of efficacy. Although I did not receive a tattoo, I had a personal experience with the group affiliation expressed through the act of authentication from the master in an incident during my first visit.

In the evening, Lung Pi Peaw asked me to give another tattoo recipient a ride to Bangkok, telling me that I should take 'my fellow disciples' with me (my fieldnotes, March 2009). This surprised me, as I am a woman driving alone and the temple is far from the main road. At first I did not accept or deny the request. However, 'my other fellow' told me, "It is fine, as we are under the same master"; hence, I agreed to the monk's request. This extract from my fieldnotes describes the experience:

> It seems like I was tested for being a member of this closed community. I feel like everyone on that terrace was waiting for my reply to the monk.

[460] Although it depends on Lung Pi Peaw when they will receive tattoos, these participants often ask others to go first when their turns come.

> They wanted to know if I could show that I can belonged in their community (my fieldnotes, March 2009)

This is the moment that my relationship to the ritual community shifted from observer to participant. I not only took on the role of the audience but also that of the performer. In this way, my contract of the performance is establish. During my first day, the monk and some participants, to some degree, seemed hesitant to talk with me. After my first day, I was treated as other practising members. If personal narratives can relocated into a specific setting of community during the 'open' space of performance practices (Nicholson, 2005: 98), my embodied narrative interacted with other participants' narratives. Nicholson (2005: 94) asserts that community narratives are formulated and expressed in dialogue with others; hence, the community narratives can be constructed during the spatial and temporal frame of ritual. During my fieldwork, I also become a part of narratives of this *sak yant* community, which are expressed through fellowship, respect to the master and observation of the codes of conduct. This creates a sense of community and, in turn, can help sustain belief and influence efficacy.

From my fieldwork experience, I can still feel the sense of belonging to this community despite not having a tattoo. However, it is worth noting that, my position within the ritual community is dynamic[461]; my role constantly shifts along the continuum between the observer and participant.

Despite the sense of community that resonates among people who have the same tattoo master, I wish to stress that having a *yant* tattoo on the body does not signify that the wearer is part of a gang culture. Although many gang members have tattoos to indicate that they belong to a certain group (Beeler, 2005: 96), this is not the function of *sak yant*, which is designed only to be a vessel of spiritual power. In fact, the patterns of *yants* are so similar among most masters that people cannot trace tattoos to a specific master unless they are practising members or researchers of *sak yant.*[462]

[461] I have discussed my position as a researcher during fieldwork in Chapter 1.
[462] Despite having seen these tattoos for many years, I often cannot tell the different between *yants* from other masters and *yants* from the masters of Wat Bang Phra.

Furthermore, a wide demographic partakes in *sak yant*, including a wide age range and both genders. During my ethnographic experience at Wat Bang Phra, I saw some young female participants in their first-year university uniforms.[463] Other participants told me they had been tattooed in the pattern of a house lizard on their wrists simply to look attractive (my fieldnotes, March 2009). Some participants made a livelihood as construction workers, so they asked for patterns that would give them protection. Other participants were businessmen, who wished to have tattoos that can bring fortune to their profession. Mr. Bodhisawan[464] told me that many salesmen responded to the economic crisis (of 2009) by seeking *sak yant* to assist them with difficulties in their business. Pra Narin also added that several students[465]sought tattoos to bolster their studying:

> They come to gain confidence for their studies, because they believe that some tattoos can boost their intellectual abilities. The masters usually tell them that if they get a tattoo, they must practice meditation, recite the Buddhist incantations and do only good deeds. I personally think these principles can make them focus on their studies which could result in their success [My translation].[466]

To my knowledge, gang members in Thailand, especially in Bangkok, often have decorative tattoos on their body as symbols of being in a specific gang. I acknowledge that some gang members may also have *yant*s on their bodies, but the choice of having a *yant* tattoo depends entirely on personal consideration. The tradition of *sak yant* is well-known for its purpose of physical protection; therefore, those who are at risk during their daily lives, such as construction workers, often have *yant* tattoos. Using a similar line of logic, gang members may seek *yant* tattoos to protect them from the violence that they attract. If the public sees only gang members with *yant* tattoos, then they will get a negative impression of this practice. However, every practising member whom I met during my field research, especially in Wat Bang Phra, always strongly insisted that there was no connection between gang culture and their practices. They regarded their *sak yant* as a practice that reminded them to always conduct bright *kamma*. A

[463] The university uniforms in Thailand are all very similar regardless of the year of study. However, these female participants were students at the university where I graduated; therefore, I could distinguish their uniforms.
[464] Mr. Pathum Bodhisawan, personal communication, 9 April 2009.
[465] The age restriction for being tattooed in Wat Bang Phra is approximately 16 years; thus, most of the participants are university or high school students.
[466] Pra Narin, personal communication, 9 April 2009.

good example of their attitude is the leaping tiger tattoo, which is the signature pattern of Wat Bang Phra for providing supreme protection to the wearer. In my conversation with Mr. Bodhisawan and Pra Narin, they assert that the deeper meaning of the leaping tiger pattern is to remind the wearer to be compassionate [Thai, Pali: เมตตา/metta] towards other beings, as even a wild tiger might feel this compassion and do no harm[467].

Finding urban and rural community identity in Parn Yak

Although most participants do not know each other, they often come from communities near the temples. However, I did not find that the Parn Yak ritual created community narratives or presented the identity of the community where it was performed. As stated in the beginning of this thesis, the two forms of trance-possession rituals that I studied are considered non-site-specific. In addition, if I had to distinguish between the two by drawing upon only my experience of various Parn Yaks, I would say that I see no difference between the rituals in rural areas and those in urban areas. One possible reason is that Bangkok and its vicinity are mostly regarded as urban areas, with the exception of Wat Nongkodsiriwat,[468] which is located in the middle of rice paddy fields. Although the area is considered rural, the ritual process is still similar to those of the other temples I visited. Furthermore, most Parn Yaks in my field research were facilitated by Pra Kru Sanghavichai, whom I followed, so the ritual process and several features in the rituals were similar. In addition, some organisers of Parn Yaks are not local people but organisers who go to different temples to arrange rituals; therefore, the performance of the ritual probably did not present the identity of the community where it was performed.

