ANCESTRAL SPIRIT MEDIUMSHIP IN SOUTHERN THAILAND: 
THE NORA PERFORMANCE AS A SYMBOL OF 
THE SOUTH ON THE PERIPHERY OF A BUDDHIST NATION-STATE

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By 
Marlane P. Guelden

Dissertation Committee:
Christine R. Yano, Chairperson 
Alice G. Dewey 
Heather Young Leslie 
Andrew Arno 
Barbara Watson Andaya
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ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, new forms of spirit mediumship emerged in urban Thailand. Spirits and their mediums answered the modern needs of clients as the country underwent a major transition from an agriculture-based society to a globalized industrial economy. Meanwhile, there has been a weakening in state Buddhism and an increase in small, independent religious groups.

In the far south of Thailand, one of the earliest forms of spirit mediumship is coping with these economic, social, and religious changes. Nora is a genre of dance-drama performance, which arose as a way to communicate with ancestors centuries ago around Songkhla Lake. Members of the nora community consider themselves ethnically Thai, religiously Theravada Buddhists, and ardently loyal to King and country. But the nora rituals are influenced by Animism, Hindu-Brahmanism, Taoism, Islam, and other beliefs. Although the nora population is small, their performance has become significant as a constructed symbol of southern culture under nationalism. This dissertation asks the central question: nora is iconic for whom? In the religiously and ethnically diverse south, nora does not represent many borderlands residents, who are of Chinese and Malay heritage with their own mediumship traditions. Therefore the nora subculture illustrates the relationship between the nation-state and its politically contested and ethnically diverse margins.

My central research question is: how does a traditional spirit medium performance, such as nora, articulate with modern nation-building in Thailand in the 2000s? My thesis is that nora is iconic of southern Thailand and that this symbol has been co-opted by the central government to include nora in national identity. However,
there are also tensions as the drama maintains some separateness while blending with the center. This relationship is analyzed through three theoretical frameworks: nationalism and identity, religion, and gender. On gender, I argue there is increased participation by women and contestation of gender meanings. On religion, the research found nora is a syncretic belief system that serves rural communities but also gains legitimacy from association with Buddhism. This ethnographic study was conducted in the provinces of Pattani, Songkhla, and Phatthalung from 2000 to 2003.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SCOPE OF THE STUDY
AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Passing the Spirit: The Story of Nora Plaeg

When I first met Nora Plaeg Chanabaan in March 2001, the 81-year-old ailing patriarch was surrounded by a small entourage of relatives, all sitting on the spotless white tile floor of their quiet country home in Phatthalung Province. With a rasping voice made raw by cigarettes and a perfume drinking spirit, Nora Plaeg described the highlight of his illustrious career – dancing for the Thai King. In 1975, he performed at the National Theatre in Bangkok before King Bhumibol Adulyadej (King Rama IX, r. 1946 to present) and won first prize.

But Nora Plaeg remembered the day more for the honor that the King bestowed on the nora genre. He said, “After I finished the performance in the National Theatre, the King ordered me to perform for ten minutes in Chitlada Royal Palace. After I got dressed, I went to see the King. The King told me not to bow to him because my nora clothes are the symbol of a king. I’m proud that even the King gave respect to nora.”

Nora Plaeg was possessed by the early founder of the nora performance, a prince named Khun Sii Satthaa, who danced and sang beautifully through this human vehicle. But as the famed Nora Plaeg teetered on the edge of death, a crucial decision lay ahead.

1 Initiated performers use the title Nora. For others in the nora lineage, I use the respectful title of khun, equivalent to the Western Mr., Mrs. or Ms., on first usage.
2 Founder Khun Sii Satthaa received his costume from a king in an ancient Phatthalung principality, according to the legend. David Wyatt (1984: 61) writes that in the mid 14th century, there were many Thai principalities but few could be called kingdoms, like Lan Na at Chiang Mai. However, nora families refer to the ruler of the Phatthalung principality as a king, so I use this term.
He must transmit his spirits to a male heir. In fact, his oldest daughter told me, he had already died twice but recovered even while a funeral was being planned. “Taa (grandfather Plaeg) doesn’t have any nora ancestors. He can dance by himself; no one taught him. The spirit chose him to be nora because he is a particular person. When he died, it was like the spirit wanted to take him back, but he recovered. Taa has to have confidence that he can pass the spirit to the right person, so he can die. He has never passed the spirit to anyone when he was sick,” she said. “He will dance until he dies on the stage. I’m worried about him now because the doctor won’t let him stay in the hospital.” I asked, “When did he die before?” This time Nora Plaeg’s adopted son answered, “Last Friday.”

These temporary deaths meant the spirit urgently wanted to take him. The family had speculated on whether the spirit of Khun Sii Satthaa would go to his adopted son or real son, Nora Banjop (Jop) Chanabaan. This son is a 56-year-old rice farmer who lives in northern Malaysia and participates in a nora group there. The traditional rules of nora forbid women from performing certain rituals, and therefore the spirit must pass to a male relative, they explained.

This critical juncture in the passing of a nora leader came to a climax two months later during the 40th annual Teachers’ Stage Ceremony at a Buddhist temple (wat) in the same village. As the stifling May heat suffused the air, I listened to the opening spirit invocation at Wat Thakhae, believed to be the original place of the dance and the burial site for the ashes of Khun Sii Satthaa. The atmosphere was charged with urgency as musicians hit taut drumheads and the shrill whine of a reed flute pierced the air. Dancers turned slowly, outfitted in beaded orange-blue-yellow costumes, wearing long silver
fingernails, and gold crowns. Fanning themselves, about 250 people sat on blue plastic chairs and mats on the ground around a simple bamboo stage with a roof of nipa palm. Moderating the ceremony through a microphone, Nora Jop addressed the critical issue at hand: “There is a rumor that Nora Plaeg died from sickness, and that instead his four children will dance for him this year. But we have to wait for the judgment from the ancestors (taa yaai nora). If Nora Plaeg dies, the ancient nora in southern Thailand will die too.”

Four men assisted a feeble Nora Plaeg onto the stage where he sat on a cushioned chair and was quickly possessed by the spirit of Khun Sii Satthaa. His appearance caused a flurry of activity by mediums under possession. In trance, his adult daughter ran onto the platform yelling, draped him in a white sheet, put her foot on him, and pointed with her finger assertively. A woman cried on his shoulder as others sprayed him with perfume and flowers. After a few minutes, Nora Plaeg was led off. But on the final day of the ceremony, he appeared again when a motorcycle pulled up with the weak man propped up between two helpers. As Nora Plaeg was assisted onto the stage, Nora Jop suddenly bowed down at his feet. The father put his foot on his son’s back and instantly the spirit was transferred. There was stunned silence as the audience slowly realized the meaning of the gesture. Then middle aged female mediums began to sing and cry loudly as the helpers lowered Nora Plaeg onto a chair. Shortly, he exited the stage, touching bowed heads and acknowledging people with a wave of his hand. Then Nora Jop put on the nora costume and danced in a rapturous trance in the midst of swirling mediums.
Two months later, I received a call that Nora Plaeg had died. The King was sending a royal cremation flame by airplane from Bangkok to the Hat Yai airport. Government officers dressed in immaculate white uniforms would escort it to a multiple tiered wooden altar, decorated with purple cloth bunting and flowers, erected in the village. It was an unusually grand funeral for this rural farming region for a man who once danced for the King.

In the story of Nora Plaeg, we witness the dual loyalties of nora people. They believe both in the spirits of their ancestors based on Animism and in the nation’s religion of Buddhism. They serve both an ancient southern kingdom, where the art originated, and the Thai monarchy in the “imagined community” of the nation (Anderson 1983). The evolution and tensions of the nora tradition representing both the local and national are the subjects of this research.

Central Research Question

My central research question is how and why does a traditional spirit medium performance, such as nora, articulate with modern nation-building in Thailand in the 21st century? My thesis is that nora is iconic of southern Thailand and that this symbol has been co-opted by the central government to include nora in Thai national identity. This dissertation will trace how and why this came about. The nora performance illustrates the relationship between the nation-state and its margins both in the past and in the modern

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3 Nora Plaeg’s surviving wife, Pian Chanabaan, assisted in producing a funeral booklet in 2002, which provided information on the funeral arrangements. The Thai King is identified with incarnations of the Hindu gods Vishnu and Indra. This practice of sending a flame appears to connect the King with the Hindu god of fire, Agni.
era. As described more fully below, *nora* performance is significant in three discursive areas: nationalism and identity, religion, and gender.

The reason for this study is that there has been a weakening in state Buddhism in the late modern era and a concurrent increase in small religious sects and spirit mediumship in Thailand and other countries in Southeast Asia (Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall 1994). Recently, the resurgence of a Malay Muslim separatist movement in the deep south has made this type of inquiry even more pertinent. There is a need for greater understanding of religious expression that is both on the margins of the national religion and on the edges of the nation.

I undertook this ethnographic study of spirit mediumship from October 2000 to March 2003 (two years and five months), and later I periodically attended *nora* ceremonies until 2005. The research concentrated on the east coast, southern provinces of Pattani, Songkhla, and Phatthalung, particularly the cities of Pattani, Khok Pho, Hat Yai, and Songkhla, and the villages of Baan Bo Daeng, and Baan Thakhae.

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4 The term “modern” is difficult to define both historically and culturally, as is the term “traditional.” According to historian Thongchai Winichakul (1994: 19), the modern era in Southeast Asia did not occur at the same time as modernity in Europe. In Thailand, historians consider the 19th century resistance against European colonial powers as the beginning of the modern era. But Thongchai remarked that the term “modern” usually embodies positive characteristics such as progress and refers to the West. However, the opposite term “traditional” is often seen as backward and inferior, he wrote.

5 In this dissertation, I refer to Buddhism as the national religion. However, there is no “official” national religion under the 1997 Thai constitution, which is liberal in regards to accepting other faiths in the Kingdom. Article 73 states, “The State shall patronize and protect Buddhism and other religions, promote good understanding and harmony among followers of all religions...” (Bangkok Post 20 June 2005). But in practice, Theravada Buddhism has long been the nation’s religion and the king must be a Buddhist. On June 20, 2005, 100 monks and 500 laypersons demonstrated at Parliament in Bangkok for the constitution to be changed to make Buddhism the official religion.

6 Anthropologist Saroja Devi Dorairajoo (2002: 2-3) reported that Thai-Malay Muslims in the south call themselves *nayu*, from the word *Melayu*, referring to Malays in Malaysia. *Nayu* however is a complex term used by Malays to differentiate themselves from Thai-Buddhists, as well as serving other functions.
What is *Nora*?

*Nora* is a genre of dance-drama performance, which arose as a way to communicate with ancestors through song, dance, and spirit possession in southern Thailand. Academics consider the performance to be the earliest form of Siamese dance, which influenced other genres. Ancestor spirits dance, sing, and speak through their descendants' bodies when possessing. The spirits select certain persons in the lineage to be regularly possessed, often forcing the role on the reticent offspring though coercive means like illness. Over the years, a relationship develops. The spirit medium invites the spirit to enter the body and control all its functions – speaking, dancing, singing, and eating. The actual onset of possession occurs very quickly, indicated by the shaking of head and limbs for a few moments. This trance state might last a few minutes or hours. When the spirit leaves, the medium often falls back in an exhausted condition, looking dazed and professing amnesia. But not all *nora* leaders and descendants have the ability to enter possession, determined by astrological and other factors. But all can communicate with ancestors through such means as offerings, song, and dance.

Although the population of persons who identify themselves as *nora* is rather small, probably a few thousand, the tradition is significant beyond its size as a symbol of southern Thai culture and identity. *Nora* exists only in southern Thailand and northern Malaysia. It is concentrated on the east coast of the southern peninsula around Songkhla Lake, the largest in-land body of water in the country. The region is known for the cities

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7 As discussed in Chapter 3, there are many historical terms for the *nora* genre, such as *nora chatri* and *manora*. What I am calling *nora* throughout this work is variously dubbed as *maanoora*, *manora*, *manohra* or *nooraa* due to different systems of transliteration of Romanization. I am using the term “dance-drama” because this is commonly applied to Thai performances. However, I consider the *nora* ceremony to be more of a ritual, which utilizes performance.
of Phatthalung, Songkhla, and Nakhon Si Thammarat and for the Sathingphra Peninsula, the site of many early religious monuments. Although the date is in dispute, several scholars have argued that nora appeared in what is today southern Thailand between the 11th to 15th centuries or earlier (Brandon 1993, Pittaya 1992, Udom 1999b). Indian dance and religion, specifically Hindu-Brahmanism, probably influenced the genre.

Over the years, nora performances divided into two main streams: one for public entertainment as a vaudeville-type show and the other consisting of spiritual rituals to satisfy ancestors and fulfill vows. This research focuses on the latter ritual stream as represented by the most sacred Teachers’ Stage Ceremony (nora roong khruu), which descendants hold yearly. However, nora spirit possession ceremonies and entertainment intertwine in multiple ways as troupes try to satisfy both the ancestors and the public to survive.

Nora is a religious performance based on agricultural village culture. Independent individual families practice this belief system, employing an oral tradition with many variations. The believers describe themselves as Thai in ethnicity and adherents of Theravada Buddhism. I found that nora identity is not restricted to biological family lines and can be an achieved status. Therefore, persons may become nora if they are possessed by nora spirits, perform nora dancing and singing, believe strongly in the nora spirits, or are part of a loosely defined southern family of ethnic Thai Buddhists (see

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8 The word “Tai” is often used to refer to various ethnic groups, while the word “Thai” refers to persons with Thai nationality (Swearer 1995: 175). In a nationalistic move, the name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939, a change believed by some to show that the Tai rather than the Chinese ran the nation (Wyatt 1984: 253). The new terminology identified Tai ethnicity with Thai nationality, marginalizing those with other ethnic backgrounds. However, scholars have challenged the concept of Tai ethnicity and who would be included under that label. To identify Thai citizens with different heritages, I use the terms Thai-Chinese and Thai-Malay. This is also problematic because there has been a great deal of intermarriage. Often nora persons, who described themselves as fully Thai in ethnicity, admitted to having a few ancestors from different backgrounds such as Chinese ancestry.
Chapter 6, Theme 1). Since *nora* identity is both achieved and ascribed, being *nora*
means a person can be part of either a real or an imagined family. I will refer to this
group variously as the *nora* community (or communities) or the *nora* family, using the
term "family" in a broad sense.

The performance is based upon a story about a southern king who exiled his
daughter for dancing or being pregnant. Her son became the founder of the dance. I am
calling this story the Phatthalung Legend. More than two centuries ago, members of the
Siamese royalty brought some *nora* troupes to the Bangkok region. There the dance
gradually changed into a drama honoring the monarchy, Buddhism, and central Thai
culture. The Thai government considers *nora*, along with shadow puppetry, as a symbol
of the south in its nation-building project. Many southerners also consider *nora* to be part
of southern identity, which overlaps with but is not identical to central identity.

Persons who speak of *nora* use the term in a generic fashion to mean a person,
genre, lineage, community, and title. At first, I was baffled by the cultural domain of
*nora*. Was it a person, spirit, group, ritual, performance, lineage, or genre? (see Ginsburg
1972, Yousof 1982). To cope, I made *nora* into an adjective and added a second
descriptive noun in parentheses, such as *nora* (leader, group, person, performer, spirit
medium), *nora* (spirit, ancestor), *nora* (ceremony, ritual), and *nora* (dance-drama,
performance, genre). This was my first indication that from an emic view, *nora* was a
broad concept. As a real and imagined kinship system, it was "a framework for
interpreting life" (Schultz 1998). Being part of the *nora* group provides a unique identity.

*Nora* mediums possess much like other spirit mediums but their *nora* title sets them apart
as something special. A young man in the lineage told me, "Another kind of spirit
medium is called spirit medium (khon song jao). But the spirit medium of nora is called nora.” Eventually, I became accustomed to the multiple meanings of the term. However, from this exercise, I learned that the varied linguistic applications had greater implications beyond the confusion of a foreigner facing a complex cultural topic. The expansiveness of the nora belief system and community makes it flexible and encompassing, capable of taking in new members and linking to other religious sects, I argue.

Another title for the performance also had greater significance than I originally realized. At first, I spoke of the genre as manora based on usage in academic articles (Gesick 1995, Ginsburg 1971). I understood the term nora to be an shortened version, as southerners are known for simplifying words (Ginsberg 1971: 12). But later two Thai professors told me that the word manora is associated with the Bangkok dramatic performance of the Indic Suthon-Manora tale, whereas nora referred to the southern ancestral tradition. In this discourse, nora symbolized southern identity, but manora was associated with central Thai identity. Thus even the name of nora expressed a separate southern selfhood. Apparently the name nora is a relatively new development since in the 18th century the performance was known as menora in the east coast of the northern Malay peninsula (Andaya 1979: 191, see Chapter 3).

I also discovered that nora spirits are not always beneficial and can be malevolent (discussed in Chapter 7, Theme 3). Nora participants regularly told me that the spirits have the ability to punish if not respected and obeyed. Their power to affect living persons means that the nora tradition will continue. Through coercion, the ancestors force the community to persist and be strong. Several researchers have mentioned this spiritual
duality of rewards and punishment in Thailand (Irvine 1982, Morris 1994a, Pattana 1999) and other countries (Carter 2000). I would ask, what is the meaning of danger in this relationship, what does it invoke, what things are dangerous, and what are the social processes that occur?

First, in this relationship, I argue that the living have ambivalent feelings toward ancestors who are both loving and dangerous. Researcher Walter Irvine (1982: 290) found that ancestor spirits in northern matrilineal groups were more benevolent than non-related teacher spirits who could castigate severely. He argued that these gentler ancestor spirits would possess women who were able to handle this weaker power. Irvine wrote that the ancestor spirits:

...are thus presented as reluctant to strike their own living descendants themselves. They are also thought to be devoid of the ‘heat’ which makes teacher spirits so dangerous. The ideology therefore, appropriately makes them capable of domestication through the ritual intervention of ‘soft-souled’ women, while the control of teacher spirits’ power can only be effected by ‘hard-souled’ men (1982: 290).

Similarly, in the nora belief system, descendants think of ancestor spirits as loving parents who provide guidance and rewards. However, there is a threatening side to ancestors who have the capacity to kill and can wield black magic when necessary. Ancestors are considered part of the Thai hierarchical structure where older persons, particularly family, have power over the younger and demand respect and obedience. This feeling of danger reinforces the status and power of the older generations in nora.

Second, my research shows that spirits punish the living for actions that violate the hierarchical power structure and threaten the continuance of the community. Offspring are punished for: (1) neglecting to fulfill a vow, (2) being disrespectful, (3)

9 At this point, I do not analyze Irvine’s gender argument about soft souls.
violating a moral code, (4) refusing possession, and (5) arguing with other family members. The spirits are particularly worried that the nora community will disintegrate, and they will be forgotten. Therefore, ancestors disperse punishment when their children stop the annual ceremonies, neglect to give offerings, and refuse possession. Usually nora persons will promise to perform a ritual that demonstrates respect and remembrance, for instance by dancing for the spirits, putting up an altar, giving an offering, or sponsoring a ceremony. Ancestors are disturbed when offspring disagree over property and money inheritances. Although retributions can be severe, descendants state that the intention of the ancestors is good – to maintain the family, a goal that is also valued by the nora community.

Third, in this relationship, a feeling of danger serves several purposes in the performance. The element of danger heightens the excitement of the spectacle. Because ceremonies attract many unwanted spirits who hunger for food offerings, these spirits may possess without warning or permission. Or nora spirits may possess suddenly because they want to dance. Thus, there is an air of the unexpected, unknowable, and fearsome. To my surprise, nora families, including children, often described these experiences as fun (sanug) although they seemed more frightening to me. As developed by anthropologist Victor Turner (1977, 1982), performance theory argued that cultures express themselves through ritual and theatrical performances which define, reflect, and transform society. Public performances are a liminal time when participants explore many possibilities of imagination, creativity, and play (the ludic). Applying performance theory, anthropologist Bruce Kapferer (1991: xi-xiv) showed how an exorcism ritual in

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10 In Chapter 7, Theme 3, I discuss types of messages conveyed by the spirit through illness.
Sri Lanka could change terrifying demons into powerless objects of fun, in a process of reflexivity, deconstruction, and empowerment. The nora performance also is an enchanted sacred space where the community can engage in “social metacommentaries” (Turner 1982: 104) and explore the relationship between this world and the next. Performing nora enables villagers to confront the terrifying power of ancestors and to imaginatively negotiate, appease, and share intense emotions with them.

In addition, I argue that the fear of danger serves the purpose of forcing the living to behave in certain ways to avoid punishment. In an unexpected way, this aspect improves the image of nora because it purifies the motivation of the participants. They have little choice but to give respect to the ancestors. Thus, this drama is elevated above other kinds of mediumship that critics say are motivated by money.

In analyzing how nora ancestors police their offspring, the concepts of philosopher Michel Foucault (1979) are useful to explore punishment and the body. He described government agencies using the human body for torture, discipline, and control through technologies of power. Sociologist Bryan S. Turner summarized this theory: “In modern society, power has a specific focus, namely the body which is the product of political/power relationships. The body as an object of power is produced in order to be controlled, identified and reproduced” (1996: 63). As a coercive technique, the punishment must fit the crime and affect others in society, according to Foucault. Likewise, nora ancestors force their will on the living, and sometimes their relatives, through physical penalties such as illness and mental disorientation. The nora drama also focuses on the body in possession. The ancestors demand that selected offspring give over their bodies as vehicles for communication, a bridge between the two worlds. Nora
people say this experience is exhausting although they remember little of their behavior when possessed.

Foucault’s historical research focused on power at the macro level expressed through monarchy and governmental bodies, but the nora ancestors exert power from another realm outside of state control. By these exploring power relations from the periphery as well as the center, I maintain that power is complex and works on many levels. Other theories on embodiment suggest that the body can be a metaphor or representation for cultural changes. Turner proposed a “somatic society” in which “major political and personal problems are both problematized in the body and expressed through it” (1996: 1). Applying this to nora, I argue that the body is used to express a shared rural culture, which resists the challenging discourse of modernity. The ancestors promote their concepts of proper hierarchical kinship relationships against newer practices of independent life styles, consumerism, and capitalist competition. The body is used to resist modernity. Foucault discussed resistance and deviance but minimized their effectiveness, while I see resistance as essential to discourses of power (B. Turner 1996: 7, T. Turner 1994: 40). Resistance also enters this drama in another area. Some descendants request permission to refuse the obligation to ancestors, citing their busy lives. Thus they are able to resist the spirits’ powers, yet they do so carefully showing the proper amount of respect.

**Theoretical Perspectives and Ethnographic Literature Review**

Anthropologist Janice Boddy (1994), along with other scholars, has recommended a multi-dimensional theoretical approach when studying the complexity of spirit possession (see Brown 1991, Lambek 1993, Tsing 1993). Therefore taking a holistic
perspective, I am approaching the topic by using three theoretical areas -- nationalism and identity, religion, and gender. Specifically Chapter 3 explores nationalism and identity while Chapter 4 discusses gender. Chapter 5 focuses on religion, particularly nora’s relationship to the syncretism of folk Buddhism.

Summary of Three Theoretical Areas. On the topic of nationalism and identity, I argue that nora is a symbol of southern Thai Buddhists, which the nation-state has co-opted to bolster and spread national identity into a border region of ethnic and political diversity and difference. This is happening now because Thailand is undergoing major changes due to global capitalism and Western consumerism resulting in anxiety about the boundaries of Thainess and loss of cultural traditions. Although nora communities have welcomed the interest of the monarchy and nation-state in the past, there are areas of unease in which local beliefs and values conflict with the national narrative.

On religion, I argue that nora straddles several religious worlds. Although founded largely on Animism and Hinduism, nora adopted many aspects of national Buddhism and thereby gained monastic support and legitimacy. Modern religious nationalism attempts to frame national identity within a state-sponsored faith. But historically, world religions developed symbiotic relationships with local belief systems. As a result, there has been accommodation and mutual benefits, as well as tensions and resistance. Nora is also part of an intellectual elite discourse, which pits reformist Buddhism against so-called superstitious indigenous beliefs. But subaltern discourses counter this viewpoint and instead champion pragmatic syncretic beliefs in rural communities. In this debate, the nora tradition is linked to both Buddhism and indigenous beliefs.
On gender, I argue that members of the nora community are contesting gender meanings. This reflects the redefinitions of femininity and masculinity occurring on the national level within modernity. Gender issues cannot be viewed in isolation. They are multifaceted and intersect with family, ethnicity, class, power, the nation, and international forces. Although women have been marginalized and religiously devalued in Buddhism, they have developed their own religious knowledge and access to spirits, especially female spirits. This change in the gendered power structure is happening quietly and with some resistance from both men and women who accept the cultural belief that men are more spiritually powerful. Nevertheless, the number of women participating in and leading nora ceremonies has increased indicating a shift in gender roles.

Nationalism and Identity.

*Constructing Thainess.* This study explores some key questions. For whom is nora a symbol? Why is nora a symbol? Why is this an issue now? I maintain that nora is one of a cluster of national symbols draw from different regions in the country. Nora has been absorbed into Thai identity partly because it blends with constructed Thainess (khwam pen thai) more than ethnic Chinese and Malay cultures, which predominate and maintain their own religious traditions in the south (see Appendix A: Three Types of Spirit Medium Practices). But this symbiosis is uneasy because many elements of nora conflict with Westernized concepts of development and science embraced by the central government. Also, nora families have their own agency in expressing identity and resisting national culture. Therefore, the nora tradition is composed of a variety of discourses and counter-discourses. For instance, women in nora are part of the Thai
discourse on femininity which subordinates them, but they are also part of the ethnicity discourse that privileges Thai ethnicity over minority groups (on gender, see Mascia-Lees and Black 2000: 100).

To answer the question of “why now,” I point out that in the past 25 years, Thailand has become an advanced developing nation within global capitalism. This process involved bolstering Thai identity and demarking the periphery of Thainess. I refer to anthropology and ritual scholar Shigeharu Tanabe’s argument that since the 1980s under globalization, the Thai nation has intensified its push for uniformity and control.

It has redefined and strengthened many boundaries, not only of the state territory with neighbouring countries, but also of the internal spatial, social, and ethnic boundaries of the people, and their places of living and working. These processes involve constant patrolling and surveillance of the boundaries by the agencies of the nation-state (Tanabe 1996: 5).

Therefore, the absorption of *nora* into the national identity extends the internal boundaries of Thainess in the south. But as a counter measure, we can expect local loyalties to reassert themselves, as groups tend to defend against being “swallowed up” in this process (Hall 1993: 354).

For the concept of identity, I draw on leading Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul’s theory of an internal and external dichotomy that separates persons considered Thai from the Other or the un-Thai. He argued that Thai identity has a vague boundary which does not coincide with national borderlines. Therefore, groups within the nation which are considered un-Thai are threatening to the homogeneous, bounded
sovereign nation. Most of Thailand's conflicts have been with internal forces rather than external ones, he noted. "To confirm Thainess, it does not matter if the enemy is relatively abstract or ill defined. The enemy must always be present" (Thongchais 1994: 168). I also use the theories of historian Craig Reynolds who likewise stated that identity has separated the Thai from the Other: "The power of Thai identity lies in its imagined capacity to differentiate inside from outside and in the process of doing so to hold the subversive Other at arm's length" (Reynolds 1991: 30).

Nostalgia in Times of Change. As Thailand undergoes a major transition from an agricultural to an industrialized economy, new discourses are challenging many of the constructed identities of the past - monarchy, Buddhism, language, and village family structures. Meanwhile a current, insistent debate on Thai identity proposes that Western culture is sweeping the nation and erasing cherished cultural practices and values. This identity discourse "...attacks the failure of modern Thai society in light of Buddhist Thai tradition, arguing that modernity, capitalism, and consumerism have uprooted Thai people from the fundamentals of Thai civilization..." (Thongchais 1994: 10). The advocates of this view have urged a return to basic values reputedly rooted in village life.

This argument embodies strong elements of nostalgia and the fear that traditions will be lost (see Ivy 1995: 10). For analysis of vanishing folklore and feelings of loss, mourning, and nostalgia, I turn to anthropologist Marilyn Ivy whose research on Japan

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11 The lack of research on these minorities reflects the Bangkok elite perspective that the country belonged to the ethnic Tai (Thai) (Anderson 1978: 211). Thongchais (1994: 13) also argued that the nation has failed to integrate "ethnic, religious or ideological" minorities into the modern state.
12 The Japanese government has argued that Japan is a modern nation, which has retained its traditions and taken only the best of the West (Ivy 1995). In the 19th century, Thailand's (then Siam) leaders advocated the same perspective in dealing with Western colonialists.
reveals striking parallels to yearnings for the past expressed in Thailand. *Nora* is about vanishing ancestors who are present but not present. At one time, ancestors guided descendants, but today their influence has waned. The *nora* performance is also about a rural society that is vanishing and family structures which are fractured, to use Ivy’s insights on Japan (1995: 20). Describing blind spirit mediums at a Japanese Buddhist temple for the dead, Ivy reported on attempts to communicate with the deceased and to momentarily hold onto the past through mourning. In a similar fashion, the popular Thai discourse features nostalgia for the vanishing village, which includes the older arts like the southern drama of *nora*. Just as the nation’s discourse on what it means to be Thai is grounded in historical narratives, *nora*’s honored pastness is essential to its legitimacy (Thongchai 1994: 12).

The *nora* tradition is placed in opposition to the forces of modernity, which are understood to be Western, threatening to family ties and community structures, and lacking in spiritual values. In this Bangkok constructed dichotomy, *nora* is aligned with the central government’s vision of Thai culture and with the state religion of Theravada Buddhism. Thus, Thai state identity incorporates *nora* as national identity. However, there are many cracks in this simplified polarity, and *nora* southerners have their own version of events. For instance, the national past is framed in terms of a lineage of kingdoms based in the central Thai region while the *nora* past is based on a southern kingdom. If nostalgia is a yearning for the past, possibly a past greatness or golden era, we must ask, “whose past is it?” Is it the past of southerners or a past of a central state?

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13 For questioning of this Weber dichotomy, see Day 2002: 7.
On the Borders of the Nation. There is a growing body of knowledge about diverse groups on the edges of the Thai nation (Chaiwat 1994, Gesick 1995, Hamilton 1999, Kamala 1997, Kammerer and Tannenbaum 1996). In the past, Western anthropologists over-emphasized the influence of organized Buddhism and tended to neglect other religious movements and local traditions (Juree and Vicharat 1979, Kamala 1997, Phillips 1976). That scholarship painted Thai society as homogeneous based on village reports from the Cornell University Project from 1947 to 1957, which were generalized to the whole nation (Juree and Vicharat 1979). Researchers lauded Thailand for having a unique, loosely structured social system (Embree 1950, Evers 1969, Potter 1976), which was successful in creating a dynastic Buddhist nation. Regional histories, beliefs, and rebellions were ignored (Anderson 1978, Juree and Vicharat 1979, Phillips 1976). Western support for Thai economic and national progress diverted researchers from the costs paid by the rural peasantry and ethnic minorities (Phillips 1976).

But today scholars are turning their gaze to outlying communities and borderlands. The concept of the nation’s “geo-body” emerged with a look back at geographic mapping and the historic suppression of fluid borders due to Western colonial threats (Thongchai 1994). Studies on identities at the edges of the nation deal with early wandering monks (Kamala 1997), distant villages with local histories (Gesick 1985), minorities in northern communities (Eberhardt 1988, Kammerer 1996, Symonds 1999), Thai-Malay Muslims in the south (Chaiwat 1994, Cornish 1997, McVey 1984, Surin 1985), and the educated middle classes negotiating identity in the south (Horstmann 2002). This shift in academic attention toward the margins provides the framework for
this study, which focuses on a small religious movement with an identity divided between the local and national.

Religion.

*Spirit Possession Worldwide.* This study is about spirit mediumship, rather than shamanism. As defined in academic literature, mostly males in hunter-gatherer societies experienced shamanism while females in more complex social organizations practiced possession trance (Bourguignon 1994; for shamanism, see Atkinson 1992, Harner 1990). According to the classic definition by religious historian Mircea Eliade (1964), shamanism occurred in Central Asia and Siberia among partly nomadic hunters. The shaman’s soul could magically fly to the sky and underworld to rescue a patient’s soul. Shamans had the power to control spirits. Conversely, spirit mediumship was a different phenomenon involving a person being controlled and possessed by spirits.

Spirit mediumship involving trance possession has long been a topic of the field of anthropology, which focused on small bounded communities in mostly non-Western cultures. The changing views in anthropology are significant for the current research because there has been a shift from a medical, dysfunctional model to the perspective that mediumship exists in most societies as part of local cultures. Therefore, I discuss here the changes in anthropological interest in trance possession since 1980s. Influenced by late 19th century Western scientific principles, secularization, and Darwinian evolutionary models, early research questioned the persistent belief in the supernatural (Howard and Mageo 1996, Pals 1996). According to the theories of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx, spirits were of little importance compared to the functioning of supreme gods in modern societies (Howard and Mageo 1996). Studies sought underlying causes in
psychology and medicine, theorized about hysteria and epilepsy, and voiced concerns that shamans or mediums might be pathological. But later research showed most spirit practitioners were psychologically normal and many were particularly intelligent and skilled (for overviews see Boddy 1994, Eliade 1964, Levy et al. 1996).

A cross-cultural study by Erika Bourguignon (1973) confirmed the universality of trance, also called altered states of consciousness. She argued that entering into an altered state was a “psychobiological capacity of the species, and thus universal” although use of the capacity and patterns varied by cultures (Bourguignon 1973: 12). I would add that trance states vary greatly and do not always fit the Western idea of a trance. From my observations in Thailand, entering into trance is quite rapid and simple, involving some retching and coughing and taking only a few minutes (Bilmes 1995: 232). Once in trance, the possessed medium remains aware of the environment and audience and may even look at the clock to check the time to depart. Even when a medium dances violently at a festival, the possessing spirit is careful not to collide with anyone accidentally. Some Westerners feel this type of trance does not fit their concept of what is real, and they are not convinced.

From the 1950s to early 1980s, psychology and functionalism were the two major theoretical explanations for possession. Freudian psychoanalytic theory defined spirit possession as hysteria caused by repressed unconscious oedipal desires from infancy (Breuer and Freud 1895, Castillo 1994). Influential researchers took a psychological case study approach, arguing that people used spirits as cultural constructs to act out emotional conflicts (Crapanzano and Garrison 1977, Obeyesekere 1981, 1984). Dissociation theory proposed that possession resulted from divided consciousness caused by extreme

In the 1980s, a paradigm shift occurred in which possession was put within a larger arena including class, identity, history, and resistance in a multiple perspective approach (Boddy 1994, Howard and Mageo 1996). The new theories looked to phenomenology, cultural knowledge, and deep interpretation modeled after a method called thick description (Boddy 1994, Geertz 1973: 3-30). The experience was reframed as an integral part of culture construction and communication (Hale 1997, Lambek 1993). Academics saw possession as an avenue for challenging hegemonic powers, whether consciously or not (Brown 1991, Collins 1997, Kendall 1985, Mageo 1996, Ong 1987, Sharp 1990). My research is grounded in this newer perspective of mediumship as part of cultural knowledge and construction.

The academic Lewis-Boddy debate, which focused on the women who dominated mediumship worldwide (Boddy 1994, Bourguignon 1973, Kendall 1985, Lewis 1978), best illustrated this theoretical change. Anthropologist I. M. Lewis (1978) claimed that women used possession as a strategy to gain material advantages and rebel against male
oppression. Possession cults were amoral and peripheral, subordinate to the society’s male dominated central religion, he said.14 Employing a more grounded, female centered approach, Boddy (1989) found the opposite phenomenon -- that mediums underpinned the moral order and were central to the society. She employed wider discourses of gender, power, nationalism, body, and performance. Scholars today apply Boddy’s use of theoretical diversity with even more emphasis on the construction and representation of the nation-state (Kendall 1998). My study is based on the perspective that mediumship is central to societies and particularly important in gender and national discourses. For instance, nora performers in public shows and advertising today represent southern Thailand, just as mediums promoted the Korean nation in Kendall’s research (1998).

Religious Nationalism and National Religion. In the late 19th century, the monarchy constructed Siamese identity to embody a combination of Western scientific thinking and rational Buddhist morality. Forest monks spread the boundaries of the nation and absorbed local belief systems (Lewis 1997: 338, Tambiah 1984). Later, constitutional leaders continued to civilize Thainess with a heavy emphasis on reformist Buddhism as a state legitimizing agency (Jackson 1989, Kamala 1997, Keyes et al. 1994, Reynolds 1991, Swearer 1995). This first stage of nation-building began with a popular narrative based on Buddhism, monarchy, and Thai language, according to anthropologist Charles Keyes (Sanitsuda 2004b). The second stage promoted this imagined community through the media, legal system, schools, central government, and religious bureaucracy. Describing the historical role of religions in Thailand, Laos, and Burma, Asian studies

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14 This popular functionalist theory explained why women were so prevalent in spirit possession worldwide. Numerous studies (Danforth 1989, Kessler 1977, Lee 1990) supported this theory, but others rejected it (Boddy 1989, Brown 1991, Kendall 1985, Lambek 1993).
and religion scholar Bardwell Smith wrote that political leaders “...made use of ‘religious’ beliefs, practices and institutions to provide cohesiveness to the realm and legitimacy to the holding of power” (Smith, ed. 1978: vi). Buddhism serves the same role today by giving moral authority to the government, although its influence appears to be decreasing in the face of modernity (Jackson 1997). Anthropologist John Bowen described religion in the modern state as a rather new construction linked with national culture:

What we may call “religious nationalism” involves the construction of an idealized nation in religious terms and the construction of an idealized religion in national terms. The identification of religion and the nation is not ancient or primordial; it is part of the recent history of modern nation-states. It involves active efforts by religious and political leaders to convince people that national identity is essentially that of a particular religion... (1998: 235).

However, he noted that the concept of separate and exclusive religions founded on one sacred text is a relatively recent Western model from Christianity and Judaism. People in many Eastern countries, such as China, India, and Japan, follow a combination of faiths without apparent conflict including Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto, Hinduism, and Animism. These religions use a variety of texts; some blended (Bowen 1998: 23). In Japan, many people combine different religious practices, commonly seeking practical help from Shinto for everyday problems and then turning to Buddhism for death rituals (Reader 1991, Reader and Tanabe 1998). The syncretism of nora, especially combined with Thai folk Buddhism, is reflective of this Eastern model, I propose.

Mediumship and the State. In Thailand, marginalized professional spirit mediums, who today are often charged with being superstitious, immoral, and not really Buddhists, are in the middle of the fray over what it means to have Thai identity. Their
position must be viewed within the context of an apparent decline in the power of state-sponsored Buddhism with the arrival of the boom economy (Jackson 1997, 1999ab, Keyes 1999). These conditions are making it possible for alternative religious ideologies to blossom, a phenomenon also occurring in other East and Southeast Asian countries (Apinya 1993, Barker 1997, Keyes et al. 1994, Lee and Ackerman 1997). Although scholars had once predicted that religion would fade away with positivism, in actuality religious beliefs and other such "primordial attachments" (Geertz 1973: 259) have persevered, answering difficult questions about mortality and identity (Keyes et al. 1994). While scholars have focused on how state powers promote ideologies in Southeast Asia (Steedly 1999), mediumship is usually relegated to the lesser sphere of local culture.

Some academics have focused on Thai public and government discourses on mediumship. Thai anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa was insightful in applying Foucault's discourse analysis to show how the government and Buddhist monkhood used a "hegemonic discourse on religious beliefs and practices through the national media" (1998:1).\(^{15}\) His analysis focused on a so-called "black sheep" Thai-Chinese medium who after 26 years of practice exposed himself as a fraud on a national Army television channel in 1997 (Morris also analyzed this medium, 2000: 333).\(^{16}\) Tricks of self-mutilation were revealed and performed on the show. The program promoted the official government view that mediums were superstitious, anti-Buddhist frauds who impeded modernity with their irrationality. Meanwhile the counter-discourse by members of the public and by the cults themselves reasoned that mediums provided emotional and moral

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\(^{15}\) Pattana's dissertation from University of Washington (1999) provided valuable ethnography on the hierarchical networks of mediums, who hold annual ceremonies to respect their teacher spirits in several provinces.

\(^{16}\) On the believability of northern mediums, see Bilmes 1995.
support for clients who had unpredictable and frustrating lives within capitalist culture. Some of the public attacked the program’s organizers for offending spirit worshippers and the spirits themselves.

Pattana argued that the views of scholars, officials, and the elite were imposed through the media, as a technology of power, to control popular religions. The public’s counter reaction illustrated that many voices resisted the state’s master narrative. The central debate on mediums can be understood on two levels: whether mediums are fake or real and whether science or magic will triumph, he wrote. Despite the imposing globalized culture, regional popular beliefs are surviving because they answer personal concerns and provide comfort in difficult times, according to Pattana.

I found his analysis of government use of the media particularly insightful for my research because he demonstrated two competing discourses – the official versus the local. While the official viewpoint was spread through the powerful medium of television, broadcast into every village and marketplace, local views were still expressed through other outlets. These discourses also reflect Enlightenment concepts of secularization introduced through colonialism to Southeast Asia, although Thailand itself was not colonized. Despite shifts to the secular and scientific, one recent study on Malaysia found an increase in religious movements partly in reaction to Western values and economics: “In Asia the emergent industrial economies are embedded in societies where magic and shamanism flourish. This vibrant religious life shows no evidence of being submerged in the tide of modernization, secularization, and rationalization. Its capacity to accommodate industrial capitalism should not be underestimated” (Lee and Ackerman 1997: 6).
Also exploring discourses on mediumship, researcher Erick White (1999) framed the debate on mediums within larger historical changes. He argued that the authority of the state had declined which led to a proliferation of other institutions to fill the public’s needs (see Keyes et al. 1994). According to White, a “contestation over authenticity, authority and legitimacy” (1999: 1) can be seen in the mediums’ argument that they are good Buddhists. This debate was played out in print media accounts over some scandals, where tensions were between traditional syncretic folk Buddhism and rational reform Buddhism. Professional mediums have striven for legitimacy but public attitudes toward them vary and shift, White wrote. The public variously thinks of mediums as fakes, folk healers, or real mediators for deities. His analysis was particularly useful because White expands and complexifies the types of discourses, pointing out nuances in perspectives. Since my research found many overlapping, competing, and changing views relating to different types of mediumship, this concept of multiple discourses or mini-discourses was pertinent.

Addressing the topic of new religious movements, historian Peter A. Jackson (1999b) identified three “prosperity religions” in and outside of Theravada Buddhism that focused on making money. Although once on the periphery, these movements moved to the center with an upswing in the economy in the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. This new commercial type of faith, Jackson argued, did not demonstrate a religious decline but was the “productive core of a new, highly popular expression of religio-cultural symbolism and ritual” (1999b: 248). Arguing against dividing so-called authentic religions from commercialized faiths, he stated that religion and economy could not be separated. Jackson’s insightful analysis showed how spirit mediums were being brought into the
country’s religious core as transmitters of nationally revered spirits such as King Chualongkorn, King Narai, and the Chinese Goddess of Mercy named Guan Im (also spelled Kwan Yin) (1999b: 276). Also describing this process of mediums seeking legitimacy and moving toward the center, Irvine reported on mediums fighting communists in the north for the government in the 1970s. The link between nationalism and religious systems is especially relevant to my study, which connects national identity to the nora ancestral tradition.

Mediumship Moves from Villages to Cities. From the 1960s to 1970s, research on Thai spiritual practitioners focused on north and northeastern matrilineal ancestral groups which provided community solidarity, kept landholdings together, and partially controlled the reproduction of young women and sexuality of young men in villages (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984, Davis 1984, Hale 1982, Rhum 1994). In some areas, the so-called “cults” appeared to be an arena for gender contestation. This was illustrated by women’s physical aggression toward men when possessed and their usurpation of some male ritual duties (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984, McMorran 1984). In response, some men destroyed shrines in anger (Cohen 1984, Turton 1972). Such religious assertion by some women and backlash by some men might have parallels in the south where nora women are taking over more male roles. As these northern villages splintered from unequal development and an increase in landlessness, matrilineages diminished. Meanwhile a distinctly modern mediumship sprung up in cities, serving new capitalist,


In the late 1970s, an estimated 250 to 300 mediums lived in Chiang Mai (Irvine 1982). By the early 1990s, with as many as 1,100 mediums practicing there, an “explosion of mediumship” apparently had occurred (Morris 1994a: 165). This meaningful increase surprised some researchers who expected a reduction in such spiritual practices with the modern age. After the original research in the 1970s, further significant research did not appear until the 1990s on the north (Morris 1994a, 2000, Tanabe 1991, 1996, 1999), northeast (Pattana 1999), and Bangkok (White 1999).

Some of the earliest fieldwork in 1977 was conducted in Chiang Mai by sociologist Gehan Wijeyewardene (1981, 1986) using Freudian theory. He introduced many of the key issues discussed by later researchers – the existence of older matrilineal spirit cults that functioned mainly to protect female chastity in every northern province, the newer emergence of mostly female professional urban mediums, and the existence of a small but noticeable group of male homosexual and transvestite mediums. In relationship to my research, Wijeyewardene found that male mediums were similar to Buddhist monks and that spirits through their mediums supported Buddhist temples. Monks gave a partial endorsement of spirit mediums by blessing important ceremonies and eating a meal but leaving before the possession began. I found a similar symbiotic relationship between nora and Buddhist monks in the south. Nora leaders are compared to monks in sacredness, and monks bless annual rituals. On gender, Wijeyewardene learned that female mediums gave over their agency to male spirits. This has been a common pattern throughout Thailand until recently. Re-analyzing the situation 15 years
later, he noted the continuing expansion of spirit mediums in the northern city and the newer Chinese following of Goddess Guan Im. In contemporary urban society, the spirits dealt with “the stresses of modern life” (Wijeyewardene 1996: 471). I would suggest that the proliferation of mediums across the country today could be traced back to these early observations on the emergence of economically independent female mediums due to capitalist development.

Also conducting research in Chiang Mai from 1977 to 1979, Irvine (1982) analyzed spirit mediumship, concepts of madness, and nationalist discourses. The state had been promoting anti-communism and neo-traditional nationalism since the 1950s, particularly expressed through the concepts of the nation, monarchy, and Buddhism. Applying the idea of a “bounded entity under threat,” Irvine compared the village discourse on insanity and spirit attack with the national discourse on communists threatening an invasion of the nation and its institutions. Spirit mediums ostentatiously displayed their loyalty and improved their status by supporting anti-communist drives.

Irvine also identified two types of mediumship -- traditional and modern. Grandfather spirits and other spirits, who protected the land or were derived from legends, possessed traditional mediums. These spirits were identified with lower ghosts (phii), who ate raw bloody buffalo meat or had died violently (phii taai hoong). (I would note that the annual

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18 Although Irvine stated he was not developing theory, he employed the concepts of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Mary Douglas, and Michel Foucault. Irvine’s dissertation explored the understanding of insanity by the dominant Tai-speaking Thai Yuan of northern Thailand. He connected insanity with state ideologies of “‘development’, ‘modernisation’, ‘neo-traditional nationalism’, and ‘anti-communism’” (1982: 2). As relevant background, Irvine described the conquest of the Thai Yuan by the central Thai in the 19th century and the subsequent spread of central Thai culture, language, economics, and politics into the north. Rosalind Morris (1994) explored this theme further to understand the appearance of spirits from the Chiang Mai dynasty who challenged central government hegemony.

