

**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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