[467] The legend of the leaping tiger comes from the story of Pra Udomprachanart, who is regarded as the master of all masters at this temple. He once met a tiger in the forest, and, instead of escaping, he showed his compassion towards the tiger until it was tamed and leapt away (Pra Narin and Mr. Bodhisawan, 2009).
[468] In the Supanburi province. Approximately 100 kilometres from Bangkok.

Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to offer an alternative lens for examining how the sense of efficacy of trance-possession rituals is perceived and expressed by those who participate in them. Its focus on the embodiment and spatio–temporal dimensions has been a means to investigate the qualities of engaging in the performance aspects of culturally articulated practices. Perspectives from applied drama have specifically offered a mechanism for engaging directly with the ways in which ritual participants perceive and articulate a sense of personal therapeutic transformation. This thesis contributes to the field of performance studies by providing an alternative view for examining the potential of therapeutic transformation through the embodied experiences in performance practices.By questioning how trance-possession rituals are conceptualised by contemporary Thai Buddhists as having therapeutic potential, this research has revealed that the embodied experience and surrounding socio-cultural factors are the primary determinants of how rituals and their efficacy are conceptualised.

The conceptualisation of ritual efficacy through embodied experience

Issues relating to the meaning and identification of rituals and their efficacy have emerged during my research on the practices of Parn Yak and *sak yant*. As discussed in Chapter 1, the widespread idea of 'authentic' Buddhism is evidenced in the existing literature of some Thai contemporary scholars and in my fieldwork investigation. These rituals have been strongly and widely criticised as being 'nonsense' and 'contaminated' practices, which are often unacknowledged by government and religious authorities.Yet, evidence from my fieldwork reveals that these rituals are nevertheless extensively practised and have a great number of practising members. Conceptualisation and identification of ritual efficacy within a contemporary Thai context have always been complex. The practices of Parn Yak and *sak yant* are perceived by some Thai Buddhists to have therapeutic potentiality, while others consider them to be non-rational.

This complexity and the paradoxical circumstances of these rituals reflect on the ongoing argument discussed in Chapter 1 among scholars across a range of disciplines concerning the concept of ritual and its efficacy. In particular, this

relates to the view that rituals are actually 'ineffective and non-rational acts' (Sax, 2010: 4). Without any causal explanation as to how and when rituals can establish their intended effects, the meaning and efficacy of ritual has been viewed as ratified by those who study them in order to "make sense of otherwise irrational, pseudo-rational or non-rational behaviour" (Goody, 1961: 157).

Referring to Sax's discussion of the definition of ritual cited in Chapter 1,[469] he states that for those who perform rituals, their practices "do indeed fit into a cosmology in terms of which they make sense" (Sax, 2010:4). Examples in my field research described in Chapter 5, show that most respondents believed that the rituals they attended had efficacy. Some asserted that they could feel the sense of therapeutic transformation in their bodies during and after the ceremonies. These accounts confirm that a sense of ritual efficacy is processed in the heart of their lived experience: their bodies. The belief and the sense of efficacy can be embodied and expressed in ritual through performance activities or as Sklar has asserts that "a transformation [is] enacted upon oneself through the details of performance" (2001: 189). In this way, the ritual's performativity can contribute to the process of constructing the meaning of a ritual, or as Bell asserts, the actions are the "key to what make ritual[s] […] what they are" (1997: 160). This was also exemplified during my fieldwork in Parn Yak. Some respondents expertly taught me how to behave in the ritual; however, when I questioned the meaning of the ritual objects, chanting, or activities, they were often hesitant to explain, and many eventually responded, "It is about the belief" [Thai: มันเป็นเรื่องของความเชื่อ/*man pen reung khong kwam cher*][470] or "Everyone has been doing this" [Thai: เค้าก็ทำกันแบบนี้/*kao kor tum kun baab nee*]. Similar responses were found in Rhum's research in Northern Thailand (1996), which was discussed in Chapter 1. Rhum noted that his informants had difficulty trying to explain their cultural practices and typically told him that "[…] I don't know any other reason why we do this [...] anyhow, it doesn't matter" (1996: 327). These statements reveal the significance of the performance aspect of rituals, for the respondents learned and conceptualised their cultural performances through their experiences. For those

[469] Page 22.
[470] Some *sak yant* tattoo wearers answered similarly when asked to discuss the meaning of their practices.

who practise Parn Yak, ritual actions are not only an expression of belief, but they also contribute to the belief. As Myerhoff states, “Doing is believing” (1977: 223).

In this way, Sax’s statement above not only points to the socio-cultural context as a significant factor to the conceptualisation of ritual efficacy, but also highlights the importance of the embodied and performance aspects of the ritual. The meanings and efficacy of ritual become embodied, conceptualised, and expressed via the process of the lived experience of those who attend. The idea of ritual as an embodied phenomenon may help to explain the complexity of the perceptions of Parn Yak and *sak yant*. For ritual participants, these two trance-possession rituals seem sensible and fit into their realm of experience. Non-practising members may regard these rituals as non-rational, not only because they cannot find a solid explanation for rituals and their efficacy, but also because those who take part often cannot verbalise an understanding of their experience. This issue was also reflected in challenges mentioned in Chapter 1 that I personally experienced while conducting fieldwork. Some respondents told me that they had experienced difficulties articulating their feelings because they were rarely asked about them. Through my research, I have found that it is not the ritual per se but rather the embodied experience of ritual that, borrowing from Geertz’s statement, ‘shape the consciousness of people’ (1973: 113). Since ritual meaning, belief, and efficacy are perceived, constructed, and expressed through the bodies of those who participate, they rarely objectively consider their ritual actions. A similar challenge is also shown in performance studies in relation to experience that is understood through the actor’s body during performance (Johnson, 1987: 4; Zarrilli, 2002: 8-9; Kemp, 2013: 93). Zarrilli has stated in regard to acting, “[…] when we think and talk about acting, we do not examine our language or the assumptions that lie behind it” (2002: 8 The difficulties of expressing the experience of ritual efficacy may not be the inability to explain the ritual to be performed, but rather “the limitations of our propositional modes of representation” (Johnson, 1987: 4). In this sense, toward the end of my field investigations, it became clear that respondents’ statements—“It is about the belief” and “It's been passed down”[471] and from Rhum’s research, “I don't know any other reason [for doing rituals]” (1996: 327)—might not signify non-rationality.