19 For example, some mediums said their spirits patrolled the country’s northern borders against communist invasions. Several spirit mediums were members of the right wing, anti-communist Village Scouts (see Bowie 1997).
nora ceremony also included buffalo sacrifice until the early 1990s, but these rituals seem to have disappeared.) Irvine wrote that modern Chiang Mai mediums instead stressed the morality and Buddhist nature of their spirits called lords (jao). The spirits were revered figures, such as kings from the Chiang Mai dynasties, Siamese kings, and Buddhist monks, who came to earth to make merit and defend the country. To further illustrate their support of the mainstream national religion, marginalized mediums held public ceremonies to contribute to Buddhist temples. In summary, Irvine described a historical movement of mediumship away from local earth guardians towards Buddhism, capitalist consumerism, and the nation-state. More recently, other academics have confirmed this trend toward consumerism into the 21st century. Irvine's excellent research is particularly relevant to my study in showing the interdependent relationship between local religious groups and the nation. He also identified the trend toward increased religious consumerism, as seen in nora vow fulfillment today.

In another major study in Chiang Mai from 1991 to 1993, anthropologist Rosalind Morris (2000) argued that mediumship related to people's origins by bringing the past into the present through possession. For instance, early founding fathers of royal dynasties commonly possessed mediums. When northern middle class people felt a sense of loss they told "narratives of origin," but these tales also included vacancies such as missing kinship ties and guardian spirits. The context of this theatrical experience about origins was the modern north, which had developed on the margins of the Thai nation within late capitalism. People used mediumship as a vehicle because it symbolized historical northern rituals and culture and focused on beginnings. In "discourses of loss

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and return,” mediums re-lived a feudal time in northern Lanna culture, with its lavishness and personal power, before the north was colonized by the nation. *Nora* families also expressed a fear of loss of traditional values and community. Morris described how mediumship was employed in a public cursing ritual to make a modern political statement that related to Thailand’s major democratic movements in the 1970s and in 1992. Those living on the periphery saw Chiang Mai as predating Bangkok and superior to the capital in moral terms.

Morris contributed to the dialogue on mediumship by treating it as a modern and expanding phenomenon rather than a leftover from the past. She documented that spirits served both capitalism and anti-capitalism and helped residents deal with consumerism and changing values. She presented a compelling argument for a macro perspective on center and periphery construction that is very applicable to *nora*. I found many similarities to my research. For instance, spirit mediums in *nora* are also possessed by local royalty from the past. And many *nora* families praise their communities for preserving family structures and ethics, while complaining that these values have been abandoned in the consumerist society, epitomized by Bangkok. I also found traditional versus modern and rural versus city discourses in the construction of local identity.

**Gender.** The following review of gender literature concentrates on these areas: (1) the debate over the relatively high status of Southeast Asian women, (2) the recent impact of modernity, (3) the role of women in Buddhism, and (4) women in mediumship. Although Thai research is beginning to make a contribution to gender theory, anthropologist Penny Van Esterik found in the 1990s that gender was “under theorized” (1999b: 275). The current research would help fill that gap by addressing the religious
roles of women outside of central Buddhism. When addressing gender, particularly within development discourses, I must first acknowledge that there is no single category of “women.” Rather difference divides women by class, ethnicity, education, and history (di Leonardo 1991, McClintock 1995, Mohanty 1991, Moore 1988). Also, hegemonic relations are common where women pressure other women into conformity with patriarchal standards. Women should not be seen as victims because they also practice agency, power, and resistance within a globalized economy (Moller 1999, Ong 1987, Steedly 1999). More recently, female scholars (Jeffrey 2002, Law 2000) have emphasized the agency and resistance of Southeast Asian women. But decades ago, the gender research applauded the unusually high status of women living in Thailand, rather than their defiance.

**High Status and Complementary Roles.** Gender traditions in the region follow varying models. Women in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries have historically been described as enjoying relatively high status (Andaya 1995, Reid 1988, Winzeler 1996), but authors have also observed gender inequality and ingrained stratified relations (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984, Cook and Jackson 1999, Jawanit 2000, Lyttleton 1999). The mainland Southeast Asian pattern generally had complementary gender relationships in rural areas, which contrasted with gendered hierarchical structures in the state (Karim 1995, P. Van Esterik 1999a). Writing on gender in island Southeast Asia, anthropologist Shelly Errington (1990) noted that while Westerners emphasized the egalitarian cultures in the region, research into this interesting phenomenon was scarce.

The debate on the status of women in Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia has been extensive. Setting the stage historically, historian Anthony Reid (1988) contended
that Southeast Asia in the 15th to 17th centuries had a “pattern of high female autonomy and economic importance” in spite of the effect of world religions such as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Confucianism. Women and men were not equal but functioned separately. Women were thought to have special ritual powers related to reproduction. Unlike India, China and the Middle East, Southeast Asian females were unusually valued, Reid wrote. Key factors were equal inheritance, monogamy, simple divorce practices, and matrilocal residence. However, Reid qualified this description by noting that women had less access to education because religions dominated by men provided education only to boys. Although the idea of a female ruler or queen was not acceptable to the world religions, some women ruled in Indonesia and the Philippines but not Thailand, he wrote. At a Southeast Asian gender history conference in Hawai‘i in 1998, some scholars questioned Reid’s claims that all or most women had high status in the region in the past. They particularly challenged the historical sources, which were largely articles written by foreign male traders visiting ports and indigenous texts by elite men.

The arrival of world religions, such as Islam in Indonesia and Christianity in the Philippines, lowered the positions of women significantly, some at the conference argued.

Addressing the concept of a Southeast Asian region, historian Barbara Watson Andaya (1995) concluded that one of the distinctive elements was the position of women. In the pre-industrial period, Southeast Asian women were equivalent to women in agricultural regions of Africa and North America. But Southeast Asian women enjoyed some advantages over women in other Asian countries, particularly compared to East

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21 He noted that Vietnam was an exception due to early patriarchal Confucianism.
Asia and India. The factors contributing to this higher status were common bilateral descent in kinship, important roles in agriculture and markets, marriage exchanges that were equivalent and did not require a dowry, and female roles in indigenous rituals, which were complementary to male roles. The involvement of women in strong local belief systems countered some of the effects of the male-dominated world religions, Andaya wrote. As early as the 13th to 14th centuries, Chinese records show Southeast Asian women were important in trading. Dependence on rice meant that women’s work was needed in this labor-intensive crop. The prevalence of a female rice goddess further showed connections between women and the spiritual side of fertility. However, the arrival of international trade in the 17th to 18th centuries, such as the pepper trade in Sumatra, shifted agricultural control to men who could travel longer distances from home gardens, had more capital, and were privileged by European traders. Despite these setbacks, Southeast Asian women have been able to maintain some independence in the modern era, Andaya concluded.

Illustrating that last point on women’s autonomy, anthropologist Sulamith Heins Potter’s early work (1977) found that northern Thai families were structured around women related by blood. Rather than being based on male hierarchy, this “female centered family system” provided many entrepreneurial opportunities for girls and women. In these matrilocal households, the husbands moved into their wives’ homes. Despite her praise for women’s authority in the home, Potter also reported that the

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22 Hanna Papanek and Laurel Schwede (1988) make a similar argument for Indonesian women, who were more active economically than women in many Asian Muslim countries. Society considered Indonesian women good with money and they worked freely in the markets. The authors compared Indonesian women with women in China, South India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and concluded that Indonesian women were in a better position because they did not live in restrictive patrilineal hierarchical families.
husband was the recognized authority as the head of household, and this role passed from father-in-law to son-in-law.

Another widely held gender theory among Southeast Asian academics has been the concept of complementary roles. Anthropologist Bencha Yoddumnern-Attig (1992, on "bilateralism," see Wazir Jahan Karim 1995) argued that Thai women were not subordinated. Traditionally men controlled matters in the public sphere such as politics and the economy while women made domestic decisions and were respected for owning the family land. In the past, sons were educated and daughters received the land as their inheritance, but today these gender roles are breaking down, she wrote.

In summary, Thai women have some advantages over women from more patriarchical societies but often their power is expressed in the domestic and petty trading spheres rather than in the wider public world of big business and politics. Women in the nora tradition have gained some power in the rural south from practices of bilateral descent and female land ownership. But they are limited in their career and religious opportunities due to gender stereotyping.

In Discourses on Women and Modern Development, As Thailand shifts away from subsistence agriculture (Bhassorn 2000), the strains on many women are particularly harsh, according to some scholars. Global top-down capitalist development with a male bias has eroded the rural economic base of many women and pushed them to migrate to cities for low paying jobs in the new international sexual division of labor (Bell 1992, 1997, Boserup 1970, Darunee and Pandey 1997, Whittaker 1999). But there were opportunities too. Young women have left the countryside in unheard of numbers, following routes formerly only taken by their brothers, to obtain urban employment and

Gender role construction was in rapid flux as women, like never before, were mobile, cash earning, and symbols of modernity (Mills 1999). As part of this modernization process, more women were marrying later and some were not marrying at all. According to a study titled “Why Don’t They Marry? Never-married Women in Thailand” (Erera 2003), the most common reason for women not marrying was the desire for freedom in managing their lives and money. Those interviewed also cited difficulties, seen as inherent in marriage, such as domestic violence, the burden of childcare not shared with a spouse, and unfaithful husbands. All these problems are regularly brought to spirit mediums in the south, including nora spiritualists, I would add.

The debate on women’s status has blended with a new debate on women in capitalist development, leading researchers to ask whether economic changes were bringing “new opportunities or new inequalities” (Darunee and Pandey 1997: 83). Scholars Darunee Tantiwiramanond and Shashi Ranjan Pandey concluded that the top-down, male oriented development promoted by the West and international financial institutions since WWII had actually worsened women’s position through industrialization, urbanization, and Westernization (1997: 88). A like-minded economist Peter F. Bell (1992) maintained that women were an essential ingredient in the globalized cheap labor force, a principle paradigm that had emerged since the 1970s. Studying labor migration to Bangkok, anthropologist Mary Beth Mills (1996) found young females experienced conflicts between being “good daughters” who financially supported their families and being “modern women” who kept up with fashions in the national discourse.
on progress and consumption (for similar economic tensions, see Potter 1977). Many women also ran into the restrictions of “capitalist labor discipline” (Mills 1997: 40). Similar cultural conflicts in Malaysia resulted in massive spirit possessions in Japanese factories staffed by young Muslim women (Ong 1987). In a book that described the effects of globalization on women in Asian countries from 1970 to 2000, the editors argued that, “Modernisation is not gender neutral. In the modernisation process women are ‘developed’ differently, often inadvertently, from men” (Edwards and Roces, eds. 2000: 1).23

Women within the nora tradition intersect with all these changing roles. They are the good daughters expected to support their families; they are the older women left home to care for grandchildren while daughters work in factories; they are the mobile phone toting youths influenced by Westernized advertising and tempted by the high profits of prostitution. Modernization is definitely not gender neutral. Society expects nora women, like other women, to embody proper Thai womanhood despite all the pressures and new opportunities surrounding them.

Women and Buddhism. Women’s positions within religion are also in flux. In Southeast Asia, the historical arrival of male dominated world religions played a significant role in the suppression of indigenous faiths where females had been influential (Andaya 1994). Today the vast majority, about 90%, of Thais are Buddhists. The monkhood is a large organized state religion in contrast to home-based professional mediums who are a small female-oriented, community tradition with great variation. Most modern Thai scholarship has framed women’s religious experiences within the

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23 This book covered Burma, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.
context of state Theravada Buddhism that does not permit female ordination on historical
grounds. Although the historical Lord Buddha created an order of female monks, called
the Bhikkuni Sangha, the order disappeared before Buddhism came to Thailand. On this
basis, ordination is not permitted today. Religious conservatives fight the ordination of
women, deriding the reform movement as Western style feminism. There is an order of
Buddhist women 13,000 strong called mae chii, who might be considered “lay nuns.”
They promise to follow some of the religious precepts, put on white robes, shave their
heads, and live in a Buddhist temple. But these women are considered lower grade
devotees, who often serve the housekeeping needs of monks. Thai society generally
views them as unhappy and destitute women who beg for a living (Sanitsuda 2001: 233).

Being born a woman is commonly believed to indicate bad karma from immoral
behavior in a former life. Meanwhile male monks are privileged as “fields of merit” (see
Falk 1999, Keyes 1983: 274). Buddhists who give them contributions can gain good
karma that provides protection and luck in the present. Women cannot touch monks or
speak to them privately for fear of robbing monks of sacred power or sexually tempting
them. Women’s magical powers are thought to be derived from menstrual blood, which is
defined as polluting (Terwiel 1994: 89-9, 112). Beliefs about lower karma and menstrual
pollution have been used to limit women’s roles in mediumship and nora leadership
positions (discussed in Chapter 4). The exclusion of women from the highest religious
role in Buddhism has led some scholars to propose that women may be turning to

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24 I am using the term “lay nun” for mae chii. These women cannot ordain according to the rules of Thai
Theravada Buddhism, and therefore they are not equivalent to nuns (bhikkhuni) or monks (bhikkhu) in their
religious positions or duties. Mae chii follow eight precepts. Mahayana Buddhism, prevalent in China and
Taiwan, allows women to ordain and several Thai women have taken that route (Sanitsuda interview with
Phra Dhammapitaka, also known as P.A. Payutto, 2001: 221).
possession for religious expression (Khin 1983, Tanabe 1991). One scholar controversially contended that Buddhist beliefs devalue women and push them into marginal roles as spirit mediums, nuns, and prostitutes (Khin 1980, 1983). And yet within Buddhism, there are new opportunities for a small population of women who are becoming meditation masters and lay nuns in all female nunneries (Falk 1999, Kabilsingh 1991, J. Van Esterik 1996, 1999).

In a 1980s, discussion on how Buddhism shapes gender, leading scholars debated whether women were more attached to worldly desires (Keyes 1984, Kirsch 1975, 1996). Scholars criticized such arguments for using Buddhist texts and rituals read as texts, rather than employing empirical research on women (Tanabe 1991, Tannenbaum 1999, P. Van Esterik 1999b). But many of these debates sidestepped what I regard as the key issue: the role of religious women who communicate with spiritual forces outside the organized state religion. In this regard, scholars have noted that the male monkhood was a “masculine stronghold of supernatural power” which did not look favorably on female spirit mediums (Irvine 1984: 318, Reynolds 1994: 72). I would add that most religious research focuses on Buddhism from a national perspective with little analysis of religious women on the periphery.

Female Dominance of Mediumship. Most, but not all, Thai mediums are female and most clients are female (Irvine 1982, Tanabe 1999). Yet the literature on spirit mediums does not concentrate sufficiently on women or express their voices (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984). Scholarly speculation on why more females in Thailand enter into possession has been varied and contradictory. Theories run the gamut from resistance against male domination, to assertion of moral authority by the powerless, to an
opportunity to act out sexually and aggressively, to a desire for wealth and power, and to a devotion to the spiritual (Davis 1984, Golomb 1985, Irvine 1982, 1984, Khin 1983, McMorran 1984, Muecke 1992a). Some argued that mediumship was a way of “accessing power,” and therefore, the practice was starting to attract more men. Men became conduits for the most powerful spirits and served an elite clientele (Morris 1994a: 52, 1994b).

While most Thai mediums are female. Most spirits are male. When possessed, female mediums undergo “carnivalesque” gender and status inversions to become womanizing warriors and wealthy nobles (Morris 1994a, see also Boddy 1994: 423). In their religious practices, some marginalized poor women have risen to become middle class or wealthy. They have undergone real-life status transformations by creating patron-client entourages and mediumship networks (Pattana 1999, White 1999). In many ways, mediums rival and challenge the sacred role of male Buddhist monks (Irvine 1984). For instance, in sessions with mediums, clients receive counseling on personal concerns in a therapeutic religious context.

Both gender and national identity theory provide insights into the spiritual appearances of deceased Siamese kings and ancient warrior heroes as hyper-masculine icons. The multiple spiritual appearances of King Chulalongkorn and Goddess Guan Im are prime examples of the heavenly world reflecting the current needs and attitudes of Thai society, according to academics (Nidhi 1993, Sanitsuda 2001). We must ask about the gendered meanings of women channeling the most masculine, holy, and culturally notable Thai spirits (Stengs 1999). Mediums embody the dynastic state itself when they

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25 For contested gender constructions in Thai history, see Jeffrey 1999.
become iconic kings, an act that can be viewed as extreme patriotism or an affront to the monarchy amounting to lese majeste. Such possession might be a graphic example of the nation’s geo-body expressed through women’s bodies (see Jeffrey 1999). Like Morris and anthropologist Irene Stengs, I also found that women channeled nationally known, powerful male spirits. However, I observed that more female nora spirits possessed female mediums who in turn became quite powerful in ceremonies.

Strong Thai gender ideologies influence women’s religious roles. Irvine described the belief that women have soft souls and thin boundaries, which can be easily penetrated by outside elements while men have hard souls (1982: 111). Therefore, men can handle the hottest and most dangerous magic without being harmed themselves. Irvine argued that Thais used a body model based on Indian beliefs in a “bounded entity in danger of penetration or destabilisation by outside agents” (1982: 138). This model constructed women as being medically different. They underwent monthly physical stress during menstruation and had soft souls and a lower karmic status. Further elaborating on gender differences, Irvine wrote that outside the monkhood, some men used Buddhist meditation to develop psychic energy to conquer wild animals, evil spirits, and threatening outsiders. Once ordained, men had access to mystical drawings and spells in manuscripts. But women did not have these skills or knowledge because they were refused ordination. Irvine attributed this refusal to beliefs that women lacked merit and had polluting menstruation.26 In addition, there are Thai cultural beliefs about an ancient lineage of teacher spirits who passed powers to selected men, called “doctors of magic” (Irvine 1982: 225). Possessing superior merit (baaramii), these doctors could withstand hot and

26 I would note that Irvine’s explanation for the ban on female ordination differs starkly from the official reasons given regarding historical lineage.
destabilizing forces and resist madness. Meanwhile, women also possessed hot magical power in their menstrual blood, but their magic was considered of lower quality. Thus, Irvine proposed that ideology around women’s magic simply reinforced concepts of female inferiority.

Irvine described the emergence of female professional mediums in Chiang Mai as both challenging gender roles but also acquiescing to patriarchy. He found 84% of the mediums were women, and some were making a profit. Mediumship “...allows women to exercise considerable power and influence over clients of both sexes and...to acquire considerable wealth...” (Irvine 1982: 321). Female mediums at times clearly identified themselves with the spirit lord and thereby expressed their agency in manipulating power that was normally restricted to men. He described one startling spirit medium session when three Buddhist abbots bowed to a female medium possessed by a male Buddhist spirit (Irvine 1982, Muecke 1992). He said the act was a “…blatant negation of all cultural rules about the position of the sexes with regard to Buddhism and the control of strong supernatural power...” (1982: 349). In contrast, Irvine also contended that mediumship was a venue of female submission. Generally, female mediums endorsed androcentric beliefs by saying they were only passive vehicles for the power of the male spirits. Sometimes mediums claimed to stop menstruating at an early age because they identified with maleness.

From my observations, the situation that Irvine described in the north more than 20 years ago, in many ways persists in the south today. He painted a picture of ingrained cultural and religious rules that work to exclude women from religious epistemology. However, I would not describe the current difficult and slow process of negotiating
gender power in terms of women's submission or identifying with maleness. This terminology implies that subaltern women have lost their agency. Rather I would say that nora women are working within ideologies of masculinity and femininity to expand their knowledge and roles, gradually moving from the margins to the center.

Methodology

Research Design and Site Selection. The original aim of the research was to study professional mediums in southern cities. Researchers first described these mediums in the north (Irvine 1984, Morris 1994, Tanabe 1991) and later documented them in the northeast and central areas (Pattana 1999, White 1999). I chose instead to study mediums in the southern region for several reasons. There was a scarcity of research on the south. While academics thought the north and northeast were the home of quintessential Thai culture, they tended to neglect the south, with its strong Muslim culture, as not quite Thai. Western academics also accepted a nationalistic view of Thai identity based in village life in certain regions (Bell 1982: 69, Phillips 1976). The south was seen as Muslim and violent. In the 1970s to 1980s, a separatist movement promoting an Islamic state was active, as was resistance by the Chinese Communist Party, making research into the rural deep south dangerous and restricted (Chavivun 1980). In 2000, anthropologist Chavivun Prachuabmoh told me she had difficulty doing her research outside Pattani City in the 1970s because locals warned that separatists might kidnap or kill her. However, in the 1990s, the academic perspective changed and interest developed in peripheral border groups, which had local histories, dialects, and identities, and sometimes challenged the nation-building project (Thongchai 1994).
Another appeal of the south was its diversity—in ethnicity, language, religion, and resources. The most notable difference is the large Muslim majorities in the four most southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun. On the boundaries between ethnicities and countries, people often emphasized markers of identity. Therefore, the south appeared to be a good region to study differing types of mediumship. As it turned out, I was not alone in this re-assessment of the region. In June 2002, an enterprising doctoral candidate from Harvard University, Saroja Dorairajoo, pulled together the First Inter-Dialogue Conference on Southern Thailand at Prince of Songkla University (PSU), Pattani Campus.27 The conference brochure stated, “This conference was conceived with the aim of focusing scholarly attention on the important but ignored region of Southern Thailand.” Academics and government officials tended to research the disadvantaged north and northeast and looked to the far south only on issues of political unrest, it stated. About 400 people attended the conference from more than 25 countries. To the astonishment of many attendees, the south suddenly was on the “cutting edge” of new scholarship.28

Having selected the south, I planned to live in one city and travel to others since this type of mediumship was an urban phenomenon. I chose Pattani City, with a

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27 Named after the father of the present King, the university spells its name as Songkla, without the ‘h,’ which differs in spelling from the province and city of Songkhla.
28 During the research period, three other conferences in Thailand provided some information on spirit possession and nora. (1) The 8th International Conference on Thai Studies took place in January 2002 at Nakhon Phanom, hosted by the Faculty of Humanities, Ramkhamhaeng University. This conference, held every three years, began 26 years ago. Thai and foreign academics, particularly Americans, have promoted it. Financial contributors included the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Toyota Foundation, Ministry of University Affairs, and smaller companies. (2) A conference titled Tendencies of Change of Songkhla Lake: History, Culture, and Developing Vision occurred in June 2003 at The Institute for Southern Thai Studies, Songkhla Province. The Thai government produced it for the benefit of Thai academics. (3) A workshop titled Plural Peninsula: Historical Interactions among the Thai, Malays, Chinese and Others was held in February 2004 at Walailak University, Nakhon Si Thammarat. The National University of Singapore, Chulalongkorn University, and Walailak University organized it. The Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore provided funding.
population of about 50,000, because it is a rather typical small city and centrally located for access to other provinces. The province was home to spirit practitioners from the three ethnic groups described previously (Chaveewan et al. 1986, Chavivun 1980). As the home of the south’s most famous Chinese goddess, Jao Mae Lim Ko Niau, Pattani provided an excellent vantage point for observing vibrant Thai-Chinese rituals, which were influencing shrines as far away as Bangkok (Hamilton 1999). The province also had a number of nora dance performance groups and Malay Muslim groups performing a similar ritual called mayong.29 Pattani Province is about 70%-80% Muslim and the rather recent influence of more conservative scripture-based beliefs can be seen in a stricter dress code for women (Horstmann 2002: 84).30

The first year in Pattani, I studied many forms of mediumship in this and other provinces. I found a complex web of traditions that interlinked, often sharing the same symbols and concepts. By comparing and contrasting them, it was possible to propose answers to key questions, such as why females dominated certain types of mediumship and males dominate others. As background noise to daily life, there were regular reports of violence. Often a bomb (raheut) would go off without much damage, apparently as a warning, but sometimes the effects were severe. Thirty-eight people were injured and a

29 Mayong is a Malay Muslim style of ancestor propitiation similar to nora. It is practiced in southern Thailand and northern Malaysia (Nuriyan Salae 1999).
30 The PSU Pattani Campus houses the Humanities and Social Science Faculty, which oversees the Anthropology-Sociology and Foreign Language departments. The main campus is in Hat Yai, which boasts a large university hospital, dental school, and education in the physical sciences. PSU Pattani Campus sponsored my research in conjunction with Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. My advisor was Ajaan (a Thai word for teacher) Prachitr Mahahing, a veteran sociologist who had received his university education in India as a Buddhist monk. The National Research Council of Thailand granted the research permit. Beginning work close to the university proved advantageous because several Thai professors provided references to people connected to nora and mediumship. I obtained student assistants through the university and a Thai professor gave me lessons in the local dialect. The Western foreign community was a tightly knit group of about ten persons who mostly taught languages, including German, French, and English.
boy killed at the Hat Yai train station in April 2001. Attackers regularly ambushed police at checkpoints and burnt schools in several provinces.

Although some blamed a handful of lingering Muslim separatists, many academics and social critics said the ongoing conflicts came from many sources – official corruption, territory conflicts between the police and military, and powerful well-connected people (called “dark influences” or mafia by the government) involved in the lucrative smuggling and entertainment business.  

Quoting an early leader of the separatist movement Wan Abdul Kadir Che Man, Bangkok Post columnist Sanitsuda Ekachai wrote that cultural differences and human rights abuses were issues. “The roots of the violence, he said, are mainly political injustice and oppression marked by the government’s lack of understanding of the Malay culture” (Sanitsuda 2004a).

On September 12, 2001, I learned of the attack on the United States World Trade Center and Pentagon. I spent an anxious month reading newspapers and waiting for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Tensions rose in the south with demonstrations against the U.S. My Thai advisor suggested I leave Pattani immediately. On October 12, I moved to Songkhla City in Songkhla Province, about two hours north. The Songkhla region proved to be ethnographically rich and the unplanned move was beneficial to my

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31 In the same column, Sanitsuda summed up the tangled mix of perpetrators and causes: “Many academics have analysed the causes of the southern violence. They point to the political oppression of ethnic Malays by ruling Thais who assume a cultural superiority, historical bitterness, a widening economic gap, the plunder of natural resources and support from international terrorist networks” (2004a).

32 This province is somewhat outside of the troubled deep south partly because it has an equal balance in population between Buddhists and Muslims. Being further from the border region and from the conservative Malaysian state of Kelantan, the Songkhla Muslim communities were reputed to be more moderate. For instance, many Muslim women do not wear headscarves and more people speak Thai language at home, rather than Malay. The foreign community is larger with about 200 Westerners, mostly in the offshore oil business and some language teachers. Oil interests often are a lightning rod for discontent, and the controversial Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline project in Songkhla Province involved numerous protests over several years. But unlike the situation in Saudi Arabia, the Thai southern conflict has not targeted Westerners.
research. The province includes the major commercial center of Hat Yai. Well known for its nightlife and cheap goods, Hat Yai attracts significant numbers of ethnic Chinese tourists from Malaysia and Singapore. Religious pilgrimage sites are new attractions. The result has been new opportunities for enterprising spirit mediums with Chinese shrines and Buddhist monks promoting temple development. The largest lying down Buddha statue in the south was completed and painted gold in Songkhla Province, ready for the tourist buses. Nora people also perform in Hat Yai, Songkhla city, and farther north along the peninsula of Sathingphra, and in Phatthalung and Nakhon Si Thammarat provinces. For another year and a half, I worked in this region, interviewing, attending ceremonies, and analyzing data.33

Data Collection. This study utilized in-depth interviews and case studies, participant-observation, translations of relevant Thai academic research, and the study of newspapers for social changes. Photography of public ceremonies and festivals was used for documentation.34

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33 I considered moving back to Pattani a few times, but the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 increasing tensions in the south. Thailand sent troops to Iraq for the reconstruction effort, despite objections by legislators, and two died. Then the U.S. awarded Thailand non-Nato ally status. Government critics said these moves toward the U.S. contributed to southern unrest. The southern situation radically escalated on January 2004 when attackers raided an Army camp and killed four soldiers, while others set fire to about 20 schools. On April 28, 2004. Police and military killed 106 mostly young militants who attacked police stations and staged a standoff in the sacred Krue Se Mosque in Pattani Province. And on October 25, 78 handcuffed protestors suffocated in overcrowded army trucks in an incident at Tak Bai, Narathiwat Province. More than 500 persons died that year in what clearly was a revival of the separatist movement. Whether one is in the deep south or on the edges of it, the whole region is characterized by the continuing legacy of early 20th century colonial border demarcations and the role of minorities within the nation-state. Mediumship is constructed in this “border of Thainess” (Thongchai 1994: 169). In the south, the boundary of Thainess does not end at the boundary of the nation but at the beginning of the four Muslim majority provinces.

34 This project is guided by the hypothesis that cultural constructions, particularly gender, are changing with modernity (Bencha 1992ab). Such culturally sensitive and nuanced changes cannot reliably be recorded on limited choice questionnaires but must be observed in behavior and understood through personal conversations (Bernard 1994, Pelto and Pelto 1978). When I approached this topic, I was aware of criticisms of overly vague qualitative methodology, but this research counters that problem by employing a wide variety of specific data collection techniques for soundness, such as triangulation. Therefore, the core
**In-depth Interviews and Case Studies.** Interviews were conducted with spirit mediums, their entourages and clients, social scientists, historians, dramatic arts professors, community members, monks, and others. Persons interviewed by category included: 58 spirit mediums, 30 followers of spirit mediums, 18 academics, 13 monks and lay nuns, and 29 others including temple committee members and the public, for a total of 148 persons. My research initially investigated many types of mediumship and later focused on mediumship within the *nora* performance. Three types of interviews were employed: informal, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews (Bernard 1994). In-depth qualitative research and participant-observation were essential to gain trust particularly with professional home-based mediums who have been devalued within the national discourse on religion. Therefore, home-based mediums tend to be suspicious of outside inquiries. They do not advertise; rather clients are referred to them personally. Permission had to be granted to watch a session and to interview both the human medium and the spirit. This meant convincing the medium, and later the spirit, that I meant well. When asked why I found this subject interesting, I explained that Western scholars were interested in the increasing number of mediums in Thailand in modern times. This seemed plausible to the mediums, who also were surprised by how many others were practicing. I credit my assistants with being my cross cultural ambassadors. They were young female university students who usually believed in the spirits and showed proper respect. Female mediums often took a motherly liking to them and offered advice and blessings for their educational careers.

**findings of this study can be analytically generalized in the southern region and stand up to questions of validity (Miles and Huberman 1994).**
In casual conversations with librarians, market sellers, and motorcycle taxi drivers, I was asked about my research. When I said I studied spirit mediums, usually the next question was, "Do you believe (chua mai)?" I replied, "I believe 50% and don't believe 50% (chua haa-sip percen, mai chua haa-sip percen)." The questioner usually immediately agreed that some mediums are real and others not. In the discourse on professional mediumship, an important tenet is that there are plenty of fakes out there. Belief is such a common topic that spirit mediums themselves discuss it easily. At first, I was rather hesitant to bring up this possibly sensitive topic with professional mediums. I was careful to state that I was not questioning their practices, but wanted guidance on identifying real mediums. But the question was eagerly answered, seeming to be a regular topic. I should re-state that nora mediums are in a completely different category than professional home-based mediums. Nora mediums are highly regarded in society and their possession experiences are considered part of their family obligation to ancestors, rather than a possible profit-making venture.

This research complied with federal regulations for protecting human subjects from the Department of Health and Human Services. Those interviewed were assured of anonymity, unless they specifically requested otherwise. Anonymity was preserved by coding their names and maintaining files in a protected location. Using oral and written consent forms, I thoroughly explained the project, use of the information, and compensation. I assured them that they could stop the interview and withdraw consent at any time. Although I offered to use pseudonyms, nora actors, who perform for the general public and welcome tourists, were proud to receive the recognition and wanted their names associated with the information.
As more spirit mediums were located, I was able to be more selective in interviewing. Purposive sampling was used based on the theoretical framework and research question. The sample included a variety of persons by sex, class, ethnicity, age, educational level, location, and other relevant variables based on an estimate of their prevalence in this population from other researchers (Marshall and Rossman 1995). For instance, other studies found that about 80% of home-based mediums and their clients are women. Also my research focused on female gender. Thus for home mediums, I sought a sample that was weighed toward female participation rather than a 50-50 male-female split. The data gathered provided insights into the variations among practitioners in the south, despite the lack of complete representativeness.

A list of questions for an interview guide was tailored for each interview. In-depth interviews usually lasted for one to one-and-a-half hours and were tape-recorded. During lengthy ceremonies, it was possible to tape record a number of shorter interviews with mediums and clients. When I was not allowed to tape record, which was rare, I took detailed notes. The interviews were often conducted in both central and southern Thai dialect. Being from the south, my assistants were a great help with the southern dialect. However, even they had difficulty with some words because dialects differ from one province to another. Having been a professional photographer for many years, I used those skills to collect visual data to assist the recall of details in complex public ceremonies and festivals. However, I did not photograph spirit medium sessions, which were more private and sensitive events.

To prevent loss of details, I wrote fieldnotes from memory the same evening or the next day and began translating the Thai language audiotapes into English within a few
days. With the help of my assistant, I typed translations into a computer, which took about seven to eight hours per 90-minute tape. During this process, I was able to discuss different aspects of the event with the assistant who had observed things that escaped me. She also provided additional personal knowledge about Thai culture. To avoid becoming inundated with untranslated tapes, I followed a pattern of translating tapes before conducting new interviews, as much as possible. During the translations, close attention was paid to the meaning of words and the best way to express them in English. I created two vocabulary lists of general words (47 pages) and religious terms (23 pages). At the end of the research, I had translated 103 audiotapes of 60 or 90 minutes in length, each containing one or more interviews.

Case studies were completed for three home-based professional mediums. For the case studies, a socio-demographic interview guide (see Appendix B: Interview Guide for Individual Mediums) was employed and revised throughout the study period. In this situation, it was necessary to create separate guides for two interviews – one for the human medium and one for the spirit. Obtaining all the information required three to four visits with the medium. The interview guide method has strength in gaining more ethnographically detailed material. Its weakness is its lack of wide generalizability and the limited number of cases that could be studied in such depth. To compensate the interviewees for their time and valuable information, I always gave a contribution in an envelope at the end of the interview. Most persons were happy to accept it. Thai-Chinese spirit mediums, who were attached to temples, would insist the money be given to the

35 It took some time to develop a Romanized spelling system of Thai words that reflected the actual pronunciation of words. Academics use different systems which is confusing for the reader (on the need for a uniform system, see Raendchen 1997).
temple instead. And of course no contributions were made to Buddhist monks, who should not touch money. But every temple has a donation box for this purpose. I did not give contributions to government officers or professors because such interviews fall within their job descriptions.

*Participant-observation.* During the project, I attended 39 festivals and ceremonies and undertook 41 research visits to temples, shrines, mosques, villages, museums, and cemeteries. I observed public and private performances including annual ceremonies to honor teacher spirits, birthdays of deified Chinese historical figures, and possession sessions in homes. The practitioners generally were welcoming and not offended by Western interest, as long as it was respectful rather than skeptical. Also my presence gave them added prestige because mediums who can attract foreign visitors are respected. I participated by being a client, taking my turn before the spirit medium to speak directly to the spirit. Often I was expected to ask something for myself, and so I requested a blessing for my research. Usually the spirit predicted that I would be successful in my studies. To speak with the spirit, the client is required to give a small offering of candles, flowers, incense and a few baht (about US 50 cents to $1) to show respect. In addition, I made a larger financial contribution, just as I did for regular interviews. At large ceremonies, I gave a contribution to help offset the expenses, and afterward sent photographs to the organizers.

The only dilemma I faced in participation was connected with fire walking rituals. Early in the research project in 2001, a spirit medium at a Chinese Hainanese Temple in Pattani invited me to join in an upcoming fire walking ritual. I considered accepting his offer to experience more thoroughly the psychological effect of the ritual. Passing
through the fire is a significant rite of passage for young men of Chinese heritage to demonstrate their purity, belief in a protecting god, and ethnic identity. My reservations had to do with the meaning of the ceremony to them. Although standards have been relaxed, participants are supposed to abstain from sex and drinking alcohol, eat vegetarian food, and generally allow the spirit to inspire, protect, and maybe possess them. All these purifying actions enable the miracle to happen. You can run through red-hot coals with flames licking up your legs without being burned, except for possibly a few minor blisters. Most Thais assumed that I was a Christian because I was from the U.S. Clearly, I was not part of their belief system. To run across the coals might imply the ceremony was fraudulent, that anyone could do it without harm.

Being a woman posed another problem. Only in the last few years have women been allowed to run across the fire at some of the major temples in Phuket, the historical home of the Vegetarian Festival. Now a small but increasing number of women are crossing, possibly 5% of the participants. These women usually go at the end of the event when the public is allowed to cross. The respected older mediums, who consecrate the fire and are clearly possessed, are all males and they cross first. As a woman and an apparent non-believer, I thought I would doubly put into question the legitimacy of the ceremony. So I decided against it.

Regarding participation, I usually was the only Westerner present at these ceremonies. The image I had of myself melting into the chaos of the event was quickly dispelled when I heard my name and “University of Hawai‘i” pronounced loudly over the

36 That said, I should add that a fellow Ph.D. candidate from Australia did run the fire twice at the Great-Grandfather of the Red Mountain Ceremony in Songkhla City. But first, he had to seek permission and protection from a spirit medium to cross. The experience was trance-like and exhilarating making him feel invincible.
microphone system at the Hainanese temple in Pattani. Later at the *nora* ceremony at Wat Thakhae, Nora Jop said into a microphone, “She comes here from America to interview Taa Plaeg. Even though she is a foreigner, she is interested in *nora*. But Thai people, who are closer to *nora* than her, don’t pay attention to *nora*.“ He added:

You see even American people would like to know about *nora*. They come here to give respect to Nora Plaeg and [his spirit] Khun Sattha. She sent us the photographs of Nora Plaeg and promised to come to see the ceremony. And now she has come. Some people may suspect that the foreigners will not understand *nora*. But they come here because Khun Sattha brings them here. She will record about the ceremony and print it in a book to sell in America.

In this case, the status of having a Western academic attend was gently used to shame Thais who did not give sufficient attention to the drama, even though Americans were willing to buy a book about it. My presence was also framed within the *nora* discourse; I was a trustworthy person for attending as promised, and the spirit had brought me. My Otherness had some status as a wealthy Western scientist, and I was held up as a mirror to Thai society to show what they had lost and didn’t appreciate.

*Research Data from Performances.* The following is an account of performances I attended to illustrate the range of events on which this research is based. The first *nora* performance I observed was at the annual festival for Goddess Lim Ko Niau in Pattani where a troupe from Phatthalung Province was hired to entertain the Chinese goddess in February 2001. A three-day religious ceremony to show respect to the *nora* teachers was held that same year in May in Thakhae village, Phatthalung Province. I attended this *nora* teacher’s stage ceremony for five years, from 2001 to

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37 Some persons, reputedly separatists, damaged this famous shrine in May 2004 as part of a series of attacks on Buddhist and Taoist religious temples.
2005, to gain an understanding of the ceremony over time. Also in 2001, a rare nora initiation ritual was performed in the district of Khok Pho, Pattani Province.

Educational institutions often hold large cultural fairs including nora performances. The PSU, Pattani Campus sponsored several nora performances, largely for entertainment but with ritual elements, at its annual cultural fair in July 2001. Rajabhat Institute Songkhla (formerly Songkhla Teachers College that became a university in 2005) sponsored a modern nora performance as part of its August 2002 annual fair. Periodically, nora groups would perform at local festivals as part of the standard entertainment. For instance, during the annual Vegetarian Festival in October 2002, a group of young girls performed a nora dance under a master teacher at a new Chinese Mahayana Buddhist university and temple in Hat Yai. A unique nora competition for the 14 southern provinces was sponsored by the government National Cultural Office at Rajabhat Institute Songkhla in August 2003, held in conjunction with nora performances at the institute’s annual fair. In May 2004, a teachers’ stage ceremony was held at Baan Bo Daeng, Sathingphra District, Songkhla Province during which primary school students took part in a ritual to introduce them to the art. This was the first performance in this village in decades and academics engaged villagers in discussions on reviving the art to improve community cohesiveness. In July 2004, an initiation ceremony was held at PSU Hat Yai campus under the direction of national artist Nora Yog Chuubua. These ceremonies over a five year period included the full range of performances from entertainment to high sacred ritual.

**Analysis using Grounded Theory.** This study is largely driven by theory, which emerged from the data according to the grounded theory method originated by
Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), and later refined (Glaser 1978, Strauss 1987, Strauss and Corbin 1998). I have included lengthy quotes from interviews to allow the voices of insiders to be heard and to enable readers to evaluate the analysis (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). My model for this format is the deep ethnography of anthropologist Serena Nanda in Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India (1999). The hope is that this approach will fill a gap in the literature by adding richness in detail from an emic understanding. I am labeling this method a modified version of grounded theory because clearly theory is not simply “discovered” from data. The imposition of outside theory is unavoidable as the researcher's theoretical perspective enters into the selection, organization, and categorization of data (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995).

A central tool employed is coding for conceptual categories, which can lead to higher levels of analysis and theory building. Although this is both an inductive and deductive process, as much as possible, codes were derived from the informants' indigenous categories or cultural domains in accordance with the inductive approach (Bernard 1994, Coffey and Atkinson 1996). The coded interviews were then grouped to seek similarities and contrasts and patterns appeared which become “core themes” (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). Within each theme, I looked for diverse voices and variations. This method also complements anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s (1973: 3-30) interpretative “thick description” by providing practical methods for learning the meanings of social actions from participants. Results were confirmed through triangulation.

38 Fifty-three codes were used including: black magic and deception, competition between groups, consciousness and agency of spirit medium, emotions, gender, inheritance, spirit punishment, ethnicity issues, relations between spirit medium and spirit, connections to royalty, spirit behavior, and taboos.
Personal Background

My interest in this phenomenon arose while working as a freelance photojournalist in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Thailand from 1984 to 1991. My then-husband, a reporter for the Asian Wall Street Journal, was posted to those countries. I lived in Bangkok for two-and-a-half years and wrote a book on popular religious beliefs titled Thailand: Into the Spirit World (1995). In the process of researching that book, I traveled the country extensively, attending festivals, visiting sacred sites, and interviewing mediums, scholars, monks, and the public. I glimpsed the deep significance of these performances for communities in transition, facing the economic and cultural uncertainties of global modernization.

Several factors got me hooked on what turned out to be a long academic journey. Through the eye of a photographer, the spectacle of possession and shrines with carnivalesque pomp and glitter was a delight (for photographic representation in the National Geographic, see Lutz and Collins 1993). As a feminist, I found the gender and class status reversals intriguing when a lower class humble woman would become a masculine commanding king. As an agnostic, I marveled at the strong belief that drew clients to the spirits for assistance on matters both mundane and profound. When I first saw mediumship, I had been out of the academic environment for many years and accepted the common Western view that the arrival of science and education would end such so-called “superstitions” (see Lee and Ackerman 1997: 6). Instead, I found that in modernizing capitalist Thailand, people of all classes were turning to faith in ancient personalities to deal with survival in uncertain times. Although journalism tends to study the surfaces, I wanted to explore the meanings of ceremonies in greater depth. My
thoughts turned to anthropology as a discipline dedicated to that pursuit. As a "mature" student of 50, I returned to graduate school at University of Hawai‘i in 1995 to gain anthropological knowledge to continue this research. Graduate school revolutionized my theoretical understanding of culture and women’s issues. In 1997 and 1998, I took two pre-dissertation trips to Thailand to meet professors and find an appropriate field site before beginning fieldwork in October 2000.

Since this is a study about religion, my own belief system is relevant. A third generation American with German-French ancestry, I was raised as a Catholic. But in secondary school, I became a born-again fundamentalist Christian and officer in a Youth for Christ club. Later as a young adult, unable to answer eternal questions with any certainty, I turned to agnosticism. Still today, I do not follow any of the main world religions although I believe in humanism and hope there is another life after this one.

When visiting spirit mediums, I do not ask myself if they are "real" or not. Proving their veracity is not part of my study. The believability of possession concerns me only to the extent that it concerns clients and mediums who critically judge the trustworthiness of other practitioners (see Bilmes 1995, Morris 2000, White 1999). I cannot claim neutrality, but I can strive for withholding judgments and applying "methodological agnosticism" (Hamilton 1995: 4-5). Many of the mediums I have met seem to be sincere people who are helping others.

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39 I find Thai mediums very accepting of this vague position, possibly because they come from a syncretic tradition that accommodates many faiths. For them, the crucial element in this relationship is that I show respect to the spirits. Rather ironically, my willingness to communicate with the invisible world was criticized, not by Thais, but by a few Australians. Fundamentalist Christian friends told me their religion forbade dabbling with dark forces, and they were disturbed that I did so. Being accustomed to the inclusive practices of Thai “folk Buddhism,” I was disturbed by this lack of tolerance.
Outline of Chapters

Chapter 2 presents the structure and functioning of nora troupes by describing the legends, organization, function of spirit mediums, spirits, calendar of ceremonies, and ritual practices. This chapter sets the stage by providing a basic understanding of the drama as a local religion. Chapter 3 explores nationalism and identity through the historical background of the drama. This chapter describes the debates about its age and origin and the drama’s migration from the southern part of the country to the center. The chapter discusses the modern era when nora developed its entertainment format and was used in advertising. Chapter 4 analyzes nora gender constructions, documenting how the roles of women are expanding despite limitations from Buddhist doctrine and Thai cultural beliefs. This chapter also covers nora masculinity, nora spirit mediums who serve clients at home, and nora services valuable to women. Chapter 5 deals with the aspects of nora that people identify as belonging to different religions, particularly Buddhism, and how these relate to legitimacy and cultural capital. Chapter 6 analyzes core cultural themes related to group identity in this world. It discusses the meaning of kinship that goes beyond blood ties and the importance of place and past in creating a symbol of the south. Chapter 7 continues with core cultural themes and identity issues but focuses on other worldly topics. It explores human agency in communicating with the spirit world and discourses on belief and morality. Chapter 8 presents the summary and conclusions regarding the thesis, theoretical analysis, and findings.
CHAPTER 2
ROOTS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE:
THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING OF NORA TRoupES

Introduction

This chapter explains the structure and functioning of nora groups that perform the most sacred ritual, the Nora Teacher's Stage ceremony (nora roong khruu). This is called “ancient nora” (nora booraan) as opposed to modern style groups, which primarily entertain with “modern nora” (nora samai mai or nora than samai). I advance the argument presented in Chapter 1 that nora is a local religious system, which has been adapted to the national project. First, the chapter describes the blending of two legends, one rooted in the history of a local kingdom and the other in the national religion and monarchy. Second, under the topic of organization and locations, I describe some of the variations in regional performances that have resisted the homogenizing influence of nationalism. Third, I describe the syncretic religious character of the ceremony. For instance, spirit mediums serve as mediators with the ancestors, showing ties to Animism. Also, people hire troupes for Animistic house blessings and vow fulfillment. Meanwhile, the influence of the national religion emerges in the practice of suspending performances during the Buddhist Lenten period and in propitiating the Lord Buddha. The structure and functioning of nora troupes demonstrate the process of the local being absorbed into the national, a history of the margins moving toward the center.

As is readily apparent from this chapter, nora is the most detailed and elaborate of all types of spirit possession in the south. Rangsit University drama teacher Thianchai

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Isaradej reported that southern people in the nora community say nora is too complex for them to understand fully. This complexity with its esoteric knowledge raises the status of the performance. It has become a rich oral art, only accessible to the high priests, or "big nora" who have studied it for years. Nora occupies a special category of mediumship, as a sacred ancestral ceremony employing ancient mysterious words and rituals. It is quite unlike the newer form of home-based professional mediumship, which is more accessible to the average person. Fitting Durkheim's concept of the sacred, the nora ceremony is a site of fear and reverence, clearly something out of the ordinary (Durkheim 1915, Pals 1996: 99). As shown in this chapter, nora fulfills several characteristics of a religion: (1) it deals with the supernatural and sacred; (2) it consists of a belief system including behavioral norms; (3) it involves certain practices such as rituals; (4) it professes a moral code; and (5) it is a group activity (Johnstone 1997: 7-13).

The information presented is derived from my own observations, interviews with nora performers, and articles by Thai researchers. Nora is practiced by many families who have developed their own variations on the dancing styles and rituals; therefore the following is a synthesis of these variations.

**Basic Beliefs and Terminology**

Nora is a shared performance and belief system. In several southern provinces, nora members know the main characters in the Phatthalung Legend, the key rituals, and religious language. They are familiar with the singing and music, available now on audiotapes and compact disks. This common body of cultural knowledge links people across a wide southern region, much as Taoist rituals tie together Thai-Chinese from Phuket to Pattani, and Buddhist ceremonies connect most Thai citizens across the nation. Of course
there are differences in practice and disagreements between and within nora groups. But this religious belief system has created a strong network that has yet to be well understood.

_Nora_ is founded on an ideology that groups of relatives are descended from the same southern family or families. But true believers, who dance and sing, are also accepted into this community. There are two kinds of ancestral spirits: (1) the individual’s own family spirits (_puu yaa taa yaai_ or _taa yaai_) who are described as grandparents and older relatives on either the paternal or maternal side, and (2) the _nora_ spirits (_khruu maw nora_ or _taa yaai nora_) from the original founding family described in the Phatthalung Legend.\(^{40}\)

One term for the founding _nora_ spirits, _khruu maw nora_, literally means _nora_ teacher doctor, indicating both the teaching function of ancestors and their physical or spiritual healing.\(^{41}\) Traditional village doctors, who use herbs, prayers, spells, and other means for curing both physical and spiritual illnesses, are also called teacher (_khruu_) or doctor (_maw_), so this terminology is part of rural lexicon. _Nora_ spirits are also called _taa yaai nora_, meaning grandparents on the mother’s side. The Thai word for ancestors, _puu yaa taa yaai_, refers to grandparents on both the paternal and maternal sides of the family. But it extends to any deceased relatives in older generations. However, southerners shorten this to _taa yaai_, referring to the mother’s lineage, which may imply importance attached

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\(^{40}\) Other general terms used for ancestors are _banphachon_ and _banphaburut_. Some informants explained that people called _banphaburut_ were very distant relatives from centuries ago.

\(^{41}\) The term _khruu maw nora_ is most commonly used for deceased ancestors, but it can also mean living _nora_ leaders, which can be confusing.
to the maternal side. In other regions of the country, the paternal side is emphasized instead.  

Sometimes, *nora* ancestors are also referred to as the first or original teachers (*khruu ton*). All the descendents (*luuglaan*) are considered of the same ancestral group (*taa yaai diawgan*). Southern families often have a shrine to the ancestors (*hing bucha*), which is a shelf attached to the wall in their homes, although this is not required. The shelf would normally hold urns with ashes and photographs of the deceased but not a statue of the Buddha. This shelf is equivalent to the ubiquitous spirit house for the guardian spirit of the land (*phra phuum* or *phra phuum jao thii*) seen at most houses and businesses in the Kingdom (interview Pittaya 2004).

The *nora* ancestors have not been reincarnated into new lives, contrary to Buddhist and Hindu belief, but stay as spirits with their offspring to protect them and bring prosperity. The annual ceremony to these ancestors is considered the link to these hovering spirits. The dancing during this ceremony is considered extremely sacred and powerful, capable of curing illness and eliminating suffering. The spirits inspire the dancing or in some cases possess and dance themselves.

**Two Legends Combine to Create Nora**

The academic search to find the origin and antiquity of *nora* rests largely on the clues contained in two rather marvelous legends. They are astounding in their survival power, geographic spread, flexible adaptations, and gender imagery. In relation to my thesis, these stories illustrate the introduction of Buddhism to local beliefs. They also

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42 The paternal grandparents are *puu yaa*, with *puu* meaning grandfather and *yaa* meaning grandmother. The maternal grandparents are *taa yaa* with *taa* meaning grandfather and *yaa* meaning grandmother.
feature royal goddesses who today are appearing as possessing spirits. In addition, the
story of an Indian bird-princess has a broad appeal throughout Thai society and therefore
pulls the nora genre toward the center as a recognizable part of national culture.

In using the term “legend,” I refer to a story, which includes elements of history
and the mystical as in the following definition: “Legends, usually taken to have an
element of local history (known characters, events, and landmarks) but may involve
supernatural elements. Legends can invite different positions of belief – they can be
believed, partly believed, or not believed, yet passed along as an interesting
story....Religious folklore makes frequent use of legend style” (Tarzia 2000: 55).43

The first tale, the Phatthalung Legend, is possibly grounded in a principality or
small kingdom (muang) which existed about the 11th to 15th century C. E. in what is
today Phatthalung Province. Although descriptions in the story relate to physical
landmarks – early chedis, islands, and towns (Suthiwong 1999) -- the story has another
ethereal side about a young princess who is cast off on a raft by her father. She gives
birth on an island to the founder of the nora genre. Drama scholar and nora expert Henry
D. Ginsburg (1971:23) identifies this legend as the “origin story” on which the
performance was first based.44

But a second, more ancient Indian tale called Sudhana-Manohara (Sanskrit) or
Phra Suthon-Nang Manora (Thai) was intermixed with the Phatthalung Legend at a later
date. The Indian story is named after the lead characters, Prince Suthon and Princess

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43 The closely related term “myth,” meaning a sacred story, could also apply to the Phatthalung narrative. However myth has been overused and defined in many ways, according to anthropologist Wade Tarzia (2000).
44 Ginsburg’s Ph.D. dissertation for the University of London (1971) compared two versions of the Suthon-Manora story, one taken from the Thai National Library and one from Wat Machimawat in Songkhla dated 1868. The dissertation also compares the Thai versions of the story to Cambodian, Lao, and Mon versions.
Manora. She is a mystical creature, half-woman and half-bird (Thai, female: kinnari; male: kinnon, based on Sanskrit words), who falls in love and marries a human prince. The name of Princess Manora or Nora is now accepted as the title of the genre, causing some confusion in separating the Indian story from the local southern drama (Ginsburg 1972: 170). To minimize that, I will use the following terms. The bird-princess story will be called the Suthon-Manora Story. The tale about the small kingdom in Phatthalung will be referred to as the Phatthalung Legend. And the ritual performance, which embodies them both, will be called nora.

Considered an ancient, almost universal story by some academics, the Suthon-Manora story is known in Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos within mainland Southeast Asia, and as far away as the Near East, Europe, and the United States where it has been found among American Indians and Alaskan Inuit (Brandon 1967: 24, 1972: 122). Theater expert James Brandon described the spread of the tale this way: “One of Asia’s ur-myths tells of a celestial bird-princess who, captured by a mortal, escapes to heaven by dancing in her angel’s feathers; this basic story acquires an aesthetic expression in the The Angel Robe (Hagoromo) in Japanese theatre, while the conflicting human and sacred views are fundamental in Manora in Thai, Burmese and Malaysian drama” (1993:4).

Asian drama scholar Poh Sim Plowright has found bird-women motifs in drama around the world and links them with ancient female shamans with magical powers (1998: 374-375).45 One example is the 7th century bird-women statues in a Goddess Guan

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45 Although I believe there is historical evidence to show the early role of women as mediators with the spirits, the connections made in this article seem to be disparate and lack evidence. Also, some of the information presented on Thai nora is not consistent with information from Thai scholars on the topic.
Im temple in Fujian, China (Plowright 1997: 106). Also the Japanese *Hagoromo* story, mentioned above, bears a striking resemblance to the Suthon-Manora Story, argued Plowright. That is a 14th century Noh theater story of an angel bird-woman caught bathing by a fisherman who steals her feather robe. She must perform a dance to regain her robe and return to paradise (1997: 108). These plot elements are almost identical to the Suthon-Manora Story, I would note.

The Suthon-Manora plot also resonates with origin myths of some Southeast Asian countries in which a human male mates with a princess from the animal kingdom, particularly a large serpent (Sanskrit: *naga*, Thai: *naag*) representing fertility. In the founding story of Champa (now part of central Vietnam) and Funan (which probably covered all the lowlands of present-day Cambodia and adjacent areas), a Brahmin priest from India marries a Naga princess, daughter of the Naga King. The legend is thought to represent the supposedly higher civilization of India combining with the fertility of a local goddess.\(^46\) Here I will briefly describe the two stories that are the backbone of the *nora* performance.

**Phatthalung Legend.** In the ancient town of Phatthalung, a chief or king had a daughter who drove him to distraction with her incessant dancing until he finally banished her.\(^47\) In another version, the daughter was inspired by an angel to eat lotus

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\(^46\) In Thailand and neighboring countries, there are two closely related goddesses connected with fertility -- the Mother Rice Goddess (Mae Phosop) and the Mother Earth Goddess (Mae Torranee). The Earth Goddess is particularly significant because of her important role in drowning the devil’s (Mara) army when Lord Buddha sought enlightenment. In standard Thai temple murals, she is painted directly beneath the Lord Buddha and often equivalent in size, for example in Songkhla’s historic Wat Machimawat.

\(^47\) The legends often refer to this ruler as *jao muang*, which can be translated several ways. *Muang* is the “term used by Tai-speaking people to designate socio-political units,” according to Swearer (1995: 362). And *jao* can mean lord or chief. Swearer said these “territorial units” were ruled by chiefly families. Usually sons were expected to begin their own cities, which proved to be a successful way for Tai-speakers to colonize and control large areas of Southeast Asia from the 11th to 14th centuries (Swearer 1995: 75).
blossoms so she could give birth to an angel. The father suspected that she had had intercourse with her brother, a soldier, or a page and exiled her by putting her on a raft with her four female helpers. The raft floated to Gachang Island where the princess gave birth to a son, whom she trained to dance in nora style. When the son grew up, he traveled back to Phatthalung. The king invited him to perform and belatedly recognized his grandson. The king forgave him and gave him the “king’s clothes,” the nora costume, and the royal title of Khun Sii Satthaa.48 The king also invited his daughter to return and gave her the honorable name of Mae Sii Maa Laa. He gave them part of the kingdom to rule. The grandson continued to perform and became the founder of the nora dance-drama. This is a summary based on legends collected by academic Udom Nuuthawng (1995). He described six versions of the story taken from nora leaders, various writers, and the Thai Department of Fine Arts.

Two versions of this story are told in the Thakhae area and both take place at an early principality named Bang Kaeo (also spelled Baang Gaew), today in Khao Chai Son District, Phatthalung Province not far from Thakhae village. They differ mainly on the description of the pregnancy, according to nora expert Pittaya Butsararat (1992, see also Some dictionaries translate jao muang as governor. But the nora families envision this person to be in a more elevated position, such as a king over a small kingdom. And the clothes he gave his grandson are referred to as the “king’s clothes.” Therefore, I will refer to this dynasty founder as a king, while realizing he ruled a small area that has not been given much attention in Thai history. However, parts of the nora poetry tell another story in which the king had a son who embarrassed him by dancing. “He danced all day and all night. His father and mother were ashamed because he was a man. They warned him, but he did not obey. They didn’t know what to do, so they isolated him on a raft with 12 female servants” (Pittaya 1992: 14, quoting Thewasaro 1965: 1-22). Although most versions of the legend honor a son or grandson for dancing, this poetry indicates some concern about male gender identity and dance constructed as a female art.

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In the first story, angels in a dream teach the princess the dance. The Hindu god Indra then directs the deity Thep Singhawn (later named Khun Sii Satthaa) to be reborn in the world by first entering a lotus flower. After eating this lotus, the princess becomes pregnant. On discovering this, the king feels terribly ashamed and banishes her and her helpers, not believing the lotus story.

In the second version, the mother of the princess is from India. This queen is named Intharani, possibly meaning the wife of Indra (Patise 2004: 26). She returns to India to give birth but her child is born at sea. Later, the daughter has a dream in which angels teach her the 12 nora dance postures. She has an affair with a palace page named Phra Muang Thawng. After that she eats the lotus containing the essence of Thep Singhawn and becomes pregnant. Embarrassed, the king exiles her with her assistants. He also feared that she would bring a curse on the city.

These versions contains several significant themes. There is a strong connection between Hindu deities and the princess. Although she is shown as pure in the first version, in the second she is considered tarnished by her affair. Her dancing obsessively implies spirit possession. From a gender perspective, the princess, rather than her son, first received the dance form and could communicate with the spiritual world. However, she is seen as a threatening evil within the kingdom and is cast off, while later her son is rehabilitated and becomes the honored founder of the genre.

Suthon-Manora Story. This second story is less convoluted, but also contains a strong female character with connections to deities. In the mythical Mount Krailas (the

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49 Pittaya Butsararat, currently researcher at the Institute for Southern Thai Studies, wrote an excellent M.A. thesis on the nora ceremony in Thakhae Village in 1992 for Srinakharinwirot University, Songkhla (see Gesick 1995: 67).
Himalayan Mountains) of Buddhist cosmology, delightful creatures lived who were half-animal and half-human. The heavenly king had seven daughters and the youngest was named Manora. The swan-like maidens would regularly fly to a pond in the Himmapan Forest at the base of their mountain. They would set aside their wings and tails for a swim. One day a hunter, named Phraan Bun, caught Manora by stealing her wings and tail. Hoping for a reward, he took her to the human Prince Suthon at his nearby palace. The two royals fell in love and married to great celebrations. It is interesting to note that in some versions the marriage is forced upon a distraught Manora, but in most accounts she is so happy that she almost forgets her heavenly home.

One day while Prince Suthon was away at war, a vengeful court fortune teller, or possibly a Brahmin priest, predicted that Manora would cause the destruction of the kingdom by fire. The king ordered her to be killed in a sacrificial fire. Cleverly Manora asked to dance a final time with her wings and tail, which had been locked up by the evil queen, who considered her less than human. Manora performed the dance and then escaped by flying to the heavens. On his return, Prince Suthon resolved to find Manora. The journey took years and required facing many mythological creatures until the prince found Manora in her mountain heaven. However, first Manora’s father required the prince to pass more trials. Finally the prince won her with the help of Indra, who assisted by identifying Manora from among her identical sisters (Chamnongsri 1986).

**Buddhist Birth Story Grafted onto Local History.** The Suthon-Manora Story is believed to have been an Indian story, which later became one of the reincarnation stories of the Lord Buddha called *jatakas. An early version of Suthon-Manora written in Sanskrit dated from the 3rd century C. E. in India and was originally not related to
Buddhism. But in the 15th century C. E., the story appeared in present-day northern Thailand as part of a collection of 50 stories of the Lord Buddha’s former lives (*pannasajatakas*). These were composed by Theravada Buddhist monks in Chiang Mai in Pali language based on the Indian original (Ginsburg 1971: 2). In the Buddhist version of Suthon-Manora, Prince Suthon becomes one of the many re-incarnations of Lord Buddha. In all, Lord Buddha was reincarnated more than 500 times before his enlightenment. With the acceptance of Theravada Buddhism by the Siamese royalty, these birth stories became a popular way to teach religious tenets in rural areas, and today they remain the basis of many sermons by monks (Brandon 1972: 115, Swearer 1995: 8).

Therefore, the Suthon-Manora Story represented a subsequent Buddhist overlay onto the local Phatthalung Legend, which was more grounded in Hindu-Brahmanism and Animism (Yousof 1982). Ginsburg argued convincingly that the Suthon-Manora Story was later added to the southern Thai legend. “It seems clear that it is the ‘origin story’ [Phatthalung Legend] which has been contaminated by the Suthon elements rather than the other way around, which suggests the greater age of the former [Phatthalung Legend] within the manora tradition” (Ginsburg 1971: 23-4).

The enchanting bird-princess story has now entered the wider Thai popular culture and its connection to Buddhism has faded. Today it is seen as “…a rather dramatic, romantic tale about young love and jealousy that led to death towards the end,” wrote director and drama scholar Mattani Mojdara Rutnin (2002: 2). *Nora* images abound in Thai culture -- *kinnari* are represented by life-sized golden statues situated at

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50 Sanskrit is the language used in Mahayana Buddhism and Pali is the language used in Theravada Buddhism (Swearer 1995: 6). Pali has no specific script but uses the local alphabet such as Mon, Khmer, or Thai (communication with historian Marja-Leena Heikkila-Horn 2004).
Bangkok’s Grand Palace complex, while early mural paintings of these lovely creatures frolicking in a forest pond can be seen in Buddhist temples. A large tapestry of the story is displayed at a southern museum for folk arts, the Institute for Southern Thai Studies, in Songkhla Province.

How Stories are Blended. Although the two stories have different religious bases, histories, and countries of origin, over the years they have combined in intriguing ways. According to Udom (1999b), many nora performers mistakenly believe the stories occurred at the same time. For instance, a nora leader said in an interview that the Phatthalung king gave a costume to his grandson, which included wings and a tail. However, this bird costume belonged to Manora, and her story was added later (Udom 1995). The character of the hunter in the Suthon-Manora Story usually provides a crucial narrative link between the two tales. The significance of this role is understood better when we realize that the hunter is also considered the joker or clown, one of the three essential roles in early Siamese drama (Ginsburg 1971: 13). Both nora and its companion art, the shadow puppet play, employed a joker for satire.51

51 These genres functioned as local mass media to comment on social and newsworthy events (Pittaya 2003: 31-32). In many cultures, clowns or comics ridicule authority figures, reversing role status, and reflecting the community to itself (Sinavaiana 1992). In the closely related drama of lakhon chatri, the male clown brought “social satire and ribald humor” to the theme of lampooning rulers (Grow 1996: 48). In one example of the crossover role of the hunter, angels used a stone to create the hunter of the Suthon-Manora Story so that he could play with the grandson from the Phatthalung Legend. As the story proceeds, the hunter and grandson both have a dream in which angels teach them the 12 nora dancing positions. This dream brings them together within the nora drama. This version also introduces the famous Suthon-Manora pond for the kinnari. But the pond is transposed to the Phatthalung Legend (from Sunanthaa Sorat, as cited in the funeral booklet by Pian Chanabaan and family 2002). The two stories are further blended in the popular skit of “hooking the swan” (khlawng hong), which tells of the hunter Phraan Bun catching Manora. This drama has been reinterpreted so that the bird-princess actually represents the Phatthalung king’s exiled daughter, Mae Sii Maa Laa. Because she refused to return to her father’s kingdom, she was lassoed and tied up by soldiers to be taken to the ship (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983). One example of crossing between nora and the shadow puppet play can be seen in the hand gestures used by the hunter in nora that are like movements by a similar character in the puppet play (communication Thianchai 2003).
With all this literary blending, it is certainly understandable that some southern people do not distinguish between the two tales. But Nora Awuth Chaichana of Pattani Province had no trouble explaining the difference to me in 2001. He identified the Suthon-Manora Story, which includes the names of Indian cities, as an Indian morality tale. In contrast, the Phatthalung Legend contains a historical account of the south and the real names of the king’s grandson and daughter. Nora Awuth explained, “...the first story [from India] is like a tale which teaches people to do good deeds. It is fiction. The story mentions [the towns of] Muang Khrailaat, Chomphuu Thawiip, and Muang Baadaan, which are in the tales. But the [second] story of nora which mentions Phaw Khun Satthaa and Mae Sii Maa Laa is the real story which happened in Phatthalung.” If I wanted to understand it better, I only needed to turn on the television, he said. At the time, the Suthon-Manora Story was running in the morning and the Phatthalung Legend in the evening. This is an example of the pivotal role of television in keeping religious literature alive and before a new generation of viewers.

Suthon-Manora Plays Minimal Role in the South. At some unspecified date, the Suthon-Manora Story was added to the Phatthalung Legend due to the former’s popularity for its romance, comedy, and bird costume. Yet the story plays a relatively minor role in the annual ritual when ancestors possess (see Gesick 1995: 66). As a well-liked story, Suthon-Manora continues to be performed in Bangkok, sometimes as a ballet. But it is not essential to the meaning of nora as an ancestral ritual. However, the bird tale does serve to make southern nora recognizable around the country, thereby tying it into the Thai performing arts.
The majority of the three-day roong khruu ceremony is filled with slow stylized dancing, singing rhymed verses in southern dialect, and performing rituals. Afterward a few stories are enacted which are derived from 12 common folk tales performed in central Siam in the 19th century (Ginsburg 1972:170, fn 3). The two most commonly selected are Suthon-Manora and Phra Rothasen-Nang Merii (or Phra Rot-Merii), a well-known tale about a woman raised by a giant and an adventure involving stolen eyeballs (Suthiwong 1999). In the late 1960s, Ginsburg found that Suthon-Manora was not so popular. He said only one out of ten older nora performers acted this tale: "...(W)hile the dance-drama has most probably borrowed its name from the heroine of the [Suthon-Manora] story, it is quite erroneous to assume as many people have that the manora was merely a rural dramatization of the story of Manora and Suthon" (Ginsburg 1971: 19, quote 1972: 170).

The bird-princess turns up in the opening invocation (gaat khruu) when important spirits, gods, and goddesses are invited to the stage. The nora leader calls the names of characters from the Suthon-Manora Story, including Phra Suthon, the hunter Phraan Bun, and the seven bird-women (Ginsburg 1971, Udom 1999b). Ginsburg identified this invocation as a vital mystical part of the performance for "...providing a formal framework for the continuity of a fixed tradition as well as formal sanctification of the player's powers, which in the setting of the manora are as much magical as artistic" (1971: 20). The performance has retained a bird dance called khinon, which is southern dialect for kinnari. And it has kept the distinctive tail and wings worn by both men and women. For the audience, the Suthon-Manora influence is most evident in the popular "hooking the swan" skit (Udom 1999b). Ginsburg (1971: 26) described this act as a
"curious survival of the Suthon tale" that somehow continued out of context of the bird-princess story. In the past, this skit was a central element in nora initiation ceremonies for small children when their topknot hair (khon chug) was cut. But the nora performance really has little to do with the Suthon-Manora Story; rather it is about communicating with ancestors related to the Phatthalung Legend.

**Organization and Locations**

**The Name.** Each group is named after the leader, known as the head of the stage (naai roong), and the place where it is based, which is an important identity marker. To illustrate, Nora Plaeg’s group from Thakhae village in Phatthalung Province is called Nora Plaeg Thakhae. Alternately a group may become known for the abilities of its leader, such as Nora Phum who danced as an angel (thewadaa) so was called Nora Phum Thewaa (Suthiwong 1999).

**Locations and Numbers.** Approximately 100 to 150 nora groups operate in the south, which encompasses 14 provinces. However of these 100 or so group, only about seven groups are considered famous and many others are dismissed as not performing the true ancient rituals, according to several nora leaders. Sompoch Ketkeaw, a dramatic arts lecturer at PSU, Pattani, said he had identified ten groups with members over 50 years of age who performed what is considered the authentic old style.

When Rajabhat Institute Songkhla held a government competition in August 2003, most provinces in the south were represented.52 Government provincial cultural

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52 The groups were Siiyaphai School from Chumphon, Nora Ganyaanaattaraat from Ranong (which didn’t attend), Sugsaasongkhraw School from Surat Thani, Nora Yawtchaai Muangphuket from Phuket, Nora Khaophornom Anuragsin from Krabi, Nora Priidaa Praditsin from Nakhon Si Thammarat, Nora Phroi Gaanjanaphom from Trang, Nora Oamjid Jaremsin from Phatthalung, Gannigaa Waniis School from

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offices selected troupes from the following 12 provinces: (listed roughly north to south): Chumphon, Ranong, Surat Thani, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phuket, Krabi, Trang, Phatthalung, Satun, Songkhla, Pattani and Yala. Clearly nora is widespread throughout the south, but with fewer troupes in the four predominantly Muslims provinces close to the Malaysian border. Representing the Cultural Office of Songkhla Province at the competition, Teerapol Sangmanee said he thought no group came from Narathiwat Province because, “In Narathiwat, the culture there is almost all Muslim culture...” Although once a Muslim style of nora was popular in the far south, today it is fading for several reasons (discussed in Chapter 3).

The stronghold of nora performances is in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung, and Songkhla provinces, all bordering on the genre’s reputed birthplace around Songkhla Lake. Nora is also active in nearby Surat Thani, Trang, and Pattani provinces. Nora Somphong Chanabaan of Phatthalung Province said the most sacred roong khruu ceremony is usually only held in three provinces: Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung, and Trang. Before his death, Nora Plaeg told me his group was the only one performing roong khruu in Phatthalung. However, I found the roong khruu ceremony in many provinces. Maybe these different opinions reflect some contestation among the groups on what constitutes authentic nora rituals.

Different Styles. Among the nora families, different styles in dance and rituals have evolved from province to province. Sompoch’s master’s degree thesis from Chulalongkorn University was on the many styles of dances that have developed as each

Satun, Nora Lamaisilp from Songkhla, Nora Loi Thanawmjit from Pattani, and Nora Jareun Sirisin from Yala.
53 Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakool (2000: 190) wrote that the shadow puppet theater is also strongest in the south’s east coast in the provinces of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung, and Songkhla.
group creatively embellished the performance. He visited *nora* families in the provinces of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Surat Thani, Trang, Krabi, Songkhla, and other areas. He found the families were not united in their dance forms, compared to the traditional Siamese dance style (*naattasin*) which is basically the same around the country. “The descendants of each family will perpetuate the dancing style of the family which is different from other families.... The dancing style of *nora* groups in Songkhla is different from the dancing style in Phatthalung and also in Nakhon [Si Thammarat].” When I interviewed him, Sompoch was searching for a dance form, which could be identified as the original one.

I found that like the dance, rituals had also been modified over time particularly through contact with other traveling groups. Nora Awuth said the initiation ceremony he performs developed through meeting other groups in his travels. Also from Pattani Province, Nora Chalerm Gaew Pim explained that each group performed rituals differently, such as the order of events and calling the spirits. For instance, in Songkhla Province after the beginning ritual, performers danced the 12 lessons (*bot*) extensively, but in Pattani Province only a little dancing occurred before the possession. 54 Also in Songkhla, performers begin the *roong khruu* on Wednesdays but in Pattani, Wednesday might be a “dead day” (*wan doi*) or bad luck day depending on the phase of the moon, Nora Chalerm said. This belief relates to early divination systems about inauspicious days (Wales 1983: 82). Nora Oamjid Jarernsin of Phatthalung Province reported that her

54 The number 12 is sacred for *nora* – there are 12 ancestors, 12 offerings, 12 positions, 12 lessons, and 12 songs. Seven and nine are also auspicious in the Phatthalung Legend, as in contemporary Thai society. These numbers should not always be taken literally, as they have symbolic meanings relating to good fortune.
performance was different from groups in her own province because of the instructions from her particular teacher. Therefore, variations occur from group to group.

**Traveling Stage.** Fifty years ago, when Nora Chalerm was a teen, *nora* was famous. Almost every fair had a *nora* competition (*nora roong khaeng*) with groups seriously pitted against each other to win. Troupes traveled from town to town throughout the south and into Malaysia, commonly walking all day and performing at night until the early morning hours. They often stayed in monasteries and were fed by local people. Researcher Prayat Gasem (1995: 161) wrote that there were two kinds of so-called “walking stages” (*deun roong*). *Nora* troupes either would travel looking for jobs without any specific destination or would go to the homes of people who hired them. Nowadays most troupes have a home base and travel short distances, performing only about a dozen times a year. For instance, the husband and wife troupe of Nora Chalerm Gaew Pim and Nora Prapa Gaew Pim performs mostly in the couple’s home province of Pattani. But with modern transportation, they are able to go farther on occasion. They have performed in the southern provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, Songkhla, Phatthalung, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Surat Thani. The distance from Pattani to Surat Thani is 408 kilometers, which can be traveled in a few hours today.

**Members of the Troupe.** *Nora* traveling groups typically consist of 12 to 20 persons including performers and musicians. Most troupe members are related to each other. The head or owner of the troupe is called the “head of the stage” (*naai roong*). Another important leadership role is the principal initiated performer or “big nora” (*nora yai*). Often an older man performs both roles. But nowadays about 30% of troupes are run by women, as the head of the stage. However, women are not allowed to serve as the big
A typical large group would have six men who performed rituals and played male roles such as the hero and hunter or joker, seven women who danced and played female roles, and five to six male musicians (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983).55 Although groups employ many performers, the essential three actors are the leader, the heroine, and the hunter (Suthiwong 1999). Related to nora performers, children as young as ten-years-old are brought into the troupes to be mentored. Similar to training in classical Thai dance in Bangkok, nora instruction begins at an early age so the dancer can achieve difficult hand and body positions. Young dancers press their hands backwards into smaller and smaller coconut shells for the characteristic Thai hand gesture. Dancers must also bend their backs to form a circular shape considered attractive (Prayat 1995).

Language. Southern language and ancient words are essential elements in the identity of the performance. Nora performers sing poetry and speak to the audience mostly in southern Thai dialect, with central Thai used occasionally for speaking roles (on poetry see Postures, Lessons and Songs in this chapter). For several rituals, like sending the spirits out of mediums’ bodies and cutting the offerings, a Pali Buddhist prayer is employed. My southern assistant could understand only 70% of the ceremony because of the old Thai and Pali words.

Music. Several instruments appear to be of Indian origin (Suthiwong 1999) and the music depends largely on percussion (see Appendix C: Nora Musical Instruments and Costumes). Drums control rhythm and must follow the dancers’ steps closely (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983, Pittaya 1995, Suthiwong 1999). Apparently some groups have added a bowed fiddle (saw) (Prayat 1995), although I only saw this instrument used with a Thai-

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55 Although the joker is usually male, one article mentioned that both men and women could play this role (Committee for Compiling the Document 1999).
Malay Muslim group which enacted a similar performance called mayong. Today almost all nora groups use microphones, and often giant loudspeakers are set around the performance grounds. Some use an electric piano keyboard. Western instruments and music may be used to accompany the short plays (Prayat 1995). On his laptop computer at a conference on the history of the Songkhla Lake in June 2003, Thianchai showed me photographs of modern instruments used in a village performance – a Western style drum set with cymbals and an electric guitar with amplifiers.

Traditionally, the male musicians sit in a row on the floor along one side of the stage. Occasionally the musicians include boys as young as 12-years-old and trendy young men with long hair. More often they are older men who are loyal followers of a particular troupe. They may perform some of the rituals such as blessing the instruments. The musicians act as a chorus, repeating back poetic lines sung by the leader. For some musicians this is a career. Finding and paying a qualified group of musicians is not easy. So sometimes full-time troupes lend their musicians to poorer troupes in a pinch, considered a significant act of generosity.

Worldwide many types of music are used with trance ceremonies and are culturally understood to mark the possession condition (Rouget 1985). Academics once thought the beat of the music caused a biological response leading to trance. But today researchers believe the music is associated with certain emotions related to spirits, such as remembering and longing, particular to each society (Roseman 1991: 151). Likewise, the sounds of the nora musical instruments, particularly the drum hit with short sticks and the shrill flute, call the spirits and attune the mediums to accept them (see Wong 2001: 24) In May 2005, I attended a roong khruu which was delayed for a few hours while a
nora leader searched for a flute (pii) player. I was told that the spirits would not come without this sound. The flute is rather difficult to play and musicians tend to older men, who are scarce.

Costumes. The costume plays a crucial role in the performance today due to its heavy symbolic meanings, although some elements are of relatively new vintage. To some scholars, parts of the costume look like the attire of a king and therefore reflects the high status of the art, which continues to be performed for royalty and the ruling elite (Chatchai 1995). Other researchers point out that the costume was given by the Phatthalung king and therefore the crown (seut) looks like a king’s crown. Other costume elements are emblematic of the mythical bird-human, such as the tail, wings, and nails (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983). As an example of its symbolism, on the second day of the roong khruu ceremony when inviting the teachers to the stage, the leader wraps himself in a waistband of layered white cloth (phawg) containing offerings of betel, coins and candles and thus turns his body into an offering itself (Chatchai 1995: 84).

Although today a curved stiff tail and upper garments made of colored plastic beads make the costume distinctive and supposedly “traditional,” four black-and-white photographs taken in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province about 1905, during the reign of King Rama V, do not appear to show these elements (see photographs with article by Suthiwong 1999). Then men wore pants that covered their knees, cloths hanging from waists, and decorations that crossed bare chests. In the past coconut shells, seashells, bones, crystal, and other stones were used (Prayat 1995). However, a list of nora items dated 1881 does show that several of the present-day elements and instruments existed more than a century ago. They included drums, clappers, crown, hunter’s mask, metal
decorations, close fitting trunks, sword, and nails for a total cost of about 22 coins (*rian*). The goods were made in the south and sold in Songkhla (Suthiwong 1999: 3877).

In the first decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, more garments were added for decoration and to cover bare chests. In the 1930s, even more coverings were added for modesty as female dancers began to perform in Phatthalung (Prayat 1995). And in the 1940s to 1950s, under Prime Minister Pibulsongkhram, additional clothing was adopted to civilize the dance (Mattani 2002: 1, see Appendix E). An early sacred item is the distinctive hunter’s mask (*naa phraan*), a half face with long nose, no chin and white hair. The mask is painted red for men and white for women (Pittaya 1995, Suthiwong 1999). Performers are seen wearing the hunter’s mask in the turn-of-the-20\textsuperscript{th} century photographs. *Nora* leaders today place several hunter’s masks on offering plates at the altar for the *roong khruu*.

Regarding the nails in contemporary times, a *nora* man told me that performers wear the nails on the thumb and all fingers except the middle finger, which is used for pointing at ghosts (*wai chii phii*). I observed that performers either followed this style or wore metal nails on four fingers but not the thumb. Similar long nails are used in a northern dance called *faawn ngiaw*. The costume materials, such as the nails and loose beads, are purchased from Bangkok and then assembled by each troupe. For instance, *nora* style beads are added to the nails, making them unique. At *nora* ceremonies, sometimes ritual items are for “rent” (*tawn*). As with marketing Buddha amulets, the sellers do not use the term to “buy” because that would be an insult to the religion. Instead they rent amulets. In *nora*, a set of 12 brass bracelets, six for each arm, rents for
The 12 bracelets represent the 12 deities (ong) from the Phatthalung Legend (interview Songphuum 2003).

**Economic and Educational Levels.** The majority of nora families are middle to lower class, with many being farmers. Occupations included teacher, police officer, banker, janitor, government electrical worker, railway worker, university radio disk jockey, rice farmer, rubber taper, car mechanic, homemaker, and car company employee. Nora Plaeg, who died at 81, was illiterate. Many leaders in their 50s and 60s had only primary school educations, dropping out of school about age 10 (prathom 4). Today’s younger leaders are more educated, following the government’s push for higher education. One leader, aged 35, finished several years of college. According to anthropologist Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakool (2000: 190), most performers in the sister art of shadow puppetry (nang talung) had primary school educations and were rural farmers, although some were moving to cities.56

Supporting these observations, a survey of 30 merchandise sellers and audience members at the roong khruu at Wat Thakhae in 2004 found that their occupations were farmers, students, small business people, traders, government employees, and laborers. Seventy percent were between 16 and 54 years of age. Nearly 60% had only primary school educations while 30% had secondary school educations. The people were from the local area with 80% from Phatthalung Province, 10% from Songkhla Province, and 10% from Satun and Krabi provinces (Patise 2004: 38).

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56 In 2002, Thailand instituted tuition free education for 12 years of primary and secondary school for grade one to 12. But in the rural south, many poor students leave school before secondary education because of the cost of state school fees, transport, books, lunches and uniforms, plus the need to support the family financially. In 2003, the government found many primary school students did not continue their education due to costs (Preeyanat 2003).
Generations. The age of *nora* performers tends to cluster around the younger and older ages, with a gap in the middle. For instance, musicians are almost all men, aged either in their late teens to 20s or 50s to 60s. A similar pattern exists among spirit mediums, who are almost all female, with a few in their 20s but most in the 40 to 70 age range. One *nora* leader suggested that spirits prefer to possess the young and old. But another reason for the demographic spread is the waning interest in the performance among youths, aside from a recent interest in dance classes for girls.

In contrast to performers, audiences are composed of people of all ages, fairly equally balanced in terms of sex. A village *nora* ceremony, accompanied by a local fair with merchandise and games, brings out the whole community and may attract people from nearby provinces if the *nora* group is well known. Crowds can range from 200 to 500 people. Usually visitors who are middle aged and older sit close to the stage in rapt attention, accompanied by small children. I interviewed one group of teenage boys who spent as much time hanging out on their shiny motorcycles among the fair booths as watching the *nora* show. But when I asked them what they thought of the dancing, none disparaged it. They said they liked to watch but were not skilled at dancing themselves so did not perform. They preferred playing soccer and riding motorcycles. At a private *nora* ceremony in a Hat Yai suburb, teenage boys also attended but stayed in the back area playing games. Therefore, *nora* shows still attract many people, although the accompanying fair is a big part of the draw.

**Spirit Mediums and Possession**

There are two distinct types of rituals: (1) those that require possession, which are held during three designated months and (2) ceremonies that do not need possession and
can occur at any time of the year. In possession ceremonies, the role of the *nora* leader is to sing, dance, perform rituals, and invite the spirits to possess. Spirits will then possess one or more spirit mediums (*khon song* or *raang song*) and speak through the medium’s mouth to descendants. Some *nora* leaders can possess and others cannot. There are different theories on the selection of persons for possession, some of which appear rather arbitrary. First, the date of birth is significant. Spirits possess people born on Tuesday, Thursday, or Saturday and in certain months and years. According to one *nora* man, the spirit possesses a person who was born on the same day and month that the spirit was born. Second, spirits come to people with soft or sensitive souls (*jit awm*). Third, spirits pick people who are in the *nora* lineage and are pure, generous, and lacking in jealousy.

Nora Wan Chaichana and his son Nora Awuth are fully initiated *nora* leaders, but neither can be possessed. Instead, their role is to invoke the spirits to possess mediums. Often their friend Khun Fung serves as a spirit medium for them.⁵⁷ At an interview at Nora Wan’s house in Pattani Province, Fung explained, “These groups (in Pattani Province) have a spirit medium, but mostly the *nora* leader is not possessed. He is only the president who invites the spirit (*winjan* or *winyaan*) to possess the spirit medium.”⁵⁸ I asked Nora Awuth why he was not ever possessed. He said:

I was born in the strong day and month. I was born on Tuesday. We have *thii nang khruu ma*, which is the date or time that is suitable for the spirits to possess. If spirit mediums are born in the right time, they can be possessed by the spirits, even though they are not *nora*. Some people hire *nora* groups to perform for ancestors five years after they die. They invite the ancestors to possess one of the family members. The spirit will possess a person who was born in the right time that is suitable for the spirit to possess.

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⁵⁷ *Khun* means Mr., Mrs., or Miss. in Thai.
⁵⁸ The *winyaan* is the afterlife spirit that carries the person’s essence to the next life for rebirth.
Nora Awuth then used three fingers to count the day, month, and year of birth. At least two of these dates must fall on the pointer finger for you to be possessed. The three fingers represent heaven, home, and hell, he said. Each nora family needs one spirit medium. This is a family member who becomes a medium as a service to the relatives. This medium will give the nora leader a list of ancestral spirits, from seven to as many as 20 spirits. The leader then invites the spirits to attend the ceremony and to sit on the offering shelf. One spirit will possess one medium for the whole ceremony. So while Nora Plaeg had three possessing spirits, only one would speak through him during the roong khruu ceremony. Therefore, if 50 spirits are invited to possess, there need to be 50 spirit mediums to receive them. Otherwise, someone in the audience will be possessed unexpectedly.

When there are major ceremonies such as an initiation or roong khruu, many mediums will come. The mediums are in the nora community but have not been initiated as performers and therefore do not wear the bird-human costume. They wear traditional pants (joonggraben), white or yellow blouses or shirts, silver or copper belts, and a shoulder scarf (sabai). Most are middle age and older women. According to Nora Awuth, a nora ceremony might include 20% initiated performers and 80% spirit mediums. Most spirit mediums only possess once a year at the roong khruu ceremony but some also possess at home to help relatives or serve the public. Many mediums become possessed about age 30 and do it until they die, therefore it is common to see mediums at ceremonies aged 50 to 75 years old, said Nora Awuth. Typically the spirit will make the chosen person sick, but medical science cannot cure this illness. The person seeks out a traditional doctor or fortuneteller who explains that a nora spirit wants to use her body as
a mount. Then often a long-term relationship of accommodation and exchange of favors and obligations develops between the human and spirit.

The possessing spirits can be either male or female. And as mentioned early in this chapter, spirits can be either personal ancestors or/and characters from the Phatthalung Legend. The legendary spirits, who have individual identities and stories, like Mae Sii Maa Laa, can possess more than one person at a time because they have many aspects. They have both left and right sides and different reincarnations. For example, the spirit of legendary Khun Sii Sattha was reincarnated four times so these four spirits possess four mediums, according to one medium. Also I was told that spirits could separate into 12 parts just like Hindu gods. For example, a Phatthalung Legend figure named Phra Muang Thawng had 12 wives and each wife had 12 spirit parts. In a large three-day nora ceremony, such as at Wat Thakhae, the organizers will invite many spirits and additional ones also will come. As many as 60 mediums will be possessed. When this same ceremony is held at a villager’s home, the host instead will invite a limited number of spirits who are deceased relatives or are particularly respected deities (Pittaya 1992: 66).

Nora Ceremonies In and Out of Season

Possession ceremonies take place during the nora season, which in most areas of the south occurs in the sixth, seventh, and ninth lunar months, roughly April to September. The eighth lunar month in July or August is skipped because this is the

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59 Chatchai Sugragaan (1995) wrote that the nora season in Trang was during the second to the third lunar months due to a different dry season there. Meanwhile, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung and Songkhla hold their ceremonies from the sixth to the ninth lunar months. While using the lunar calendar might seem rather esoteric, Thai calendars are marked with the four phases of the moon, which are Buddhist holy days, so awareness of the moon’s cycles is widespread (Segaller 1989: 114).
beginning of Buddhist Lent (*khao phansaa*). Lent is a three-month retreat during the rainy season when monks retire to temples for intense prayer, and at this time ordinations are common (Gerson 1996: 8, Thanapol 2003: 16). The *nora* belief system is not Buddhist but those in the community and their ancestral spirits are Buddhists. Therefore many allowances are made to show respect to the national religion, such as not having rituals on the Buddhist holy days (*wan phra*) which occur four times on the phases of the moon every month. If a *nora* ceremony involving possession lands on a holy day, it will be postponed until the next day. On that holy day, the ancestors in the spirit world are thought to be performing their own religious rituals – such as following the five precepts or making merit – and cannot possess on earth (Chatchai 1995, Pittaya 1992: 88, Sawaang 1999).

The *nora* season is during the dry period before rice-planting begins again (Chatchai 1995). It is common in Asia for performances to adhere to the agricultural calendar in relation to planting and harvesting (Brandon 1993: 9, Gerson 1996: 1). *Nora* performers, along with shadow puppet masters, were usually farmers who traveled and performed during the slow agricultural season as a part-time vocation (Ginsburg 1972: 179, Paritta 2000: 212). The troupes interviewed for this study performed mostly during the three-month *nora* season. For instance, Nora Chalerm did 13 performances a year. Ten of these performances occurred within the *nora* season and therefore involved possession. Other groups did eight to ten performances a year, again mostly during the *nora* season.

In the *nora* season, the most important event is the *roong khruu*, which can be either a one-day ceremony (*roong khruu leg*) or a more sacred three-day ceremony.
During this ceremony, descendants can fulfill spiritual contracts (gae bon) by giving offerings or dancing for the spirits. Another major ceremony in this season is the initiation called the “ritual to tie the cloth and put on the crown” (phithii phung phaa khrawp seut). Modeled after a Buddhist monk’s ordination, the initiation allows the performer to become a complete, perfect nora qualified to perform rituals and wear the sacred crown (Pittaya 1995). Without this ritual, a nora performer is considered immature or an unripe person (khon dip), like a Buddhist man who has not been ordained (Terwiel 1994: 88). And therefore, the spirits will not accept him or her as a performer.

Organized for both males and females, from as young as nine-years-old, the nora initiation involves blessings and hair cutting by monks, nora leaders, and possessed spirit mediums. A man who passes this ceremony is called a big nora, but women are not allowed this title because they are restricted from doing certain rituals (discussed in Chapter 4).

Any time during the year, a troupe may perform at public fairs, college cultural festivals, government heritage days, house blessings, funerals, ordinations, annual Buddhist ceremonies, and royal visits. Pittaya (2003) divided shows for both nora and shadow puppetry into three types: (1) home performances hosted by individuals for gae bon ceremonies, ordinations and funerals, (2) temple fairs for seasonal festivals and for religious days to earn money for the temple, and (3) celebration festivals, which are sponsored by charitable organizations or the government to earn funds for schools, sports, and other good causes. One example is the annual Red Cross festival held in most provinces. By organizing such events, groups can make public merit (bamrung

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60 See Appendix G: Teacher Spirits in the Classical Arts for a comparison between this ceremony and the homage to teachers of the dramatic arts.
Also commercially minded business promoters can turn a profit by sponsoring festivals.

The following description illustrates the rather confused blending of commercialism and ritual in today’s nora performances. While events outside the season do not include possession, the performers still honor the nora teachers and ancestors with a ritual to respect the teachers (wai khruu) at the beginning of the event. Also an altar might be set up under the stage out of sight of the audience. As nora shows have modernized, they now offer a wide variety of entertainment for the public, and troupes are often hired for two to three nights. Performing at fairs is for entertainment so singing and talking are increased to appease the audience. In the traditional vein, the Rajabhat Institute Songkhla held its annual fairs in 2002 and 2003 and featured several well-known troupes who gave long evening shows. The audience consisted of about 250 people mostly aged 30s to 60s who brought their own seating mats, ready for old-time viewing of nora song and dance but without possession or ritual.

In contrast, the 2001 annual cultural fair at PSU, Pattani, provided more modern fare. I saw four nora performances, but only one was a stately affair with an older man dancing slowly. A second show was comprised of all girls about ten-years-old who did acrobatics by standing on their heads. A third group was mostly women in their 20s accompanied by the traditional instruments blasted into the audience with amplifiers. The last was a vaudeville-type comedy act by three older men who did a stand-up routine of ribald slapstick with sexual innuendos and ethnic jokes. This range of performances in Pattani gives an idea of the diversity that now goes under the umbrella of nora.
Nora troupes continue to perform at Buddhist funerals both to entertain guests and the departed, but the possibility of unwanted spirits is ever present. Nora Chalerm performed at the important cremation ceremony for the abbot of Wat Than Thoo in Yala. The abbot was fond of nora so his daughter invited the group. The Thai King sent the royal flame (phithii phra rachathan phleung sop) for the fire. While nora ancestors would not be invoked at such an event, other spirits may attack. Nora Chalerm said he protects himself from ghosts by doing a secret ceremony at the beginning of each performance. He said:

While we are performing for the funeral, we don’t do the Teachers’ Stage Ceremony. So if we are possessed, we are possessed by other ghosts (phii). Ghost possession happened with another nora group, not mine….During the performance, the dancers went mad (baa). They screamed and ran around on the stage. Sometimes the ghost possesses people in the audience and the audience members become mad too…Sometimes the ghost goes away by itself. Sometimes, the possessed people have to go to a ghost doctor (maw phii).