[471] This statement is also mentioned in Chapter 1 in the section on ritual authenticity.

I therefore suggest that practising members' difficulties in explaining their ceremonies cannot be used as criteria to imply that ritual is meaningless or inefficacious.

In examining ritual experience as an embodied process, my ethnographic experience suggests that issues surrounding the perspectives and contexts framing efficacy should be addressed when dealing with the complexity of ritual. Conversations with different groups of people during my fieldwork confirm that efficacy can be variously perceived, since it depends on the perspectives and criteria used to identify it. Quack and Tobelmann's interpretive framework, (2010: 17–18) as discussed in Chapter 1, was particularly useful in my research. This studyinitially investigated ritual from the perspectives of those participating in it and examined ritual efficacy according to their experiences. For respondents in my field investigations, the rituals they attended had efficacy, and their embodied presence and actions in the realm of rituals constituted and affirmed the rituals' meaning and efficacy. During my fieldwork, no respondents were aware or spoke of the 'hidden' or 'implicit[472]' functions of the ritual (Quack and Sax, 2010: 5), since it was not necessary to establish 'legitimate' reasons for the ritual to be performed. For them, the performances of Parn Yak and *sak yant* were intrinsically rational and fit within their 'cultural logic'. With this in mind, identifying (non-)rationality may be not sufficiently appropriate for investigating the experience of ritual, for the term always carries with it connotations of subjectivity. Similarly, the central problem and complexities of the efficacy of ritual rest in the fact that they cannot have a fixed definition due to different individual perspectives and contexts. This issue is exemplified in the various perceptions towards the contemporary practices of Parn Yak and *sak yant*. My research on these rituals also revealed the need for further investigation, especially of the perspectives of ritual participants, monks, ritual organisers, community members, and researchers.

Staal (1979: 9) asserts that ritual is activity without meaning because those who perform have to "act according to the rules"; hence "the important thing is what

[472] The 'hidden' or 'implicit' functions in this sense indicate "the underlying concepts that are expressed, represented or symbolised by ritual (Sax, 2010: 5), rather than the performance of ritual itself.

you do, not what you think, believe or say" (Staal, 1979: 4). Although I concur with Staal's emphasis of the importance of actions at the moment of ritual, I argue that his statement may raise the the problem of how mind and body interact during these live occurrences. The embodied experience is psychophysical: "doing, thinking, believing, or expressing" can all operate continually and simultaneously. They become intimately interwoven during lived experience through the embodied process of the body. In a phenomenological approach, Merleau-Ponty confirms this point, stating that every aspect of experience "is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence" (Merleau-Ponty: 1962: 89). This view is also held by Theravada Buddhists, who believe that embodied actions are dynamic and psychophysical processes. As Rahula describes, "Life and movement are not two different things" (1974: 26). By extension, in performance studies, Zarrilli asserts that the body represents "the mental, emotional, cosmological, and philosophical modes of existence" (2002: 93). In this sense, the actions, the presence, and the state of being in a centrality of the activities can contribute to the way in which a sense of efficacy is constituted and expressed.

In this way, the explanation for why rituals are performed may thus not be primarily grounded upon the actions or 'the rules" of the ritual, but upon the total embodied experiences of those who perform them. Such was also exemplified during this study's field investigations, particularly when respondents could not entirely explain the details of their actions and experience, yet could nevertheless express their sentiments about therapeutic transformation. I would also suggest that extending Staal's analysis of ritual as an 'activity' (1979: 4) to include a paradigm of embodiment may enable us to gain a greater understanding of ritual experience. Theories of embodiment (Csordas, 1993; 2002; Bourdieu, 1972; Merleau-Ponty, 1962) suggests that an individual perceive and conceptualised his/her knowledge of self and culture through body that "always already in the world" (Csordas, 1993: 138). Therefore, actions in ritual are governed by a somatic mode of attention; "the culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas, 1993: 138).

My fieldwork in the practices of Parn Yak and *sak yant* revealed that the mechanism that facilitates the conceptualising of ritual experiences operates at

the interaction between participants' body and the space of ritual. The example are manifold: as described in Chapter 5, respondents spoke of how they felt that 'there was something' in the air during their experience; a local respondent related her sense of feeling "simultaneously warm and cool" when she entered the ritual ground. During the performance of Parn Yak and *sak yant*, the ritual spatial dimensions (for instance, being conducted in consecrated area) and the embodied presence of other people (e.g., monks, fellow ritual participants, onlookers) helped construct the sense of being in a particular sphere of ritual, and through this sense, those who attend Parn Yak and *sak yant* can "arrive at a meaningful account of what is happening" (Schieffelin, 1985: 721).

Csordas has suggested the paradigm of embodiment as an approach to understanding culture and self (2002). He suggests, "Attention to a bodily sensation can thus become a mode of attending to the intersubjective milieu that gives rise to that sensation" (Csordas, 1993: 38). Therefore, 'feeling of the doing' may be the focus rather than 'what is done' (Varela, 2003: 125).I have drawn on aspects of embodiment, particularly this idea of body as a locus of experience and culture as a starting point for the purpose of this thesis. The dynamic of embodied process in ritual experience was highlighted during my fieldwork in Parn Yak and *sak yant*, and examined in relation to the ritual participants' articulations of the sense of therapeutic transformation.