For funerals, once the ceremony for opening the stage has been completed, a ritual doctor will sprinkle all the instruments and performers with holy water to protect against bad luck (Prayat 1995). Providing nora for funerals also shows the wealth of the hosts as the show is expensive, I was told. According to Paritta, shadow plays are also hired for cremations and other events: “…a well-to-do household [owner] sponsors a troupe to perform in order to entertain his guests as well as enhance his reputation in the community” (2000: 191). Although entertaining at a funeral to attract guests might seem

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61 Today the Thai word phii has a negative connotation of an evil ghost. Instead, the afterlife soul is called a winyaan, a more positive term used for benevolent spirits.
inappropriate in Western culture, Thai funerals contain both very poignant rituals and some lighter activities. 62

Monks’ ordinations, which can occur any time during the year, also frequently feature nora shows. Some people make a wish to either earn or win the money needed for the ordination of a male relative. If the money arrives, the supplicant will pay off the promise (gae bon) to the ancestors by hiring a nora group to dance at the ordination event. Nora Awuth said he does ten gae bon ceremonies a year and about six of these are for ordinations. Nora groups are also hired for an annual ceremony to give robes to the monks (thot kathin) at the end of lent in October or November. Nora groups often perform during an important festival (loy krathong) in November, when banana leaf offerings are floated on rivers to get rid of past sins in honor of a water goddess from Brahmanism.

As a southern cultural symbol, nora shows entertain at several distinctly southern events, such as at the Buddhist festival in October for “pulling the Buddha” statue (phithii chag phra or laag phra). Rural temples make floats on wheels, depicting events in the life of Lord Buddha, and pull them along country roads to a central parade ground for judging. Held in the fifth lunar month, another southern Buddhist ceremony is the bathing of the statue of the revered monk Luang Phaw Thuat Yiap Naam Thalae Juut (Revered great-grandfather who put his foot into salt water and made it fresh) at Wat Chang Hai in Pattani Province. Nora Chalerm and four other nora groups were invited to hold a competition during this event.

62 All night gambling in the room with the coffin is common, although recently government officials have been concerned about professional gamblers who travel from funeral to funeral without knowing the deceased.
The annual Chinese ceremony to honor Goddess Lim Ko Niau at Leng Chu Kiang Shrine in Pattani in 2001 featured three distinctly different shows, which performed simultaneously for five nights. A black-and-white Chinese gangster film played on the right side of the performance area; a live Chinese opera with elaborate gowns performed on the left; and a nora group from Phatthalung held the center stage. All shows faced the entrance to the shrine to provide viewing for the goddess. This event illustrates the relationship between nora, associated with Theravada Buddhism, with a 16th century Fujian goddess, important to ethnic Chinese identity in the south. Also in 1998, I saw nora performed for another significant local spirit. In this case, there were three spirits, the three brothers who are the tutelary spirits of Phatthalung, named Thuat Saam Phi Nawng. A nora group danced in front of a stooped male spirit medium, who embodied the brothers and gave healing massages for the public in the town center at night.

In addition to these organized activities, many nora leaders provide a variety of magical services and products, like blessed face powder. As a magician knowledgeable in local lore, the leader is sought after for spells (khaathaa) to help with many personal problems, including providing inner radiance for beauty contestants and invulnerability for those in dangerous professions.

**Costs of Production**

One of the main reasons today for the decline in private nora ceremonies is the cost for hosts. Expenses have risen because productions are more complicated with electronic equipment and larger groups, while payment is in cash rather than in donated or bartered goods. Shadow puppetry also is performed more at commercial fairs now than at homes because of increasing fees (Paritta 2000: 213-4). To hire a troupe for a three-
night performance costs from 15,000B-25,000B (about US $357-595). This is equivalent to the cost of four new refrigerators or a motorcycle. Charges for a one-night performance can range from 5,000B-10,000B (US $119-238). Of course this is a change from the late 1960s when Ginsburg reported the nightly fee for a large troupe was 1,500B (US $36 by today’s exchange rate) and for a small group was 200B-300B (US $5-7). The money pays for musicians, electricity, transportation, food, offerings, ritual objects, equipment rental, tents, donations to monks, and many other necessary items. Hosts must provide substantial food offerings for the spirits and meals for guests. Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter (who wished not to be named) reported that hosting a three-day roong khruu at her home cost 50,000B. Nora performers do not charge to dance at each other’s events, but their gas is covered. Nora initiations are also pricey so parents share the expenses, according to Nora Awuth. Sompoch said to cut costs, some ceremonies have been reduced to one or two days, but then the rituals may not be complete.

While hosts and their relatives cover costs at private ceremonies, at larger events open to the public, everyone is asked to chip in. Requests for money are done frankly, without embarrassment, and put in Buddhist terms of “making merit” (tham bun) for good karma. Some leaders, such as Nora Plaeg, will reduce their personal fees for these religious reasons. When I interviewed Nora Plaeg in his home, he said, “Please donate money for the ceremony.” His adopted son added, “When you donate money, you can go inside the stage, and you can take photographs.”

63 U.S. dollar equivalences are based on 42B to US $1, which was the rate at this time.
64 Henry Ginsburg wrote his Ph.D. dissertation for the University of London on a comparison of texts from the Suthon-Manora story in 1971. In this and a subsequent article for the Siam Society, he provided the most comprehensive information on nora for English speakers until today.
During the actual ceremony, donations were requested regularly, and a silver pot was passed around for this purpose. Additional funds were generated by specific rituals. Clients donated (or are charged) 132B (US $3.14) for the ritual “to step on the mark” (yiap sen) to heal blemishes on children. Fees vary from place to place. At a nora ceremony in another province, participants gave 32B (US 76 cents) for this blemish healing ritual. At Wat Thakhae, 112B (US $2.67) was charged for the gae bon ritual, and nora costumes could be rented for 100B (US $2.38). The audience was told that an offering as small as 20B (US 48 cents) would make merit. Organizers thanked those giving 200B (US $4.76) over the microphone. If a fair is set up for the ceremony, organizers will charge the merchandise sellers for booth space. One small but necessary expense is the contribution to the monks who bless the opening of the event. At Wat Thakhae in 2001, monks were given donation of 20B (US 48 cents) each, which was considered not too little or too much for a religious person. (Normally, hosts of events give donations in white envelopes to monks, and the amount is usually larger than this.)

Although sometimes there are questions about how the money is spent, the nora career is not lucrative for most leaders who are in the lower income brackets. Speaking into a microphone at the roong khruu, Nora Jop described his ailing father Nora Plaeg: “He is not rich, but some people gossip about him that he may take some money from this ceremony. Actually, if he did that he might have four or five Mercedes Benzes. But when the ceremony comes, he needs to borrow some money from many people to organize the ceremony.” Ginsburg wrote that few leaders succeeded financially, however,

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65 I was told that the number 32 related to people having 32 organs but it also is considered a mystical number in Hinduism and Buddhism.
they received compensation in high status: “The nora master in former times could be either quite well to do, especially if he were a renowned player, having many wives, or quite poor. In either case he was always a prominent member of the rural community, both for his role as a magician and as an entertainer” (1972: 180).

**Nora Teachers’ Stage Ceremony (nora roong khruu)**

The Nora Teachers’ Stage Ceremony is the ultimate sacred ritual, in contrast to nora shows in fairs, which are often considered profane commercialism. This ceremony is the longest and most complex, covering specific lessons, poems, postures, skits, and rituals, which must be performed carefully in a certain order as passed down in each family. “The pattern of nora roong khruu is a custom. It is a fixed, inflexible form. For changing it, they can only add more interesting things, but they don’t change the pattern” (interview Pittaya 2004). While the basic pattern is retained, the ceremony may be shortened to fit modern schedules and reduce costs.

The roong khruu has maintained its relative consistency over the years largely because descendants would offend the spirits by changing it (Prayat 1995). The ceremony’s first main purpose is to show respect to the ancestors, described as giving a prayerful wai hand gesture to the teachers (wai khruu). The descendants thank the ancestors for auspiciousness (mongkhon) and try to repay their kindness. The second purpose is to perform certain rituals, most importantly a vow fulfilling ritual for wishes granted (Chatchai 1995, Pittaya 1995). According to Pittaya (1995), a third purpose is to hold the initiation ritual for bestowing crowns on new performers (khrawp seu), but in my experience this significant ritual was held as a separate event. According to Sompoch, the ceremony is not to help people in specific ways but to praise the ancestors.
The Teachers’ Stage Ceremony has a unique name, which illustrates the symbolic significance of the stage. A normal theater stage is called wethii. But the nora stage is called roong, meaning stage or pavilion. The special term indicates the importance of the rituals held in the stage and the historic structure itself, which as historian Lorraine Gesick noted, is torn down after each yearly ceremony “to prevent dangerous spirits from returning” (Gesick 1995: 67, Sawaang 1999).

The title of the ceremony has caused some confusion. Some researchers use the term roong while others use long, meaning to descend or go down, which is synonymous with the spirit descending or possession (Pittaya 1995: 43). Therefore, the ceremony can be translated as Teachers’ Stage Ceremony or Teachers’ Descending Ceremony. Pittaya said the ceremony is known by both words. But he and several Thai academics prefer roong (Chatchai 1995, Pittaya 1992, Prayat 1995), while others use long (Sawaang 1999). Gesick said the confusion in terminology was partly due to the switching of ‘l’ for ‘r’ in southern dialect and a “deliberate semantic ambiguity” since both words describe important elements in the performance (Gesick 1995: 66). When I asked Nora Oamjid the correct term in 2004, she said emphatically that long was wrong. Therefore, in this study I will follow the practice of most researchers and nora leaders and use the term roong for this key ceremony. The second word in the ceremony, khruu, means teacher or teachers which is translated broadly to include ancestors and other high level spirits who have passed on their teachings and performing abilities to the living descendants (see Appendix G: Teacher Spirits in the Classical Arts).

Original Ceremony. The Teachers’ Stage Ceremony is based on a re-enactment of the first ancestor possession ceremony held by a Phatthalung king centuries ago and
described in the Phatthalung Legend. Whether or not this ceremony actually occurred in history is still unknown (Suthiwong 1999) and probably not relevant for this research. Regardless, nora groups today follow rituals from this legend thereby physically replaying and remembering their history. Here I will describe the “original” ceremony as related by nora groups and compare it to practices today.

When the king learned of the existence of his grandson, he invited the young man to attend a ceremony that lasted for three days and nights, beginning on Wednesday afternoon and ended on Friday (Pittaya 1995). Today nora groups usually follow this same schedule by inviting spirits on Wednesday and sending them back to their celestial abode on Friday. Most of the sacred rituals occur on Thursday, which is considered the “Teachers’ Day” (wan khruu) in Thai culture (Chatchai 1995, Pittaya 1995) and is also revered by spirit mediums. On Thursdays, students hold ceremonies annually to respect or wai teachers (wai khruu). At the original nora ceremony, the monarch invited the ancestor spirits to attend and gave them food and a dance offering showing respect (ram thawaai khruu). The king prepared 12 sets of offerings, including betel, which are still prepared today. The Phatthalung Legend also explains the meaning of several key rituals -- “setting up the town,” “hooking the swan,” and “killing the crocodile.” Today even the size of the stage is based on the size of the king’s stage described in archaic measurements of nine sawg wide and 11 sawg long (Udom 1995).66 Although there are variations in the story, each troupe attempts to re-create the legend, as they know it. At the beginning of the ceremony, nora leaders will apologize to the audience in advance for accidentally make any mistakes.

66 A sawg is an elbow length, which is about half a meter long (Pittaya 1995: 47).
Scheduling a Ceremony. Nora families may host a roong khruu ceremony every one, three, five, seven, or nine years, or even after more than a decade. The date depends on the negotiated promise to the spirit, which occurs when the spirit is possessing. Odd numbered years are considered more auspicious in Thailand. If the descendants forego the ceremony, they will be punished probably through illness (Chatchai 1995, Sawaang 1999). Since most families do not have their own troupe, they will hire a nora group to perform. As mentioned, families can hold a “large” three-day ceremony or a “small” ceremony lasting one day and one night to save on expenses. The shorter version is to assure the ancestors that they are not forgotten (gaan kham khruu) and to communicate that a larger event is planned. This notification protects the family from spiritual retribution (Chatchai 1995, Pittaya 1992, 1995). In addition to these formal ceremonies, nora families regularly make offerings to small ancestor shrines in their homes.

Although the dominant religion of participants is Theravada Buddhism, religious groups from other local shrines may also attend the roong khruu, making the ceremony a polyglot gathering of faiths. Those attending might include followers of the Chinese Goddess Guan Im, Hindu devotees of the God Shiva (Phra Isuan), Chinese spirit mediums from Taoist shrines, and followers of local tutelary spirits. Other nora troupes are invited to perform and donate their time, cementing networks among nora families.

Stage and Offerings. Today’s stage looks essentially the same as the simple open air, on the ground structure photographed almost a century ago for a visit by King Chulalongkorn in Nakhon Si Thammarat (Suthiwong 1999). In the past, nora people danced under the skies, but later they built stages probably for protection from rain and to formalize shows held at fairs. The structure began as a single undivided room, and male
performers dressed in public view. But about the 1940s, a curtain was added to divide the space and provide a private dressing room, probably for women (Prayat 1995). Today the stage is built in a rectangle shape, supported by eight poles and open on all sides with a triangular gable roof or inverted L shaped roof covered with thatch. It is built on the ground and mats are laid inside (Pittaya 1995). According to some scholars, the stage faces either north or south, as it is inauspicious to disturb the sun by facing toward the east or west. Either gachaeng leaves or pandan leaves are used in making the roof. Gachaeng leaves are symbolic for two reasons: first, the legendary princess used them to make the hut on her raft when she was banished, and second, there is a female spirit of the leaves and poles named Phii Nang Oo Gachaeng (Pittaya 1995). At the base of the four corner posts, a square-shaped leaf container (phlap phlung) is placed with offerings.

By the 1960s, when nora groups started to perform at large fairs using electricity, they switched to elevated stages for better viewing by large audiences (Prayat 1995) (see Appendix E: Four Periods of Nora Development). But the village performance still takes place on the ground. This allows the audience to gather closely around and step into the inner stage quickly when the ancestors call them. The difference between the traditional bamboo stage and the stages for entertainment at fairs is striking and symbolic. Often the stage at a fair will be used for different performances including the commercialized likay drama. It is about five feet off the ground and has a painted backdrop featuring a village

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67 Facing west when sleeping is considered bad luck as the west represents death, where the sun sets. In a differing opinion, Chatchai (1995) reported that the nora stage faces east.

68 Likay (also spelled ilge) developed in central Thailand in the early 1900s and became a “...vulgarized court drama under the influence and tutelage of ex-palace dancers...” (Ginsburg 1967: 67). Brandon uses likay as an example of a big city commercial theater, which appealed to lower paid workers. This type of genre “...began as outcast theatres despised by the intelligentsia...” (Brandon 1993: 3). It became very popular and played all over the country from the 1920s to 1950s. Known for their improvisation and elaborate costumes, likay performers are often seen today at southern fairs and religious festivals.
scene or modern cement buildings in bright colors. There is no altar or religious symbol in view. The musicians are more hidden. *Nora* performers dress in the back, away from public gaze, distanced from the audience. When *nora* leaves its village stage, it crosses over into this hybrid area of secular spectacle.

In contrast, for the village *roong khruu* ceremony, the symbols of Buddhism and Hindu-Brahmanism are paramount and immediately visible. Beginning at a Buddha statue on an altar in the stage, a Brahmanism style holy cotton string (*saai sin*) is strung around the outside of the stage as a protective fence against evil spirits. If the ceremony is held in a monastery, the string may go outside the stage to a Buddhist shrine. As offerings, tall and short banana leaf structures (*bai sii*) sit on the floor. Thought to be of Indian origin, these structures are commonly offered at important Buddhist ceremonies. They come in a great variety with individual names. At one *roong khruu*, the *bai sii* was northern style and had 12 layers, but I have seen others decorated with the lacy sweet (*laa*), thought to be spirit clothing.\(^{69}\) *Bai sii* are also given to professional spirit mediums and the number of layers represents the level in heaven where the spirit resides. The use of desserts like *laa* is significant because these sweets are generally reserved for the annual ancestor ceremony called Duan Sip, Ching Pret, or Wan Saat, which is a feature of southern culture (Pittaya 1992: 84). Colored blinking lights reminiscent of Christmas might decorate the *bai sii* and the stage. Although to Westerners these may seem overly festive for a sacred ceremony, such lights are common on guardian spirit houses and in temple buildings. I recall being startled when I came upon the coffin of an abbot at Wat

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\(^{69}\) I first became aware of the importance of this spirit sweet at the annual ancestors’ ceremony named the Tenth Month (*duan sip*) in Nakhon Si Thammarat in 1990. There I saw a homemakers’ group dripping creamy batter into a giant wok to form the dessert. Resembling funeral sackcloth worn by Chinese in Southeast Asia, the brown sweet symbolized spirit clothes (Pittaya 1995).
Mutchalin Wapi Wihan in Pattani Province. The abbot's body was waiting for royal burial, which might take up to two years, and the elaborate coffin was festooned with colored blinking lights.

Along the back or side wall of the nora stage is a long shelf (phaalai) at eye level for the offerings. When the ceremony begins, many spirits are invoked and come to rest on this shelf. Considered sacred, access to the shelf is restricted to males and possessed female mediums, who are allowed to reach up to the shelf to adjust offerings. I have also seen transvestite (gateui) performers adjust offerings on this shelf. Food offerings are a major expense for ceremonies. At the end of a nora initiation ceremony in Pattani Province, I counted the offerings as a male helper lowered numerous round metal trays from the shelf. There were nine dishes of the spirit sweet laa, just described. There were 27 whole boiled chickens with heads, two boiled pig's heads, and many bowls of rice and cucumbers. At another event, I saw alcohol in brown bottles and bottled orange juice on the shelf. Pittaya (1995) also listed other offerings of bananas, sugarcane, puffed rice, and coconuts, with most items in sets of three, nine, or 12. There should be 12 specific offerings including cigarettes, according to Sawaang (1999). Providing the correct items is important because the ancestors, once they possess, will check the offerings and object loudly if anything is amiss (Sawaang 1999). The spirits eat the essence of the food and then the hosts can eat the physical substance.

Towards the rear of the stage is the paraphernalia for the ceremony and a second offering place for male and female hunter masks, golden crowns, and beaded costumes. There are many items: a holy water vessel, candles, incense, flowers, and small sets of betel with leaves, nuts, and ingredients (maag phluu) wrapped together and ready to
chew. Long stemmed cogon grasses (*bai yaa khaa*) are tied together in bunches for sprinkling holy water on the audience and supplicants to chase away bad luck. As containers for the crowns, gray metal boxes with conical tops line the back wall. Pictures of the Thai King, Queen, King’s mother, and King Chulalongkorn may hang from the supporting beams of the stage.

To invite the teacher spirits, candles are stuck on many of the offerings including crowns, masks, and the holy water vessel (Chatchai 1995). In the past, betel sets were offered as an essential welcome to guests, and today betel is still a significant element in *nora*. Betel is used as an offering to ancestors in the vow fulfillment ritual where 12 sets of betel are needed for 12 ancestors, as dictated by the Phatthalung Legend. It is also used to invite *nora* troupes to perform at private homes (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983), to invite the spirit to possess, and to encourage the transfer of a spirit from one person to another. At Wat Thakhae, the hosts made betel offerings available to descendants for a small fee, 100 sets for 35B (US 83 cents).

Inside the stage is a bamboo back rest, made of two vertical and a horizontal pole, like an inverted U, where spirit mediums rest while being possessed and performers sit (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983). Some stages are built around a permanent guardian spirit house (*saan phra phuum*) illustrating the Animistic aspects of the ritual. An essential part of every ceremony is a square white cloth (*phuug phaa daat phedaan*) which is tied at four corners and hangs from the ceiling over the center of the stage. It may contain betel, flowers, candle, incense, puffed rice, and the *nora* bracelets and nails (Pittaya 1995: 48, interview Songphuum Chanabaan 2003). The cloth is a transportation place for the

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70 A betel set consists of betel leaf (*bai phluu*), lime (*puun*), and areca nut (*maag*). It is referred to as *maag phluu*. Tobacco is also commonly chewed by spirit mediums.
spirits. Spirits will travel from their resting place on the shelf to the hanging cloth and then down a holy string onto the stage, where possession will occur. A smaller duplicate of this cloth is also hung over one end of the offering shelf (Chatchai 1995 and my observation). Similar small cloths are hung over home shrines to nora spirits.

Toward the back or side of the stage, electronic equipment is installed. There are usually two microphones used by the nora leader and a singing musician. To one side of the stage, the musicians sit in front of their instruments on the floor. A curtain may be hung behind or to the side of the stage to create a separate dressing room. Descendants will change clothes here before giving a dance offering. But rather than dressing in private, male leaders dress slowly as a ritual in full view of the audience often with the assistance of an older woman.

**Nora Ancestors from the Phatthalung Legend.** As used by Nora Plaeg’s group, the lesson to invite the nora teachers (*bot cheun khruu nora*) identifies the 12 important nora spirits from the Phatthalung Legend. There are six males and six females. Today, these and lesser spirits possess mediums at *roong khruu* ceremonies and accept vows from believers. This list is drawn from interviews with nora families and the research of Thai scholars (Suthiwong 1999, Udom 1999b) particularly Pittaya (1992).

1. Phra Thep Singhawn – Nora families generally believe that this deity is Shiva, the Hindu god of dance, who resides in heaven. His name means angel lion.

2. Khun Sii Sattha – Phra Thep Singhawn was reborn in human form to bring dancing to the world in the body of a young prince named Ajitta Kumaan or Jao Chaai Noi. Later he was given the title of Khun Sii Sattha. His name is probably the rank of a leader and means auspiciousness, being a teacher, and setting a standard. In
some versions, Khun Sii Satthaa is the son of the Phatthalung king and queen, and in others, he is their grandson. Many people think he is the son of the princess who was sent away on a raft. He later danced for his grandfather and received the nora costume.

3. Phrayaa Saai Faa Faat (or Thao Goosin) – He is the king of the Phatthalung Kingdom when it was situated at Bang Kaeo in present day Phatthalung Province. His name means lightning strikes.

4. Inthara Gawranii (or Naang Inthiraanii) – She is the queen of the Phatthalung Kingdom, who is probably Indian or Sinhalese. She gave birth to her daughter on a boat, possibly while traveling between South Asia and Thailand, and named her Naang Sri Khongkhaa (glorious river) maybe in reference to the Ganges River.

5. Mae Sii Maa Laa – She is the daughter of the king and queen and was exiled. According to some versions of the tale, she underwent three name changes. Her original name was Naang Sri Khongkhaa, referring to her birth at sea or on a river. When she was exiled on the island, she discarded her old name because her father thought it had destroyed his honor. Instead she took the name Naang Nuan Thawng Samlii (woman and glowing golden cotton wool) because she wove cloth on the island for an elderly couple, who actually were deities. After she gave birth and returned to the kingdom, her father changed her name to Mae Sii Maa Laa (mother and auspiciousness flower), apparently to signify her new higher status. This princess is also thought to be Shiva’s consort, Uma Devi (in Thai: Umaa Thewii or Phra Mae Umaa) (interview Pittaya 2004).71

71 The identities of the Phatthalung queen and princess are disputed. Scholars have argued that Mae Sii Maa Laa is the queen rather than the princess. And some think the two personages are related through past lives.
6. Phra Muang Thawng – He is a page or military officer in the Phatthalung Kingdom who may have had a secret relationship with Mae Sii Maa Laa and fathered her son. Or he may be a reincarnation of Phra Thep Singhawn, reborn on earth to create the nora dance. He reputedly had 12 wives from various ethnic and religious backgrounds including Chinese, Lao, Burmese, and Malay, who were Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim. He was involved in a ship wreck in the Andaman Sea. His wives possess a number of spirit mediums in Thakhae village.

7. Phraan Bun – He is the hunter and comedian in nora. As a bodyguard in the Phatthalung palace, he took care of princess Mae Sii Maa Laa. Later he forcibly brought her back from the island by catching her with a lasso, which is re-enacted in the Suthon-Manora scene of hooking the swans. His name means hunter and merit.

8. Mae Khaenawn Faai Khwaa (right side) – She is an assistant to Mae Sii Maa Laa and one of the wives of Phra Muang Thawng. She accompanied Mae Sii Maa Laa to the island and may have been her younger sister. Several spirits are divided into left and right sides with opposing personalities. This right side spirit is rather controlling and easily dissatisfied with descendants and their offerings.

9. Mae Khaenawn Faai Saai (left side) – She is the left side of the previous spirit and is respected by other spirits as a compromiser. One spirit medium said she is a healer who cared for Khun Sii Satthaa on the island.

10. Mae Sii Dawg Mai – Possibly the sister of Mae Sii Maa Laa, she also traveled to the island. She may have been a wife of Phra Muang Thawng. Her name means mother, auspiciousness, and flower.

(see Phinyo 1965, Pittaya 1992, Udom 1999b). However the nora persons I interviewed, including some spirit mediums of Mae Sii Maa Laa, say she is the princess who was exiled.
11. Mawm Rawng – He is a soldier who served under Phra Muang Thawng.

12. Mae Khiw Heun – Another wife of Phra Muang Thawng, she helped raise Mae Sii Maa Laa. Some people believe that she is actually an Indian angel who wants to preserve nora dancing.

Postures, Lessons and Songs. The ceremony is based on 12 dance positions or attitudes (thaa), 12 lessons or sung poetry (bot), and 12 songs (phlaeng). These have been taught by the ancestors and must be performed in a specific order (see Gesick 1995). According to the legend, the princess dreamt about the 12 postures and lessons. In the dream, either an angel, a mystical bird-man, or the princess’ unborn son danced the postures accompanied by music from the original instruments (Suthiwong 1999, Udom 1995). When she woke, she practiced the steps and ordered the construction of the instruments. The often repeated number of 12 might be related to the 12 constellations of stars, which are imprinted on bowls in the nora initiation ceremony (Suthiwong 1999). These constellations are the symbol of ancient southern towns.

While the performance is orally transmitted, the dance positions and verses have been recorded in articles and books by researchers at least since the reign of King Rama VI (r. 1910-1925) (Pittaya 1995, Suthiwong 1999). The performers must dance with both grace and energy. They sing rhythmically while also improvising verses. Being able to

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72 According to Pittaya (1995: 49), eight of the lessons/sung poetry are: 1) lessons for songs and dancing – Teachers Teach (bot khruu sawn), Primary Lesson (bot prathom), An Elephant Named Ngaam Follows its Group (bot phlaai ngaam taam khloong), Rain Falls in the North (bot fon tog khaang naa), and 2) lessons for songs alone – Inviting Nora Spirits (bot gaat khruu), Teachers Gathering Together (bot chumnumkhruu), Giving Respect to Nora Spirits (bot buuchaa khruu maw), and Sending the Teachers Back (bot song khruu).

73 By the 13th century, Thai people were using the 12 animal year cycles in the Chinese system (Wales 1983: 8).
sing and dance at the same time, called “doing the lesson” (tham bot), is considered a real skill.

Postures (thaa) are stylized dance poses, like ballet positions. They consist of the actions, which are described in each lesson. There are an original 12 postures (thaa mae bot or thaa pathom), which all nora performers learn and then expand upon (interview Pittaya 2004, Suthiwong 1999). Prince Damrong (his full name is Somdet Grom Phrayaa Damrongraachaanuphaap) described the 12 postures of a nora performer from Trang Province (Suthiwong 1999). However, today there is disagreement about which are the original positions because many have been added.

Themes of the postures are taken from nature, art designs, music, literature, and lifestyles. These are described in a book titled Phra Pharot Opens the Stage or Phra Pharot Begins the Performance (Phra pharot beug roong) by King Rama VI. He described many postures, which he observed at nora shows in the south (Suthiwong 1999). Suthiwong Phongphaibun, considered the academic father of southern Thai culture, lists 27 of these recorded positions. The titles describe animals and nature, which the nora dancers imitate elegantly. Examples are “to move gracefully like a deer walking in the forest,” “the wind blows the top of banana trees,” “the lion plays with his tail and the deer jumps,” and “to dance like a gibbon climbing a tree slowly.” Hindu-Brahmanism is also a theme; positions are called, “wai-ing the first Brahma with four faces” and “Rama [a reincarnation of Vishnu] pulls the bow” (Suthiwong 1999: 3881-2). Several postures are part of traditional Siamese dance reflecting the relationship between nora

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74 The 12 basic postures are: a Thai design representing a serpent’s head and flame posture, eclipsed moon posture, budding lotus posture, unfolding lotus posture, bursting lotus posture, blooming lotus posture, spider spins its web posture, graceful swan posture, elephant joins its tusks posture, bird-human posture, dancing posture, and lower the fingers posture (Suthiwong 1999).
dance with the masked (*khon*) dance (communication Pawana Markmuk 2003). These postures demonstrate the creative wisdom of local people, according to Pittaya (2003: 37).

The only *nora* performer to be honored as a national artist, Nora Yok Chuubua, posed for photographs of 29 positions in the *Encyclopedia of Thai Culture: Southern Region* (Suthiwong 1999: 3886-3891). To illustrate a buffalo with horns, he held his elbows out to the side and with palms up and curled his long imitation fingernails toward his ears. He also demonstrated four hand positions of a lotus changing from a bud to an open flower. As the mystical bird-man (*garuda*), he lifted his hanging waist cloths like wings. Illustrating the labor of a farmer, he showed how southern people cut sugar palm trees. From the Indian epic, the *Ramayana* (*raammagian*), he showed Lord Rama crossing the ocean. Referring to nature, he also used his hands to show a spider spinning a web. On a Buddhist theme, Nora Yok Chuubua demonstrated the classic posture of Lord Buddha holding up his hand to protect from evil. These positions illustrate the religious and environmental roots of the dance.

The lessons (*bot*) are sung poetry, which follows the posture. The poetic verses relate to a ritual or to a story in Thai literature. (The word *bot* is rather ambiguous as it can be translated as song, stanza, lesson, chapter, or sung poetry.) The lessons include ritual prayers in which the *nora* performers communicate with the spirits in song. For instance, one lesson invokes the spirits at the beginning of the ceremony (*bot gaat khruu*) and another sends the spirits back at the end (*bot song khruu*). The leader will sing a line and the chorus of musicians will reply in song. Each lesson has a corresponding dance posture. Lessons sometimes have more worldly messages. According to Prayat (1995:
163), a lesson sung behind the curtain (bot naa maan) discusses the appearance of a buxom girl, which is meant to attract males to the performance. But this lesson also tells about morality and Buddhist teachings.

The songs (phlaeng) and music have different styles using four, six, or eight syllable poetry. The music emphasizes rhythm over melody (Suthiwong 1999). Memorizing all the composed lyrics (gamphrat) is considered quite difficult. But the nora leader must also improvise poetry (mutto or glawn sot) about daily events, such as politics, the economy, admiration of young women, and others topics to get the audience involved. Two or three performers might engage in throwing lines back and forth (yoon glawn) (Committee for Compiling the Document 1999, Prayat 1995, Suthiwong 1999: 3881). Special dances (ram) are required for specific rituals. Suthiwong (1999) lists 10 of these dances including the dance to stab the crocodile (ram thaeng khe) and the dance to hook the swan (ram khlawng hong).

Thai Classic Folk Tales. Thai classical literature is inserted into the nora performance to entertain audiences with monsters, magic, royalty, and minor wives (see Appendix D: Thai Classic Folk Tales). I propose that the enactment of these stories further connects nora with constructed Thainess, particularly the national arts, monarchy, history, and the supernatural. Many of the tales were written or commissioned by kings to promote the concept of monarchy and to define the proper role for the public. Today they are kept alive through TV dramas.

After completing the required rituals in the roong khruu, two or three performers often act out a popular short skit for entertainment but without possession. The

75 A minor wife (mia noi) refers to mistresses, who are not legally married but are supported by married men. The legal wife is called the major wife (mia luang).
commercial performances of modern nora emphasize this type of acting. At country fairs, nora actors perform plays from modern novels, melodramas, and traditional stories along with sentimental country singing. Meanwhile traditional singing and dancing are scaled back. But for the village ceremony, the rituals come first and the plays are secondary. These plays, many of which date back to the 19th century in central Siam, have long been a characteristic of nora and sometimes are performed until dawn (Ginsburg 1972: 170). Nevertheless, for some, the relationship between the plays and nora is contested. One teacher in Songkhla told me the plays are not part of "pure" southern culture but an influence from central Thai society (communication Pawana Markmuk 2004).

Nora draws on 12 classic stories, probably introduced by the end of the second Chakri reign (King Rama II, r. 1809-1824). In addition, birth stories (chaadog or jataka) from the former incarnations of the Lord Buddha were added in the early decades of the 1900s (Prayat 1995: 165). More tales were added as groups performed ancient royalty plays and folk legends (Pittaya 2003). Many tales were written as poetry or drama by leading scholars and royalty, including King Rama II and King Rama III (r. 1824-1851), and the famous poet Sunthorn Phu (1786-1856). As mentioned, the two most commonly performed today are Suthon-Manora and Phra Rot-Merii (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983, Committee for Compiling the Document 1999, Suthiwong 1999).

Drama expert Mattani Mojdara Runtin (1996: 11) explained that many of these stories were performed as the repertoire for a folk dance-drama called lakhon nok (outside dance-drama), which itself originated about the 17th century in the Ayutthaya Kingdom. The title of this genre either refers to the plays held outside the royal court or plays in the provinces such as in the south. Lakhon nok may actually have developed out
of nora when it moved north to Ayutthaya. The lakhon nok troupes specialized in jataka stories from the former lives of the Buddha, emphasizing dramatic action. At first only male players were used.

Nowadays, many folk tales have been modernized and shown on television so they are still familiar to young audiences. “They are stories about the adventurous and polygynous life of princely heroes,” wrote Associate Professor Siraporn Nathalang (2000: 29) of Chulalongkorn University. Having studied TV shows in the early 1990s, she concluded that these folk tales (chakchak wongwong) remained popular because they dealt with family conflicts largely between wives and mistresses.

Schedule of Rituals. The following is taken from my own observations supplemented by information from researchers Chatchai Sugragaan (1995), Pittaya (1995), and Thianchai (2003). As rituals vary by location and troupes, I have here summarized the essential and common ones. Some individualized rituals are only performed when requested, such as cutting the topknot, and therefore have faded with the lack of demand. Following the schedule is an explanation of the rituals.

First day – Ceremony begins Wednesday evening about 5 p.m.

Showing respect to the guardian spirit of the land (gaan wai phra phuum).76

Chanting by monks (phra suat).

Entering the stage (gaan khao roong).

Beginning the ceremony or opening the stage (gaan beug roong).

Invoking the spirits who then descend onto the stage (gaan gaat khruu

76 I have translated the rituals using the gerund word gaan at the beginning, but the word for ritual, phithii, can be used instead.
and gaan long roong).

Setting up the town (gaan tang muang).

Possessing of spirit mediums (gaan jap long or gaan khao song).

Performing a play (gaan sadaeng). Although the first day's ceremony
ends at this point, a host may request the actors to perform a play
for entertainment, possibly lasting until 2 a.m. or later.

Second Day – Thursday, all day.

This Teachers' Day is related to the planet Jupiter and astrological
characteristics of wisdom (Segaller 1989: 52, Wong 1991: 20). The first
dancer must be male because the ancestors will not accept a woman
dancing, who would bring bad luck (Pittaya 1992: 91). This second day of
the ceremony is filled with essential rituals and the exciting events of
possessing and dancing to pay off vows. According to Pittaya (1995), on
this day the two key rituals are vow fulfillment (gae bon) and possibly an
initiation, which includes cutting the topknot (tat jug).

Invoking the spirits who then descend onto the stage (gaan gaat khruu
and gaan long roong).

Dancing lessons of 12 songs and 12 lessons (gaan ram bot sip sawng
plaeng sip sawng bot).

Cutting the topknot (gaan tat jug).

Releasing from the initiation (gaan phuug phaa ploi).

Possessing of spirit mediums (gaan jap long or gaan khao song).

Fulfilling vows (gaan gae bon).
Dancing offerings to the teachers (gaan ram thawaai khruu). The day ends with this dance, and afterward there is nora dancing and singing for entertainment.

Third Day – Friday, all day.

On the final day, the two important rituals are “sending the teachers off” (gaan song khruu) and “cutting the offerings” (gaan tat meuy), but they aren’t the most entertaining and often go unnoticed. For the audience, the highlights are the performance of the hunter hooking the seven nubile swans and the dramatic stabbing of the life-sized crocodile model.

Invoking the spirits who then descend onto the stage (gaan gaat khruu and gaan long roong).

Stepping on the mark (gaan yiap sen).

Cutting tangled hair (gaan tat phom phi chaw).

Kicking the buffalo head (gaan ram thiip hua khwaai).

Hooking the swan dance (gaan ram khlawng hong).

Stabbing the crocodile (gaan ram thaeng khe or jorakhe).

Sending off the teachers (gaan song khruu).

Cutting the offerings (gaan tat meuy).

Whipping a ghost (gaan khian phraai).

Turning over the mat to close the door on the spirit world (gaan phlig saat khlaa).

Explanations of Main Rituals (in order performed).
Showing respect to the guardian spirit of the land (*gaan wai phra phuum*). A local spirit doctor (*maw*) does a ceremony to ask the guardian spirit of the land for permission to use the land for the *nora* stage and ceremony. The spirit is called Phra Phuum Roong Nora.

**Chanting by monks (*phra suat*).** Five, seven, or nine Buddhist monks chant a prayer for auspiciousness (*suat chai mongkhon khaathaa*). In a ritual to send merit to the ancestors (*gruat naam*), a monk will pour water over a finger from one container to another. The water is then poured onto the ground.

**Entering the stage (*gaan khao roong*).** The host welcomes the *nora* groups with a betel tray. To the accompaniment of music, the performers carry costumes, instruments, and equipment inside the stage. They enter from the south or north side, according to different sources, rather than the west side that is considered the area for the dead. Items are placed in the center of the stage (*tang khruu*).

**Beginning the ceremony or opening the stage (*gaan beug roong*).** This ritual to invite the teachers and ancestors begins with lighting candles stuck on the drums, hunter’s masks, and crowns. Footed trays of offerings are prepared. The bracelets and nails of the *nora* costume are put in a bowl with betel. Respect is paid to the Triple Gems of Buddhism (*phra rattana trai*) -- the Lord Buddha, Buddha’s teachings, and the monkhood (*phra phut, phra tham, phra song*) -- by saying a prayer three times. Then the leader recites the lesson to invite the teachers and ancestors. Then the ritual is held to “throw the betel” (*phithii sat maag*). Betel is inserted into the stage roof to invite angels for protection, and it is
put under a mat to invite the Earth Goddess (Mae Torranee), also for protection. Betel is also inserted through a bracelet while a prayer is said to ask the ancestors to care for descendants and to transform any disaster into peacefulness. Finally, the betel is thrown at the drums, which are beaten.

Invoking the spirits who then descend onto the stage (*gaan gaat khruu* and *gaan long roong*). On the first day, the music for the 12 songs is played. The *nora* leader invites the ancestors and teachers in an invocation ritual by reciting poetry, which mentions the Earth Goddess. The leaders will slowly dress in costumes in the middle of the stage and again pay respect to the Triple Gems. The leader sings the poetry from several lessons. These include the lessons to invite the teachers for an auspicious occasion, to pay respect to various spiritual deities including the Hindu god Brahma, and to respect parents for their kindness. The *nora* leaders will tell the history of the rituals and do a dance offering to the teachers.

On the second day, the *nora* leader folds a white cloth (*phawg*) in layers based on the number of crowns present, puts offerings in the folds and wraps this around the waist. The leaders sing several lessons and then take a break for breakfast. *Nora* performers are not allowed to eat while in full costume so they must take off top garments to eat. Many forego lunch. Next, women come to dance. Then the leader gives offerings to spirits (*sen wai khruu*) by having the host and leader call the names of all the ancestors and teachers to accept the offerings. Many candles are lit in front of the crowns and on the offering dishes.
The leader does a dance and lesson to admire the teachers and then sings lessons on various topics, such as about the rain in the north and a beautiful elephant.

The invocation ceremony is common to other Thai performing arts. “Most Thai traditional entertainments begin with a sung invocation which serves as a formal prayer sanctifying the proceedings about to commence, and as an acknowledgment of the sources of the performer’s skills” (Ginsburg 1972: 172-3). The nora ritual is called gaan gaat khruu which is southern dialect for the commonly known ritual to show respect to teachers (wai khruu), according to Chatchai (1995: 80). He wrote that the ritual consists of descendants telling the ancestors about the ceremony and inviting them to watch, giving many wai gestures for respect, and giving offerings, all while music is played. The nora invocation has the distinctive feature of reiterating the memorized history of the genre. In repeating back the words in chant form, the chorus also learns the story which has been spread orally over a large geographic area “with a considerable accuracy,” according to Ginsburg (1972: 173).

Thai scholars have studied the text of the invocation to determine the historical origin of nora (Ginsburg 1971). This ritual illustrates the syncretic nature of the ceremony in which gods and spirits are named from the religions of Hindu-Brahmanism, Buddhism and Animism. The invited Hindu gods are Indra (Phra In), Brahma (Phra Phrom) and Shiva (Phra Isuan). As the creator of dance, Shiva is considered the most significant deity. This Hindu influence can be seen

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77 Following the recent practice of other academics, I am capitalizing the term Animism to put this belief system on the same level as other religions, although it is not an organized religion (see Brewer 2000: 69).
today in the belief among nora descendants that the founder of the genre, Khun Sii Satthaa, is actually a reincarnation of Shiva.

Also propitiated are Indian yogis called ruusii, who are usually depicted wearing tiger skin robes and conical hats in Thailand. While doing research on tattoo masters in Bangkok in 1990, I learned that people involved in supernatural arts believe there are 108 ruusii, an auspicious number. Individual ruusii are known for protecting occupations, such as tattoo masters, lawyers, and doctors (Guelden 1995: 155). Also mentioned in the nora ritual is the god of the underworld, Phayaa Yom (yommabaan), who decides each person’s fate. The invocation includes spirits derived from a mixture of Animism and Hinduism, such as the Earth Goddess and the guardian spirit of the land (Phra Phuum). Also the nation’s tutelary angel (Phra Siam Thewathirat), whose statue is located in the Grand Palace complex in Bangkok, is invoked. I was told this angel protects Khun Sii Satthaa. The ritual shows respect to more than 30 guardian spirits in nature from three southern provinces. Respect is given to a number of ghosts (phii) with the hope that they will do no harm. Marginal ghosts are thought to reside under the offering shelf for the ceremony. Spirits of people who died violent deaths (phii taai hong) are feared as unpredictable unhappy ghosts who died before their time and might possess people in the audience. The uncertainty of whether a possessing spirit is an honored ancestor or a renegade phii causes some consternation, and several rituals are performed to keep out malevolent ghosts.
The dashing figure of Khun Phaen, from the Thai literary classic Khun Chang - Khun Phaen, is invoked. Khun Phaen is understood to be a real figure who lived in the Ayutthaya era, rather than just a literary device. Parts of this story may be enacted as one of the 12 plays. Characters from the Suthon-Manora Story are invited including the hunter and the seven bird-princesses. Also invoked are two male spirits who can perform feats; Phrayaa Thoomnam walks on water and Phrayaa Lui Fai walks on burning coals.

**Setting up the town (gaan tang muang).** This ritual claims the land for building the stage by recounting that in the Phatthalung Legend, the king gave his grandson land for a town. A brass bowl will be turned over and objects placed under it, including some types of grasses. Then the performer will put a foot on the bowl and dance the lessons. Alternatively, water may be put in a large bowl with various symbolic items, such sheaves of paddy rice. Although Chatchai (1995) describes this as occurring on the second day, I observed it on the first day and was told the town had to be established before the other rituals.

**Possessing of spirit mediums (gaan jap long or gaan khao song).** Possessions occur every day of the ceremony, however, most take place on the second day when vows are fulfilled including the promise to be possessed. Spirit mediums get dressed in appropriate clothes near the stage. This preparation ritual can also take place in the host's house, but the room must be decorated like the nora stage with ritual elements, including the sacred string draped around the room and a square white cloth hanging from the ceiling. In this case, once the mediums are possessed, they will dance from the house to the outdoor stage.
Mediums use woven mats, pillows, and white cloths and make offerings (khruang buacha khruu) of betel sets and the standard three items given at Buddhist temples -- candles, incense, and flowers (Chatchai 1995). The nora leader begins the possession event by singing to invite the spirits. The mediums sit on the floor with hands in a wai gesture facing a candle and recite a certain lesson. In some cases, the mediums will cover their heads and bodies with white cloth to concentrate (Sawaang 1999), an act considered symbolic of the protective role of the ancestors (Thianchai 2003b).

The nora teachers from the Phatthalung Legend are invited to possess first, and then the family's personal ancestor spirits are invited. The question of who will receive the spirit can be problematic. In the past, each family had its own spirit medium (Chatchai 1995). But today some families do not have a permanent medium, so all the descendants must cover themselves in white cloth, wai, and wait for the spirit to choose one. If many spirits come at once, they will look for others to possess in the area. The host should provide additional spirit mediums for this possible situation. If the opposite occurs and no spirits come, the nora leader must recite a lesson with harsh words to demand that the spirits appear (described in Chapter 5) (Chatchai 1995: 90). Gesick (1995) noted that the whole ceremony is a "dangerous" period because of the presence of good and bad spirits. "The most exciting part of the ceremony, judging from the crowding around and intentness of the spectators, is when the ancestral nora spirits actually descend into the body of a medium, speaking to and dancing for their descendants" (Gesick 1995: 66).
The possession process is described as catching the spirit as it descends (jap long). Pittaya wrote, “We can see the unusual behavior of the spirit mediums. For example, their hands, arms and legs will tremble and the body will sway. When the spirits completely possess, the spirit mediums will stand up and dance to the songs... If the offerings are not complete, they will complain and the host has to find what they want to please them” (1995: 57).

There may be other problems. Some spirits tussle with each other over who will possess first. Some become upset when they arrive on the first day, Wednesday, but find no medium to possess (Chatchai 1995). In general, spirits are easily offended. After possession has occurred, the spirit in the medium's body will check the offerings on the shelf, which is decorated with lighted candles. The host or another descendant will ask the ancestor's name and if the offerings are acceptable. If not, changes are made rapidly. An angry spirit might become violent and throw offerings off the shelf (Thianchai 2003b). Once the matter of offerings is settled, the descendants will ask the ancestor spirit for advice on problems and for a blessing. They will then discuss and agree on details for the next ceremony.

To test whether the possession is real, the host might have the mediums put lighted candles in their mouths three times or walk through a burning fire. If the mediums do not feel the heat from these ordeals, the possession is real (Chatchai 1995). I have frequently seen mediums grasp a bunch of lighted candles, wave them over the offerings, and put them in their mouths to suck the smoke called “eating the fire flowers” (gaan saweuy dawgmai fai) (Pittaya 1995,
Sawaang 1999). I was told that spirits cannot eat the food and other offerings directly, but they collect the essence through the candle flames and eat the flames (weu marap), sometimes biting off the ends of the candles.

Musicians -- particularly drummers and the flute player -- play an integral role in announcing the entrance and departure of the spirits. During important parts of the possession, such as when the spirit leaves the human body, the musicians will play a song called "raise up or lift up" (phleng cheut). When this occurs, the medium will shake, fling out arms and legs, and fall back in apparent unconscious. This action is described as "to fling or flutter" (sabat). The person will look normal but dazed, not knowing what occurred during the possession (Chatchai 1995, Sawaang 1999, Thianchai 2003b). Then the next ancestor has to be invited until all spirits have possessed and departed.

Dancing lessons of 12 songs and 12 lessons (gaan ram bot sip sawng plaeng sip sawng bot). The leader recounts in song a brief rendition of the 12 songs and 12 folk tales described previously.

Cutting the topknot ritual (gaan tat jug). In the past virtually all children had topknots. But later the practice changed so that only parents with ill or difficult children allowed a section of the child’s hair to grow while the rest of the hair was closely cut. People believed that the topknot served to keep the soul (khwan) in place and assure a healthy childhood. When I lived in Bangkok in the late 1980s, I attended an annual topknot cutting ceremony held by the official court Brahmin priests at their shrine near the Giant Swing. Pittaya (1995) reported this ritual took place at roong khruu ceremonies for girls aged 11 and boys aged
13. The topknot symbolized a promise to the spirit to follow the nora tradition in exchange for the child's well-being. The child sat on a white cloth and a nora leader sprinkled holy water on the head with the assistance of mediums. The leader then used a Malay dagger (kris) to cut the hair while music played (Pittaya 1995). I watched a similar hair cutting ritual at a nora initiation for female children and young adults in Pattani Province. A piece of hair was cut symbolically, but the children had not grown topknots, as the practice has died out in the country.

**Releasing from the initiation (gaan phuug phaa ploi).** Persons in nora families can request that the ancestors release them from the obligation to dance and be possessed. The spiritual approval is essential because without it the descendant will be punished. I have met a few people who had participated in this ritual (Pittaya 1995: 61).

**Fulfilling vows ritual (gaan gae bon).** The main demand for nora performances during the three-month season is to do the gae bon ritual. In this, people pay off promises to the spirits once a request has been granted. The word bon means to make a votive prayer or wish, while the word gae means to untie, loosen, or mend. Therefore a person would first make a wish (bon) along with a specific promise of a reward and then untie the promise (gae or gae bon) by providing the offering.\(^78\) Often the supplicant will promise to dance either as nora in the bird costume or as the hunter. Families regularly hire troupes to perform it

\(^{78}\) Another term for making a vow and following through is bon baan saan glaao.
at their homes. The survival of *nora* is partly due to the demand for this ritual, according to Nora Somphong. Therefore, I discuss it in detail.

This spiritual contract is not unique to *nora* but is ubiquitous in Thai culture. “In Thailand it is common for people to pray for help (to cure an illness, to get a son through his school examinations, or for prosperity) and to promise a play performance should their wish be granted” (Brandon 1967: 195). Shadow puppet performers also performed vow fulfillment, which is considered a sacred (*sagsit*) ritual. Some puppeteers gained reputations for being particularly effective (Dowsey-Magog 2002: 12, 16). It is also prevalent in the practice of Buddhism in other countries. Ian Reader and George J. Tanabe, Jr. (1998) described how prayers for benefits are a common religious activity in Japan, where wishes are made for advantages in business and education and for protection from illness. They argue that this practice is central for much of Japanese religion, rather than being a superstitious, peripheral activity.

In Thailand, Ginsburg (1972: 180) reported that *nora* helped to spread this wish practice when troupes moved to the central region and evolved into a similar dance, *lakhon chatri*, with a strong vow fulfilling aspect (see Chapter 3). Brandon (1967: 195) found that in the 1960s, offering dances were performed daily at the Bangkok City Pillar (*lag muang*), sponsored by grateful people who had been granted wishes. These dances began in 1782 when Rama I (r. 1782-1809) built the shrine, and therefore may have existed in the central region before *nora* performances were well-known there.
I found that today some spirit mediums advertise their abilities for vow fulfillment. At a roong khruu, I was handed a one-sheet advertisement for a medium who channeled nora, Chinese, and Indian spirits and was adept at the gae bon ceremony. The flyer used the word for a bribe (sinbon) to describe the promise made to the spirit. Requests to the spirits and the follow-up payments are often made at a statue or symbol of the deity, whether it is Buddhist, Hindu or Animist. Other researchers and I have reported on this ritual at many sacred sites. Examples include the King Chulalongkorn equestrian statue in Bangkok (Nidhi 1993), the Emerald Buddha temple in the Grand Palace complex, the Hindu Erawan Shrine to Brahma in Bangkok, the shrine for Mae Naak Phra Khanong in Bangkok (Guelden 1995, Ka F. Wong 2000), and the shrine for the father of the King at PSU, Pattani. The participation of nora in this widespread practice links it to the larger ritual culture often called folk Buddhism or practical Buddhism.

There are two kinds of gae bon in the nora ceremony, according to Nora Chalerm. The first is a general wish for an assortment of things. The request can be made any time of the year at a variety of sacred venues. For instance, people make wishes and vows to a male spirit, lao Phaw Lag Muang, at the Pattani City Pillar. They also make wishes at a vertical log from a takien tree, which reputedly contains the female spirit of lao Mae Takien Thawng at a Buddhist temple behind PSU, Pattani Campus. (At the pole, other visitors told me that you make a wish to the spirit and then rub powder on the pole to see winning lottery numbers.) A

79 Teachers at PSU, Pattani, regularly request that the father of the King stop the rain from falling on their annual cultural fair. When it does not rain, they fulfilled their vow by giving boiled eggs to the statue of this much-loved prince situated at the entrance to the university. Reputedly, one of his favorite foods was eggs.
relative, rather than the person with the problem, can make the wish. For example, a woman made a vow for her nephew to recover from an accident. When he got better, he danced the hunter’s dance at a roong khruu ceremony to pay off his aunt’s vow.

The second type of gae bon occurs when a nora descendant has an illness caused by the ancestors (khruu maw yaang or taa yaai yaang) that cannot be cured medically (Pittaya 1995). The ancestors are invited to possess a spirit medium and then asked why they are causing the ailment. Speaking through the medium’s mouth, the ancestors usually say they felt neglected. They demand to be shown respect through certain offerings and a short offering dance (explained in detail later). Or the ancestors may want to use the descendant’s body to dance. The ill person guarantees to do what the ancestors require and soon recovers.

In both types of gae bon, the descendants are only obligated to give the reward if the wish is granted. Once the descendants have benefitted, they must follow through or suffer severe consequences, possibly even death. Neglected, hungry spirits can kill if no food offerings are given, according to Nora Wan. Accidents and bad luck in business also may occur. Therefore, it is imperative that the vow fulfillment ritual is done “completely” and on the correct days, so that the ancestors will receive the offerings. Once I watched while a nora family member accused another of doing incomplete rituals – a serious charge. Hosting a gae bon ceremony at a private home is costly, so people will travel to roong khruu ceremonies of famous nora leaders to use the opportunity to pay off the vow.
The requests made of the spirits offer insights into concerns of *nora* families in the south. The following long wish list is compiled from *nora* performers and descendants. Requests include being able to recover from illness caused by spirits, to get a new job, and to pass examinations which may be for school entrance, jobs, or the military. Also people ask to avoid the military draft, to win the lottery, for the return of lost children (runaway adolescents or kidnapped youngsters), and to give birth to a child of a specific sex. Wish lists also include relief from debt, to win a court case, to win in a land dispute, and to sell property at a profit. Descendants ask to get rid of black magic, such as a curse sent from a minor wife to a legal wife by an unscrupulous ritual doctor. There is fear of Muslim doctors who can insert pins into a victim’s stomach.

Ancestor spirits reputedly have the power to minimize the harm of an accident and prevent death. In April 2002, I read in the newspaper about a Chiang Mai tour bus that crashed during the Songkhran New Year holidays. Fourteen people were killed. Later at a *roong khruu*, I asked Nora Somphong about the wishes which were granted, and he mentioned this accident. He said, “This year there are more people who *gae bon*. I asked them, ‘What are you doing the *gae bon* for?’” One man reported that he was on that bus when it turned over. Nora Somphong continued, “He was aware of himself and was conscious that his bus was turning over, but he thought of Phaw Khun Sii Satthaa and raised his hands [in a *wai*]. Many people died, but he only had a sprain. He said it was a miracle (*paatihaan*).”
Sometimes the wishes involve large sums of money. A spirit medium at a roong khruu ceremony said she had prayed for the return of things stolen from her – a mobile phone and 100,000B (US $2,381), possibly her life’s savings. If the items were returned, she would actively participate in the next year’s nora ceremony, she said. Alternately, requests can be rather minor. Another medium said she asked for the return of her kitchen pots, and it was granted. Some desires are thought to border on the unethical. Several nora leaders consider it a sin to ask for a winning lottery number, although this is still a common request. I was told that the modern lottery was invented after the founding of nora, and therefore this request was not appropriate. Dealing with magic involving mistresses also can involve the nora person in some questionable affairs especially when the mistress pretends to be the legal wife (see Chapter 4).

Several nora leaders said that cures for spirit sickness are a common request. Some estimate as many as 80% of clients have medical problems, particularly women. Spirit induced symptoms include madness, losing consciousness, stomach aches, spinal pain, vomiting blood, wounds that keep bleeding, not being able to eat or drink, and other rather generalized ailments like aches and pains in limbs. Sometimes the illness demonstrates that the spirits want food in the form of offerings, as previously discussed. But other ailments – such as breathing problems, high blood pressure, or being paralyzed – are health matters and require hospitalization, said Nora Jop. I was also told that nora couldn’t cure cancer.
Determining whether the sickness is due to medical causes or spirits is the job of the traditional village doctor (maw baan) or vision doctor (maw duu). These doctors may identify nora spirits as the problem. The patient might have offended the spirits in a variety of ways often unintentionally, like killing a snake, which was really an ancestor spirit, urinating on a sacred place, or neglecting shrine. The patient can then hire a nora group to hold an initial propitiatory ceremony. Rice is placed on the patient’s body. Offerings are given consisting of betel sets, a nora costume, long fingernails, and bracelets. The patient is expected to improve in seven days and then must hire a troupe during the nora season to pay off the other things promised, said Nora Awuth. In some cases, this spirit induced illness indicates that the spirits want to use the patient as a long term spirit medium.

For their promises to the spirits, descendants will perform a short vow fulfillment dance (ram gae bon) either in the nora costume or in the character of the hunter (phraan). Although the character of the bird-princess is female and the hunter is male, men and women can perform either dance. The well known hunter is also a character in the shadow puppet play. The distinctive hunter’s dance (ram awg phraan) is considered quite humorous. A bare-chested boy or man wears a half-face red mask and traditional pants and thrusts his hands and torso forward.

Emblematic of the south, the hunter character is regularly performed at both sacred and secular events. For example, a government agricultural fair,

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80 I am using the term “vision doctor” because maw duu literally means, “doctor look.” Usually this is translated as “fortune teller,” meaning someone who predicts the future. But the maw duu also looks into the supernatural realm and tells the patient what is causing the problems, particularly illness.
featuring locally produced One Tambon, One Product (OTOP) goods, was held on the grounds of the Chinese Naja Shrine (Saan Jao Ong Thep Naja) near Hat Yai in 2002. At the event, a primary school group of 62 boys about 12-years-old pranced across the field playing the hunter to the audience’s delight. In another festival later that year, a group of middle aged male hunters danced, joked, and sweated in the sun at the annual Buddhist parade for pulling the Buddha statue in Songkhla at the end of the Lenten season. So performing the gae bon ritual as the hunter provides entertainment as well as a sacred dance.

As previously mentioned, the gae bon rituals cannot occur on the Buddhist holy days because the spirits will not possess (song) to receive the offerings, according to several nora leaders. Instead the spirits, who are Buddhists (khon phut), practice the Buddhist precepts or moral rules (thuu siin) on that day. “It is like the tradition. You cannot do the gae bon ceremony completely (gae bon khaat) because the ancestors don’t come to receive the offerings,” explained the oldest daughter of Nora Plaeg.

Here is a more detailed description of the procedure in the vow fulfillment ritual during the roong khruu. For the offerings, the supplicants prepare footed trays with pedestals (phaan) containing flowers, incense, candles, and 12 betel sets for the 12 legendary ancestors. A small amount of money is added for making merit for the ancestors (ngeun chaa taa yaaai) such as 12B (US 29 cents) (Pittaya

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81 My assistant from Phatthalung Province said this ritual was only performed in the south, but the Bangkok Post (11 November 2003) reported the same ceremony in the central region. The newspaper stated that relics of the Lord Buddha were taken by boat to Taling Chan, Bangkok in an annual chag phra ceremony. However, the two ceremonies may differ. The central ceremony was held two days after loi krathong day in November, while the southern ceremony was held on October 11th, the day after the end of the Lenten period (awg phansaa). There is a special room to display chag phra at the Institute for Southern Thai Studies, and Songkhla is renowned for this ceremony and its floats.
Other gifts promised to the ancestors might include perfume, pieces of thin gold leaf, a *nora* crown with a certain number of layers, and even the pledge to have one’s child train under a *nora* leader.\(^{82}\) The leader will light candles at different locations on the stage, give respect to the Buddhist Triple Gems, say a prayer for vow fulfillment, and invite the spirits to take the offerings. Also the leader may give blessed betel sets to the descendents, who will chew them for auspiciousness. Then the leader dedicates a dance to the teachers (Pittaya 1995).

The descendants put on the costumes and dance under the guidance of an initiated performer. This offering is made to the *nora* spirits who are possessing in spirit mediums. While the descendants dance, the *nora* leader informs the spirits that the obligation is being met. Although the descendants are usually not possessed during the dance, sometimes a spirit will take the opportunity to take over their bodies. This creates a new, more intimate relationship with the ancestors but is considered a rather frightening experience.

The dancing is very brief, about five minutes, and a bit awkward for those untrained in dance. For instance, at the Wat Thakhae ceremony in 2004, people were put in groups of four. Sometimes men and women were separated. They danced briefly in a circle and then danced facing the offering area at the back of the stage, with the less experienced copying the others. According to Pittaya (interview 2004), in the past descendents danced longer and performed many

\(^{82}\) The exactness of this payment reminded me of promises made to Brahma at the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok, where supplicants promise a certain size of wooden elephants or length of flower garlands. I have been told that the value of the gift is not relevant to the spirits — that lavish or poor offerings would be accepted equally. Therefore, I wonder if specifying the offering serves to leave no room for spiritual retribution for inadequate payment.
lessons (bot), but the ritual has been shortened to proceed more quickly and to allow for additional dancers and donations (interview Pittaya 2004). After the dance, the descendants must take off the nora costume immediately because it is considered to be of royal rank and reserved for initiated performers.

Stepping on the mark (gaan yiap sen). Nora provides a unique healing service for the black or red sores, which appear on children’s skin and may indicate their selection as nora performers. These growths look like large moles or birthmarks but are painful, difficult to cure, and can spread. At a nora ceremony, I saw an extreme case of a large growth on a child’s face that distorted the features. If the sore is not cured in infancy, it will grow larger as the person ages, according to nora informants. Nora Somphong said, “This sore (sen) cannot be cured by medical treatment or medical science. Medical science says that the sore is a problem of capillaries, but it cannot be cured by an operation. If you have an operation, it will come again. But when nora cures it, it will be gone.”

According to Pittaya (1995), if the mark does not gradually disappear, the ritual must be repeated three times, possibly over three years. The clients are mostly women with restless and crying babies about one year of age and younger. The small fee for this service includes an offering tray for the “lifting up to the teachers” (yog khruu) ritual.

The cause of the sore is explained in several ways. According to the Phatthalung Legend, Khun Sii Sattha cured welts on the faces of two hunters by putting his foot in sea water and then stepping on their sores (Patise 2004: 19). Some people believe the mark is made by the ancestors, the female ghost of the
stage who resides in the posts named Phii Nang Oo Gachaeng, or the ghost of the mark named Phii Jao Sen (Pittaya 1995). A pediatric nurse at Songkla Nakarind University Hospital in Hat Yai told me the ailment is called hemangioma, a disease of the blood that is difficult to cure and requires several treatments. An American medical website showed pictures of exactly what I had seen at the ceremony and stated that this is a birthmark that will usually disappear on its own but might require steroids. 83

At the beginning of the ritual, water is poured into a tray and some items are put inside. These include incense, candles, flowers like lotus, a razor, a whetstone for sharpening, a large coin, betel ingredients, gold and silver ornaments, sheaves of paddy rice, a ring, types of grasses, and a small amount of money such as 12B to 32B (US 29 to 76 cents). These items symbolize the origin of the world and provide luck (Patise 2004: 20). From my observation, the nora leader calls boys first and then asks the ailment of the child. With a pencil, he writes a mystical design (yantra or yan) on his big toe in old Khmer script (khawm), often used in ritual arts such as tattooing. He puts his toe in the water and then into the flame of a candle. Holding a Malay dagger (kris), he puts his foot on the sore, turns around three times, stomps his foot and points at the child with his chin jutted out. While saying a magical prayer, the leader repeats this

83 "Hemangiomas are abnormally dense collections of dilated small blood vessels (capillaries) that may occur in the skin or internal organs." They appear at birth or shortly after and superficial "strawberry" ones often will disappear on their own. But these birthmarks can also become infected and bleed. Treatment usually includes steroids and possibly lasers (Medline Plus website, http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus, A Service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health).
process touching the sore with his toe a total of three times, twice while facing the child and once with his back turned. Another nora man helps to place the foot on the sore and scrape it with the dagger or a red wooden sword. 84 Some of the items in the water, like the coin and whetstone, are pressed against the sore also. The leader may be possessed during the ritual so that his prayers are actually uttered by the spirits. Or if the leader is unable to possess, a spirit medium will be used. Because this ritual involves possession and the power of the spirits to heal, the leader behaves intensely and the musicians beat the drums loudly.

A survey of 30 persons attending this ritual at Wat Thakhae found that 87% (26 persons) believed in it mostly because they had actually seen children cured or knew it was a regular ritual. Meanwhile 7% (two persons) disbelieved because they had not seen it before or thought it was unscientific (Patise 2004: 39).

Cutting tangled hair (gaan tat phom phii chaw). Some children and adults have long matted hair, tangled like a bird’s nest often from birth. The hair (phom phii chaw) is considered the mark of a spirit. 85 Parents of these children believe the ancestors have selected their offspring to be nora performers or spirit mediums. In this ritual held on the second or third days, a nora leader cuts the hair and releases the person from these obligations (Pittaya 1995). The nora leader has to get permission from the ancestors before cutting the locks. If the ancestors do

84 Nora Awuth said the nora performer who does this ritual represents an angel and the other actor is the hunter who follows the angel. Officially, only nora men are allowed to perform it, but possessed female spirit mediums may participate to some extent.

85 I did a web search for this condition but only found beauty tips. I did not locate any description of this being a medical problem for adults or children.
not give permission, the hair will grow and tangle again. The leader has to do a
special dance, cut the hair three times, pick up the hair from the floor three times,
and give it to the person to keep. Hair that grows after this will not tangle. The
locks also become a powerful amulet against danger. Specific Islamic spirits are
known for tangling hair named Yin Muu Mii and To Haa Dam and two daughters
named Jan Ju Rii and Sii Ju Raa (Pittaya 1995: 63).

There seems to be less demand for this ritual, which I did not observe.
However, I have seen a few adult woman with matted hair at roong khruu
ceremonies. In June 2005 at the Chanabaan family roong khruu, I interviewed a
lay nun who was 78 and had tangled hair since she was 41, about the time she
became a nun. She said it was up to the spirits to make it fall off from the nape of
the neck when they are ready. If it is cut too early, she might weaken, according
to Nora Jop. Until then only a nora person can touch it. I have also seen tangled
hair on offering plates at nora altars.

Kicking the buffalo head (gaan ram thiip hua khwaal). There is a final
gae bon ritual, which requires doing a buffalo head dance and giving a buffalo
head as an offering to two ancestor spirits, named Thuat Gaw and Phii Chaeng
(Pittaya 1995: 51, 68). There are several ways to perform this ritual. First, a head
is grilled or boiled and put on the offering shelf and later placed on the stage
floor. At the end of the ritual, the leader will cut the string tied to the horns and
kick the head off the stage. Second, a whole dead buffalo is put on the front of the
stage, and the head is chopped off. Alternately, the animal’s head is turned to one
side. I did not see this ritual and wondered whether it was still practiced. But at
the roong khruu for Nora Plaeg in 2001, his son reassured the audience that Nora Plaeg was well enough to do the “dance for kicking the buffalo’s head.” Despite this, the ritual was not performed at that ceremony.

**Hooking the swans dance (gaan ram khlawng hong).** Taken from the Suthon-Manora Story, this skit depicts hunters chasing swans at the mythical pond. At the roong khruu at Wat Thakhae, women in nora costumes sing and then are chased by Phraan Bun and another hunter. Six women played swans, mostly in their 20s, but one year a few middle aged women joined in. The seventh swan is the chief swan played by a male nora leader. Apparently the swans are supposed to flee in a specific style, replicating a mystical design (yan). The design protects people from danger and gives good luck, and is sometimes painted on turtles (Pittaya 1995). However, I only observed the swans running randomly from the hunters. In the end, all seven are individually lassoed and tied up with a rope.86

This Indian story is linked to the Phatthalung Legend by a different interpretation of the characters. The main swan is thought to represent Mae Sii Maa Laa, the king’s exiled daughter. Since she did not want to return to the Phatthalung Kingdom, she was captured by a hunter or soldiers (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983). However, most viewers did not make this connection and considered the skit to be from the familiar Suthon-Manora Story.

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86 The hunter carries 12 items, such as weapons and food. Ginsburg observed that the hunter throws a rope around each of the seven women and spins them (1972: 181).
This skit is one of the highlights of the three-day ceremony and comes just before the exciting crocodile stabbing.\footnote{A survey of 30 people at the Wat Thakhae ceremony found that the three most popular events were first, hooking the swan, second, the ritual to show respect to nora teachers and possession, and third, stabbing the crocodile (Patise 2004: 22).} One year when a local dance class performed the show, the nora leader spoke loudly into a microphone, embellishing the action to make it humorous and thrilling. Although only one swan was captured in the Suthon-Manora Story, the audience likes this part so much that now all seven swans are caught. More than 30 years ago, Ginsburg (1972: 181) wrote that the “hooking the swans” and “stabbing the crocodile” rituals were usually only performed for a topknot cutting during an initiation ceremony or for vow fulfilling. But today I observed that both skits are considered the highlights of the roong khruu ceremony, indicating their rise in popularity.

I was surprised during the play when suddenly a woman, who was being chased, burst into tears, fainted, and was carried out. People near me said she was possessed, possibly by one of the seven sister spirits. But a nora performer said she was only tired, since ghosts were not allowed into the ritual area. The following year at the same ceremony, this swan collapsed again and was carried out crying. Someone near us said it was a performance, like a soap opera, and was better than the previous year. The audience of several hundred seemed pleased with the drama.

In 2004, the skit was even more rambunctious when two of the young female swans became very rowdy with the hunters, pushing and kicking them in the rear, quite seriously trying to prevent capture. One swan collapsed after being
sprinkled with holy water by a medium. After this display, Nora Somphong played the lead swan and danced slowly and elegantly in the fashion of the masked dance (*khon*), as if to show the young women how it was done. But in 2005, several women became even more violent in fighting off their attackers and collapsed after their capture. I interviewed two swans who said they were possessed by *kinnari* spirits and could remember little, but they thought the *kinnari* would fight the hunters like this out of fear.\(^8\)

**Stabbing the crocodile (*gaan ram thaeng khe*).** At the conclusion of hooking of the swans, the *nora* leaders sing a song about rain because in the Phatthalung Legend, a crocodile appeared when it rained. This final ritual is both dramatic and ritually dangerous. In the story, the king sent his soldiers to bring his daughter back to the palace from her island, but either at a landing or a river, a crocodile blocked their way. The soldiers stabbed it and proceeded to the town (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983, Udom 1995). Despite this Phatthalung legendary version, the connection between the crocodile and the *nora* performance seems rather slim. Southerners are more familiar with the Kraithong literary story about the crocodile king named Chalawan. In fact academics and *nora* participants say that it is the story of the hero Kraithong, which is performed (Ginsburg 1972: 181).

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\(^8\) Every year I have found this drama disturbing because it reminds me of violence against women. While the hunter is usually a comic figure, his slapstick pelvic thrusts can also be seen as aggression. Clearly, this is my cultural baggage and not related to the intention of the skit. But the resistance I have seen from the swans in the past few years makes me wonder whether they have felt too much like victims in this show, whether being possessed or not.
The ritual involves creating a life-size crocodile of woven rattan wrapped around a banana tree with a head made from the trunk of a coconut tree. The models are rather life-like and menacing with mirrors for teeth and red bulging eyes. Knowledgeable about incantations, the maker of the crocodile performs a ceremony for calling the crocodile’s spirit into the model. He brings it to life by ritually opening its eyes and mouth. Afterward, he places the model in a southwest direction because if it faces northeast, it cannot be stabbed and killed, according to the belief. A white cloth is hung over the model held by strings at four corners, just like the ceiling cloth in the nora stage. Candles are stuck onto the animal’s back.

To begin the ritual, seven senior nora performers gather on the stage and dance powerfully holding long spears. Each spear has a name. One nora leader plays the role of Kraithong. The performers sing a lesson to call back the soul (khwan) of Kraithong to increase his courage to act. He must kill an animal, a major sin in Buddhist beliefs. The performers then sing the story of the crocodile Chalawan who is able to turn himself into a human. The nora leader must say several protective prayers before leading the dancing group out of the stage to the model lying on the ground. Small children and their parents have been waiting in the heat for more than an hour for this moment.

Dramatically, the leader jumps in the air and thrusts his spear into the animal, followed by the spears of the others. Then they pour water on the ground to send merit to the crocodile (gruat nam chai chalawan) to help it be reborn, employing a common Buddhist ritual to send merit to ancestors (Chatchai 1995).
When the model is stabbed, a real crocodile somewhere will die and later the banana trunk will get worms like actual dead flesh. This is quite a miracle, according to nora families. Also people traveling by boat will encounter a crocodile if they sing this lesson. This ritual mixes local legend with Thai literature. It combines Animistic magic on manipulating an object to harm a living creature with Buddhist philosophy on reincarnation. The crocodile rite thus shows the syncretic nature of nora.

**Sending off the ancestors and teachers (gaan song khruu).** Since the descendants have already paid respect, given offerings, and been possessed, the ceremony ends with sending back the ancestors and nora teachers. After the crocodile ritual, the performers return to the stage to give respect and prepare some money to make merit. When money is requested during the three-day ceremony, the nora leaders explain that it is for making merit. In this case, the merit will help the spirits to live happily in heaven and to be reborn into good families with more property, I was told. The nora leader will then sing a lamentful song to send back the spirits: “If anyone comes from whichever way, please go back that way. Anyone who comes here by boat, please go back by boat. And if anyone comes by elephant or horse, please go back by elephant or horse” (Thianchai 2003b: 10). According to nora belief, the ancestors are asked to leave because the human world and spirit worlds should not mix: “Humans should live as humans, ghosts should live as ghosts (khon yuu suan khon phii yuu suan phii)” (Thianchai 2003b: 10). Sometimes the leader will lift up part of the stage roof to allow the spirits to fly out (communication Thianchai 2003). In the case of Wat
Thakhae, the spirits are bid farewell but they are not sent anywhere because it is believed they live in that village as the birthplace of nora.

**Cutting the offerings (gaan tat meuy).** After sending the spirits off, the nora leader will symbolically cut off the promises to the ancestors, which have been fulfilled. While saying prayers and dancing, the leader will cut the holy strings to six ritual objects or cut the objects themselves, including food offerings, candles, betel, coconut leaves, banana leaf structure, and the square white cloths hanging from the ceiling. The act of cutting also implies that the spirits have flown away. A specific prayer is said during the cutting, which the leader will only tell to the student who will inherit the role. If this spell is given to others, the ancestors might punish the nora leader (Chatchai 1995). (Women are not allowed to perform this essential ritual (discussed in Chapter 4.)

Identifying this ritual as vital, Thianchai (2003b) argued that the descendants’ “obligatory promise” (phantha sanyaa) has both literal and symbolic meanings. The ritual shows that the offspring are honorable and keep their promises exactly. If there are any mistakes, they will make corrections at the next ceremony.

**Whipping a ghost (gaan khian phraai).** Some “vagabond” spirits might refuse to leave the stage after receiving generous treatment, such as drunken ancestors who partook of the alcohol offerings. They can cause grief for the family. The nora leader will perform the rituals to “throw the rice” (sat saan) and “whip the ghost” (khian phraai). Ghosts leave by a corner of the stage under the offering shelf, where people are not allowed to sit (Thianchai 2003b: 11).
Turning over the mat to close the door on the spirit world (gaan phlig saat khlaa). The ceremony finishes when the leader takes the offerings off the shelf, turns over a khlaa tree mat, dances on it, and takes off the crown. Placed in the center of the stage, the mat represents the door between the afterlife spirit world and the human world. Acting seriously and quickly, the performers sever this final link (Pittaya 1995, Thianchai 2003b).

Conclusion

I have discussed the skeletal structure of nora to introduce this complex and changing tradition. By presenting this detailed description, I hope to illustrate my thesis that the ceremony was a local tradition, which has been adapted to national interests and goals. Founded as an indigenous religion, nora was concerned with the supernatural, beliefs, practices, and morality. Performances were like community prayer meetings, which enabled families to make sense of the events in their lives by appealing to outside powers. The nora performers presented a belief and value system reinforced through local legends, as well as national Buddhist tales and Thai literature. The key Animistic doctrine of propitiating ancestors and receiving benefits in exchange was the basis for most rituals. The leaders prescribed moral behavior of acting with kindness and generosity as a community, rather than being motivated by individual greed.

But part of what made nora successful was that it was fun. As a colorful entertainment filled with music, song, and flashy costumes, nora provided hours of enjoyment. The mixing of joy with ritual, of serious religion with wild and even humorous possession, would have made a heady event for any community. Local spirit mediums, who rarely possessed in public, would take the stage to catch (jap) the spirit to
the awe of the audience. The power of the drama to heal children and fulfill vows
broadened its appeal to the ordinary person. *Nora* was rooted in farming towns, which
followed the agricultural seasons, and in the nationalized religious space of Buddhist
monasteries. The nostalgia for this genre is still strong in the south where it is identified
with community, ancestors, and the land.

Next, Chapter 3 covers the discursive history of the performance in its travels
from local to national status. *Nora* is intertwined with concepts of East versus West and
with the traditional versus modern. It is objectified and consumed in postmodern
Thailand.
CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL DISCOURSES OF NORA

Introduction

Nora performance changed on its journey from the south to the center, from the periphery to the nation’s government. Beginning in the late 18th century, some rural troupes left their southern home-base, traveled northward, and blended with the dominant culture in the Thonburi-Bangkok region. The monarchy and elite co-opted the nora performance into the constructed Siamese (later Thai) culture as they struggled to create a unified kingdom and later a nation with an established artistic heritage. Nora became part of Siamese dance-drama in the seat of government and essentially disappeared into other dramatic forms. Only in the south, far from the center, did nora retain its character as rural ancestral propitiation.

A newly revived national discourse has framed Western culture as threatening to Thai identity. When nora developed a Western style, it became part of this discourse, which contrasts Eastern traditions with Western modernity (see Sulak 1991). To illustrate, the so-called “ancient” nora is reserved for propitiating ancestors in the village with family members. Meanwhile, the “modern” style is demonstrated by primary school girls who bebop to loud nora pop music in front of the McDonald’s and Sizzler in the metropolis of Hat Yai. Nora adopted Thai country music, called luang thung, and became popular culture to be consumed as southern identity. Rejecting this trend, government

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89 However, this discourse is not new as discussed by Mattani (1996).
90 Internationally, country music is often thought to represent older ways rather than the modern. This Thai country music was considered rather rebellious because the themes were about longing for the pure village
educational institutions teach a reputedly authentic style in a back-to-roots movement (see Hirsch 1991).

This fear of changes in nora tells us a great deal about why the drama is symbolic of the south. Nora is all about nostalgia and memory that focus on place, history, ancestors, tight kinship networks, living off the land, and most sentimentally -- about the way we were. Clearly, this is a constructed image, an invented tradition of past family closeness and cooperation, when blood mattered more than money.

Issues of Thai identity are embedded within modern debates about the origins of the performance on whether it came from another country or is indigenous to the south. According to this nationalist discourse, if the genre were born out of hunters imitating forest sounds, it is considered Thai, even though those hunters lived before the formation of the Thai nation. (As a local art, which influenced the court dances of the kings in Bangkok, the status of the art was significantly enhanced when it became part of the national culture.) But if nora were based on Indian or Indonesian dance to worship Hindu gods, the drama becomes the Other, the un-Thai, as described by historian Thongchai. The centuries during which the drama developed in Siam seem irrelevant to this debate, just as the centuries the Malay Muslims have lived in the south, does not preclude them from being called khaeg or Arabic guests of the nation. The "subversive Other," as described by historian Reynolds, can be imagined inside the official borders as well as outside. Therefore, at least for academics, the origin of nora is still an issue today. In
search of this illusive identity, historians have investigated the invocation to the spirits at
the beginning of the ceremony and natural landmarks mentioned in the story. In addition,
the costumes and dance positions of dramas in surrounding countries have been studied,
particularly in Java (chawua) in current day Indonesia and Cambodia.

These discourses focus on the local and foreign. But we must ask, “whose local,”
and “whose foreign is it?” From the viewpoint of early nora families in the south, the
monarchy and central government were once foreign and distant. In the past, southern
principalities existed in practice almost independently of the power from the center. In
contemporary times, the government and Thai elite have painted Western culture as the
foreign force, even when modified through Thai sensibilities to be more local.
Particularly around the 1940s, government boards determined and promoted their
conceptions of Thai identity (Gesick 1995). The Thai elite prided itself on accepting only
the valuable elements from foreign cultures while maintaining the Thai essence without
corruption—“to ‘modernize’ but not to ‘Westernize’” (Gesick 1995: 16). However, I
would caution that modernity is not an external force that is imposed but rather that
changes in Thai society were framed or constituted within modernity. Yet this paradigm
of an outside foreign influence was widely accepted by most Thai and foreign historians
for quite some time. The weight of nationalism, also suppressed local histories. Gesick
argued that Thailand’s national history discourse “has increasingly submerged and
reworked” (1995: 1) earlier discourses of local history for its own purposes.

Gesick researched 17th century Phatthalung manuscripts that journeyed from the
south to the center. The Bangkok rulers appropriated these in 1902 as historical
documents for nation-building. The manuscripts were sacred at home but secular and
devalued in Bangkok. Like those manuscripts that traveled from the margins to the center and changed their character along the way, *nora* also changed in essence when it moved to the center. In this context, *nora* is only one of many local histories based on story telling that differed from place to place in a “multi-vocal history” (Gesick 1995: 2).

Although *nora* performance is significant in the south, it plays a rather marginal role in Thai “high” culture. While it is the oldest known Siamese dramatic form, it is not considered the most refined. Developed in 1515, the elegant and constrained *khon* masked dance is the showcase of Siamese classical arts. Inspired by large leather shadow puppets, this dance was developed by the courts and even Kings Rama I, II, and VI wrote plays for it. In contrast, *nora* has continued to be a local art form filled with guttural singing, southern dialect, and earthy humor. As a theater of the common people, *nora* has no written script like the court dramas but is a “folk art, sprung from Thai village life” (Brandon 1972: 115). Possibly a reflection of its lesser role is the fact that a recent book on Thai national symbols, titled *Thailand: King Bhumibol Adulyadej, The Golden Jubilee 1946-1996*, described the celebrated masked dance but does not mention *nora*. *Nora* seems to come to national attention when a master dancer performs for the royal family and when women dancers are featured in advertising for southern hotels and products.

91 At a *nora* performance in Pattani Province in 2001, I watched a skit in which the hunter-clown behaved like an elephant. He said he had two trunks. The first trunk was for his wife at home and the other trunk was for swinging at the performance. When the audience laughed, my assistant asked if I knew what he meant.

92 *Nora* includes both improvised and memorized poems. It is considered an oral art because leaders memorize the poetic songs and pass them onto select students. However, as mentioned in Chapter 2, researchers have recorded the words of the genre for a long time (Committee for Compiling the Document 1999). Also, *nora* performers sometimes refer to written songs or prayers when they perform rare rituals.
In the historical changes described here, I hasten to point out that nora troupes had their own agency and that cultures always are in flux (see Handler 1988). Influences went both ways between nora and central Siamese culture. For instance, nora had a major effect on dancing styles in the court and central region when it first moved there. And more recently, successful nora troupes have eagerly adopted modern equipment, such as electrical sound systems, to improve their appeal to the next generation as a living southern art.

In summary, the following history is rich with discourses and counter discourses, which spread from the southern art out to the nation-state and beyond. This chapter also discusses people's constructed meanings about the traditional and modern and claims of truth and falsehood. But first, this history begins with the background of the early performance as a way to communicate with the spirit world.

**Propitiating Gods through Theater**

In combining performance with spirit propitiation, the nora drama is typical of early theater forms in Asia. Whether in the countryside or the cities, religion and performance were intertwined as a way to communicate with the spiritual world.

“Everywhere in Asia and Oceania, early performance was associated with man’s relations to the gods. In animistic belief performance is service to the gods, a request for good health, or a good harvest, a channel to invite the spirits of the sacred world into the temporary world of mankind....” (Brandon 1993: 3). Spirit possession was common in such performances where the actor literally became the deity on stage. Plays were built on legends and religious tales, particularly the numerous stories about the former lives of
the Buddha (*jataka*) which appeared in Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Laos (Keyes 1995: 32).

Hindu-Brahmanic gods and their reincarnations, such as Vishnu and Rama, appeared in the masked dance in the Siamese royal courts and in the shadow puppet plays of what is today Indonesia, Malaysia, and southern Thailand. But these foreign genres were changed significantly to fit local beliefs and customs. For instance, in the *Ramayana*, Rama is changed from being a reincarnation of Vishnu to being a reincarnation of Lord Buddha in Thailand, Burma/Myanmar and Cambodia (Brandon 1993: 3-4). Another major narrative to sweep the region is the Suthon-Manora Story. So-called folk theater was performed in festivals to honor and thank the spirits in conjunction with agricultural events such as harvests and the new year (Swearer 1995: 36).

Meanwhile, rulers in the centers of political power sponsored elite genres. Kings kept refined fulltime performers in their courts who, through dance and story telling, supported the belief in god-kings (*deva-raja*) and raised the rulers' status. From at least the 15th to 19th centuries, it was the practice in Southeast Asian wars to capture large populations and bring them back for labor including royal performing troupes. When the Siamese in 1431 conquered the Khmer capital at Angkor, in present-day western Cambodia, they brought back royal dancers and musicians, who served significant ritual roles (Brandon 1993: 236, for the theater state in Bali, see Geertz 1980). The Burmese did the same when they sacked Ayutthaya in 1767. Therefore, Siamese performances have long served multiple functions as entertainment through skilled arts, adjuncts to the monarchy, and religious communion in villages.
Dance (*natasin*) and dance-drama (*lakhon*) have been vital parts of Thai life from the beginning of its history to the present day. This is due largely to their close relationship with Buddhism, the national religion, and with Brahmanistic Hinduism and animistic popular cults in those ceremonies, traditions, and customs so important to the lives of the people. The Thai monarchy has also from as far back as the fourteenth century played a very significant role in the development, enrichment, and patronization of dramatic literature and production, both within the royal court and outside for the enjoyment and education of the general public (Mattani 1996: 1).

Brandon credits *nora* with the creation of the three person cast – prince, princess, and comedian –, which is the basis for most Siamese theater. “If the tradition dies out, it will be the end of an art which may explain patterns which underlie human drama in Thailand,” he warned (Brandon 1993: 236). In a similar vein, Ginsburg wrote, “The *manora* dance-drama has been widely credited as a survival of primitive Thai drama, perhaps because it is in effect the only surviving popular dance-drama whose origins clearly go back further than living memory” (1971: 12-13). Although its age is uncertain, Ginsburg continued, “What can be said with fair certainty is that the *manora* is a cohesive southern Thai cultural entity, which at some time in the past history was dominated by the Manora-Suthon story.”

**Thai and Malay *Nora* on both sides of the Border**

While *nora* today is identified with early Siamese drama and southern culture, its roots lie in an ethnically diverse area between present-day Thailand and Malaysia. Considering the drama’s iconic status, it is somewhat ironic that *nora* developed in a region, which was predominantly ethnic Malay until late in the 17th century. These blended cultures on the edge of the nation challenge the nationalist project and constructions of Thainess.
Islam was probably established in the Patani principality between the 12th to 15th centuries. In the 17th century, Patani was a powerful center connected with the Islamic Malay world, and by the 18th to 19th centuries, it was called a “cradle of Islam” in the region (Surin 1985: 48-9). Pressured between British and French colonial powers, King Chulalongkorn consolidated his kingdom by defining the southern borders with British Malaya. Beginning in 1902, the King took away the power of the Malay Muslim royalty in the southern principalities and substituted Siamese officials, despite resistance from Malays in the Patani rebellion. In 1909, the Anglo-Siamese Agreement gave Great Britain the Malay states of Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, and Perlis while Siam retained Patani (Andaya 2001: 200-1, Kobkua 1988: 148, Surin 1985: 28-9).

The border demarcation drew an artificial line dividing people by nationality and isolating Malay Muslims in a predominantly Thai Buddhist nation. “Patani, which had been one of the most important Malay kingdoms in the seventeenth century and had remained a center of Islamic scholarship, was now severed from the rest of the Malay world…. By insisting on the retention of Patani, Siam bequeathed to future governments the problem of absorbing the ethnically and culturally distinct Malay Muslims into the modern Thai state” (Andaya 2001: 201).

The northern Malay peninsula has long been the home of nora performances, appreciated by royalty and commoners. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Malay rulers in Perak praised the nora (called menora) troupes in Siamese influenced areas like Kedah.

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93 The former Muslim kingdom is spelled Patani, which differentiates it from the present city and province of Pattani. According to some academics, Islam became the official faith of the Malay peninsula in the 15th century with the conversion of the Kedah ruler in 1474 and the Patani ruler shortly afterward (Kobkua 1988: 5). But this view is being contested by some Malay Muslim academics who argue instead that conversion in Patani came earlier in the 12th to 13th centuries (Horstmann 2002: 19).
"The novelty of a menora would ensure the success of any celebration and any expense involved was therefore justified" (Andaya 1979: 191). In 1816, Sultan Iskandar of Perak held a lavish celebration, which included Chinese snake charmers, Indians in demon costumes, and Dutch shooting guns, but the Kedah menora show was the most impressive (Andaya 1979: 191).

Possibly about the same time as nora developed in the Phatthalung Kingdom, another southern dance-drama emerged called mayong (also spelled makyong). Thai Buddhists often describe it as Muslim nora. Scholars disagree over whether mayong or nora appeared first and which is an offshoot (interview Sompoch 2001). Scholar Nuriyan Salae (1999) reported that the mayong ritual has a linguistic connection to offerings for the Mother Rice Goddess. It possibly originated in Java under the Batak Putih tribal group. Andaya (2001: 122) noted that women played the major roles and the dance was thought to be a blend of Thai and Malay influences particular to Kelantan and Patani. The two genres are similar in music, dance, sacred paraphernalia, and rituals, but differ in costume and other ritual items. Most importantly, both involve possession by ancestral spirits and the healing of ancestor caused illnesses. I attended a mayong performance in a rural district of Pattani Province in 2001, in which men played all the key roles. But Malay residents said it was fading due to recent pressure from local Islamic leaders who adhere closely to scriptures and frown on ancestral possession. The Encyclopedia of Thai Culture: Southern Region reported on another ethnically blended performance, called nora khaeg, but I never saw a performance of this (Kruun 1999, see Chapter 5).

In the past few decades, scholars in Malaysia have observed nora-like performances involving a mixture of ethnic Thais, Malays, and Chinese performers and
audiences. The propitiated deities represent several religions (Johnson 1999, Jonit 2002, Murallitharan 2001, Tan 1988, Yousof 1982). When anthropologist Louis Golomb (1978, 1985) researched multiethnic curing in southern Thailand, he found Thais and Malays seeking each other out for healing and supernatural spells. Muslims respected Buddhist magic and visa-versa, although some of this respect came from outsider status. And in northern Malaysia, he found nora served to integrate Malay and Thai communities (see Chapter 5).

However, in this dissertation I found little Malay or Islamic influence in nora performances today around Songkhla Lake and farther south to Pattani Province. Nora leaders report that they serve few Muslim clients. And the Muslim dominated far southern provinces apparently have few nora ceremonies. Has there been a change since Golomb’s reporting on frequent ethnic interaction in the late 1970s? I would speculate that the “Malayness” of the nora performance has declined with the spread of more textually-based Islam.94

Thai residents in Kelantan State have found that their nora-like performance, called nuuraa, is changing due to religious regulations and modernity (Johnson 1999). The performance was banned by Parti Islam SeMalaysia of the Islamic Kelantan State government in the 1990s. The rituals were deemed not Islamic and the sexes performed together. The ban was loosened later and nuuraa could be performed at Thai temple fairs. In 1997, Plowright (1998) likewise found the genre banned in Kelantan but still was able to find a shadow puppet play involving exorcism in the area.

94 I would like to thank my committee member Dr. Barbara Watson Andaya for suggesting I look more closely at the role of Malay Muslims in nora and possible changes in ethnic interaction since Golomb did his research

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There are other modern challenges. “Despite the exalted ritual status of the Nuruoa [performer] within the Thai village, the nuuraa theatre is in decline faced with the onslaught of modern forms of entertainment that have found their way even to the ‘remotest’ Thai settlement. Most Kelantanese Thai households are equipped with television sets and video recorders, signs of the increasing cosmopolitanism and affluence...” (Johnson 1999: 308). He also found older performers were retiring and there was a lack of new recruits as young people sought regular salaried jobs. But known for their love magic, some nuuraa performers have turned to a private trade in love medicine sold at “exorbitant rates” (Johnson 1999: 309). Therefore, in both Thailand and Malaysia, the dance-drama faces stiff competition from alternative entertainment and religious changes.

**History of Nora**

**Early Southern Independent States (6\textsuperscript{th} century).** Evidence exist that nora dance came from India but when and how is in dispute. About 500 C. E., the region of present-day southern Thailand and northern Malaysia was an important trading link between India and China (Munro-Hay 2001: 11-12). Due to geography, the area was separated from both the Siamese kingdoms and from rulers in the Malay Peninsula (Dowsey-Magog 2002). Before the nation-states of Thailand and Malaysia developed, the southern region was dotted with semi-independent administrative units called chiefdoms, kingdoms, or states, which paid tribute to several larger empires but were semi-autonomous (Andaya and Andaya 1982 and 2001, Davisakd 2002, Sunait 1999). “These early Southern Thai city-states existed before the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya kingdoms expanded southwards to include them in modern Thailand. Most of the historical
information currently available is concerned with the kingdoms of Central Thailand, which were far removed from the relatively independent Southern areas by physical barriers of distance and poor communication until the 20th century” (Dowsey-Magog 2002: 1-2).