The embodiment of efficacy

Through literature research and ethnographic experience, this thesis revealed that the notion of 'feeling better', a sentiment that was often expressed by respondents in relation to their experience in ritual, can be conceptualised, articulated, and valued as an expression of the sense of efficacy. Framing the notion of 'feeling better' in terms of efficacy emphasises the culturally articulated bodies within the process of ritual. The cultural knowledge of ritual is continually and simultaneously established and communicated among those who experience it. The examination of this process requires an understanding of the body as more than a fixed passive object, but rather as an entity in an active state and in the process of becoming. The embodiment of efficacy encompasses aspects of both a socio-cultural context and the lived experience that takes place during the ritual

performance. In my research, these two aspects have been the primary determinants that operate collectively, creating the participants' sense of transformation. The interconnection between these two is evident in the performances of Thai Buddhist rituals. The concept of *kamma* in Theravada Buddhism is intimately engaged with the way Thais perform rituals to achieve the sense of therapeutic transformation. This form of ritual, or as I have termed it, the 'Thai Buddhist style of *kamma* purification' was particularly evident during my ethnographic experience at Wat Noinai where those who took part emulated their deathand revival as a result of the chanting. Performing such tasks in rituals, i.e., prostrating on the floor, can be an affirmation that the result of their dark *kamma* from the past has been alleviated.

Examining the embodiment of efficacy in this way emphasises the need for an interdisciplinary research framework that connects ritual as a culturally defined practice with the understanding of its dynamics. In this thesis, I have found that methodologies and discourses from performance studies have been useful in expanding the understanding of the body from being a site of cultural expression to including an active experiential site for transformation. In addition, theoretical concepts and perspectives from anthropology, cultural studies and Buddhist studies have been employed to help examine Thai historical and socio-cultural aspects.

The notion of embodiment has been addressed in the works of performance studies scholars, particularly the aspects of the interrelationship of body and mind, and the embodied experience as a key to the transformation process (For example, Zarrilli, 2002; Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Daboo, 2008; Jacobs, 2010). Daboo (2008) stated that ritual can be explored through "the understanding of it nature *as* performance" (2008: 44: original emphasis) which is "live events which operate in a specific time and place through the presence and embodiment of those taking part" (2008: 43). In the ways its disciplines inherently engage with 'liveness' and 'presence', performance has enabled a greater understanding of the fluidity of lived experience in Parn Yak and *sak yant*.

From a performance perspective, experience is a non-linear and ever-shifting process. Conversations with my respondents revealed that their experiences

during ritual are extremely fluid. They spoke of their mixed feelings between a sense of fear and safety. Some reported that they not only felt a sense of therapeutic transformation, i.e. 'feeling better' and 'cool', they also had fun participating in the ritual. For these respondents, the sense of efficacy and entertainment operated as "a braid or helix, tightening and loosening over time" (Schechner, 2006: 80). Research conducted by Wong (2001) on the *wai khruu*[473] ritual in Thai traditional dance has addressed the interweaving of efficacy and entertainment as one of the fundamental features in Thai ritual performance (xxii, 60). This confirms my suggestion that 'being entertained' has no impact on the embodiment of efficacy in Thai ritual. The non-linear multicity and complexity is the intrinsic quality of, in Jacobs' words, "the actuality of the live performance" (2010: 2). As Daboo suggests that "the nature of efficacy lied within […] the present-ing or presence-ing of an act of performance through the body" (2008: 40). The concept of impermanence in Theravada Buddhism also confirms that the presence or sense of being here and now is crucial to the transformation (Sumedho, 1989: 3).

The embodiment of therapeutic transformation operates within a place and time of performance. In Parn Yak and *sak yant*, the spatial and temporal dimensions place the embodied presence of those who attend rituals into the state of 'in-betweeness': being in the landscape between their everyday life and the spiritual realm of ritual. Jaeger (2006: 123) refers to the in-betweeness in performance as the moment in which a performer "has a keen awareness of herself, the other performers and the audience in the immediacy of a live performance". In this sense, the in-betweeness indicates the quality of presence at the centre of the embodied experience. Nonetheless, in various fields, including performance and ritual studies, in-betweeness is often referred to in performance and ritual studies as 'liminality', a term introduced by Victor Turner who defined it as a position of being "neither here nor there' and being 'betwixt and between' (1969: 95). I argue that Turner's concept indicates a fixed linear stage rather than a dynamic process of lived experience that is continual flux. Within the spatio-temporal frame of ritual,

[473] It is a similar ritual to *wai kru* in *sak yant* tradition. *Wai kru* is a form of Thai ritual that pays homage to the teachers. However, the details of the performances vary among the practices. I have used the spelling '*wai khruu*' as original used in Wong's research to denote the difference between this ritual in Thai dance and *wai kru* in *sak yant* tattoo practices.

the negotiation between reality in everyday life and the reality in the ritual realm is a fluid process, as the knowledge of self is “continually created and recreated through interaction with others” (Nicholson, 2005: 65). In this way, I suggest that the sense of space and time of those who take part continually shift along the continuum between their everyday world and their spiritual world. Similarly, the transformation is not a linear process. In this thesis, I have used the word ‘liminal’ with care. This term can indicate the specificity of location and time during ritual; yet, it cannot grasp the significance of the dynamics or the fluidity of performance and the ephemeral nature of experience. For the purpose of this thesis, in order to engage with the dynamics of experiences within the therapeutic transformation process in ritual, I have made use of the key concept of ‘bewilderment’ from the context of applied drama to describe the conditions of those who attended Parn Yak and *sak yant* during their ‘presence’ in ritual. Although originally introduced in relation to applied drama practices, I suggest that the notion of bewilderment can be expanded to examine the way in which the therapeutic transformation can be established through the embodied experience in rituals.

The notion of bewilderment indicates,

> [B]oth the state of being confused within that moment of application [of applied drama practice], and the state of flux that can become the energetic creative force behind the use of theatre. [The state of bewilderment] does not indicate passivity in the face of a problem, therefore, but rather that transitory state between awe and the struggle to comprehend (Thompson, 2006: 22, 200).

Thompson’s statement not only indicates the experience as a ‘dynamic process of becoming’, it also points out the dynamics of the spatio-temporal dimension as an entry point for transformation. My fieldwork investigation in Parn Yak and *sak yant* has revealed that the experience of those who attend ritual is transformed by the intervention of ritual. Their ‘everyday self’ is placed in the spiritual realm of ritual. The dislocation from their familiarity of everyday life leads to, as taken from Thompson’s words, a “state of being confused”. Respondents spoke of how they experienced this bewilderment, describing it as ‘feeling scared’ or ‘not knowing what to do’, particularly during the beginning of ritual.