There is little known about two early kingdoms called Tambralinga (a kingdom which covered the present Nakhon Si Thammarat, see Munro-Hay 2001: 22) and Langasuka (in the present Pattani area), but theater expert Paul Dowsey-Magog suggested that their direct trade with India could have affected performances before the arrival of the Srivijaya Empire in the 7th century. The Langasuka Kingdom sent representatives to the emperor in China in the 6th century and had a reputation as a Buddhist center (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 21 and 2001, see Wyatt 1970). This region was a “melting pot of cultural influences” (Dowsey-Magog 2002: 2) that produced distinctive cultural arts and performances, particularly nora and the shadow puppet play.95 Both performances were used to propitiate spirits and their masters were considered religiously powerful.96

Srivijaya Empire (7th to 13th centuries). Key elements of the drama, such as dance postures and the invocation of Hindu gods, are thought to have come from Indian culture brought through overseas trading from Sri Lanka or India to Java, then to the Malay peninsula, and up to what is today southern Thailand (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983

95 Both arts are strongly associated with the Province of Phatthalung. The shadow play is created by leaning leather figures against a white screen, which is lit by a lamp from behind. In the Thai term for shadow puppetry (nang talung), nang refers to the leather hide that is used to make the puppets and talung is thought to come from the name of Phatthalung (Ginsburg 1967: 68). Talung is taken from leg talung, which is a pole for tying up elephants. Some academics believe that soldiers who rode on elephants saw this Indian play in Java and brought it to Phatthalung and Nakhon Si Thammarat. (Pittaya 2003, who cites Udom 1988). In Malaysia, the performance is called wayang kulit meaning shadow made by leather.
96 But while nora has only developed in southern Thailand and northern Malaysia, the shadow play genre is spread over a larger area: Indonesia, Malaysia, India, China, Turkey, and Greece. Indonesian shadow puppetry developed in Bali and Java about a thousand years ago, and the coming of Islam influenced the art (Brandon 1967, Dowsey-Magog 2002: 2).
reference Kukrit Pramoj: 114, Pittaya 2003). This influence probably traveled through the Srivijaya Kingdom (srivichai), which was a major maritime kingdom or entrepot based in Sumatra from the 7th to 13th centuries. However little is known about this kingdom, and its history is in dispute (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 19, 26 and 2001).97

The late prime minister, art historian, and classical dancer M. R. Kukrit Pramoj stated that the dancing positions and story of nora identify it as coming from the Srivijaya Empire (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983). During this empire, the famous Buddhist temple of Borobudur was constructed in Java in the 8th to 9th centuries. This cosmic mountain or stupa contains carvings of dancers in Indian styles that appear to be nora's basic postures. (Ginsburg 1971: 1, see Swearer 1995: 171). Known for its maritime trade with India and China, this empire primarily followed Mahayana Buddhism. It extended into the Malay peninsula and southern Thailand as far north as Chaiya in Surat Thani Province (Chaiwat and Pittaya 1983). There has been some speculation that Chaiya was the center of the empire.98

The empire had an administration center at Nakhon Si Thammarat (Sanskrit: Nagara Sri Dhammaraja; early European rendering: Ligor) which administered over Phatthalung and other southern cities (Arun 1980, Keyes 1995: 261). Also Nakhon Si Thammarat was an early home of nora performances and remains an influential nora teaching center today (Brandon 1967: 62, Plowright 1998: 384).

But even early in the Common Era (or Christian Era), India’s reputed cultural colonization of Southeast Asia was considered so pervasive that historians used the terms

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97 According to the Andayas, there is a dearth of evidence on the Srivijaya Empire and when it existed.
98 The area around Songkhla Lake had a dense population even before the development of the 13th century Sukhothai Kingdom, according to archaeological evidence. Towns existed in the region since the 7th to 8th centuries C. E., and statues and amulets have been found attesting to Buddhist and Hindu worship. The Theravada Buddhist temple Wat Pha Kho in Sathingphra District, Songkhla Province, was an early religious center (Pittaya 2003: 4). Today this temple is a tourist pilgrimage site as the birthplace of Luang Phaw Thuat, a highly regarded, magically powerful southern monk from the Ayutthaya period.
"classic Indianized civilizations," "Hinduized," and "Farther India" to describe the new societies with heavy Hindu characteristics (Golomb 1985: 51, Keyes 1995: 65-66, 106 fn 1). However some scholars have suggested there is too much emphasis on India and not enough on local input in these descriptions. Instead, they argue that aspects of the Indian belief system were accepted because they fit well with indigenous Southeast Asian ideas regarding nature and spirits (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 14-6, and 2001).

The arguments for an Indian origin of nora are based on various elements: first, that many Southeast Asian dances were influenced by India; second, that nora involves propitiating gods of Hindu-Brahmanism which had spread in the region around Songkhla Lake; and third, that similar dances were practiced in India which was trading with southern Thailand through Java (Pittaya 2003: 9-11). On the first point, Brandon wrote that more than a thousand years ago, "... Indian-style dance became known to performers far beyond that country’s boundaries. It fused with local dance styles, creating numerous related dance forms..." (1993: 4). Pittaya (2003) also reported that Indian culture is the basis for dances in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Burma, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

On the second issue, the area around Songkhla Lake clearly was a historical religious center. From the 6th to 13th centuries C. E., Indian traders and Brahmin priests are believed to have brought Hindu-Brahmanic religion (satsanaa phraam) to the region. The religion had sects for Vishnu (Phra Naaraai) (waisanop nigai) and for Shiva (Phra Isuan) (saiwa nigai).99 Sculptures have been uncovered of the elephant-headed Hindu god

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99 Brahmanism was an early form of Hinduism when powerful priests were needed to perform complex rituals. The Brahmins were the priestly caste while the word "Brahman" refers to a concept of reality, which represents many gods. The three manifestations of Brahman are the gods Vishnu the preserver, Shiva the destroyer, and Brahma the creator. While Hinduism emerged about 1500 B. C. E., Buddhism developed as a reformation of Hinduism beginning in the 6th century B. C. E.
Ganesh (Phra Phigkhanet) and of stone Shiva lingas or phallic symbols (O’Connor 1983, Pittaya 2003). Southeast Asian art historian Stanley O’Connor suggested that the Shiva lingas from Nakhon Si Thammarat might date from the 5th or 6th centuries, which would put this influence even earlier. Hindu-Brahmanism in the south continued to exist through the Ayutthaya period and even today plays a significant role. For instance, Nakhon Si Thammarat still has two principal shrines to Shiva and Vishnu. From information in the nora tale and its rituals, it is thought that the play was originally used to praise the Brahmanic gods of Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu. One lesson or song (bot) in the performance mentioned a god who gave birth to the nora genre. According to academics, the meaning is that Shiva, as the creator of all dance, originated nora (Pittaya 2003, Wong 1991).

Nora contains many elements of Buddhism, and historically the two main sects of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, were influential in the region (Pittaya 2003: 9-11). Statues of Mahayana Buddhist saints or bodhisattva (phoothisat) have been found there. And a 17th century map contains unique drawings of 63 Buddhist temples along the eastern side of the Songkhla Lake (Thongchai 1994: 28-9).\textsuperscript{100} Also, the Phatthalung Legend mentions landmarks around Phatthalung like Gachang Island in Songkhla Lake, where the princess was exiled. The legend describes a golden Buddha image and festival for ancestors at Wat Thaa Khura in Sathingphra District. “All of these can confirm that the people at that time could use the legend and lesson for paying respect to teachers (bot wai khruu) to record historical facts accurately” (Suthiwong 1999: 3873).

\textsuperscript{100} This map is also displayed at the Institute for Southern Thai Studies, Songkhla Province. It is a rare pre-modern pictorial map, which depicts sacred sites such as Thai style chedis and temples, interspersed with local plants. It does not use conventional geographical dimensions.
Third, another indication of Indian origin is the similarity between nora and an ancient Indian drama of wandering performers called yaatraa yaatriti, which originated in the Bengal region but moved to southern India. Meaning to “walk” in Sanskrit and in Bengali dialect, the name later became chaatrit (or chatri), which is also an early name for nora (Pittaya 2003, he cites Phaasuk Inthraawut 1986). In sum, nora was thought to have come from southern India during the time of the Srivijaya Empire in the 7th to 13th centuries. But Srivijaya was not the only empire in the area to bring in foreign trade and influence nora. As discussed earlier, the Patani Kingdom was a thriving trade center for Indians, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, and British until it was attacked by Siamese forces in 1786 after an attempt at independence (Bougas 1990: 114-7).

Taking a different approach, some Thai researchers argued that nora was locally born. Arun Wetsuwan (1980) rejected a commonly held theory that nora grew out of the flourishing arts in Java during the Srivijaya Empire. In an article titled, “Manooraa Did Not Originate in Java,” Arun based his evidence on historical records and the nora songs. He said nora originated possibly as early as the 7th century in Phatthalung, which was then controlled by Srivijaya. Nora then spread to what is now Indonesia, rather than the reverse, Arun argued. The possibility of an indigenous origin has also been argued by others, who speculate that nora may have developed from hunter propitiation ceremonies in the jungles. The nora instruments — flute like an oboe, cymbals, drums, and wooden clappers — could have evolved from natural materials used to attract animals. For example, to entice animals, hunters blew on leaves by making a sound that is similar to the flute (pii) used in nora today. At one time, poems were recited to the sound of small cymbals (ching) to lull and catch bees, and these cymbals are used in the performance
now. Natural musical instruments might have been incorporated into the dance-drama as a way to communicate with spirits (Chaiwat and Pittaya 1983, Pittaya 1992 citing Chuan Petgaew 1980).

This debate is far from dead. When I attended a conference on the history of the Songkhla Lake region at the Institute for Southern Thai Studies in June 2003, various academics suggested that nora came from the Ayutthaya Kingdom, the Khmer Kingdom, or Java. And rather ironically, since my sources were Thai scholars, I was asked by other Thai scholars, “Is nora from India?” The issue may still be alive because of pride in southern identity. According to Ginsburg, regional self-respect may have caused some Thai researchers to downplay the possible Indian influence, which can be seen in the Suthon-Manora Story. Publishers of a 1965 version of the nora story did not include this important Indic tale. He wrote, “Their omission may possibly reflect the selective preference of the compilers who were definitely trying to de-emphasize any possible links between the dance-drama and the Suthon tale, in order to stress the native antiquity of the drama” (Ginsburg 1971: 24, fn 1).

Ginsburg warned about trying to date the performance: “It would be difficult however to assess its actual age or origins. Southern Thai scholars, proud of their own regional cultural traditions, have attempted to do so, but on the basis of wishful etymologies and inferences from the rather obscure invocation tradition attached to the manora drama, rather than solid evidence” (1971:13). I would argue that these controversies continue because nora is such a strong emblem of southern identity and to some extent national identity. Therefore, its historical narrative has larger political and social meanings.
Southern Thailand during the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya Kingdoms (13th to 18th centuries). In the center of present-day Thailand, the Siamese political nation emerged with the first capital at Sukhothai (1257 to 1438) and the later Ayutthaya Kingdom (1351 to 1767). Meanwhile in the far south, a family dynasty is thought to have established the Phatthalung principality (probably 11th to 15th centuries) and have developed a relationship with some Siamese kings (Suthiwong 1999, Udom 1999b). The east coast of the southern peninsula was dotted with thriving trading cities such as Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, and Patani, and Khota Baru in the Malay peninsula (Dowsey-Magog 2002: 1).

Although it has long been taught in history books that the important Siamese kingdoms developed in the central-northern region and moved toward the center -- from Sukhothai to Ayutthaya, and then from Thonburi to Bangkok -- some scholars are now disputing this. Some academics are arguing that southern principalities were significant because of the foreign trade in southern port cities (Ishii 2002). Growth may have traveled from the south to the central-north in the 13th to 14th centuries. Such a revision of history would give more weight to the rather ignored southern cities, but it would also challenge nationalist historical discourse.

A recent book titled Pattani State in “Siiwichai” is Older than Sukhothai State in History (Sujit, ed. 2004) posed the question of who were the original inhabitants of the land prior to the Sukhothai Kingdom. In it, historian Thongchai argued that the discourse of Thailand being a homogeneous unified nation had pushed non-Thai ethnic groups and older principalities like Patani to the margins. Addressing contemporary problems, he stated that the current southern unrest has been exacerbated by Thai ethnocentricity based
on a national history. Thai historian Sunait Chutintaranond wrote on the same subject regarding the official histories of both Thailand and Burma. He said a “centralist historical ideology” (Sunait 1999: 104) meant history was written from the perspective of the capital of Ayutthaya for the Thais and the various capitals of the Burmese based on chronicles about kings. The result was a “… perhaps unconscious attempt by historians to marginalize the local autonomy of big and small cities in the Thai and Burmese kingdoms” (Sunait 1999: 104).

In this chapter, I frame much of the history of norä from the center, looking at norä developments in relationship to the Siamese kingdoms. However, an equally fruitful perspective would be to explore norä from the Malay peninsula or other principalities or nations that influenced the south. But the paucity of southern history makes it difficult to explore other perspectives.

History on Islamic political movements in the south has been particularly scarce and considered sensitive. When I was doing research at the PSU Pattani library in 2001, a Muslim student told me she was frustrated trying to find information on local Muslim leaders in the past century, particularly in Thai language. She had to go to Malaysian universities to find resource materials. But in 2004, the resurgence of ethnic violence resulted in a proliferation of history books on the region, especially on Pattani Province, in both Thai and Malay languages (Bangkok Post, 7 July 2004). Contributing to the dearth of information was the absence of surviving historical chronicles on the south, at
least in the Thai Buddhist regions, according to historian Kennon Breazeale.\(^{101}\) (Some chronicles have been published on the Patani Kingdom. See Teeuw and Wyatt 1970).

The Phatthalung Legend reports that the *nora* genre was born when Phatthalung was founded (Udom 1999b). Numerous scholars have remarked that this legend is clearly a mixture of historical facts and imagined events (interview Saruup 2001, Suthiwong 1999, Udom 1999b). At one point this lake was a major port open to the sea where foreign traders met and followed the trade winds between China and India (interview Saruup 2001). Specifically the legend describes the districts of Sathingphra, Ranot, and Krasae Sin on the east side of the lake and Phatthalung and surroundings on the lake’s west side. As previously described, the story tells of villages, temples and festivals in the area which survive today (Suthiwong 1999).

Several amateur Thai researchers in the 1960s wrote local histories of the south, but their methods were suspect, according to Gesick (1995: 75): “...they proceeded on the assumption that the stories were historical (or rather Historical) and then proved further points from that assumption.” Non-professionals wrote histories citing chronicles, archaeology, and local manuscripts like the story of Lady White Blood to show that the

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\(^{101}\) I am very grateful for Breazeale’s comments on this chapter. In August 2003, he wrote, “Unlike all other regions of present-day Thailand, the Thai of the South did not have a chronicle tradition or, if one existed, the chronicles have not survived. David Wyatt translated two ‘chronicles’ from Nakhon Sithammarat, but one is an early 19th-century legal text and the other is a local religious history compiled probably in the mid-17th century. Neither these nor the other ‘chronicles’ of the South provide continuous chronologies. The other ‘chronicles’ of Nakhon Sithammarat, Phatthalung, Songkhla and Thalang (Ujung Salang) were compiled in the 19th century for the heads of the respective ruling families. They drew upon personal recollections and texts that were available at the time of writing. One of the Songkhla annals starts in the 1750s and one from Phatthalung records a few events as far back as the 1730s. The rest take the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 (i.e., the Bangkok framework of history) as their starting point, and the Phatthalung chronicle alone continues beyond the 1860s. Thus the Southern towns did not preserve their own histories independently of the capital, and I think that partly explains why historians of Thailand have neglected the history of this region.”

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people described in the ritual invocation of nora were from the Tambralinga kingdom. Gesick refers to two authors in this regard: Yiamyong Surakitbanhan and Thewasaro (a pseudonym).

In the Encyclopedia of Thai Culture: Southern Region, Udom (1999b) cited research to show that people and landmarks in the legends of nora had existed. In the first report, titled Nora, Phinno (or Phinyo) Chittham and Yiamyong Surakitbanhan stated that based on the legends, nora originated during the time of the Phatthalung principality (muang Phatthalung gao) between 1315 to 1508 C.E. (Arun 1980, Phinno 1965, Udom 1999b). The report located the legend in the Phatthalung region because of the popularity of the dance there and the existence of Gachang Island (see Arun 1980). Along with other researchers, Yiamyong disagreed with a suggestion by Prince Damrong that nora came from Ayutthaya during the time of that kingdom. Prince Damrong ([1919] 1965) wrote an introduction to two plays from the Ayutthaya period, including the Nang Manora play, which has been reprinted several times. But his thoughts on the origin place of nora have been disputed (Udom 1999b: 3897, Yiamyong 1965).¹⁰²

The second report was by Thewasaro (pseudonym 1965). He said the Phatthalung Legend apparently originated in the 13th century at the time of a southern king named Phra Jao Jantharaphaana, who was thought to be instrumental in giving the revered Emerald Buddha image (Phra Kaeo Mawrakot) to the Siamese king.¹⁰³ This southern king, whose grandson reputedly founded nora dance, built chedis in Buddhist temples in

¹⁰² Prince Damrong’s introduction contained parts of both the Suthon-Manora Story and the Phatthalung Legend (See also Ginsburg 1971: 25, fn 13-14).
¹⁰³ The link with the Emerald Buddha is sketchy. This most respected Buddha image of the Chakri Kingdom is believed to have originated in India, traveled to Sri Lanka, and then to present-day Chiang Mai, Thailand, and Laos beginning in the 15th century. According to Swearer (1995: 94), the statue symbolized the king’s authority and connection to the powerful spiritual realm. It also was vital in alliances between various principalities.
Sathingphra District and Phatthalung Province and developed several ancient cities (Udom 1999b). Thewasaro argued that Indian Brahmin priests brought *nora* to the south to perform dances for the Hindu gods Indra, Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva.

Summarizing the research derived from legends and other sources, Pittaya (1992: 6-7, 53) wrote that *nora* probably occurred when Phatthalung town, which moved several times, was established at Bang Kaeo on the west side of Songkhla Lake from the mid-11th to the mid-15th centuries. 104 Bang Kaeo still can be identified by its ancient moat and gate. Researchers think that the king’s daughter had intercourse with a prince (or governor’s son) from the Kotcharat family, which had settled nearby Baan Thakhae. After her son, Khun Sii Satthaa, returned and received his title, he ruled the large Thakhae area known for its agriculture. Chinese merchants used the large river there for transporting goods. The Phatthalung king controlled an elephant military camp and relied on the produce from the Thakhae area to feed his army (Pittaya 1992).

The practice of the *nora* still helps to explain local history and culture today. A historical book on the region, titled *The History of Civilization of Southern Thailand*, explained the importance of *nora* to the adjacent province of Trang: “In the southern area, we are accustomed to the proverb, ‘Come to Trang to see either nang or nora’” (Prathum 2002: 237). *Nang* refers to the shadow puppet play (*nang talung*). Being on the west coast of the peninsula, Trang was cut off from other towns by a mountain range but it was in contact with Phatthalung and Nakhon Si Thammarat. Trang adopted these two

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104 Phatthalung town moved more than 12 times to follow the residences of governors and for political reasons. Typically, the governor’s house was used as the city hall. The compound included a nearby prison for convicts who provided labor. In addition, the governor earned money from paddy fields and trade, so his residence became the commercial center. Therefore, wherever the governor lived became the ‘new town,’ according to Prince Damrong (Prathum 2002: 221-222). King Rama VI ordered the last move in 1924.
arts from Phatthalung, which were considered "valued things of local people" (2002: 237). Trang's relative isolation meant that it was less affected by war and politics. Therefore, Trang maintained the arts of nora and nang talung for a longer period than other regions, according to the account (Prathum 2002: 237).

The Phatthalung Legend also links nora with other famous historical deities and tales in the Songkhla Lake region. Nora is mentioned in stories about Naang Luat Khao (also called Mae Luat Khao) (Lady White blood), Taa Yaai Phraam Jan (Grandparent Brahmin Moon), and Tuat Samlii (Great-grandfather Cotton Wool) (Pittaya 2003: 5). Nora dancing is particularly connected with the goddess named Jao Mae Yu Hua (also spelled Chao Mae Uu Hua) (Royal Mother or Queen Mother) at Wat Thaa Khura in Sathingphra, Songkhla Province. In searching for information on the legend of Lady White Blood, Gesick (1995: 62-65) learned of this other goddess and attended her festival in 1987. In October 2004, I visited the temple and in May 2005, I attended the annual ceremony to pour water on the tiny golden Buddha statue, about an inch tall, which represents her. Hundreds of people came to pour libations and fulfill vows by giving offerings, being ordained as monks for short periods, becoming lay nuns, or performing nora dances. Abbot Khemmajaroo told me that Jao Mae Yu Hua was the same person as Mae Sii Maa Laa, who first danced nora. The story about this goddess is essentially the same as the Phatthalung Legend, about a princess put adrift on a raft by her father because she enjoyed dancing.105 He said the goddess and temple dated back to the

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105 Another interesting aspect of the Jao Mae Yu Hua legend is that in some versions the exiled child is female and in others, the child is male. The oral histories told of a girl while the written histories reported a boy. Therefore, Gesick wondered whether the written version was a revision that was considered more "authoritative" (Gesick 1995: 63, and fn 23). I mention this in light of the questions about the sex of the
beginning of Ayutthaya period, 700 to 800 years ago. The abbot stated that the small Buddha statue contained many spirits in addition to Jao Mae Yu Hua, namely her son, angels, and sacred things. However, those I interviewed identified the goddess with the Buddha figure. This is rather unusual as male spirits, such as monks, are thought to reside in Buddha statues.

Gesick (1995: 70) argued that the dissimilarities between the tales are not an academic dilemma because every place is unique while part of a larger region. Gesick’s observations are pertinent in showing the widespread belief in nora and the large number of people who dance nora in vow fulfillment. She wrote, “One prominent feature of this performance is the extraordinary number of people—in the hundreds—who don manora costumes or masks, and, under the guidance of the professional manora performers, dance before Chao Mae Yu Hua to redeem vows made to her” (Gesick 1995: 64-65). She added, “Everywhere I went in pursuit of stories about the past, the manora motif cropped up” (Gesick 1995: 65). This festival illustrates the interconnections between nora and other spirits in the south, particularly female goddesses.

In July 2004, I visited a 14th century temple named Wat Khian in Bang Kaeo, the location of the ancient Phatthalung principality. It is believed that Lady White Blood was born in nearby Sathingphra District, Songkhla Province and built many temples in the area (Gesick 1995, Munro-Hay 2001: 49-52, Pittaya 1992: 54-55). Wat Khian had two statues of her and one of her husband, which are propitiated. In residence at the temple, an 86-year-old woman, Khun Khin Nuunun, told me that Jao Mae Yu Hua was the same person as Mae Sii Maa Laa, confirming the information from the abbot mentioned before.

founder of nora in the Phatthalung Legend. In that legend, sometimes the youth who danced for the king is his daughter, and in other narratives, the youth is the daughter’s son.
However, Jao Mae Yu Hua was not the same as Lady White Blood, who has a very different history associated with Malaysia and the island of Langkawi. But the two goddesses are related, she said. The vivid memory of this elder lay Buddhist woman (ubaasigaa) further supports Gesick’s argument for multiple local histories and illustrates the network of goddesses.

During the era under discussion, early nora performances were thought to be rather simple, performed by a few illiterate actors who traveled the countryside with light equipment (Brandon 1972: 116, see Ginsburg 1971: 27). Impromptu dialogue, full of local color, rough language, and humor, was added to the basic rituals and skits. Men with semi-bare chests played all roles (Jonit 2002). But during the Ayutthaya period, some nora performances became more refined. Consequently, they were shown in southern palaces (Suthiwong 1999). According to Brandon, by the 17th century, nora in the south had “...assumed its traditional form: a folk performance linked to animistic beliefs, primarily staging the Jataka legend about Princess Manohra and Prince Suton in a dance style somewhat influenced by Indian dance” (1972:116).

King Taksin and the Early Chakri Dynasty (18th to 19th centuries). This period saw the movement of some nora troupes to Bangkok and the blending with central

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106 Today Lady White Blood, also known as Lady Masuri, is respected at her gravesite, which has become a tourist attraction on Langkawi Island. Visitors drink water from a sacred pond and receive blessings there. According to the story, she lived 200 to 300 years ago and was married to the local chief’s son. When he went off to war against the Siamese, she had a child and was accused of adultery. Lady Masuri claimed her innocence and said her blood would run white to prove it. She also cursed the island for seven generations. When she was executed by a kris dagger, her blood indeed was white, and then the island was attacked by the Siamese (websites: Malaysia-by-Malaysian.com and Tasanee Yawaprapas in kinnaree.com). Two Thai informants added an update to this story based on Thai news sources. They said Lady Masuri’s son escaped to Thailand after her death. A few years ago, a young woman in Phuket was been identified as her descendant. The Malaysian government reportedly sends her money yearly, but she chooses to live in Thailand for the present.
culture associated with the monarchy. After the Burmese sacked the Ayutthaya capital in 1767, the new Siamese military leader, King Taksin, gained power and established a capital in Thonburi (r. 1767 to 1782) across the river from present day Bangkok. He quickly started to restore the arts including performances, which has been decimated. In 1769, King Taksin put Nakhon Si Thammarat under his control. Since that city was an ancient Buddhist center and had escaped the Burmese war, it was thought to be a repository of Siamese arts (Arun 1980). In 1780, he told the governor of Nakhon Si Thammarat to send a nora troupe in the capitol for a performance for the sacred Emerald Buddha.

Under the early Chakri Dynasty, the capitol was moved to Bangkok in 1782. More nora performances were held under the reigns of Rama III and IV from 1824 to 1868 (Mattani 2002). During the reign of Rama IV (King Mongkut, r. 1851 to 1868), a Nakhon Si Thammarat troupe performed at a royal funeral in the Pramane Grounds (also called Sanam Luang, a large field in front of the Grand Palace complex). King Mongkut wrote a letter regarding the event in 1860 stating, “This lakhon chatri that you brought to show for this funeral is very popular because no one has seen it before” (Suthiwong 1999: 3871). From this comment, it appears that although the drama had been brought to central Siam earlier, it was not well known. The performance was well-liked and soon more nora troupes were brought to Bangkok by royalty and elite (Ginsburg 1972: 171).

The performance that came north came to be called lakhon chatri. This style of performance continues today, focusing on healing, soul-calling, and paying off vows. The two performance styles—nora and lakhon chatri—share many of the same elements, illustrating the influence of nora. They include a belief in a genealogy of powerful
teacher spirits, secret magical prayers (gathaa), use of the Suthon-Manora Story from the Buddha birth tales, and the passing of ritual objects down through the generations such as the golden crown (Grow 1992, 1996). But being closer to Bangkok and sponsored by nobles, lakhon chatri focused more on the classical literature, the Siamese court, and the monarchy (Grow 1996).

Several Siamese dances at the time influenced each other, borrowing musical instruments, costumes, songs, and stories. Other major dance forms included the masked dance of the court (khon), a dance restricted to women performers in the court (lakhon nai), and outside theater including commercial theater in the cities and provincial plays (lakhon nok) (Brandon 1972: 118~1993). Kukrit, who was also a khon dancer, described the debt owed to nora by other genre:

Anyone who was covered with the khon on his or her head must pay respect to nora as the great holy teacher. Every time they heard the nora music, they did a wai.... The moment I saw Khun Uppatham [a famous nora dancer] perform the dance, I was so excited because the real nora teacher, whom my khon teacher told me to pay respect to, was in front of my eyes. The art, which Khun Uppatham performed, was the pure art. It was the light coming out of highly civilized people. Also, it was the power, which is far beyond time and ageless (Kukrit quoted in Preecha 1980: 17).

While nora was influencing performances in central Siam, in the south its presence can be seen in 19th century temple wall paintings. At the royal Wat Machimawat in Songkhla City, a mural from 1863 depicts a nora performance attracting the attention of a Western soldier, his wife, and child. While these ordination hall murals are in central Thai style, they depict southern pastimes as well. Anthropologist Irving Chan Johnson (1999: 291) also described a mural painting of nora in a Thai temple in Kelantan State, Malaysia dating from the 19th or early 20th century.
Contemporary Era (20th to 21st centuries)

*Greeting Kings.* As a symbol of the south, *nora* performances have historically been used to welcome kings, nobles, and foreigners, according to the Institute for Southern Thai Studies. Such shows were considered offerings to kings and royalty and a sign of respect for high government officers who came for inspection tours (Pittaya 2003). “It is believed that before *nora* had the role of providing entertainment for the community, *nora* was performed for important rituals such as the rituals for kings or governors and high-class people in villages. We also can identify this role from the costumes which are similar to the king’s costume in ancient times” (Pittaya 1992: 2). On display at the Institute’s museum are impressive turn-of-the-century black-and-white photographs showing a welcoming ceremony in 1905 for King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn) in Paak Phanang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. In another photograph of *nora* performers, a costumed middle aged man is flanked by two male youths facing the camera in frozen poses in front of a typical palm covered bamboo stage (Arun 1980).

These early photographs show *nora* as an exclusively male dance genre connected with important Buddhist temples. Some photographs show a performance for the Buddha relic at the royal Wat Phra Mahaathaat Wawramahaawihaan in Nakhon Si Thammarat during the same reign (Arun 1980). Also reproduced in the Encyclopedia of Thai Culture: Southern Region, these images are of boys and men in bare feet, wearing hanging waist sashes symbolic of the bird wings, their chests crisscrossed with ornaments. Some men wear the layered crown (*seut*) of the genre and bend back their fingers in stylized poses. Performers are caught in mid-step dancing on woven mats laid on the ground near the
temple. Young men bend their right legs to touch their shoulders while three adult men dressed in hunter masks look straight into the lens. Older men appear to be instructing younger boys, who act as dancers, drummers, and audience. These images reflect the significance of nora as a southern cultural product, valuable enough to present to royalty during the years of administrative centralization encompassing the southern provinces at the turn of the 20th century. The nora men were respected community leaders who could assist the government in representing the south to other nations (Pittaya 1992, 2003).107

_Nora Leaders Honored by Royalty._ Accomplished nora leaders say the highlight of their careers was performing for the royal family. Some renowned masters were honored to perform at the National Theatre in Bangkok. The Institute for Southern Thai Studies recognizes these men today. Climbing the hill to the Institute’s museum, I looked up to see a larger-than-life black metal sculpture of muscular nora men acrobatically balancing in a pyramid on each other’s thighs.

The room for Folk Plays and Musical Instruments displays a photographic gallery of elderly and deceased nora masters. Born in Phatthalung in 1891, Nora Khun Uppatham Narakorn (Nora Phum Thewaa) performed gracefully like an angel, according to the wall caption. One description stated that Nora Yok Chuubua was also born in Phatthalung and declared a national artist in 1987. His grandfather “…took an oath that

107 From an anthropological viewpoint, these remarkable century-old photographs bring to mind many comparisons. The nora performance is immediately recognizable, although today the costume has been modified to be more modest or “civilized” (Mattani 2002: 1). Also the photographs are reminiscent of the black-and-white movies taken by anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson of Balinese dancing in the 1930s (Mead 1972: 231). Their film showed trance dancing with Indonesian daggers turned against the performers. It should be noted, however, that this film has been criticized as a constructed representation since it was staged during the day with young women, rather than at night with older women as was typical. The modifications were made to fit lighting limitations and assumed aesthetic needs of the anthropologists. Despite that, in looking at the Thai photographs, I am struck by the similarities between Balinese and Thai dances, both being religious performances held in the open, associated with temples, and involving trance or possession.
he would give away the grandson to be adopted by nora masters.” Two prominent masters trained the boy, and when he was 16, Nora Yok Chuubua began his own troupe. Also known for his graceful style, Nora Khlaï Phrommet (or Nora Khlaï Khiinawn) was born in Nakhon Si Thammarat in 1853 and performed for King Chulalongkorn at the Grand Palace in 1908. He is the only nora leader to be conferred a title for performing for the King (Pittaya 2003). The gallery has no displays of female nora leaders, although a few have received government recognition in competitions and have performed in Bangkok.

The history of nora in the 20th century is often described through the lives of these prominent masters who have received honors for preserving southern culture. In 1980, Art and Culture magazine ran a cover story by Preecha Nunsuk on Nora Phum Thewaa, who at 89 was still dancing and being honored by the Phatthalung Provincial government as “The Artist of the South.” He was from a poor rice growing family and gained basic literacy from living with a monk. To learn the dance postures, Nora Phum Thewaa trained under a famed nora master from Nakhon Si Thammarat for six years, in a typical apprenticeship. He began performing in 1905 at 14 years of age and traveled throughout the south. In 1915, he had the honor to perform for King Rama VI in Phatthalung and Songkhla provinces. Nora Phum Thewaa performed for King Bhumiphol Adulyadej in 1959 and received a royal medal from the King in 1971 when the dancer was 80. Aside from his performance abilities, Nora Phum Thewaa was one of several nora leaders to become involved in politics. He served as subdistrict officer for many years and was given the title of Khun Upatham Narakorn by the King in 1930 for this
community work (Pittaya 2003, Preecha 1980). (For other historical events described by Pittaya, see Appendix E: Four Periods of Nora Development.)

**Historical Changes in the Name of the Genre**

The naming of the performance reflects its journey over time and space. A certain amount of confusion still swirls around the performance due to the multiple names of the genre and lack of knowledge by Bangkok people about southern traditions, according to Ginsburg (1971). The various names and Romanized spellings that have been used for the dance-drama include *manora chatri* (or *jatri*), *lakhon chatri*, *nora chatri*, *maanoora*, *manora*, *menora*, *manohra*, and *nora*. Since the term and spelling "nora" is the most commonly used today in the south, I will use it in this paper, however the pronunciation has long vowels, like *nooraa*. Part of the confusion is that *nora* changed its name and characteristics as it moved from the south to central Siam where it spawned offshoots.

*Chatri.* The originally recorded name for *nora* was *chatri*. Since the era of King Rama II (reign 1809-1824), the performance was called *chatri* in literature and legend (Suthiwong 1999). There are various translations for the Indian word *chatri*. Ginsburg said *chatri* probably referred to wandering players or royalty, but in the Thai context, *chatri* means “valiant, manly, powerful” (1971: 14-15). As previously mentioned, *chatri* is believed to refer to a group of wandering performers in India. Brandon wrote that *chatri* meant sorcerer (1967: 61), but this translation is not mentioned by other researchers.108

108 Mary Grow (1992: 111) objected to the performers being called sorcerers because the term had a “strong negative connotation.” Her informants said the performers did not engage in black magic or sorcery; instead, they were part of the folk Brahmanic tradition.
Lakhon Chatri. When members of the royalty imported these troupes to central Siam, the Thai word for play, lakhon, was added and the performance was referred to as lakhon chatri. This offshoot dance of lakhon chatri is today performed in central Thailand particularly Phetchaburi, Bangkok, and Ayutthaya (Grow 1992, Paritta 2003). But its origin was in the nora genre from Phatthalung and Songkhla. Over time, the lakhon chatri performance changed to fit the central Thai culture and dialect and lost much of its southern components and language (Ginsburg 1971). Therefore, today lakhon chatri exists in various forms in central Thailand and is quite different from nora in the south. In Phetchaburi Province south of Bangkok, lakhon chatri is still performed, but it is under the direction of mostly female leaders (Grow 1992). It also includes the Suthon-Manora Story. But unlike the southern play based on the Phatthalung principality, lakhon chatri in Phetchaburi reflects the influence of the central monarchy. Anthropologist Mary L. Grow described the drama: “... the performers evoked the spectacle and glory of an ancient Siamese court. Accompanied by an orchestra, a chorus of voices not only praised the institution of kingship, but sang numerous stanzas describing a monarch as compassionate, virtuous, intelligent, and morally superior” (1996: 48).

In Bangkok, the public can view daily shortened forms of lakhon chatri at various shrines. Rather bored commercial dancers entertain the gods for wishes granted in the vow fulfilling ritual performed at the City Pillar (lag muang) near the Grand Palace

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109 In a minority view, Arun (1980) and some other scholars have suggested the word lakhon stood for the southern city of Lakhon Sii Thammarat where some troupes originated, known today as Nakhon Si Thammarat.

110 Apparently this performance moved north in a variety of ways. Pittaya (interview 2004) stated that at the beginning of the Rattanakosin period in the reign of King Rama III, a commander moved a group of people from the Thai-Malay peninsula (before the current borders were drawn) to a village called Naang Leung apparently in the central area. “These people disseminated their performance, which means nora performance. Later it was adapted to be lakhon chatri,” he said.
complex and at the famed Hindu Erawan Shrine to the four-faced Brahma at the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel. Similar dancers also perform for the spirit of a Buddha statue believed to have supernatural powers at Wat Sothon in Chachoengsao Province in central-eastern Thailand (Ginsburg 1971, 1972, and personal observations). Such shows bear practically no resemblance to the stylized, intensely controlled dancing and passionate possessions of nora descendants.

**Manora or Nora.** When the Suthon-Manora Story was added, the genre in the south took the name of manora or more commonly the shorter name of nora. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the name menora was known in the northern Malay peninsula in the 18th century (Andaya 1979: 191). But at times, it is still called lakhon chatiri. Alternatively, some southerners believe the name of nora came instead from a large southern frog called gop nora (nora frog) whose skin was used in making a drum for the performance (Chaiwut and Pittaya 1983).

**Women Join or Re-join Nora?**

Historians have generally assumed that nora was a male-only performance until early in the 20th century. At the official government ceremonies photographed in 1905, women were absent. According to Ginsburg, the roles of women in nora were performed by boys and men until the early decades of the 1900s (Ginsburg 1971, 1972: 178). But actually, we know little about the early formation of the art during the time of the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya kingdoms. There is little evidence on the involvement of women. Area legends give hints that at one time women may have been key figures in ancestral rituals. For instance, sometimes the Phatthalung Legend describes the founder of nora as the daughter of the king, and at other times the founder is her son. This legend
describes the purpose of the dance as propitiating the ancestors, a role which probably would have been culturally suitable for women because of their connections with birth, family, and agricultural fertility. Other southern legends also tell of religious women (Gesick 1995). Such tales often include taboo sexual acts, rejection from the ruling family, exile, and reconciliation.

At one time, myths and legends would have been dismissed as falsehoods. But today they are considered seriously as sacred stories containing historical information (Tarzia 2000). Therefore, it is possible that women were instrumental in nora early on, before the dance became a male art. There are other examples of such gender switching in Asian genres. Japanese kabuki began as a female play. But due to issues of sexuality and prostitution involving the cast and audience, kabuki became a male performance.\footnote{In 17th century Japan, the popular kabuki play began as an all-female performance with prostitutes playing sexually attractive roles for male audiences. The excitement of the show caused it to be banned, and kabuki turned into a male performance. Today famous male actors are known for playing beautiful and honorable women (website Japanzone, 30 June 2004).}

The remembered history of nora only goes as far back as the memory of the eldest dancers. It has been assumed that nora was male dominated from its inception because its roots are in patriarchal Indian Hindu-Brahmanism with strict rules about gender, pollution, and purity (see Douglas 1963, Scupin 2001: 39). But this view might be short-sighted. Archaeological evidence from the Mon and Khmer empires depicted female dancers in Indian poses, implying that early religious dancing included women. Relying on such archaeological evidence, Mattani (1996: 15-19) went back to pre-Sukhothai times to discover the roots of Siamese dancing. She looked at the Buddhist Dvaravati Mon empire (6th to 12th or 13th centuries) which ruled the central area of present-day Thailand. Terracotta dancing figurines were found in Indian-type poses.
including a bird-woman. The Khmer conquered the Mon and contributed their own Indian and Brahmanic influenced styles. Khmer temples in Cambodia depict topless male and female dancers showing respect to the gods. These sculptures probably reflect temple performances to seek good crops in an agricultural community. This type of dancing to honor to the gods was also typical of *nora*, she wrote.

During later Siamese history, there was a split between male and female dancing when female troupes were only allowed to dance for the courts. During the Ayutthaya Empire, the royalty created the first recorded all-female troupes of inner court women and barred other subjects from having such troupes. Female court groups were called "women’s plays inside" (*lakhon nang nai*), while outside groups were described as being out of the court or in the provinces, as "plays outside" (*lakhon nok*). *Nora* was included in the latter category. Many outside groups performed for common people. Some had all male casts, but we don’t know if that applied to all. The monarchy’s prerogative to have the only female casts did affect one genre, the *nora* offshoot of *lakhon chatri* in central Thailand. When King Rama IV in 1861 lifted the ban on women performing, women were added to the *lakhon chatri* performance. And by the 1920s, most performers of *lakhon chatri* in Phetchaburi were female. Later most the leaders were also female (Grow 1992: 105, 108).

Did the royal edict affect *nora* in the far south the same way it affected *lakhon chatri* in Petchaburi closer to Bangkok? Southern researchers have not mentioned the royal edict. Instead, they have commented that adding women to *nora* was a commercial decision to attract larger audiences in the early decades of the 20th century. Ginsburg said the change occurred when troupes began to travel more widely after the railways were
completed. He puts this date as 1900 but others suggest the 1920s to 1930s. At that point, companies expanded their memberships beyond three actors, and women were added to play female roles (Ginsburg 1971: 27). From discussions with older nora men, Pittaya (2003: 23) determined that the inclusion of women occurred about the 1920s to 1930s, and some groups even had all-female casts. Prayat (1995) also reported that women were added about the 1930s when they joined Phatthalung troupes. Two important women were the wives of Nora Teum, despite the fact that he had won them in a nora competition. Named Khun Nuuwin and Khun Nuuwaat, these women went on to become well-known female performers possibly in the 1950s (Johnson 1999: 292, Prayat 1995).

Gradually women participated more in both nora and the associated art of puppetry (see Chapter 4). After WWII, female leaders (nang mae khoong) of shadow puppet groups appeared and performed on par with male leaders. One female puppet expert from Phatthalung became famous in the early 1950s. Women in puppetry were valued for their good voices and excelled in off-color comedy. Part of the acceptance of women in nora and the shadow play had to do with the belief that their teacher spirits would punish them for not accepting the roles (Pittaya 2003: 26).

Meanwhile, the aging population of respected nora men is currently declining. Young men show little interest in the demanding role, which often does not provide steady work or a large income. The position is associated with out-of-date provincial practices instead of modern consumer lifestyles. In addition, some men believe nora

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112 Other sources reported the three trunk lines of the railroads were not completed until much later, possibly the 1910s to 1920s, and the southern line opened in Pattani in 1916 (Jory 2004: 31). The railroad, however, was probably not used extensively by troupes going short distances from town to town.
leaders are effeminate and similar to transvestites (gateui or kathoey), who are stigmatized and ridiculed in Thai society (research in progress by Thianchai 2004, also see Jackson 2000: 1, Totman 2003).\textsuperscript{113} While women in nora families are likewise drawn to urban lifestyles, a number of them own their land through inheritance. They have strong village ties and are instrumental in maintaining the genre.

In summary, our knowledge about gender in nora in the early years is scant. At present researchers think that only men performed in troupes in the 1800s, and women joined in the 1920s. I would recommend a closer examination of legendary, linguistic, and archaeological evidence to question some of the assumptions about this masculinized art, which has heavy female overtones. While that would be a task for historians, in this anthropological study, I turn more to how men and women invoke historical gender roles considering the increased participation of women in this ritual previously reserved for men (see Chapter 4).

**Postmodern Thai Theater and Feminist Nora**

Feminist scholars have raised issues about the gender constructions in the Suthon-Manora Story and its connection to the nora dance drama. They associate the heroine Manora with mediumship, healing, and resistance to female subjugation expressed through performance. Besides influencing the nora drama, the Suthon-Manora Story has spread throughout Thai culture with spin-offs into ballet, art, and advertising (see Appendix F: Suthon-Manora as Ballet). Bangkok productions of the ballet can be seen as part of a larger cultural movement for Thais to return to their roots through “postmodern Thai theatre” (Kittisak 2002), which combines traditional literature with Western and

\textsuperscript{113} Jackson and Totman define this group as transgender and transsexual males. They are also called lady boys or the third sex.
modern elements. Theater directors have been re-making classical literature plays to address modern concerns, emphasizing identity and feminism. Specializing in Thai theater and literature, Kittisak Kerdarunsuksri reported that in the 1990s, globalization and economic development created a widespread debate about Thai identity and local culture. Thainess was closely associated with performance, music, food, sports, literature, and dress, although many of these things are "...rather irrelevant in today's circumstances," as modern citizens turn to consuming foreign goods (Kittisak 2002: 1-3).

One such example of postmodern theater can be seen in a feminist version of the Suthon-Manora Story prepared for an international conference at PSU, Pattani campus, which I attended in 2002. The dance was produced by Saovaluk Pongthongkam, head dance teacher from Thammasat University. Director Mattani wrote about this performance in a paper on folk arts and political development. According to Mattani, the performance was a feminist interpretation in which a highly intelligent woman named Manora struggled for freedom: "To Saovaluk (the female producer), to live in freedom is more important than anything else, with or without love" (2002: 5). According to Mattani, audiences were attracted to the character of Manora because she suffered throughout the play, more than does her husband, the hero Phra Suthon. 114

Another drama academic to interpret the Suthon-Manora Story and the nora play in feminist terms is Plowright. She argued that the southern nora performance was founded by royal female spirit mediums who were adept at healing (Plowright 1998:

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114 Mattani pointed out that the United Nations since the 1970s had encouraged women to combine modern and traditional arts for social and political ends. For her, performing old literature with a new political viewpoint challenged cultural assumptions. Mattani also praised the new Thai Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which planned to join traditionalists with modernists, but she warned that tourism has a negative side: "...if commercialism overpowers aesthetics, the outcome would be a tragedy, as in the present" (2002: 6).
She described Mae Sii Maa Laa as becoming ill from spirit possession and using a coconut shell as a drum to enter a kind of shamanic trance. She argued that the bird-woman emblem represented female power in Thailand and other Asian countries:

In the ritualistic Manora New Year performance, which I witnessed in the village of Tung Yai [near Nakhon Si Thammarat] in April 1997, I was seeing something vital to village life: a ‘well’ from which an entire community had drawn its living water since ancient times. And just as it has always been the function of woman to draw the life-sustaining fluid from the well, so it is the female who still presides over this village – her power being symbolized by the mythical and dramatic image of the ‘bird-woman’, endlessly regenerative and eternal (Plowright 1998: 392).

I also see significant gender meaning in the existence of strong female protagonists in both the Suthon-Manora Story and the Phatthalung Legend (explored in Chapter 4). But I find Plowright’s analysis rather romanticized and regret the lack of grounded ethnography to substantiate it. Yet, it illustrates a post-modernist reinterpretation, which is being invoked now by feminist scholars inside and outside of Thailand. The next section explores discourses on tradition.

**Discourses on Ancient and Modern Nora**

Today academics and nora families draw a distinction between nora for entertainment at public festivals, modern nora, and the ceremony to propitiate ancestors, ancient nora. This section investigates the concepts of the traditional and modern and their meanings. I argue that the term “traditional” is an interpretation since all cultures constantly change and are always being remade (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 273).

Scholars Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin wrote that while tradition can be defined as “an inherited body of customs and beliefs,” it is completely a symbolic construction.\(^\text{115}\)

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Looking at the concept of nora tradition, we must ask, “whose tradition is this?” Another relevant question is “for what purpose?” I suggest that the tradition of nora is a nostalgic attempt to grab the fading past and bolster local identity within a rapidly modernizing society. The image of the nora village is the quintessential rural Thai village of middle class imagining and state hegemony (Hirsch 1991), and therefore an appropriate vehicle to carry national patriotism. Traditional nora is thought to represent close kinship ties, communal sharing, a slower pace of life, and being close to nature. Meanwhile, the other side of this duality is painted as fragmented communities, broken families, capitalist greed, consumerism, urban anomie, and Western influence. Those who consider themselves traditionalists fear that modernity are hurting the community. Older village people and young middle class academics born in the south are championing this discourse on saving the old ways.

And for the concept of the modern, we need to ask, “whose modern is this?” Nora leaders who run large performance companies at regional fairs accept the label of being modern. One leader said he was engaged in business nora. Some successful leaders have carved out comfortable incomes, and a few are wealthy. But they reject the argument that they are destroying the tradition. Instead they say that modern nora is saving the genre, which would die from lack of participants if frozen in an artificially pure state. Art must change and adapt to survive, they argue.

believe they have a unique culture, which includes a heritage of old things and people, such as ancestors, that must be preserved. These must be protected from being stolen or denigrated by others, such as Americans and other Canadians buying antiques and introducing Western culture. The government created a commission to preserve certain kinds of property from a specific French period, thereby defining national culture in a certain way (Handler 1988: 140, 145). Handler found national identity was expressed through culture in crafts fairs, festivals, and performances at which traditional cultural objects were identified and consumed.
Although the modern is often described as an outside force, impinging on the traditional arts and destroying them, I understand that traditional beliefs and practices are embedded within the modern and understood within the modern framework. The constructions of what is traditional and modern come and go in cycles over time, displaying a connected dualism. From an outside perspective, there seemed to be a great deal of overlap between the concepts of ancient and modern nora, as even the smallest village performance uses an electronic keyboard, loudspeakers, and microphones for a fun, loud show. This blurring of borders seems inherent in nora performance because in the past, entertainment was always an integral part of worshipping the sacred. Participants performed for the ancestors and allowed the ancestors to dance through them. Pittaya (2003) argued that nora and the shadow play served many functions in the community from an enjoyable way to relax after work to important rituals that marked the life stages of each community member. “So the life of each villager in Thai society cannot be separated from art, plays and local performances” (Pittaya 2003: 1-2).

Based on interviews with elder nora actors, Ginsburg (1972: 172) described a traditional performance from their memories of times gone by. Early nora shows began with a musical prelude, followed by a sung invocation of the spirits to bless the ceremony. Then there were dances, songs, and skits including a comedian and finally the long awaited appearance of the lead actor known for improvising verses and skilled dancing. Performances in this old style might also include three to four hours of “variety show” before the main drama, he wrote. Clearly from this description, ritual and entertainment were blended in the past. Yet the 1960s saw a very different Western influenced style emerging using electronic instruments and new singing styles (see
Appendix E: Four Periods of *Nora* Development). Ginsburg reported in the late 1960s that, “Recent years have seen the transformation of the southern *manora* nearly beyond recognition of its former self.” Troupes were able to survive through adaptation in the south by imitating a popular country music style (*luug thung*) which appealed to contemporary villagers. *Luug thung* translates as children of the fields or country folks.

He wrote:

*A luk thung* [also spelled *luug thung*] performance offers crooners in Western dress singing long narrative ballads on romantic themes accompanied by a Western style band and interspersed with comic skits and jokes in front of a microphone. The most successful *manora* troupes today copy the *luk thung* formula while retaining perhaps just a smattering of the traditional dance and comic verse (Ginsburg 1972: 172).116

Elderly performers complained that the new shows had a faster pace from those of their youth (Ginsburg 1971: 17). And in fact, academics reported that *nora* had indeed been scaled down to fit into a few hours rather than taking days. Suthiwong (1999: 3881) also commented on the modern changes, saying that some groups had added scenes from modern novels, switched from singing to speaking certain lines for effect, minimized dancing, and employed modern light and sound technology. Brandon said a vaudeville style had developed. “By 1972 this genre had been transformed: singers in Western costume crooned romantic lyrics to Western band accompaniment and skits and comic routines abounded” (Brandon 1993: 236). Modern *nora* with country singing was also described in a book on Songkhla Province: “The play which Nora always performed in the past was Phra Suthon-Manora. But in the present, they have changed to the

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116 As there are several phonetic systems for writing Thai in Roman letters, Ginsburg’s spelling differs from the one I use.
melodrama. Some groups mix in *luang thung* too" (Committee for Compiling the Document 1999: 288).

When I asked my assistant how she could tell a performance was modern *nora*, she said they used electric guitars. Modern instruments, such as keyboards, Western drum sets, electric guitars, and huge amplifiers were often used, especially in larger productions. A few commercial troupes employed professional dancers who performed on large stages in front of painted backdrops and giant cutouts of *nora* symbols like the crown. Paid performers replaced the *nora* villagers, who instead relied on their spiritual teachers to inspire their dance.

I will describe a large public show in the late 1960s and two more recent performances to illustrate the newer style.117 Ginsburg (1972: 174-175) explained that “show biz” had become part of big productions with name stars. In the 1960s during the annual Buddhist ceremony to honor ancestors in the south, called the Tenth Month (*Duan Sip*), the renown Nora Teum’s group performed at a Bangkok temple for thousands of young southerners, mostly men, and many southern monks. Two hours of joking, singing and dancing in traditional style took place before the short 15 minute appearance of Nora Teum in a Western suit. He cleverly created verses about current topics, including the mundane subject of losing his car keys. Then two clowns performed, followed by popular songs. On some nights a comic melodramatic play was added about a jealous husband who shot his wife, which featured a male doctor as the hero. As a high status professional, the doctor spoke the central Thai dialect, while the southern dialect was spoken by the more common characters, Ginsburg said. Although differing greatly from a

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117 I am estimating the date of this ceremony because it is not included in the paper. Ginsburg interviewed *nora* players in 1969 and submitted his dissertation in 1971.
village nora ritual, this big time public event in Bangkok was still tied to southern identity through dialect and humor and connected to Buddhism and the ancestors through the particularly southern ceremony of the Tenth Month.

The show that Ginsburg described more than 30 years ago had many similarities to two performances I saw more recently in Pattani and Songkhla. The shows in the early 21st century now display more elaborate theater settings, feature Western showgirl acts, and blast out up-to-date music. One of the most successful modern southern troupe today is owned by Nora Somphong Chanabaan whose group is named Manora Somphong Noi Daao Rung (Little Somphong Morning Star). He has been performing for nearly 40 years, combining nora dancing with modern pop concerts. Nora Somphong described his traveling show in 2003 as business nora: “When I go to perform at the cultural fairs at Maw Aw (PSU, Pattani), it is the adapted nora. We call it business or business nora (nora thuragit).” This type of program contrasts with the annual ritual roong khruu, which he organizes at Wat Thakhae.

Traveling throughout the southern provinces all year, Nora Somphong employs 70 mostly youthful dancers to perform on an elaborate outdoor stage under a huge replica of a gold nora crown. The free evening's entertainment at the Art and Culture Show of Prince of PSU, Pattani in July 2001 began with dancers in elaborate nora costumes, which appealed to the older audience. Humorous skits and soap opera stories were performed by senior nora actors. Then in a rather startling switch of character, the dancers changed costumes to Las Vegas style headdresses, gowns, and slick suits for the modern concert, which attracted the youth. Changing clothes more than ten times, the dancers appeared as elegant pastel butterflies and as colonial ladies in red hooped gowns
with long red net gloves, to name a few styles. Musicians played horns, electric guitars, Western drums, and keyboard. Because Nora Somphong believes strongly in his nora ancestors, he did not neglect to set up an offering table and honor the teachers (wai khruu) each night. Hidden under the stage was the offering table with candles, incense, and a picture of a statue of founder Khun Sii Satthaa. Because this was entertainment nora, the ritual was a private affair for the performers out of the audience’s sight.

The following year, Nora Somphong put on a show at Rajabhat Institute Songkhla before about 1500 people sitting on the ground. The audience was mostly in the 30 to 50 age group, equally divided between men and women. Long banners on both sides of the stage displayed painted red-and-brown bottles of Coca-cola and other ads promoted a taped music company. After the young dancers performed, seasoned nora men and women in their 50s to 60s commanded the microphones to sing and deliver bawdy punch lines. But they also repeatedly urged the audience not to abandon traditional nora. An older female performer joked that there were no real men in the troupe only transvestites. Another performer hawked a medicine called Vitamin Ruam: “It can treat you if you hurt your waist, if you cannot sleep, have heart disease, urinary infections. It can nourish your brain and add more ability when you have sex. You should eat two pills in the morning and two in the evening. You can buy one pill for two baht with ten pills in a pack.” A man walked through the crowd with a plastic bag handing out pills and collecting money. Near midnight, actors in modern dress, including Nora Somphong’s wife Jindaa, performed a soap opera style skit about a love triangle involving a mother and daughter who loved the same abusive man.
Analyzing these performances from the 1960s to today, one can see that the trend is for commercially successful groups to use big name performers and impressive stage productions while reducing ritual, traditional dance, and verse. At these same fairs, there are also smaller nora companies who maintain the long invocations to the spirits, traditional instruments, and the musician’s chorus but in shortened performances.

However, to attract the larger audiences, many productions have turned to modern styles. In a lecture on the history of nora and shadow puppets around Songkhla Lake in 2003, Pittaya said:

*Nang talung* and *nooraa* didn’t stand still. They had to change because life changed. The academics have ideas for *nang talung* and *nooraa* to do like this and like that. Academics want them to be the same as before and preserve the ancient ways. How can they earn money when there is no audience? They have to change the process by following their own way. They will search for the modern way. If they think it is modern, they will choose that way.

Scholar Prayat from Nakhon Si Thammarat Teacher’s Institute wrote that, “Nora performance today is like a kind of business which people have as an occupation. They have to get enough money to support their lives” (1995: 168). While he said troupes have to modernize for survival, he also praised primary and secondary schools and colleges for hiring famous nora performers to preserve the art. *Nora* must adapt, according to Saruup Ritchuu, executive secretary of the Phatthalung Cultural Center: “Nowadays, concerts have influenced the society very much. So if this kind of entertainment [*nora*] is fixed, it will disappear.” She added, “*Nora* thrived in the time before concerts came here. Concerts can chase *nora* and *nang talung* away. So *nang talung* and *nora* have to adapt the performance by using concerts in the performance.” But this pressure is not just on the big stage productions at fairs. Village rituals have to adapt to modern times too, she
said. People are working outside the village and have less time to attend three-day rituals. As discussed in Chapter 2, cost is another limiting factor. Sompoch explained in a 2001 interview at PSU, Pattani, “The rituals in the roong khruu ceremony are shortened. In the past, the ceremony lasted for three days. But now it is shortened to one or two days. This is involved with the economy because the three-day ceremony is costly.”

In conclusion, many rural agriculturalists support the discourse on preserving traditional nora. They have seen great changes in their communities due to industrialization and globalization and express need for ancestral guidance in the face of this perceived loss of community. Those promoting modern nora have found ways to appeal to older and younger generations and to provide culture for consumption with flashy song and dance. Another representation of this discourse on the traditional and modern was a soap opera.

“Nora:” The Soap Opera

While attending a nora ceremony in Phatthalung Province in 2001, I heard a rumor that actors from a soap opera featuring nora might come to the ceremony. Called appropriately “Nora,” the TV show was set in Nakhon Si Thammarat, considered another early home of the drama. Each show began with introductory movie clips of well-known landmarks to conjure up southern identity. The clips were of a famous chedi at the royal Wat Phra Mahaathaat in Nakhon Si Thammarat, where nora was performed for a Buddha relic ceremony early in the 20th century, and a popular bird sanctuary called Talae Noi in

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118 Dowsey-Magog (2002) described similar changes in the shadow puppet play. Advertisements from sponsors are now displayed on the puppetry screen, and electronic music has been added. Audiocassettes with modern music are important for training new puppet players and are widely available in music stores in the south. (Audio tapes of nora singing are also widely sold and played at public events. VCDs of the most famous players are now available at fairs.) Puppet groups are hired by promoters to perform at large fairs. Therefore, rural puppetry has changed from being an activity of poor farmers to a city event with larger audiences. Puppetry is “a major business for some performers” (Dowsey-Magog 2002: 11).
Phatthalung Province. Also shown were short shots of an elderly nora man dancing.

Although a respected artist, this nora performer had no role in the program itself. That day, the actors never arrived, but I avidly watched the show that year and its re-run the following year because of its interplay of nora, media, and modernity.

Thailand has five television networks, all government owned, and evening soap operas are popular fare on many of them. Nora was broadcast on Channel 7 owned by the military on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings for two hours from 8:20 to 10:20 pm. Soaps generally run for two to three months. This was a good time slot guaranteed to get many viewers, although I was not able to obtain statistics on the audience. The typical soap audience is mostly women ranging in age from teenagers to the elderly, who view at home, restaurants, and food courts nightly. Ridiculously melodramatic and spiced with gangsters, ghosts, and love triangles, soap operas are gently disparaged in the press, literally called dirty water plays (lakhon nam nao) (Van Fleet 1998). But the better shows are well-liked, discussed among their loyal audiences, and reviewed in the newspapers.

The Nora show is relevant to this study in two ways. First, the TV drama was a point of pride for people in the south since it highlighted their art form and place. It is unusual to have soaps about people in the provinces and about the less privileged. In contrast, many shows are about rich people living in Bangkok in mansions or about the elite in historical period pieces, often played by part-Chinese or part-Western Thais. This separation between rich and poor, urban and rural dwellers, and modern and traditional in Thai society has become stereotyped into “racial” characteristics defined by features and skin color. Dark skin is associated with poor farmers who work in fields, and white skin is identified with Western or Chinese heritage and success in business (Jeffrey 2002: 191
Southerners are considered darker. Second, the play is important because it highlighted a conflict between ancient and modern nora. The Nora show had many of the standard soap opera elements – jealousy, kidnapping of the mother, an evil minor wife, a jailed father, mistaken parental identity, rape, a car accident, an acid throwing gang, and a happy ending. But it was considered a cut above the rest because it featured a debate on traditional versus modern values and lifestyle.

The pivotal scene occurs when the nora master is performing on stage to a rowdy audience including young men who have been drinking. The men demand to see modern nora with young attractive women and electronic music, but the master insists on preserving the older, southern culture. Someone in the audience throws an object, knocking down the master. Then during a fight in the crowd, a knife is thrown, but a man ducks, and it accidentally hits the master. His daughter, who is in the process of getting married elsewhere at the time, learns about his injury and rushes to the stage. She is a nora teacher herself who instructs mostly girls and young women. While her father lies injured, the daughter carries on the show by dancing while crying profusely. Older women in the audience urge her to continue the tradition. At the close of the dance, she prostrates herself at her father’s feet as he dies. She promises to preserve the ancient ways in his stead.

The soap opera symbolized the conflict between traditional values embodied in the nora community and the corrupt young men, who represented modern and Western

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119 Commenting on the unusually successful TV career of a southern woman, Bangkok Post reporter Alongkorn Parivudhiphongs stated, “She’s the youngest of four children of a Narathiwat native from whom she inherited the darker skin and Southern facial features which distinguish her from the majority of leading ladies on the circuit at the moment; they, for the most part, are of Sino-Thai or Thai-Caucasian extraction” (Bangkok Post, 12 January 2005).
influences. Modernity literally kills all that is good in Thai traditional families. The savior is the “dutiful daughter” (Mills 1999), who will not let her father and the ancestors down. The plot also illustrated a continuing core value of youth today: the feeling of duty “...to pay parents back for all they have done to raise them” (Wallace 1996: 3). The play illustrated changes in the nora genre. For instance, women are more and more taking over the performance and leadership of nora while elder masters retire without male replacements. Most nora dance teachers are women who train girls in the art. Also the soap opera is a fitting venue for this message directed toward women because it is a particularly female form of entertainment and expression. As anthropologist Sara Van Fleet wrote, “The world of lakhon (soap operas) is a world of desire, longing, and suffering. It is a world in which women, in particular, suffer, and in which they must come to terms with the past, struggle for agency, seek true love, and decide their own fate” (1998: 5).

In this Nora soap, the daughter heroically stands up for the past and the importance of family and rural traditions. In this role, she embodies the discourse in which females are commonly equated with the traditional and domestic while men are connected with the modern and public.\textsuperscript{120} Anthropologist Carla Freeman (2001) argued that this dualism has been extended to new globalization theory in which the local is defined as feminine and the global as masculine. The Nora soap opera reflected this discourse that places women within constructions of the family and the traditional past.

\textsuperscript{120 A similar dichotomy existed in Malaysian factories, where anthropologist Aihwa Ong (1987: 220) found that village elders and factory managers supervised women to keep them within the bounds of traditional morals.}
Schools Promote Local Heritage

Although nora’s demise has been forecast many times, the drama appears to be making a comeback in the south largely due to colleges and cultural centers promoting it as local heritage. Scholar Arun Wetsuwan (1980) reported on a movement throughout the country to promote local culture over foreign culture, funded by banks, schools, and government. Arun wrote, “Local performances are part of the arts and culture that show the prosperity of each region. Some performances cannot be destroyed or replaced by those of foreign countries. For example, manooraa, which has been practiced for more than a century, is now the model to the chattri music play of the central region” (Arun 1980: 21-2). Colleges and private schools have included indigenous arts, such as nora, in the curriculum. Professors have attempted to preserve authentic, ancient-style performances, although sometimes modified for the tourist trade. This interest in saving local arts is partly a reaction to globalized Western culture. Voicing this viewpoint, the new permanent secretary of the Culture Ministry Khunying Dhipavadee Meksawan told the Bangkok Post, “We survived the economic crisis; now we are facing a social crisis. Thai children have absorbed Western culture and are overlooking our culture” (Bangkok Post, 20 Oct. 2004).

Dowsey-Magog (2002: 10) reported on an increase in government supported cultural centers in the south. These included the cultural center at Nakhon Si Thammarat Teachers College, the Institute for Southern Thai Studies in Songkhla Province, a cultural center at PSU, Pattani campus, and the Phatthalung Cultural Center. Nora was added earlier to the curriculum of the former Songkhla Teachers College, former Nakhon Si

121 Arun is making the point that nora (or manooraa) is important because it influenced central arts.
Thammarat Teachers College, and PSU (Arun 1980, Pittaya 2003). These colleges worked to both preserve and improve nora to appeal to modern audiences. The first generation of professional nora performers to graduate included the respected Nora Saaithipnoi Sanesin Group. The female leader is credited with combining the delicacy of female dancing with the quickness of male style. Although she employed country music, Nora Saaithipnoi successfully combined local and foreign elements and greatly influenced other groups (Pittaya 2003). In this case, this female nora was credited with blending elements of gender, and East and West.

A book on the history, identity, and knowledge of Songkhla Province (Committee for Compiling the Document 1999: 167) stated that educational institutions were teaching the dance, having competitions, and inviting senior nora leaders to teach. The book lauded the Queen for supporting the Southern Culture Protection Project through Rajabhat Institute Songkhla, which would bolster nora. “Therefore people are interested in nora more than before” (Committee for Compiling the Document 1999: 167). However, the author noted that it was difficult to find accomplished nora masters and groups with good reputations as in the past. Having listed the famous elderly leaders from each district in Songkhla Province, the author stated it was the “pride of Songkhla people” to have Nora Yok Chuubua chosen as a national artist.

The biography of Nora Phum Thewaa, described previously, illustrates that schools are tapping into the valuable skills of older performers to train the younger generation. Nora Phum Thewaa quit performing nora when he married into a prosperous family and returned to farming. For 20 years, he also served in local politics as a respected community representative. Then in 1974 at age 83, he was asked to teach at a
teachers' training school and subsequently taught at teachers colleges in Songkhla and Nakhon Si Thammarat. There he instructed more than one thousand students from many districts, including two famed nora masters who later performed for the government Tourism Authority of Thailand (Preecha 1980). Pittaya (2003) credited Nora Phum Thewaa's teaching with being a major factor in continuing the dance. Influenced by King Rama VI and central Siamese dance, his style became the standard for southern students, in a blending of central and southern dance forms.

In summary, as a tool of nationalism, educational institutions can promote or discourage selected representations of culture. Because it is part of the preservation of heritage movement, the nora genre has benefited and is being passed onto subsequent generations. But some question whether this so-called pure academic nora will be too pure to interest the general public (see Dowsey-Magog 2002).

**Cultural Objectification: Adapting Nora to Fit the Need**

As a cultural object of the south, nora has adapted to a variety of interest groups. Both nora and shadow puppetry are developing in several directions (on puppetry, see Dowsey-Magog 2002). First, as just illustrated, a more reified, supposedly authentic form is promoted by the government through educational institutions. Second, an earthy, trendy form has developed to appeal to modern public audiences. Third, as a popular symbol of the south, nora is tied into variety of other projects, as diverse as advertising, exercise, and politics.

To advance rural development, the government has used various local arts to promote projects and values such as Buddhist ethics, democracy, birth control, central Thai dialect, local products, and saving the environment. Using the arts for political
purposes is not new in the Kingdom. Under the military government of Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963), Thai classical dance productions were designed to welcome dignitaries, and several royal festivals were re-introduced to “...promote the prestige of the king, in order to win public approval and to create a sense of national unity” (Mattani 1996: 193). For nora to be included in these government social programs shows its iconic status, representing the positive aspects of being southern, I would argue.

Often a cleaner, more sanitized version of the arts is created to convey the government message. On puppetry, Dowsey-Magog reported that the shadow play has moved from a rural primitive art to “...a suitable moral vehicle for expressing and valorising the historic artistic tradition of the South” (2002: 10). In this process, Buddhist beliefs replace Brahmanic and Animistic rituals and the magical power of the performer. Puppetry, which is produced by colleges and shown on television, is cleaned up with more polite dialogue. Science is advocated over “superstition,” and the accepted political messages are conveyed, Dowsey-Magog argued. The result is a more bland, less dynamic art. “Most of the influences and changes suggested above are common problems with traditional performances all over the world. Many countries have difficulties in avoiding what has been called ‘invented traditions’, particularly when social values are rapidly changing,” wrote Dowsey-Magog (2002: 13, see Handler 1988, Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983). From conversations with southern academics, I would argue that these comments equally apply to the educational preservation of nora.

122 Ceremonies included the Royal Ploughing, Royal Kathin Procession using barges, and celebrations for the King such as the King’s Silver Jubilee. The King also promoted arts from the provinces by inviting dancers to perform for royalty and recording their shows on film (Mattani 1996: 193).

123 Handler provides an excellent discussion of folk dancing and other folklore as traditional “objects to be scrutinized, identified, revitalized, and consumed” in Quebec (1988: 12).
Like the shadow puppet show, nora groups are also used to advertise various political and social projects. For instance, the Asia Foundation in 2002 sponsored a project, which used nora to promote democratic activities such as voting in the south. A booklet and audio-cassette tape titled, “Nora For Democracy in Democratic Dissemination through a Folk Medium,” was produced by The Network of Women and Men for Human Rights at PSU, Hat Yai Campus. The booklet had a cover picture of nora performers, mostly women. The practical use of traditional arts is common in Thailand. Political campaigners in traditional likay drama costumes gave out brochures on city elections in Bangkok buses in 2002 (Bangkok Post, 10 June 2002). In another example, Srinakharinwirot University and the Rights and Liberty Protection Department announced a campaign in 2003 to hire hundreds of folk artists to perform in every province to educate the public on legal rights (Bangkok Post, 25 June 2003).

Nora is now part of popular culture through private schools, which teach dancing mostly to young girls. The public views this type of dancing as entertainment, rather than a ritual or religious experience. Dancing and acrobatics interest youth who like the costumes and postures. Although performing acrobatics has some basis in early dance styles and as an expression of a spirit medium’s powers (Ginsburg 1971: 18, Plowright 1998: 384), today these moves are taken out of the spiritual context. Elementary school girls sometimes dance provocatively in performances that resemble nora in name only. Although many nora performers criticize such desecrations, some suggest that nora’s amazing adaptability keeps it alive.

In another expansion of the art, a Rangsit University drama teacher is promoting it as exercise. As a southerner whose grandfather practiced nora, Thianchai is hoping to
boost the art though a new form of exercise called "nora-bic" for nora aerobics. The original nora dance positions were created by farmers as exercises for releasing the pains of working in the field and from climbing palm trees, he said. Then these exercises were combined with Indian dance styles to create the dance. Today, shaking for long periods and climbing the supporting poles of the stage in possession expend lots of energy. Especially for older people, the work-out is as good or better than yoga or Western aerobics, he argued (Thianchai 2003a). Financially supported by a government health foundation and working with Rajabhat Institute Songkhla, Thianchai has tried some classes and found that children like the steps. But the idea is less popular among the older set. He hopes to show that these indigenous movements are particularly well-suited to southern Thais; however the research is at a preliminary stage. Separate from his efforts, an exercise class in Nakhon Si Thammarat has started based on nora postures including "wai-ing the first Brahma with four faces."

And there have been some snags. To comply with exercise principles, some nora movements have to be changed slightly, possibly slowed down. But pride in the local art means change meets resistance, he reported. Thianchai said a northern dance using war drums (glawng sabat chai) has been successfully converted into exercise, so he has hopes for nora-bic (conversation Thianchai 2004). Thianchai is conscious of the debate that modernizing the art can destroy it, but he argues that some changes have to be made to attract youth.

A poster in my favorite chicken rice shop in Songkhla shows two pictures of a former Miss Thailand World beauty queen advertising Coca-Cola©. On the left she is dressed in nora costume, and on the right, she is in street clothes wearing
earphones and dancing to music. It states, “Being Thai also can be smart looking (sophisticated),” meaning Thais can be both traditional and modern. At the Songkhla Post Office, a government poster shows a young woman in nora costume selling local goods, under the development program called One Tambon (subdistrict) One Product (OTOP). Both posters display nubile women in colorful costumes. Although the nora clothes are modest, this advertising is similar to ads around the world in which women’s bodies are used to sell products.

As these posters and the previous examples show, nora is an adaptable symbol of southern identity that is removed from its rural foundations to be used by many interest groups for different purposes. This process was defined by Handler as “cultural objectification” (1988: 15). Culture is analyzed and certain traits are identified as coming from different locations. For instance, folk dancing, which is unique to a certain group, can be taken out of its context and inserted into another performance spectacle. Thus folk dancing as a thing in a new frame is represented as “authentic pieces of national culture” (1988: 16). A fragment of the performance is selectively preserved as authentic, but in the process, the culture is changed (1988: 51).

I argue that the nora image has become a cultural trait to be manipulated and consumed. Although older village men have reputations for being talented nora dancers and skilled in dealing with spirits, these advertisers have selected young pretty women to portray a message of traditional values mixed with modern lifestyle. This type of feminine, photogenic marketing takes the fangs out of the powerful image of middle aged men or women with legs and arms spread out in assertive, classical poses. This “nora
branding” also avoids the image of the supernaturally powerful older man outfitted in cross-gender attire wearing lipstick, beads, and long nails.\textsuperscript{124}

**Conclusion**

Centuries ago, when *nora* moved to the Kingdom’s capital, it developed into a new art form to serve different masters. Today it is also undergoing major changes but on its home turf. The performance is part of the national discourse about saving Thai traditions and resisting the foreign. This alliance is based on *nora’s* origin as an agriculturally based, propitiation ceremony, which has blended with Buddhism. In this historical journey, the genre moved from a marginal art form to iconic status representing Thai culture in the ethnically diverse south. The genre has also been modernized and select parts have been objectified to serve government and business advertising needs. The construction of *nora* as traditional or modern is certainly in flux and part of larger discourses. In understanding these perspectives, we must continually ask, “whose icon is this?” The next chapter explores another piece of historical change -- the constructions of gender in *nora*.

\textsuperscript{124} I want to thank my advisor anthropologist Christine Yano for suggesting this marketing perspective.
CHAPTER 4

A QUIET REVOLUTION: THE FEMINIZATION OF NORA

Introduction

Across the Songkhla Lake in southern Thailand, a village performance is underway on a small palm thatch and bamboo stage to show respect for ancestors. Betel nut offerings prepared, the performers start to sing the 12 ritual songs and spirit mediums enter into a state of possession, changing their everyday clothes into multi-colored beaded costumes with long, curved imitation fingernails. But a possessed woman takes center stage to make a strong demand: “All female nora please go out. Female nora cannot stay on the stage. Go out!” Her ancestor spirit is the respected mother of nora dance, Mae Sii Maa Laa. Most the women performers leave, but one stubbornly refuses to budge, silently lying on the stage facing east. Her name is Nora Oamjid Jarernsin (NOJ) of Phatthalung Province, and she is the leader of her own dance troupe. Nora Oamjcid retold the episode at a nora competition in August 2003 to university lecturer Thianchai, his mother Narin Isaradej (NI), and myself (MG).

NOJ I was like a half crazy person.
NI Like you didn’t fear anybody?
NOJ No, I did not! The reason is that I thought that the possessed person also was a woman. Mae Sii Maa Laa also is a woman. I am a female nora [performer]. Why do they have to drive me out? So, I didn’t go out. But I didn’t say anything. Other people went out of the stage....She [the spirit of Mae Sii Maa Laa] pointed at me and said, “Get up! Get up! How can you lay in the nora stage? You are a female. You cannot stay in the nora stage.” I smiled and didn’t say anything. She spoke like this many times...Then she said, “If you don’t go, I will slap your face.” When I heard that word she was standing up, but I was sitting on the floor.

125 The term feminization means an increase in women’s involvement at various levels.

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And I said, "If you doubt me and you think you are very smart, you can slap my face. But I will slap the ancestor back and knock you down."...The event happened like this. Everybody could hear me. I was really going to slap the ancestor back. I won't lie...I stood up and she stood up too. I caught the ancestor's hand and pulled her to go to the mat in front of the stage, and I let her sit down on the white cloth. And I sat down also. There was only one woman left in the stage -- that was I. And she wanted me to go out.

Many people crowded around. They filled up the area around the stage because they wanted to see a nora fight with the ancestor. Then I got the microphone and spoke: "Everybody, please don't crowd around because you could faint and maybe die. Please sit down and be calm. At this point, I want to know what the name of the ancestor is and if the spirit medium of the ancestor is a man or not. If the spirit medium is a man, I will pay for this ceremony. The owner of this house doesn't have to pay. I will pay for this ceremony. It is around 30,000B (US $714). Then you [indicating the other medium] have to be possessed without clothes. I don't have to take my clothes off because I'm a woman."

She could not fight me with words, so she lost. She cannot beat me because she has to take her clothes off when she is possessed...In fact the spirit medium is female, but she tries to drive me, a female, out. No man gives birth. Only women give birth. Have you ever heard that men give birth?

After this brazen confrontation, the other female performers returned to the stage.

Nora Oamjid had dramatically won her point -- that a woman could not take on the androcentric role of a man and exclude other women from the inner sanctum of the stage.

This analogous incident reflects the gender transition from male to female prominence in the nora performance, which has been occurring largely undocumented over the past few decades. Once considered a supremely masculine magical art (Ginsburg 1972), this ritual dance-drama is becoming a strong base for women's religious expression. Nora, most likely based on Hindu-Brahmanism (Pittaya 2003, Udom 1999b), historically was structured as a patrilineal descent system. Men with nora spirits trained their sons and other male offspring, and on death passed the spirits to them. With this population of
masters aging, few young men in modern Thai culture are willing to give up more secure and lucrative positions to follow the religious occupation (see Johnson 1999).

There has long been speculation that ritual nora would die out (Pittaya 2003). Instead, breaks in the male succession line have opened new opportunities for women leaders to inject fresh energy into the tradition. However, this change is a complicated negotiated dynamic between powerful men and women in which men continue to hold a significant place. Nora women work within the established patrilineal system as “good women,” acting as proper mothers and daughters, rather than challenging Thai gender ideology (see Packard-Winkler 1998: 87).

Although nora is on the periphery of Theravada Buddhism and the nation-state, this transition to greater female involvement has wider implications for the country as a whole. First, nora has a noteworthy place as the oldest Thai drama and as a southern cultural symbol. And second, nora women exist within the context of several groups of religious women who are gaining status and space within and outside of Buddhism. These include female meditation masters (J. Van Esterik 1996), lower-ranked nuns in all-female nunneries (Chatsumarn 1991), and professional spirit mediums (Irvine 1982). Although many monks and participants say that nora is not actually a Buddhist ritual, it is closely linked to that religion in practice. In relation to women in nora, Buddhist doctrine is used to block women from becoming leaders. However, women who control their own troupes are confronting these gender restrictions in rather subtle ways and finding inventive ways around them.

Gendered meanings are being contested within nora communities mirroring similar contestations of femininity in the national discourse. As the following discussion
shows, gender intersects with religion, power, family, class, and history, which are all gendered concepts. The gendered history of nora starts with the legend of its founder. Although male leaders honor a male founder, some women are elevating the status of the mother of nora.

**Royal Female Spirit Mediums**

As described previously, the nora performance is based on two early legends, both of which significantly feature strong heroines of royal blood associated with spirits. Several scholars suggest that these tales – the Phatthalung Legend and the Suthon-Manora Story – are based on early female spirit mediums. Brandon wrote that these myths, “…may be evidence that nora was originally a male performance form that evolved from female-spirit-medium dances of divination” (Brandon 1993: 235). Plowright (1998) argued that the nora performance was founded by female spirit mediums with powers to cure.

Illustrating the connection to mediumship, the Phatthalung Legend tells that Mae Sii Maa Laa was sent away for dancing excessively, which has been interpreted by some academics to mean in a possessed trance. As a virgin, she gave birth to a child who probably was a reincarnation of a Hindu deity. Of course, there are similarities to the virginal birth of Mary, the mother of Jesus in Christianity. For instance, a heavenly being, called the Holy Spirit or arch-angel Gabriel, impregnated Mary.\(^{126}\) I found many other commonalities between Mary and Mae Sii Maa Laa.\(^{127}\) For instance, cults to Mary are often associated with water, such as springs or rivers. Mae Sii Maa Laa is born on water

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\(^{126}\) According to Islamic teachings, Allah revealed himself to the prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel.

\(^{127}\) The British Broadcasting Corporation aired a radio program on Mary cults on Sunday June 27, 2004 in the "In Search of God" series, which provided this information.
and exiled on water. As an ordinary person, Mary served as an intermediary between the
august gods and the human world. Mae Sii Maa Laa exhibits many of these goddess
qualities as a loving mother with healing abilities who is a conduit for the spirits. A
similar role is played by the Goddess Guan Im, also associated with water, who has a
growing following among Thai-Chinese.

Significantly, nora followers today interpret the Phatthalung Legend to mean
Khun Sii Satthaa is the founder of nora rather than his mother. Although angels inspired
the mother and created the dance and instruments, the nora community at Wat Thakhae
gave the highest honors to her son. A statue of him in costume was erected there in 2001
and a new shrine built in 2005. Thais living in Kedah State, Malaysia also perform nora.
But the Kedah legend reports that Mae Sii Maa Laa was inspired by an angel on the
island and returned to her father's kingdom to rid it of disease through performing. In this
version, she becomes the heroine and founder. Her father gives part of the kingdom to
her, and she does not have a son (Yousof 1982). In Phatthalung also there are two
versions of the original roong khruu with different emphasis on male and female roles. In
the most widely accepted one, the Phatthalung king held the ceremony to thank the spirits
when his grandson returned. But in another account, the first roong khruu was actually
enacted by the king's daughter to show respect to an elderly couple as adoptive
grandparents who had taken care of her on the island. In fact, the couple had been created
by angels, and the dance was to thank the heavenly ancestors (Pittaya 1995). But as this
second version has less cache in the south, the honor for creating the genre goes to the
king and his grandson, diminishing the female role.
Nevertheless, some revisionist thinking has begun to appear which gives more status to the women in the story. I have heard some female *nora* performers describe Mae Sii Maa Laa as the originator of the dance-drama instead of her son. A lay Buddhist woman at Wat Khian emphatically stated that Mae Sii Maa Laa is the founder of *nora*. And at Wat Thaa Khura, Jao Mae Yu Hua (or Mae Sii Maa Laa) is celebrated annually by hundreds of people who consider her powerful in granting wishes (see Chapter 3). Therefore, these contrasting male and female versions of the founding tale indicate that the role of the princess may have changed from earlier times. Today a few voices argue for the prominence of the founding mother, but the official legend described in scholarly texts and by *nora* leaders silences other versions.

**The Inclusion of Women for Beauty**

Women joined the performance to play female roles and attract audiences in the 1920s to 1930s (see Chapter 3). Pittaya (interview 2004) noted the increased participation of women in both ritual and entertainment *nora*. He said this is due to contemporary changes in cultural values from Bangkok, where women have been successful in many professions including acting. “The interest in their faces and bodies can attract people more than *nora* men who aren’t good looking. Men have an ability in dancing, but for performing a story and singing songs nowadays, women can do it better.” There have been some beautiful and talented *nora* women who served as role models, he added.

Changes in the costumes also reflect the inclusion of women. In the beginning, only men performed, so the dancing styles and costumes had male characteristics, and men held the highest positions, according to lecturer Somphoch of PSU, Pattani. Apparently at one time the male and female costumes were more distinct from each
other. Certain apparel was considered part of the king’s costume, appropriate only for men. Women dancers wore colored cloth around their heads rather than the insignia gold crown. But today women wear an identical crown (Suthiwong 1999). Although the men’s dress is considered more complete with full rank (tem yot), the costumes look identical to the average observer today. I maintain that this uniform dress makes it easier for women to move into male roles.

In southern performances, old women attract audiences as well as young women. Older women get the audiences laughing with boisterous comedy acts filled with sexual innuendo, delivered in raspy, distinctly southern voices. Some flirt with musicians and take sips of a popular energy drink high in caffeine, to the enjoyment of audiences. The nora role for men has long mixed power with sexuality. Now as mature women move into leadership positions, they also exude some of this potent power, although restrained.

In general, Thai dance is strongly gendered female. From kindergarten to secondary school, parents and teachers of young girls encourage them to make-up heavily (often done professionally) and dress in elaborate adult-like costumes to perform publicly at school events, fairs, and contests. It is not unusual to see small children in net gloves, nylons, and mini skirts or outfitted like ancient Siamese princesses.

I have seen performances called nora, but the costumes, music, and steps seemed to bear no relationship to the genre. A better description might be “nora rock.” Although nora families respect the dance as a spiritual art, commercial nora dance classes are largely divorced from the ritual side. At the end of an annual parade for the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist foundation Tong Sia Siang Teung in Hat Yai in 2002, I watched a group of girls dancing modern nora. In front of Lee Gardens Hotel Plaza under the
McDonald's sign, organizers had erected a stage next to a large table of offerings to Chinese Mahayana deities. The audience numbered about 500, mostly from Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. At major Thai-Chinese religious festivals in the south, groups of primary school students perform dances and play instruments under the guidance of their teachers. The first two groups were girls about six to ten-years-old who wore gold and black costumes and danced to fast pop music imitating adult female singers. Then came the nora group of girls about ten years of age, who wore skin-colored tights and beaded costumes with tails. Strings of gold beads bounced from their waists as they danced rapidly to loud music and performed acrobatics, bending backward to stand on their hands. Such modernized dance classes have introduced thousands of girls to the drama and provided teaching jobs for nora women. On the other hand, nora classes can be viewed as a negative influence, launching more girls into the performing beauty culture, sometimes described as the "chorus line" (Mills 1999).

**From Male to Female Prominence**

Museum representations of nora show male images at the Institute for Southern Thai Studies (described in Chapter 3). A sign describes the nora crowning ceremony as a male rite of passage that entitles a performer to enact rituals. To qualify a man must be a skilled apprentice and "...a bachelor and at least 20 years of age." The photograph shows two older men putting a crown on a young man's head. Although the folk museum has no photographs or statues of nora women, they do exist. The Encyclopedia of Thai Culture: Southern Region (Udom 1999a) has a short story on Nora Ganya Naattarat, born in Nakhon Si Thammarat in 1945. Her father and siblings were all nora performers. When she was 16 years of age, her father crowned her and later made her a main character in
his troupe. Rising in prominence, she formed her own troupe, danced at the Bangkok National Theater, and appeared on television. Now she is passing her skills to her two daughters. Her history illustrates the trend for fathers to train nora daughters who then transmit the knowledge to female descendants.

**Women Dominate as Participants.** From my brief encounter with the representation of nora at the museum, I had expected to see mostly male performers at the 40th annual roong khruu in 2001 at Wat Thakhae. But, in fact, the initiated nora performers in costumes and the spirit mediums were mostly women. Counting these two types of participants inside the stage during the three-day ceremony, about 20% of them were men and 80% were women. Men still held the major ritual roles. Three male nora leaders ran the ceremony and controlled the microphone for announcements and singing poetry. Also the first dance to pay respect to nora masters was performed by a man because it is believed that the spirits demand it (Patise 2004: 17). The musicians were men who act as the chorus, repeating back verses.

Women were very active in each ritual, holding key roles, but were guided by male leaders. For example, two men and 12 women (86%) performed an important beginning ritual called “setting up the town.” A “teacher respecting” ritual consisted of two men and 18 women (90%). During one large ritual, 62 people filled the stage; ten were men and 52 were women (84%). The last day, the “stabbing the crocodile” ritual had seven men and nine women (56%). The final prayers to say farewell to the ancestors involved three men and ten women (77%).

An illustration of women’s involvement could be seen in the “stabbing the crocodile” ritual at the Nora Plaeg Chanabaan home in 2003. The youngest daughter,
Khun Sujin Chanabaan, with the assistance of another woman did the ceremony to sanctify the crocodile before the stabbing ritual. When the actual ritual was held later, a nora man attacked first, but the men were outnumbered by women carrying spears.

At Wat Thakhae, female spirit mediums dominated the small but important shrine room built in 1971 to honor Khun Sii Sattha. I thought of this as “spirit medium central” because mediums slept, drank, ate, gave respect to the ancestors, and went into possession here. They dressed distinctively in white or yellow blouses and traditional pants with a scarf (sabai) over one shoulder. Typically, the spirit would arrive unexpectedly in the body of a middle aged female medium. She would go into quick convulsions and then dance in a sedate and stylized manner across the grounds to the stage. Younger mediums, both female and male, tended to be more violent, sometimes climbing the high outside supports of the platform to enter the stage. In roong khruu ceremonies held from 2001 to 2005, the mediums in this shrine were primarily female — about 25 percent were male and 75 percent female. The mediums were mostly older, from 50 to 75 years of age, along with a few in their early twenties. Meanwhile, the audience was more evenly divided between men and women. About 200 to 500 people of all ages attended, including many children, as well as teenage boys and girls in separate small clusters.

The increased participation by women could also be seen at an unusual nora competition at Rajabhat Institute Songkhla in August 2003. Although in the past, nora groups held intense competitions with high stakes and reputedly employed black magic (Ginsburg 1971), this “folk music” competition was sponsored for the first time by the government’s National Cultural Office. Competitions were held in five regions across the
country. According to the event booklet, Thai folk music was "...a precious property which originated from the ancestors’ wisdom and had been transferred over several centuries." But the committee observed that the public was losing interest in this music, particularly the youth who favored international or Western music. This situation could affect both national pride and stability, the committee warned (Office of the National Cultural Committee 2003: 1).

*Nora* was selected as the music genre for the south. Each of the 14 southern provinces was asked to send one group. Honored national artist Nora Yok Chuubua of Ranot was a judge and the guest speaker. Indicating the seriousness of the event, the top championship prize was a hefty 20,000B (US $476). Of the 11 groups that attended, six of the leaders were female, four were male, and the last group was led by a couple. Females dominated the position of singer-dancer with 76% being girls or women. The position of musician was clearly gendered male with 92% being boys or men. I asked a student in the audience why the musicians were male, and she said because men have the strength to beat the drum loudly. Rajabhat dance teacher and *nora* performer Thammanit Nikhawmrat said that *nora* dance classes are quite popular now, drawing about 40 students, usually 75% female. The government officials and judges were all men. When it came to giving the five awards, four prizes went to groups with women leaders and one went to the couple. Female Nora Lamai Sreruksa of the Nora Lamaisilp Group of Songkhla Province won the championship and Nora Oamjid was second runner-up. Although female leaders dramatically swept the honors, Thammanit later said that this kind of competition tends to be for entertainment, while performing deep rituals requires men with religious knowledge derived from the monkhood. This is a common cultural
belief. However nora women were viewed in this competition, it gave them a bully pulpit to address the audience on topical issues of drug abuse, nature conservation, and patriotism in poetic song.

In another gauge of women’s involvement, I looked at the sex of the spirit and the medium. I found a trend for more possession by female spirits. In Thai mediumship generally, including nora, male and female spirits can possess humans of either sex. However, male spirits more commonly possess male mediums.128 In contrast, there has been a notable tendency for women to be possessed by authoritative and elite males such as deceased Siamese kings, nobles, and Buddhist religious figures (Morris 1994a). For a lower class woman, this cross-gender possession causes a reversal of her status when her body is used by an authoritative wealthy male. From his research in Chiang Mai, Irvine argued that this female identification with potent male spirits is a “...real incursion into the monastery-centered masculine stronghold of supernatural power” and warned women to be careful (Irvine 1984: 318).

But today, I maintain that there has been an increase in powerful, respected female spirits who are possessing female mediums in Thailand, thereby making female-to-female possession a more status enhancing experience. Among the well-known goddesses are Chinese Guan Im, Chinese Lim Ko Niau, Indian Uma Devi, Thai Queen Suriothai, Thai Thao Suranari, and northern Thai Mon Goddess Queen Chamathewi (Keyes 2002, Morris 1994b). Nora goddesses are also becoming better known in the south. The youngest daughter of the late Nora Plaeg said that more women are possessed

128 Female spirits in the south, particularly the Goddess Guan Im, possess a small number of men. Morris (1994b) wrote of many male transvestite spirit mediums in Chiang Mai and Lamphun who were possessed by Goddess Queen Chamathewi.
in nora because there are more female ancestor spirits from the Phatthalung Legend, such as the king's daughter and her assistants. She said, "Most of the ancestors are women." I would suggest that while the Phatthalung Legend has male and female figures, possession today by female spirits is more empowering than in the past.

Women as Troupe Leaders and Owners. The Wat Thakhae ceremony illustrates the involvement of women as participants in nora, but how many women have moved into leadership positions? Nora Chalerms Gaew Pim estimated that there were 100 groups in the south, and that about 30 of them had female leaders. Being a leader means the person owns and runs the troupe, which is named after her or him and is identified with that person's hometown. But Nora Oamjid put the figure much lower. During the interview described at the beginning of this chapter, she said that about 10% of the groups are owned by women, but that only 3% of these women know the ritual of roong khruu, the poetry, and all aspects of the drama. Thianchai Isaradej (TI) asked her about women's increasing roles as nora leaders.

NOJ It depends on the ability of individuals. Anyone who has ability to administer it can.

TI You mean before women didn't have ability?

NOJ It is not because women didn't have the ability. This is my feeling. I think that men didn't give women a chance. This is my deep feeling. For people in past times, when they did anything, women could not be leaders. They would let men be the leaders. But later I think our women had abilities too... I think it depends on changes in society. Later in society women could be village leaders, could be chiefs of a subdistrict, could be musicians or they could be presidents or director-generals of government departments. Common people could be leaders in that situation, so they also could be leaders of culture and be artists.29

29 In 1982, the law was changed to allow women to be village chiefs or subdistrict officials. The first woman was appointed province governor in 1993 (Darunee and Pandey 1996). The Bangkok Post reported in 2003 that women were 11% of district officials, 2% of subdistricts officials, and 2% of village chiefs (Sanitsuda. Bangkok Post, 8 March 2003).
Some elderly nora masters are giving that chance to their daughters as well as sons. The death of Nora Plaeg in 2001 and the roles of his strong daughters and granddaughters demonstrate how women are filling the void, shifting from the periphery to the center. In 2003, I asked Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter, aged 53, what she thought of more women being involved in nora. She said, “It depends on the head of the group. For my father’s group, there were not a lot of women. He didn’t like women. He liked only men. When women came to him, he didn’t touch them. He told other people to touch them when he did the initiation ceremony because he didn’t like women.” She was describing Nora Plaeg’s belief that only men should perform ritual roles and that nora men are similar to monks in their purity, which might be violated by touching a woman. She said that the current performance held at her home has more women now because she runs it.

The opening story in Chapter 1 about the ailing Nora Plaeg in 2001 illustrates how women are assuming leadership roles even in the face of modern developments that tear at the fabric of kinship-based villages. At that last ceremony, his daughter Sujin, 38, took a commanding role. She had been possessed since age 24 by a principal female spirit from the Phatthalung Legend, Mae Khaenawn. This strong willed spirit had been passed down the female line from her grandmother. In a loud voice and waving her arms, she told the followers: “All of the sacred spirits come here to give respect to Khun Satthaa. But both bad and good spirits will come together. I would like to tell you that, if my father cannot do the ceremony, I could do it by myself. But if father can find another person to do it, that is fine.” And certainly the daughter’s spirit was authoritative that day and instrumental in making the ceremony a success. Some observers have noted that
southern women act more aggressively and use stronger language when possessed by either male or female spirits.