Some respondents also stressed that the atmosphere of the ritual frightened them. A male respondent[474] mentioned that there is 'force' or 'power' within the ritual space of Parn Yak. I suggest that his experience may be akin to Barba's notion of 'extra-daily energy', "which renders the body theatrically 'decided', 'alive', 'believable' […]" (1995: 9). In performance practices, the extra-daily energy is generated by the 'physical pre-expressive tensions' (ibid), which are derived from the training of the performer's body. Barba's extra-daily technique involves distorting the way in which a performer is familiar with the use of his/her body in daily life, or as Meyer-Dinkgrafe describes it, creating "the shifts in balance" (1997: 36). In his study of Theravada Buddhist rituals in Sri Lanka, Kapferer emphasises this point, stating that the transformation process in ritual operates through attacking and restructuring the understanding of the experience (1991: 325-326).

In this thesis, the notion of 'extra-daily energy' in performance practices is broadened to enhance the understanding of the state of bewilderment during the ritual experience. Respondents who attended Parn Yak and *sak yant* could feel the tension of the shifts in balance. The spatio-temporal dimension of ritual encompasses the sense of being in the spiritual realm, which is different from the habitual dimensions of their everyday world. This sense is established by the performing of tasks upon arrival at the ritual ground. Numerous examples are evident: giving offerings to the master before *sak yant*, performing an act of worship or wearing the sacred thread over one's head prior to Parn Yak. These tasks act as the temporal markers for ritual participants to embody the sense of being in the realm of ritual; they enter into an extra-daily space. Hence, they are exposed to contingencies. Some scholars who study ritual also regarded the contingencies as an intrinsic quality of ritual (see for example, Howe, 2000: 63; Brown, 2003: 16; Rao, 2008: 148; Saligman et al, 2008: 91). Nonetheless, they do not explain how ritual's quality of being indeterminate can contribute to the sense of efficacy.

I suggest that the extra-daily quality of ritual establishes a sense of uncertainty and tension. However, due to its openness to contingencies, it also creates a

[474] Mr. O (age 29), personal communication, 15th April 2007. I have also discussed my conversation with Mr. O in Chapter 5.

sense of freedom, which is akin to the Turner's ludic quality of ritual in which those who attend can move beyond the restricted frame of their everyday lives (1982: 11). In this way, the ludic space becomes a potential force for efficacy (Kershaw, 1992: 24). Through this research, I have found that applied drama can be a useful lens to examine this quality of ritual and the conciliation between the sense of freedom and tension that occurs during the lived experience of ritual. In the works of applied drama scholars and practitioners (Pendzik, 1994: 29-33; Sithamparanathan, 2003 cited in Nicholson, 2005: 70; Nicholson, 2005: 24; Thompson, 2006: 23; Chinyowa, 2008: 7; O'Farrell, 1996: 129), the openness to contingencies is addressed as a key to efficacy. Within the spatio-temporal dimension of applied drama session, its participants are able to:

> extend their horizon of experience, recognising how their own identities have been shaped and formulated and, by playing new roles and inhabiting different subject positions, find different points of identification with others (Nicholson, 2005: 24).

Chinyowa's research on the efficacy of community theatre in South Africa also confirms this point. He states "It is the gap between fiction and reality, in playing in-between the self and the other, that construction of identity resides […]" (2008: 11)

During my fieldwork, conversations with tattoo wearers revealed that they felt united with the spirits of their tattoos during their participation in rituals. Within the realm of ritual, they felt that they could explore the relationship between their own identities and the identities of the spirits that resided in their bodies. This led to a sense of transformation in which they could embody the spiritual power of their tattoos. The boundaries between the wearers' selves and the 'spiritual selves' of their tattoos became blurred.

The therapeutic value of space in Thai Buddhist rituals

Ritual participants' state of bewilderment directly engages with the sense of contingency. Although they might feel the tensions of being in the unfamiliar, they still felt that they were able to explore, release and interact independently with the embodied process of ritual. The conciliation between the sense of freedom and tension that occurs within this extra-daily space can allow for the sense of

therapeutic transformation to be developed. In this thesis, I found that that understanding the therapeutic value of the space helped to reveal how the temporal and spatial aspects of ritual are the key to the embodiment of efficacy. Works of applied drama scholars (Nicholson, 2005:59; Sullivan, 2004: 23; Pendzik, 1994: 33; Prendergast and Saxton, 2013:7) stress the importance of space in their practices and the conception by participants of feeling safe, thus allowing for therapeutic transformation. In applied drama, establishing a safe environment is primarily the task of the facilitator who possesses the spatial authority of the practice. My fieldwork indicated that, not only did the manifestation of monks contribute to the notion of a safe space, but the rituals also had the intrinsic quality of being safe through their spatial dimensions. Respondents spoke of a sense of protection, because they were on the consecrated grounds of temples. The blurring of the edges between the everyday world and the spiritual realm of ritual also contributed to this sense of protection. Those who attend express their experience independently through their participation within this spiritual realm. This was exemplified in my fieldwork by respondents who described how they were able to fully participate in ritual without fearing that they would be harmed by evil, break the rules or lose face. Although believing in the rituals as their adopted reality, the ludic quality still provided some distance for those who took part to feel safe. Research in applied drama has also acknowledged that the experience of ‘both real’ and ‘not real’ during applied drama practices can lead to a sense of therapeutic efficacy (Chinyowa, 2008:7; Hunter, 2008: 16; Nicholson, 2005: 129; Somers, 2008: 63; Seymour, 2009: 32). Somers described this therapeutic value by stating, “We are 'in' it enough to care about it, but 'out' of it enough not to fear it and to be able to recognise its distance from reality” (2008: 63).

The presence of monks also contributes to the sense of security and protection. Anthropologists have referred to Thai Buddhist monks as ‘mana-filled objects’ (Kirsch, 1977: 248) and ‘sacred actors’ (Jerryson, 2001: 55). I would further suggest that by approaching monks as ritual facilitators, these notions of Thai monks can be understood not only in terms of having virtuous and spiritual power, but also by considering the individual personality and the acts of performance in ritual. Just as the skilled facilitator in applied drama knows how to perform their jobs effectively (Prendergast and Saxton state (2009: 18), the monks who act

properly and confidently in rituals contribute to a sense of trust and security. This also leads to a sense of authenticity in ritual; hence, the sense of therapeutic efficacy can be established.

An articulation of the sense of efficacy in Thai cultural context

The consideration of what may contribute to the expression of 'feeling better' also raises the importance of the understanding of the sense of therapeutic transformation as being culturally articulated. The culture of all-inclusive worship that embraces the beliefs in animism, Hinduism and Buddhism intermingles to establish the unique feature of the current form of Thai Buddhist beliefs and practices, as discussed in Chapter 2. Studies on Thai Buddhism also addressed the syncretic nature of Theravada Buddhist rituals (Tambiah, 1970; Jackson, 1999: 245-320; Kitiarsa, 2005: 461-487). This open-mindedness of contemporary Thai Buddhists, or as Kitiarsa has described, 'the cultural magic of tolerance' (2005; 487), also reflects the way in which their rituals are performed. Many examples have been evident in my fieldwork, including the chanting for offerings to the deities of the nine planets and the consecrations of the Jatukam amulet as a part of the ritual of Parn Yak. Protection and prosperity can be provided by many spiritual powers from various beliefs. Put simply, the greater and more frequent the worship, the greater the protection. According to Tambiah, the phenomena of Thai contemporary Buddhist practices becomes as Tambiah described, a 'parade of supernaturals [*sic*]' (1970: 351). Conversation with my correspondents also confirms this point. "They just make me feel good", a male correspondent stated when I asked him about the many amulets he wore around his neck.

The integration of the elements from other beliefs and the transformations of Thai Buddhist rituals are complex, contingent and ephemeral. The beliefs continually emerge and fluctuate in their popularity; new beliefs and ritual performances are adopted and become widespread during a particular period Examples of this include the worship of Trimurti and royal spirits (discussed in Chapter 2) and the Jatukam amulets. Kitiarsa's research in the worship of popular spiritual cults in Thailand (2005) examined the complex syncretic outlook of the contemporary Thai belief system and noted that the popular beliefs in the Thai Buddhist culture

have undergone a substantial amount of 'hybridization'. Kitiarsa (2005: 487) points out that it is the cultural tolerance of different beliefs, cosmopolitan life-style and the influence of capitalist consumerism that make the hybrid beliefs appropriate in contemporary Thai culture. This may be akin to Wyllie's notion of 'ritual congruity', in which he indicates in his research on Ghanaian urban rituals, that rituals persistently exist across their changing spatio-temporal environment (1968: 30-32).

I would further suggest that the hybridity of beliefs, the commercial aspects and the reformulation/modification of ritual practices not only help the rituals survive through time and settings, but also contribute to the embodiment of efficacy in ritual. In my fieldwork, I have found that the commodification of the monks' abilities and ritual objects, and the ways in which the ritual organizers creatively adjust the process of ritual to popular beliefs can also help sustain belief and ritual authenticity that is conducive to the sense of therapeutic transformation.

The fundamental concepts of Buddhism, particularly *dukkha* and *kamma*, which firmly exist within Thai culture, also greatly impact the Thai perspective on health and wellbeing. The experience of *dukkha* occurs as a dissatisfied response to life circumstances; hence it is considered as common and universal. The concept of *dukkha* is also intimately interwoven with the Buddhist ideas of *kamma* and reincarnation. *Dukkha* is a result of the *kamma* committed in both the past and present, in this life or in the past lives of a person. Thais view *dukkha* as a socially and culturally embodied phenomenon. This is also confirmed in Carlisle's research on Thai Buddhism, in which his respondents spoke of the notion of *kamma* bound up with all aspects of life: those who surround them, their social lives and their understanding of themselves (2012: 323). For Thais, circumstances that generate the condition of *dukkha* might be considered chronic, as they may derive from dark *kamma* of the past. This is exemplified in the Thai perspective on illness. The manifestation of an illness from a biomedical standpoint may be merely an episode of results from a single dark *kamma*, as discussed in Chapter 3. I would further suggest that the experience of *dukkha* from other circumstances in life may also be akin to this notion of 'dark *kamma*-related disease'. The state of *dukkha* can be chronic; hence, it can occur in the future. This view greatly influences the practices in Thai Buddhist ritual. Thai

Buddhists consider performing rituals as the 'reinforcement' or 'empowerment' of the bright *kamma*; so that the impacts of dark *kamma* can be diluted, as well as be prevented from reoccurring both in current and future lives. I suggest that the way that rituals are viewed as an act of *kamma* purification can help explain why Thai Buddhists regularly participate in rituals. This sense of *kamma* being purified leads to the therapeutic transformation that may be articulated by Thais as 'feeling better'. This is particularly evident in the case of this research. The *sak yant* tattoo wearers annually attended *wai kru* to mitigate the dark *kamma* that may have been conducted towards their masters during past years; hence allowing the power of their tattoos to be 'recharged' or 'fueled up'[475], as discussed in Chapter 4. Those who attend Parn Yak see their donations and paying for ritual objects as an opportunity for doing good deeds so that they can derive the maximum benefit from the chanting.

Socio-cultural factors and embodied experience

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to investigate the context that contributes to the articulation of the sense of therapeutic transformation. The socio-cultural informed body and the embodied phenomenon during lived experience intimately interconnect. When entering the realm of ritual, participants also carry their own set of beliefs, cultural perspectives and expectations to the ritual space. Carlisle's research on the conceptualisation of belief in Thai Buddhism also confirms this point by revealing that the beliefs "help shape—and are shaped by— […] experiences (2012: 323). Put simply, the cultural embodiment of those who attend ritual contributes to the efficacy during the ritual experience. Fischer-Lichte states,

> The nature of performance as event — articulated and brought forth in the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, the performative generation of materiality, and the emergence of meaning—enable […] transformation (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 181).

As previously discussed, Barba states that the 'extra-daily energy that can cause the body of performer to be "'decided', 'alive', 'believable' […]" is generated by the 'pre-expressivity' of the performer's body (1995: 9, 195). This pre-expressive

[475] From the account of Mr. Jong (age 40) described in Chapter 3.

condition leads the performers to become ‘present’ within the lived space of performance (Barba and Savarese, 2006: 188). The pre-expressivity in this sense comes from the training, so that the performer can generate energy that circulates within the space of performance (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 97). Although Barba mentioned the pre-expressive condition only in performance training, I would suggest that the bodies of those who attend may also operate at a ‘pre-expressive’ level during the moment of ritual. Being Thai Buddhists, their bodies are also trained through their practices of cultural embodiment in everyday life prior to their participation in ritual. They, to some extent, have knowledge of Buddhist beliefs, know how to behave in rituals (for example, how to sit properly on the floor, how to conduct their gestures when worshipping or making offerings, how to speak to the monks). Nonetheless due to the openness to contingencies of the liveness of ritual, bewilderment can still exist as a result of the blurred edges between the spiritual realm and their everyday world. In this way, they can suspend disbelief so that they can immerse themselves independently in the spiritual sphere. Therefore, the capability of believing in the ritual efficacy can be established as the ritual participants are “engaged fundamentally in the active construction of meaning as a performance event proceeds (Kershaw, 1992: 16).

Concluding Remarks

Although this thesis has deliberately attempted to use theoretical concepts and perspectives from performance studies, including applied drama, to gain a deeper understanding of the extent to which the sense of therapeutic efficacy is perceived and articulated in Thai culture, it has also addressed the fact that each ritual participant has their own embodiment of their experience both before and during their lived experience in rituals. I agree with Geertz that the researcher’s task involves the attempt to examine the informants’ worldview and perspectives towards themselves (Geertz, 1983:57-59); hence, his approach of a ‘thick description’ has shaped my strategies when conducting fieldwork. By using the notion expressed by Thai Buddhist ritual participants of ‘feeling better’ as a starting point to explore the complex ways in which the sense of transformation is constructed in ritual, this expression is not a conceptualisation of what efficacy is, but rather an articulation of how efficacy is perceived. However, each ritual practising member cannot have exactly the same perception of efficacy.

I was also aware of the limitations of my fieldwork in this area. My field study depended on my lived experiences, or as Amit described ‘by [my] absences as by [my] presences’ (2000: 2). Furthermore, although this thesis offers insights into the phenomenon of rituals in a Thai contemporary cultural context, it should not be assumed that the ritual performativity and articulation of experience is exactly the same across the practices of Parn Yak and *sak yant*. As Tambiah states, the specificity of time and space makes each ritual distinguishable (1979: 115); hence, there is no single answer for the interpretation of the cultural phenomenon (Geertz, 1988: 147). In addition, the issue of authorship is raised, as my ethnographic experience has had an impact on the fieldwork. The answers to my ethnographic inquiries are based on the particular rituals that I attended in my fieldwork, which represent only a few of the innumerable performances of Parn Yak and *sak yant*. In order to deal with ‘the burden of authorship’ (Geertz 1988: 146), the writing and perspectives from other areas are incorporated to provide a theoretical background for a broader interpretation.

Being aware of the limitations of conducting field research, I would suggest that further studies are needed to broaden the understanding of the experience of ritual efficacy. Through this research, I have realised that performance and experiential aspects of Thai Buddhists rituals as well as the perspectives of those who take part merits further attention. Future studies should include research on cultural practices in contemporary Thai Buddhism, particularly given the lack of critical studies on Thai Buddhist rituals in relation to their participants’ experiences, as discussed in Chapter 1.For example, studies of Parn Yak carried out by Chanhorm (2000) and Yindee (2000) suggest that, due to their respondents’ insufficient knowledge of Buddhist practices and *suttas*, the sense of efficacy established derives mostly from self-deception. Such research exemplifies the lack of attention given to the experience of those who participate in cultural performances. Through my participation in and observation of the practices of Parn Yak, I have witnessed ritual participants who underwent the total ritual process—that is, entered the ritual space, performed acts of worship, participated and chanted in preliminary rituals, and were sprinkled with consecrated water. I had conversations with correspondents in which they expressed feeling “cool”, “calm”, “fresh” or having “goose bumps” during their

experience of the ritual. They further revealed that their participation contributed to a sense of therapeutic transformation (as previously discussed in Chapter 5). These accounts stress the importance of the embodied process that is activated during the lived experience of ritual—an idea that has become central to this study. Understanding ritual as an embodied phenomenon has enabled this thesis to fill the gap in the existing research literature of Thai Buddhist rituals by exploring questions regarding how a sense of ritual efficacy is constructed, articulated, and valued by respondents. In doing so, this information has contributed to the groundwork for future studies of Thai ritual practices as a form of cultural performance.

The aspects of performance studies, with their capacity to engage with the spatio-temporal dynamic of lived experience, have provided the means to approach the dynamics and fluidity of the embodied process of ritual. However, Bell, in her argument for studying ritual through aspects of performance stated that "to approach something as "performance" implied a general formula for explaining it" (Bell, 1998: 218). I would argue that there is no general formula when examining ritual as to its nature of being performance. As discussed earlier, performance directly engages with 'liveness'; therefore it operates with the embodied presence of those who attend and within a specific spatio-temporal landscape. Hence, through the performance perspective, ritual cannot be treated as, in Bell's words, a 'universal phenomenon' (ibid).

Furthermore, in his study of Catholic healing rituals, Csordas stressed how performance perspectives can help grasp "the experiential specificity of [ritual] participants" (1996: 94), stating that a performance approach can:

> offer analytic purchase on experiential specificity of [ritual] participants by allowing us to ask in what manner participants in religious healing become existentially engaged in the healing process (ibid).

Performance studies, according to Schechner, "is intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural—and therefore inherently unstable" (2006: 360). Concurring with Csordas' and Schechner's statements, I would also add that due to performance's nature of being ephemeral and unfixed, perspectives from performance studies have enabled my research to provide a deeper

understanding of the significance of lived experience in the therapeutic transformation process. Grimes asserts, “I do not find practice theories any more precise or coherent than performance theories […]” (2008: 136). At the moment of completing this thesis, I found that theories of performance had offered this thesis a precise and coherent analytic framework to position the sense of ritual efficacy at the centre of the embodied experience. I would agree with Grimes who also points out that “there is no inherent incompatibly between the two kinds of theory [i.e., practice theories and theories from performance studies]”. By being situated broadly in the field of performance studies, this thesis adopts and utilises the methodologies and discourses from areas such as anthropology, sociology, and Buddhist studies to deliver a clearer understanding of the embodiment of efficacy in Thai ritual performance.

In addition, this thesis has demonstrated the potential for using applied drama to explore the mechanism of two forms of trance-possession rituals in relation to the way in which their efficacy is perceived, conceptualised and articulated. Of all the performance theories in use today, I suggest that applied drama, to some degree, may fulfil Grimes’s notion of the need for a more systematic and critical theory when exploring the process of embodiment and therapeutic transformation. The strength of applied drama is the theoretical awareness of the therapeutic potentiality of performance and directly and richly engages in the ways in which the participants develop and express a sense of therapeutic transformation through their involvement.

Given an understanding of therapeutic transformation as being culturally articulated, this research may contribute to a greater comprehension of the impact of the surrounding socio-cultural aspects towards the embodied experience of the performance practices for therapeutic purposes. The practical implication of the research offers a different perspective for drama practitioners to discern the practices developed by scholars from other cultures. Understanding the mechanism of cultural embodied practices for therapeutic purpose can contribute to the ongoing development of applied drama practices in Thailand. Since there are few applied drama practices in Thailand with practitioners trained in the West, I suggest that this thesis may bridge the gap

between the work of applied drama practitioners in Thailand and the context in which they work.

Rather than creating a completely new model to analyse ritual efficacy, this research offers an alternate lens to investigate the way in which the sense of therapeutic efficacy of performance practices is conceptualised and articulated within a specific cultural context. This application, in turn, may enable us to develop an applied drama discipline for its own sake. As Bjørn Rasmussen asserted in his talk at the opening of the Centre for Applied Theatre Research at Griffith University,

> If we could see applied drama and theatre as applications to cultural contexts, more than inferior applications from theatre, we should see not one or three methods, but hundreds of distinctive approaches emerging from a number of sets of complex contexts including leader and participator life and professional experience, age, time, cultural and political settings […] (2000: 4).

From the onset of this thesis, I found myself in agreement with Nicholson's idea of raising questions about the values of applied drama.

> Applied drama/theatre is perhaps most helpfully regarded […] as a way of conceptualizing and interpreting theatrical and cultural practices that are motivated by the desires to make a difference to the lives of others (Nicholson, 2005: 15).

As a seminal writer in the field, Nicholson suggests using applied drama as an analysis frame for a broader context; however, she did not take the idea further in her work. She only discussed and offered some issues emerging from her own practice that, in her words, "might be applied to a number of different situations and practices" (ibid). In this thesis, I have attempted to adopt Nicholson's suggestion to challenge the way applied drama is utilised as a lens for conceptualizing and interpreting other practices. This thesis demonstrates the possibility of applied drama beyond a set of performance practices, but as a useful framework for examining cultural performances.

On completion of this thesis, I have come to realise that there are a number of other possible approaches to the exploration of ritual performance in other

disciplines. This realisation can illuminate the path for further studies. For example, instead of focusing only on Western concepts such as applied drama, I see the potential for applying other theoretical ideas and perspectives from Buddhist philosophy as a future methodological framework to examine the process of therapeutic transformation in performance practices. Throughout the undertaking of this research, I have found that that the perspectives and discourses from Theravada Buddhist philosophy richly engage with the notion of 'liveness', 'presence' and the experience as an embodied process. The practices of Buddhism and performance share a quality of embodiment. The theoretical framework from Buddhist philosophy may provide other alternate 'lenses' to explore cultural performances.

Appendices

Appendix A

Lists of the Parn Yak rituals in which I conducted fieldwork:

1. Wat Noinai [Thai: วัดน้อยใน], Nonthaburi province [Thai: จังหวัดนนทบุรี], 2nd December 2006.
2. Wat Boonrod [Thai: วัดบุญรอด], Bangkok [Thai: กรุงเทพ], 1st April 2007.
3. Wat Juntharam [Thai: วันจันทาราม], Ratchaburi province [Thai: จังหวัดราชบุรี], 7th April 2007.
4. Wat Nongkodsiriwat [Thai: วัดหนองกรดสิริวัฒน์], Supanburi province [Thai: จังหวัดสุพรรณบุรี], 15thApril 2007.

The temple where I observed the practice of Sak Yant:

Wat Bang Phra [Thai: วัดบางพระ], Nakhon Pathom province [Thai: จังหวัดนครปฐม], March-April 2009, January 2011and June 2012.

Appendix B

Examples of the questions asked in conversations with ritual participants during field studies:[476]

Parn Yak:

1. How do you feel about participating in rituals?
2. Why do you attend Parn Yak?
3. Do you believe in the spiritual power of monks in rituals?
4. Have you ever been in trance-possession? If so, what is the experience and feeling during this state?
5. How do you feel when you see other participants in trance-possession?
6. How have the rituals in which you participate helped you in your daily life?
7. Have you participate in Parn Yak before? If so, how often have you attended?
8. Please tell me about yourself, i.e. age, occupation and address.

Sak yant:

1. How do you feel about having *yant* tattoos on your body?
2. Do you believe in the spiritual power of your tattoo master(s)?
3. Do you believe that the tattoo(s) on your bodies contain spirits? Do you have any experience regarding the power of your tattoo(s)?
4. Have you ever been in trance-possession? If so, what is the experience and feeling during this state
5. If have more than one *yant* tattoo, do they come from the same master?
6. Have you ever attended the *wai kru* ritual? If so, please describe your experiences with *wai kru.*

In what ways have the *wai kru* rituals helped you in your daily life?

[476]These are only some examples of questions, as the data was mostly gathered by informal conversations during my ethnographic experiences. Therefore, the questions depended on the situation, and are not presented in any particular order.

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