After that Nora Plaeg passed away, prompting a split in the nora families of that village between a progressive, development oriented nora leader and the more local, low-key Chanabaan family. They differed over issues of profits, control of the ceremony, and what constituted tradition. So by 2003, the Chanabaan daughters broke away from monastery event and sponsored a family roong khruu at their home, within earshot of a larger nora fair at Wat Thakhae. That May day, three women sat huddled together locked in an intense debate on the floor of the stage in stifling heat. Fifty other people – older female mediums dressed in white, performers in beaded costumes, and young male musicians – surrounded them. Two of the women were daughters of Nora Plaeg. The oldest daughter smoked a hand-rolled cigarette and poured water down her blouse. Appearing to be tipsy, she was in fact possessed. Also possessed, her sister Sujin angrily pointed her finger and made demands. Inside their bodies were paternal and maternal spirits having a spat over whether to extend the ceremony an extra day. The possessing spirit of Poo Dam (Great-grandfather Black) slapped his knees and the spirit of Mae Khaenawn yelled in disagreement. The emotional scene was punctuated by crying, yelling, and hugging. A third woman, Nora Oamjid, faced them calmly with her right arm raised to broker a peace. The spirits were fearful that their descendants would abandon them, while the descendants wanted to go home early to return to their busy modern lives. Finally, it was decided. Mae Khaenawn said, “We will finish the ceremony today so that our descendants won’t be busy and bothered. They can go back to do their careers.”
In the background, their older brother Nora Jop, the leader of the ceremony, rocked back and forth in a trance, possessed by the spirit of his father, Nora Plaeg. He contributed a few comments but clearly, for this negotiation, the three women under the power of their spirits were in command. Within the stage, 80% of the participants were women. While the topic appeared to be a rather mundane, housekeeping matter––whether to end one day early, it was symbolically important. The spirits expressed deep anguish in their tears that the family might drift apart. Also, they held an awesome power to punish disobedient descendants. Finally the spirits acquiesced to end the ceremony early. Soon the brother would return to his life as a farmer and nora performer in Malaysia, leaving the adult daughters to care for their father’s shrine. While the daughters filled dominant roles for this communication with the ancestors, the principal performer or big nora of the Chanabaan annual ceremony would remain a male descendant.

Although women are fulfilling these ritual roles more and more, as illustrated, they confront ingrained cultural beliefs that women should limit their public presentations and remain the so-called back legs of the elephant. Historian Saruup (interview 2001) pointed out that some women were historically held in high regard in the south as heroines. She cited the story of two sisters who fought the Burmese in the Phuket area, Thao Thepkasattri and Thao Si Sunthon, and the legend of Lady White Blood (Gesick 1995, Munro-Hay 2001). Yet this is not the reality today. She said:

In Phatthalung, it seems that men have higher status than women [do], but women are the supporters of men. Some people did research on women’s roles in the elections in Phatthalung, Songkhla, and Trang. The result was that women influence decisions in the families, but men still have the superior status in society. This is the same as in nora. Men have to be the leaders because Thai

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130 This is a common Thai saying, similar to the Western saying that behind every successful man, you will find a woman (see Jawanit Kittitornkool 2000).
society believes in the men’s role....It is related to Thai culture, that women are the back legs of the elephant.

In a similar vein, drama lecturer Sompoch said, “The leaders of the nora groups are men....The belief is that men have to be the leaders of the ceremony because men are more effective [get results] in the ceremonies for fulfilling the vows. There are also nora women but they are not as popular as men.” This concept of male effectiveness is also reflected in a cultural belief that men are better in the public sphere of politics, more able to make quick, hard decisions (Packard-Winkler 1998: 99).

Female Ancestral Animism and Arrival of World Religions. I maintain that the nora genre should be understood in the larger historical world context of female mysticism and the development of patriarchy. Before the advent of Christianity in the West, mysticism demonstrated that spiritual knowledge could come from personal revelations and could be experienced by under-educated women (Lerner 1993). In times of societal change during the early era of Christianity, female mystics increased in numbers, thriving as small, scattered groups distinct from patriarchal religious hierarchies. “Since women were forbidden the practice of the priesthood and of most public roles, with the exception of nursing the sick, it is not surprising that they expressed their religious experience in these more private mystical forms,” according to historian Gerda Lerner (1993: 72). Today female nora performers, who are also increasing in the rapidly changing post-modern era, have much in common with these early mystics.

The history of women’s involvement in ancestral religions may have come full circle in southern Thailand. In several Asian countries, academics have reported that women probably predominated as spiritual leaders in prehistory, lost those positions with
the advent of male-controlled world religions, and are now gaining leadership roles again under the new religious diversity (Andaya 1994, Brewer 2000, Sered 1994).

Anthropologist Susan Starr Sered suggested that in parts of Asia men joined the new world religions and left women with the more ancient indigenous beliefs, which were devalued. In Southeast Asia and East Asia, the new religions taught “doctrines of female pollution or subordination” (Sered 1994: 13). Some 2000 years ago, Southeast Asia already had advanced civilizations and beliefs about women’s spirituality, according to historian David Wyatt:

The world was regarded as being peopled with good and evil spirits that had the power to aid or harm humans and thus had to be propitiated by ceremonies or offerings of food. Women frequently were believed to have a special power to mediate between mankind and the spirit world, and were called upon to heal the sick or change unfavorable weather (1984: 4-5).

Historian Barbara Watson Andaya also reported that in early Southeast Asian history, “…females were often considered particularly suited as spirit mediums, a role they have continued to play in some places to the present day. Female mediation with the spirit world was fundamental to rituals of life and death, such as birth, the planting of crops and funerals” (1994: 102). The prominent role of women as spirit mediums in ancestral lineages continues to the present in the matrilineal sects of northern Thailand (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984, Irvine 1984). Women’s closeness to village fertility spirits can still be seen in rites to the female spirits of the winnowing basket and the mortar and pestle in northeast and northern Thailand (Pranee 2001).

The world religions that arrived in Southeast Asia – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, Christianity, and Confucianism – replaced or joined with indigenous Animistic
belief systems to establish androcentric religions, which supported the legitimacy of monarchies descended from the gods. The mixture of religions in Thailand is quite complex and varies by region. When travelers from India arrived in southern Thailand in the early Christian or common era, they "...found a fairly sophisticated level of life already established there. It was on this indigenous base that the veneer of Indian culture was to be superimposed" (Munro-Hay 2001: 8).

According to some historians, the first organized religion to appear was the Buddhism of the Mon Dvaravati civilization in the central region in the 6th to 9th centuries. When the Khmer of the Angkor Empire (present day Cambodia) conquered that society in the 9th century, their kings introduced Mahayana Buddhism and Hindu-Brahmanism, particularly cults to Shiva and Vishnu. The Tai-speaking people brought in the new religion of Theravada Buddhism as early as the 11th century. By the 13th century, they had created states as far south as Nakhon Si Thammarat, reviving Buddhism there with help from Singhalese Buddhists from Ceylon (Wyatt 1984, see Terwiel 1994). Islam was officially established in the Malay Patani Kingdom with the conversion of Sultan Ismail Shah in 1500 (Zulkifli 2002). From Fujian province in southeast China, Chinese immigrants brought Folk Taoism to Phuket, Trang, and other towns in the early decades of the 1800s (Cohen 2001). All these influences can be seen in nora today.

Scholars have described all the world religions as patriarchal (Young 1987: 5). However, early Buddhist doctrines treated men and women equally in some respects. Yet the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama born in the 6th century B.C.E, was reluctant to set up an order of nuns and then did so with rules requiring them to be subservient to all

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131 Amara Pongsapich (1997) argued that Hinduism and Buddhism introduced ideologies of male dominance, such as the belief in karma, that defines women as inferior.
monks (Barnes 1987: 107-108). Despite some early religious advancement for women, after about four centuries Buddhism had altered to reflect Hindu doctrine, which subjugated women (Johnstone 1997: 230). The world religions created ideologies in which women were not suitable to govern (Andaya 1994). Within the religious hierarchy, women were not permitted to hold the most holy positions. For example, in Thailand women are forbidden to ordain as Theravada Buddhist monks. This rule is being challenged today, and some Thai women have argued that this is a prime example of how the religion subordinates them (Chatsumarn 1991, Sanitsuda 2001). This restriction has meant that only men could study the religious Pali language, mystical designs, and chants, which qualified them as ritual specialists within and outside the monkhood (Andaya 1994, Darunee and Pandey 1987). The respected high civilization and androcentric religions of India were thought to represent “culture” while the local goddesses represented “fertility” (Keyes 1995: 66, 132, Sumet 1989: 139).

Anthropologist Keyes wrote, “...the dualism that links women with the earth and with nurturance and men with the supramundane and with potency is a very old idea in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia” (1995: 132).

Although key female goddesses continued to exist in Thailand, they were converted into the wives of Hindu gods or assistants to Lord Buddha, such as the Rice and Earth goddesses. The male role in reproduction eclipsed female sexual powers. Found in southern Thailand and on display at museums in Songkhla and Nakhon Si Thammarat, numerous ancient phallic-shaped stones, Shiva-linga, symbolized Shiva’s fertility and emphasized the power of male reproduction (Andaya 1994, Munro-Hay 2001). Providing a wider perspective on this historical change, Lerner wrote:
The dethroning of the powerful goddesses and their replacement by a dominant male god occur in most Near Eastern societies following the establishment of a strong and imperialistic kingship. Gradually the function of controlling fertility, formerly entirely held by the goddesses, is symbolized through the symbolic or actual mating of the male god or God-King with the Goddess or her priestess. The Mother-Goddess is transformed into the wife/consort of the chief male God (1986: 9).

In southern Thailand, Hindu patriarchal influence can be seen in the identities of the Phatthalung Legend personalities. The legendary nora founder, Khun Sii Satthaa, is believed to be a reincarnation of Shiva, the creator of dance. And Khun Sii Satthaa’s mother, Mae Sii Maa Laa, is thought to be a reincarnation of Uma Devi, the wife of Shiva (Pittaya 2004 interview). This Indian influence established men as the rightful communicators with the gods, a belief that carries over to today (Pittaya 2004 interview). Concepts of menstrual pollution and the impurity of women were introduced. These Hindu beliefs in India involved taboos and the maintenance of hierarchy (Bowen 1998: 129). Women were considered a possible sexual threat to religious men. Pollution beliefs are still widespread in southern Thailand today and limit women’s religious activities (Chatsumarn 1991, Wijeyewardene 1986).

Religious suppression in another Southeast Asian country provides a comparison. In the Philippines, Carolyn Brewer (2000) vividly described how in the 16th and 17th centuries Spanish Catholic missionaries attacked Animist priestesses in one of the more violent suppressions of indigenous beliefs. In contrast, Theravada Buddhism is generally considered an accommodating philosophy that blends with existing beliefs. Despite these

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132 I found many restrictions against menstruating women in both the world religions and spirit medium sects. One nora family member said that menstruating women could not even watch the fire-walking ceremonies at Taoist temples in Phuket during the Vegetarian Festival (see Terwiel 1994).
differing degrees of religious hegemony, by the close of the 18th century, “…the religious role of females in South East Asia generally was considerably reduced from earlier times” (Andaya 1994: 114, see Sered 1994).

Here I have been arguing that male dominated world religions, especially Hindu-Brahmanism and Buddhism, have diminished the position of women in indigenous religions. A number of Thai scholars and feminists support this view, particularly naming early Indian Brahmanism as the source of these attitudes (Amara 1997, Pittaya interview 2004). To give a recent example, in July 2004, a Khon Kaen female senator made newspaper headlines for criticizing a northern Thai custom of forbidding women to enter sacred areas of Buddhist temples. Monks charged her with disrespecting 700-year-old northern traditions. A monk, who advised the United Nations on religion and peace, said the practice was not in Buddhist scriptures but may have originated from “superstitious Brahman beliefs that 12 fluids from the female body such as menstrual blood and urine are unclean” (Bangkok Post, 6 July 2004). The monk said this custom was also present in Burma, which had ruled the north for centuries, so the practice might have originated there. To my mind, this argument falls along rather nationalistic lines, criticizing the troublesome Burmese and ignoring the larger shift to patriarchy around the world including Thailand.

Lerner (1986: 8, 21) identified the creation of patriarchy as occurring over 2500 years from about 3100 to 600 B. C. E. based on research on Western civilization from Mesopotamian and Hebrew sources. Contradicting Marxist theory (Engels 1972), she stated that this domination occurred before the development of private property and was the foundation of archaic states. Although in Thailand the devaluing of women as impure
is usually attributed to Hindu-Brahmanism, Lerner stated that the belief that “...women are incomplete and damaged human beings of an entirely different order than men...” was a Western Aristotelian concept (Lerner 1986: 10). Therefore, I would argue that while the world religions, particularly Hindu-Brahmanism and Buddhism, were damaging to the position of goddesses and priestesses in Thailand, the roots of patriarchy are much deeper, older, and wider than the prevalent analysis implies.

Today, there has been a decentering of national religions in Southeast Asia and a blossoming of many sects, which are growing apparently due to a weakening of legitimacy of state sponsored religions under capitalist modernization (Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall 1994). The new visible role of nora women needs to be understood within history and within this regional phenomenon, which I call religious post-modernization. Although nora women are more in the limelight today, we must ask how long they have been involved – possibly longer than we expect. In the past, who prepared the food offerings, made the costumes, and dressed the men? The representations at the Institute for Southern Thai Studies appear to reflect a state androcentric bias, which glosses over valuable female roles. As researcher Jovan Maud from Macquarie University, Australia, asked me, “How much of what you describe is nora actually changing, and how much is an ‘underground’ tradition of female involvement coming out into the open?” I would argue that the participation of women in this village-based religion is as old as the belief itself, but only now are women moving into higher positions. As anthropologist Wazir Jahan Karim (1995: 19) argued, women in Southeast Asia “...are not visible in formal politics or the great religions endorsed by the State,” but rather contribute significantly to these fields in the “informal sphere” that cannot be relegated to the periphery.
Is *Nora* a Women’s Religion?

I maintain that the meaning of women’s expanded involvement in ritual *nora* is that female-oriented religions are strengthening in the face of modern social and economic upheavals. *Nora* provides spiritual intervention with the practical problems of family. It also assists with survival within the supportive context of rural kinship communities where mother-daughter and sister-sister connections have been strong (Ong 1989: 296, Potter 1977). Despite this recent female orientation, magically powerful men are still quite essential to the genre. The majority of leaders are men and the culture privileges them as being more religiously powerful both within Buddhism and the supernatural realm.

Sered (1994) compared 12 “women’s religions” or “female-dominated religions” around the world, including Thailand’s northern matrilineal spirit sects and Burma’s *nat* religion. She defined these as religions in which “...women are the majority of participants and leaders, there is no higher level male authority that ultimately directs these religions, and that these religions focus on women as ritual actors” (Sered 1994: 11). According to her definition, *nora* would not qualify as a women’s religion because Buddhist-based rules discriminate against women reaching the top positions. However, *nora* performers and certainly the associated female spirit mediums have many other characteristics that Sered found in the 12 identified women’s religions. For instance, *nora* has a focus on trance possession with direct emotional connections with spirits. There is

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133 Aihwa Ong (1989: 296) argued that kinswomen living together in bilateral or matrilineal communities were more unified in their villages in Southeast Asia. She also wrote that the domestic sphere could not be separated from women’s work activities in the other areas, such as markets and agriculture.
also flexibility in the belief system that allows participants to believe in other religions. 

*Nora* has neither a central authority over all branches nor a written doctrine.

According to Sered, women's religions emphasize healing and support for women, especially for mothers who suffer from physical and emotional trials, such as the death of a child. Such religions often exist worldwide in societies that are matrilocal, matrilineal, or matrifocal and where women have a fair amount of autonomy (Sered 1994). This description applies to gender roles in Thailand. Several academics have described Thai rural social structure in many regions as being less patriarchal and more female centered, particularly where women inherit land, as in parts of the south (Amara 1997, Potter 1977). Historians also have remarked on the economic independence and autonomy of Southeast Asian women, especially when compared to women in China and India, although this issue has been greatly debated (Andaya 1995, Reid 1988).

Sociologist Ronald Johnstone (1997) wrote that women's religions emerged around the world during times of gender dissonance caused by new opportunities. This tension occurred “…not when oppression of women was of greatest intensity, but when sex roles and understandings of gender differences were changing and there were rising expectations of women as they saw what might be possible” (Johnstone 1997: 252).

Therefore, conditions seem right for *nora* to be an avenue for women’s religious articulation. But the women who practice *nora* are working within, not rebelling against, centralized Buddhism and conservative gender concepts in Thai culture. *Nora* women give very high respect to *nora* men, particularly those who have trained them, in many

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134 Judging the status of women is complex and political. Some scholars have argued that Thai women have a more egalitarian position because of these factors: matrilocal residence, equal inheritance, bilateral descent, monogamy, simple divorce, complementary roles in local rituals and women's importance in agriculture and markets (Andaya 1995, Reid 1988, Winzeler 1996).
cases their fathers and uncles. They are not trying to usurp men but are filling the many vacancies created by the passing of the old guard of potent priests.

I do not want to overstate the importance of women moving into principal ritual roles in nora. As has been noted by puppetry expert Paritta, the ritual side of nora involves few people and is limited to village life, compared to the public entertainment side, where young women provide secular amusement for crowds of hundreds. Also, some might argue that women are coming into prominence in nora just when men are abandoning it in favor of more lucrative, modern careers, which is reminiscent of other occupations, which have become feminized when devalued. In looking at the significance of this change, it is important to explore the enduring advantages for women. Sered argued that women's religions either provided short-term benefits for individuals or longer-term structural changes that empowered women as a group. In her assessment, the northern Thai matrilineal spirit cults provided major gender advantages:

“...institutionalized economic, sexual, social and religious independence for women” (Sered 1994: 268). I would note that some scholars would question this conclusion. On the surface, nora would appear to assist individual women rather than push for more radical changes in religious ideology. But I would hesitate to judge the future consequences of this strengthening in women’s public religious roles in a society where the public arena is still largely reserved for men.

In this discussion, I do not want to give an essentialist argument that women through their biology are connected to the earth, fertility, and some kind of original pure goddess from an ideal historical matriarchy (Franzmann 2000: 129). Instead I am suggesting that the increased number of women in nora reflects a strengthening of female
spirituality, which may have links to the past. But does this new involvement of women – the feminization of nora – mean that women are asserting themselves in the present and re-invoking a history? In this chapter, I have cited some gender role changes, but I have yet to hear women in the genre claim to have a feminist history. Therefore my thoughts and proposals are a matter of speculation.

**Buddhist Ideology Limits Roles for Women**

In the distant past, both Hindu-Brahmanism and Buddhism influenced the gender codes in nora. According to anthropologist Barend Jan Terwiel, these religions, “...shared religious concepts and their respective pantheons overlapped....” (1994: 12). But today the majority of nora participants and audiences are Buddhist and draw on that philosophy when creating rules for leadership. According to nora people, to obtain the high position of leader, one must: 1) practice dancing and singing, 2) be a virgin before initiation, and 3) be ordained as a Buddhist monk.

The connection with Buddhism is a key factor in nora legitimacy. In writing about professional spirit mediums in Chiang Mai, Irvine (1982) argued that marginalized mediums tied themselves closer to mainstream religion and nationalism by stressing connections to Buddhism and the royal family. Likewise nora is closely identified with the national religion, which moves it toward the center. For instance, Lord Buddha is called upon in the opening ritual of the roong khruu along with various Hindu gods and tutelary spirits. Monks are invited to chant a blessing to begin the ceremonies, which are often held in a monastery compound, but not inside the sacred Buddhist temple buildings. And monks have cut the hair of males and females in the initiation ceremony.
The association between male Buddhists and male nora leaders works to exclude women from the spiritually powerful realm. Male nora leaders are seen as analogous to monks in their sacredness and spiritual powers. Although the rule about virginity applies to both men and women, it is mostly considered a hardship and test of holiness for male nora candidates. Ideally, the initiation for nora occurs after or in conjunction with entering the monkhood, considered a purification ritual for men (Golomb 1978: 60). In both southern Thailand and northern Malaysia, the nora initiation is modeled after the Buddhist monk's ordination (see Buddhism in Chapter 5, Golomb 1978: 60-61). After leaving the monkhood, the nora man can marry, but should take only one wife and no mistresses. Nora Plaeg's family said he was effective with spirits because he was faithful to his wife. His niece explained, "... men have to be virgins (pure – bawrisut) before they become nora men. Uncle Plaeg has been nora since he was a little boy. He was nora before he married." Another leader, Nora Sompong, remained a virgin until he was 22 and became a monk before marriage (Patise 2004: 16).

Nora men are thought to have powers that are commonly associated with magically oriented monks – the ability to deal with ghosts, see the future, cure, make holy water, and endure physical deprivation. According to his family, Nora Plaeg had extraordinary powers such as being able to sing for a long time, dance without instruction, drink perfume without getting sick, and survive without food for up to a month. In a 2001 interview, Nora Plaeg said, "When I am possessed, I will know everything about the patient's sickness.... If you are disturbed by a ghost (phii), you mention my name, and you can get better. My name can chase the ghost away." His oldest daughter added, "Some people are sick and as soon as they come here, they can get
better. When father is possessed, he has supernatural power. He can make holy water to cure the patient.” As mentioned before, women were not allowed to touch him, just as they cannot touch monks because women are seen as harmful to the monks’ sacred power (Terwiel 1994).

The highest honor for a nora person is to be initiated as a complete or perfect (sombuun) principal performer or big nora. It is not possible for women to reach this goal because the candidate must become a Buddhist monk. Often Thai men become monks for short periods, from a week to a few months, around the minimum age of 20. To fulfill a vow, some men become monks for only one to three days. In the monastery, monks learn magical prayers (khaathaa) in the ritual language of Pali. Nora Awuth explained, “Every (nora) ritual requires Buddhist prayers. All of the prayers are in Pali language. We use the monk’s words in the ceremony. If the people who do the ceremony were not ordained before, they won’t know how to do this.” Also only ex-monks know the prayer for a specific nora ritual called “cutting the offerings” (tat meuy) which symbolizes the fulfillment of promises to the ancestors.135 It is thought that women cannot cut the strings completely. Nora Awuth said, “When Thai Buddhist men want to leave the monkhood, they have to enter the ordination hall with the abbot. There are only two in the hall. They have to have only two people because the monk has to take off the monk’s clothing and dress in common clothes. They can get the prayer from that time…. Women cannot be monks so they cannot do this ritual.”

Nora Plaeg’s daughter, Sujin, relaxing at the Khun Sii Satthaa shrine after a strenuous day of being possessed, explained the limits of her role as a woman: “Nora

135 After sending the spirits off, the nora leader will symbolically cut off the promises to the ancestors, which have been fulfilled, by cutting holy strings (saai sin) to offerings (Pittaya 1995).
men have to do the rituals in the ceremony starting from ‘setting up the town’ (*tang muang*). Only *nora* men who pass the initiation can do this ceremony. Women cannot be ordained [as monks] so they cannot do this ceremony. But they can dance to give respect (*ram thawaai*). So that is why I cannot take over the spirit from father.” In addition, there are gender taboos forbidding women from performing rituals while menstruating, standing higher than a possessing spirit, and climbing on the sacred offering shelf (*phaalai*) where the spirits alight (see Irvine 1982). However, when a woman is possessed, her spirit is recognized as having a higher status, and she is allowed to do some of these functions.

In the closely related *nuuraa* performed by Thais in Malaysia, Johnson found similar menstrual taboos in the past and present. “Until the 1960s, the social world of the Kelantanese *nuuraa* was strictly androcentric. Women were barred from performing due to their association with ritual uncleanness emanating from the menstrual cycle. Only men and post-menopausal women could prepare offerings... used in the propitiation rituals of *nuuraa* ancestral teachers” (Johnson 1999: 302). It was feared that menstruating women who entered the stage would let in evil spirits from competitors, he said. Johnson also found that in general Thai women in Kelantan were limited in their ritual activities because they were excluded from Buddhist knowledge.

I have just painted a picture of how *nora* has developed rules based on Buddhism and consequently reserved the top leadership roles for men. But in practice these rules are not followed strictly and are modified by both men and women. First, not all men are virgins before initiation or faithful after. Pittaya (1995) wrote that married participants could register false divorce papers to get around this rule. Also, in the past, *nora* men had
a reputation for being romantic rogues, with a woman in every town and the ability 
magically to enslave them (Ginsburg 1972). Claims of virginity have been challenged by 
outsiders. For example, the lay Buddhist woman I interviewed at Wat Khian in July 2004 
said Nora Plaeg could not have been possessed by the spirit of Khun Sii Sattha. Nora 
Plaeg was married before he became a nora leader, and therefore he was not a pure vessel 
for the spirit, she said. Although this contradicts the Plaeg family story, her version 
illustrates that the rules are not iron clad.

Second, not all male nora leaders have served as monks. One older leader said he 
never was a monk and began his own group at age 17. Other leaders reported starting 
groups at a young age, although they could not ordain as monks until age 20.136 Third, 
women have been able to head troupes and perform most rituals by having men conduct 
certain rites. Nora leaders told me that women could not do three rituals -- “setting up the 
town,” “cutting the offerings,” and “stepping on the mark.” But this problem is not 
insurmountable. A female head (naai roong) can have any initiated man such as her son 
or another leader perform these rituals for her. Then the woman can conduct the rest of 
the ceremony. Still she can never be called a big nora.

Fourth, the initiation ceremony has been changed to allow girls and women to 
share in this sacred event. There is only one initiation ceremony for both sexes, called 
“ritual to tie the cloth and put on the crown” (phitthii phuug phaa khrawp seut).137 Since 
only men can become the complete nora, I anticipated that a special ceremony would be

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136 Some nora people said the person must be 22 before being initiated, while I saw young girls going 
through the initiation ceremony, as described later.
137 Pittaya (2004 interview) reported that young students took part in a less serious ceremony to ask the 
ancestors for permission to study the art. Many of these students would not continue to become nora 
leaders so the ritual is not as powerful. I observed this ritual for children called sawt khruang sawt gamlai 
(insert decorations and insert bracelets) in Sathingphra District, Songkhla Province in 2004. Nora 
informants told me that there was only one full initiation ceremony for men and women.
held for males. But Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter explained that the ritual is the same for men and women, simply that men must ordain as monks at the same time, accomplishing everything within three days.

She said that the first day is the initiation ceremony. The second day, “The *nora* [person] has to dress in *nora* clothes, and then in the morning, they have to go to dance in three temples and three houses. And the next day, they have to ordain. If they want to leave the monkhood the day after that, it doesn’t matter. They are complete *nora* already. But sometimes *nora* [persons] don’t believe too much.” The last remark referred to her view that not everyone follows these standards. In fact, another performer related that the three temples and three houses requirement had been dropped due to time and money constraints. I would suggest that becoming a monk for a day or a week would not instill the deep ritual knowledge that *nora* men are thought to obtain from ordination.

In Khok Pho District of Pattani Province in May 2001, I attended an initiation ceremony for young girls and women, an example of how females are being introduced to sacrosanct rites. The ceremony for seven females, who were between the ages of nine and 25, took place at Nora Awuth’s car care business alongside the main road, before an audience of about 80 people. It is held only once every decade. Until they pass this ceremony, *nora* dancers cannot wear the gold crown.¹³⁸ Nora Wan and his son, Nora Awuth, performed the ceremony mostly for female relatives who attend their dancing school. Boys are not very interested in learning the dance, they said. Included were two of Nora Wan’s granddaughters and Nora Awuth’s daughter.

¹³⁸ Recently *nora* groups have created a paper crown as a temporary substitute for young performers before their initiation.
Seven high-level Buddhist monks came from seven local temples to bless the girls and women. Hanging from the ceiling were seven crowns suspended by strings. The ritual “to cut a topknot” (*tat jug*) began with the monks who represented the highest spiritual level present. The head monk sprayed holy water on each kneeling girl, while a male spirit medium held the hair for the monk to cut, since monks cannot touch females. Next down in the spiritual hierarchy, possessed spirit mediums, mostly middle aged women, cut the girls’ hair. And finally, a senior elderly *nora* man, reputed to be knowledgeable about spells, did the last cutting. As required, seven *nora* leaders from seven troupes, including two women, participated. The monks put a white cloth around each girl’s neck and released the crowns suspended from the ceiling onto the girls’ heads. Afterward, the girls took notebooks to the monks and *nora* leaders for them to sign, as evidence of acceptance into the genre. The girls will keep their locks of hair indefinitely for auspiciousness. According to spirit medium Fung, the girls’ new status allows them to perform rituals, not just dance.

During the ceremony, host Nora Awuth announced to the parents, “This ceremony is like an [Buddhist] ordination (*buat*). But the process is different because we don’t shave the heads or wear the monk’s cloth. This is the *nora* ordination.” In a later interview, Nora Awuth explained the similarities. First the girl’s soul will be called back into her body (an Animistic ritual called *riag khwan*), and then she will offer clothes to the monks -- both acts are part of a Buddhist ordinand’s indoctrination. In turn, the monks will symbolically give clothes to each girl by putting a cloth around her neck, representing new monk’s clothes (*jiiwawn*). And finally, the girls dress in costume, just

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139 I will refer to these candidates as “girls” as most of them were in the younger age range.

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as monks who put on their orange robes. Nora Awuth learned this ritual from other nora
groups while traveling. Older nora women who are already married, and therefore are not
virgins, cannot pass this ritual, but are given a special title, like monks who do not
complete a three-month Lenten season in a monastery. But even after passing the
initiation, women cannot perform rituals while menstruating and must find an initiated
male to do certain rites, Nora Awuth said. I would point out that the fact that this ritual
parallels a Buddhist ordination is significant because becoming a monk in Thailand is
considered a major rite of passage reserved for men (for the meaning of ordination see

I began this section by explaining that the inability of women to ordain as monks
excludes them from special knowledge and other religious roles outside the monkhood.
But I ended by illustrating that nora people have created new avenues for women to learn
rituals, achieve higher recognition, and become heads of their own groups.

**Nora Masculinity and Cross-gendering**

A basic dichotomy exists in Thai concepts of womanhood between women
considered to be proper and those thought to be evil such as prostitutes. “This distinction
is based on notions of proper, disciplined, ladylike and selfless womanhood embodied in
‘good’ women as virginal daughters and nurturing mothers, as opposed to a definition of
female sexuality as dangerous, and embodied (in its unrestrained form) in ‘bad’ women”
(Packard-Winkler 1998: 87). Although this female paradox has been covered extensively
by scholars, anthropologist Mary Packard-Winkler argues that masculinity also contains
an under-reported paradox between the ideal image of a responsible family provider and
a pleasure seeker and womanizer (*jao chuu*). However, since the latter role is sanctioned
and even praised by society, few men feel tension in living dual lives both in the family and outside the home with lovers (1998: 391). I propose that the *nora* man displays many of these contradictions in the construction of his image as a pious religious figure, faithful to one wife, who also reputedly exudes sexuality, romance, and power.

The male *nora* role is particularly complex because it involves cross-gendering with *nora* men adopting feminine identity through elaborate costumes, cosmetics, and charming dance. Like *nora* women, *nora* men wear long curved silver nails, lipstick, face makeup, and the delicate beads, tail, and wings of the bird-woman character. Dancing is praised for being slow and graceful like an angel. Such transformations are not uncommon in other Thai dance forms, such as the masked court dance of *khon*, improvised drama of *likay*, and central performance of *lakhon chatri*. But this gender crossing is particularly significant for the male *nora* performer because he is known for being strong and masculine and a bit of a rogue, as displayed in the genre’s controlled movements and rousing drumbeat. Although it is possible for *nora* men to be possessed by female spirits, most serve as vehicles for noble male characters from the Phatthalung Legend and revered ancestors.

An example of this intriguing blending of genders is the most famous and wealthy southern performer, Ekachai Srivichai. For the popular annual Songkhla Seafood Fair in 2003, he was pictured on the back of the program in very feminine eye makeup and lipstick wearing a beaded *nora* costume. My assistant had to convince me this was a man. Despite that, he is considered very attractive to women. At the same seafood fair in 2004, where he gave a free concert, a special booth sold VCDs of him performing in both *nora* and western dress. Although I stopped to watch him on the TV monitor, my Thai friend

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steered me away because he used such crude words. His success was apparently due to an ability to combine several art forms – country luag thung singing in Western clothes, nora dancing and imitation rituals, and off color, slapstick comedy. In one performance, he imitated the nora healing ritual of yiap sen, of putting a foot on a child’s blemish, I was told.

Historically, a man considered virile could be both a gangster and a nora dancer. About half a century ago, the south around Songkhla Lake was considered an untamed area plagued with bandits, where “real men” were expected to have the abilities to both steal a cow and dance nora (conference presentation Jory 2004). Traveling nora men had reputations for manliness and knowing sexual magic. “The manora player and his family were feared in the past because of their occult powers. And the master was held to be a threat to young girls, for he was thought capable of charming them into falling in love and following him” (Ginsburg 1972: 177). Older women too were known for hiring troupes, and the charm of the leader may have been a factor. These women were called mae yog, meaning a woman who supports or lifts up the troupe. In an interview in 2001, Saruup said, “People who can dance nora have to be nagleng (sportsman or young blood). A nora [man] who is nagleng has lots of friends.” Also comparing nora men to a nagleng, Golomb (1978: 58) wrote that both nora men and nagleng were clever and charming, which made them attractive to both women and awkward young men:

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140 For more information on this performer and luag thung see the footnote in Appendix E: Four Periods of Nora Development.
141 Although the term nagleng is sometimes defined as gangster or hooligan, Golomb understands it to mean a man or woman who leaves the village for excitement and learns about the outside world, such as performers, gamblers, and hunters.
As indicated, the most highly valued attribute of the manoora actor is his charm. Though in certain contexts, an experienced performer may be feared for his ability to capture the hearts of innocent young women, it is equally true that such players have been considered very desirable marriage partners.... Rather than being rejected for being too demonstrative, they have been emulated by those who admire their social skills. Parents have been known to enroll homely, sickly, or introverted sons in their classes with the expectation that they might achieve charm and good looks.

Packard-Winkler (1998: 101) describes the nagleng role as allowing men to enjoy pleasures without being held responsible for their extreme behavior. Today, men are both criticized and admired for having several lovers, she wrote.

Until recently, nora men were considered hyper-masculine. But now more transvestites are becoming dancers. Small traveling troupes often include one or two obviously homosexual young men who act in exaggerated feminine ways. Therefore, at a village ceremony in Sathingphra District, I was surprised to see that of the four performers, three were transvestites, an unusually high number. Transvestites are fairly common and public in Thailand and have been described as an “intermediate category” between male and female, often called the “third sex” (Jackson and Sullivan 2000: 4, Totman 2003) (discussed in Chapter 3). Research in progress by Thianchai revealed that the role of nora men is becoming stigmatized. In a 2004 research proposal, he wrote:

Where is the male nora (nora chaai)? Nowadays, nora has become the dancing of women, and the dignity (sagsii) of nora men is lost. The dignity of nora men means the nora man’s dance, which is active, strong, and fierce. These things are lost because boys don’t like to practice nora because they are afraid that other people will look at them like transvestites (gateui). These things affect nora roong khruu dancing and the number of nora men. So we want to find the way to restore the value of nora men and support the inheritance and learning of nora men.

Apparently for some young men, the gender of the nora male is in doubt, but the adults I met clearly honored the nora leader as a spiritually powerful man who displayed
power and grace. A booklet on the dance-drama said it performed exciting music and
displayed “gentle but strong dancing” (Sathaaphawn 2001). This complexity of
constructed maleness is epitomized by the costume and style of dance. Often assisted by
older women, nora men dress slowly in public, adding layers and layers of cloth and
beads, in a process that emphasizes their transition to a higher spiritual status. Once
dressed, nora boys or men assume an elegant confident demeanor. The transformation is
so great that they are hardly recognizable in street clothes.

This gentle-but-strong behavior style sharply contrasts with another significant
group of southern male mediums. Acting very aggressively with an authoritarian manner,
young Thai-Chinese men are transformed into ancient warriors by their spirits and parade
in the Vegetarian Festivals of Phuket, Trang, and Hat Yai. To the shock and fascination
of local and foreign tourists, these men engage in violent self-mutilation as an expression
of their gods’ powers (Cohen 2001). By contrast, the nora man has an ethereal quality as
the king of the angels, according to Nora Wan. He said, “Nora is related to magic. When
he is dressed, he can do anything like a king…. The king in the past was stronger than the
law. When people wear the nora dress, they become an angel or the heavenly (Hindu
God) Indra.”

The nora gender model is of a religious man who is both clearly male and yet
theatrically feminine. In some ways, he is the opposite of the Buddhist monk who
renounces sexuality, takes on a neutral gender, and seeks to withdraw from the world
(Keyes 1986: 87). Applying Keyes’ analysis, I argue that nora men are seen as powerful
and effective in the world, as a result of having great merit and karma. Golomb found
many similarities between monks and nora leaders in their religious knowledge but
argued that they had opposite lifestyles of “...contemplative celibacy as opposed to polished romantic charm...” (1978: 58). (See Chapter 5 on nora’s relationship to Buddhism for more comparisons with the monkhood.) I believe that this combination of masculine and feminine attributes actually contributes to the nora’s supernatural powers.

Examining another Southeast Asian society, historian Leonard Andaya describes the bissu people in Indonesian history, who were priests with both male and female characteristics. He wrote, “The direct link between sacred powers and a ‘third’ sex/gender is well-established in many cultures, including several in Southeast Asia” (2000: 29). Crossing “sexual boundaries” and thus uniting male and female energies is thought to give priests unusual powers, according to Andaya (2000). I propose a similar analysis could be applied to male nora leaders.

Thai Buddhist men, who perform nuuraa in Kelantan, Malaysia, also express “magico-seductive prowess,” according to Johnson (1999: 286). Applying the theories of anthropologists Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, Johnson stated that these “love magicians” are liminal, ambiguous figures who cross cultural boundaries between humans and spirits, between masculine and feminine. “His transgression of these symbolic dichotomies commences with his formal theatrical apprenticeship as an adolescent female impersonator” (Johnson 1999: 287). He described leaders who acted as princesses and queens but revert to male roles off stage. 142 I find his perceptive analysis

142 Clearly connected to southern Thai nora, the Malaysian nuuraa performance is based on the same two legends of the bird-princess and the exiled daughter and dates back at least 100 years. Like nora, the nuuraa performance originally had all male actors playing male and female roles. But women were added in the 1960s to fill vacancies when young men opted for city jobs and more regular work in agriculture. Although Malay performers have been added, the leaders remain Thai men because they are connected with the ancestor spirits and know the language of the formal drama. Johnson suggested that their temporary gender crossing is limited to the liminality of the sacred stage and required by the ancestral spirits, therefore socially acceptable.
to be applicable to Thai nora performers, particularly the view that the male leader embodies both genders – a sacred manliness and a graceful femininity, rather than being effeminate.

Aside from nora leaders, questions of masculinity are raised regarding some nora “groupies.” In the past among the devout followers of nora were older men who were particularly attentive to young male performers. But the nature of this relationship is not made explicit by the researchers. Some traveling groups had young performers, probably in their early teens, known as nora with topknots (hua jug nora). An older group of men, called nora grandfather tigers (taa sua nora), would accompany the groups to take care of equipment and help the performers without payment. Some of these men were in love with the young boys and were said to be crazy for them (Prayat 1995: 161, Suthiwong 1999: 1875). Since the information is sketchy and refers to past practices, which I have not heard of today, I will only present it here. But I might suggest that the nora performance, which involves changing gender through both acting and possession, could be a fluid and liminal arena for experimenting with sexualities.

This discussion of religiosity, sexuality, and power for men leads us to question how these traits are transferred to nora women as they move into leadership positions and increased communication with spirits. I would argue that change is occurring in the cultural belief that men are the most effective in dealing with powerful spirits and dangerous magic. The strongest evidence of this is in the recent popularity of Thai, Chinese, and Indian goddesses and their female mediums. Some of these mediums have large shrines and significant followings. This new respect for religious women
contributes to an atmosphere in which nora woman can exert their agency as leaders with spiritual prowess.

**Joining with Home-based Spirit Mediums**

The nora spirit mediums, who come to be possessed but are not initiated performers, are an important component of ceremonies. While a few men participate, most mediums are women who are middle aged and older. Because they comprise one-fourth to one-third of the active participants in the ceremony, their role is noteworthy. Mediums are easily identified by their distinctive costumes of traditional pants, white or yellow blouses, and shoulder scarves that indicate the sex of their spirits — plain white or yellow for female spirits and a plaid for male spirits. Absolutely essential to the ceremony, mediums’ bodies are the channels through which the spirits come to accept the offerings from descendants. The mediums also dance in a unique style, different from the nora dance. Some nora leaders are spirit mediums able to possess but some are not (mentioned in Chapter 2).

At one ceremony hosted by Nora Awuth, he had to allow two days of the three-day ceremony for possessions to accommodate all the mediums who attended. I asked him, “What do spirit mediums do in the ceremony, and how is it different from what nora people do?” Not a medium himself, Nora Awuth explained, “Nora people only play music, sing, and dance and invite the spirits to possess. When the spirits possess, they will do all the rituals. The descendants will come to see the spirits and ask them to predict their fortunes… The spirits will bless holy water and sprinkle it on descendants, bless them, and predict their fortunes.” I would add that the spectacle of seeing mediums being
possessed provides a great deal of the excitement of nora ceremonies and draws a large audience.

Mediums appear to fall into two broad categories. The first group (about 80%), I label as occasional spirit mediums, those who are possessed publicly only at this yearly ceremony and may periodically be possessed at home to help family members in distress. The second group (about 20%), I call professional spirit mediums, who have established home shrines for regularly treating members of the public in return for donations to the spirit. These two groups are particularly of note because they have some similarities to the traditional and modern spirit mediums found by Irvine (1982) in Chiang Mai.

As described in the literature review, from the 1970s to 1980s a number of anthropologists researched “matrilineal spirit cults” in the north and northeast. In groups of villages, women channeled lineage spirits who provided the moral framework and social cohesion for the community. These were traditional mediums who served their relatives. But when capitalist development arrived, many villagers sold their land and moved to cities for jobs. In the cities, a new form of mediumship developed -- professional mediums who saw any client and accepted donations, as a type of religious career. Therefore the nora occasional mediums seem similar to the rural traditional ones, while the nora professional mediums are akin to modern urban ones in the north and northeast. I have posed these two separate categories, the occasional and professional. But actually, there is more of a continuum from the traditional to the modern. Here are some of the distinguishing characteristics of the two groups.

Occasional mediums only served family members in need and not very often. Their services tended to focus on health problems caused by upset ancestors. Issues of
infidelity were not often addressed, possibly because the medium and client were related and rumors would fly. These mediums appeared to be more shy and uncertain of their mediumship, even though many of them had been mediums for decades. In contrast, professional mediums tended to be more outgoing, comfortable speaking with strangers, and accustomed to telling their life stories. They also were familiar with dealing with relationship problems, an essential part of professional practices. More specifically, professional mediums must cope with black magic curses and battles between legal wives and mistresses. Professional mediums earn some or all of their livelihoods from mediumship and may make substantial contributions to temples and selected religious ceremonies such as nora events.

During the roong khruu at Wat Thakhae, I could always find the spirit mediums at the Khun Sii Satthaa shrine near the nora stage. Here the mediums, including a few men, ate, slept, and possessed. In 2002, after taking off my shoes, I slide across the floor to approach three middle aged women, one chewing red betel quid. Although I earnestly explained my research, the women looked suspicious and distinctly unfriendly. They did not want to be interviewed, which was quite an unusual reaction from my experience.

In contrast, another female medium, Khun Ratchada, 51, approached eager to answer questions. A professional medium, Ratchada lived in a two-story townhouse in Phatthalung town and used an upstairs shrine for possessing. In her practice, she saw many people, equally divided between men and women. Customers came from Yala, Phuket, Hat Yai, and as far away as Bangkok. When I asked her occupation, she said, “I just stay at home, but I possess to cure patients.” Ratchada dealt with a full range of problems concerning health, university examinations, black magic, and encroaching
mistresses. She was first possessed seven years before by her father’s spirit. Today her
two main spirits are both males: a grandfather healing spirit (*Phaw Taa Maw Thep*) and a
spirit from Elephant Mountain in the south (*Jao Phaw Khao Chaang*). Her education
level is minimal, as she could not read before her first possession. Ratchada said, “... I
can’t read, but when I am possessed, I know everything. If I’m not possessed, I cannot
read. Now I can read a little bit because he [the spirit] taught me. I can read a little bit,
but I cannot write.”

She came to mediumship in the most common way, through an illness that could
not be cured by Western medicine. Ratchada said:

> When I was called, I had a terrible leg ache. The doctor can’t cure these
symptoms. When he told me that I had to be the spirit medium, I didn’t want to
be. I don’t like this way. I didn’t know anything about this. Father Plaeg, who
died, said that you should accept. Your leg will get better because the spirit wants
to stay with you. When I didn’t accept the spirit, he warned me to accept. If I
accept, I can go to share merit and fun, so I accepted.

Because Nora Plaeg helped identify her spirit, she fulfills her promise to attend
the *roong khruu* every year to make merit (*tham bun*) and give a contribution. Only after
this discussion did I notice that Ratchada had a limp. Ratchada told me about several
upcoming ceremonies in the region and revealed her knowledge about the mediumship
network. She also showed a certain amount of agency in being able to control her spirit’s
arrival times. She said, “If I invite him, he will come, but today I didn’t invite him
because I came here to join for fun.”

From this story, it is clear that ancestral spirits can provide advantages to their
human vehicles. Ratchada is learning to read, has a network of connections within the
local religious community, sees clients from around Thailand, and has a fairly
comfortable home with mediumship as her main occupation. She also has the confidence to approach a foreigner at a nora ceremony. Professional mediums often experience an increase in status when their cures are successful. And since she is a nora medium, Ratchada is part of an honored tradition of teacher spirits in the southern region.

If I had imagined a sisterhood of mediums, the next event dissuaded me from that romantic notion. Indicating the three mediums whom I first encountered, Ratchada said:

Look around at these spirit mediums, if they are sacred, they will help and give advice to people they know and ones they don’t know. Some spirit mediums talk only a little when you ask. You can see for yourself. It is because the spirit mediums are jealous of each other and have desires (gilae). But for me, I’m not. My spirit taught me to spread loving kindness (mettā) to rich and poor people, and people who have a certain style. I have to receive them equally. Even if I'm displeased with them [her clients who request immoral things like taking from others] and want to seek revenge, I cannot. Although they did something to me, just let it go. If they say that I'm not good, I should think that they say that I'm good. My spirit taught me this so I can live happily and spread loving kindness and give some money to make merit. You can see there are a lot of spirit mediums. And if you ask some of them, they say, “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.” I think, “You are a spirit medium, why don’t you know?” We have a spirit in our bodies, so we must know. Like me, I know that you two come from Songkhla to interview about old styles of possession and transfer this information to people who want to learn. But for those people who say “I don’t know,” we cannot do anything and shouldn’t blame them. I have to show kindness to Thais or foreigners. Nowadays, people are jealous of each other so that is why there are many spirit mediums today. But only a few of them are the real spirit medium. Someone saw that spirit mediums dress in a luxurious manner and wanted to be a spirit medium. They want to dress in more luxury than other spirit mediums.

In this statement, Ratchada establishes her high ethical position by using Buddhist concepts of sinful desires and loving kindness in reference to other mediums, whose ethics and honesty she questions.

As soon as she left, the three other mediums suddenly became friendly and beckoned me to talk to them. They gave me dire warnings. One said, “Remember, don’t believe her. You [already] walk in the right way. Don’t go [to her house]. She wants to
take advantage. You must not go! Don't walk in the wrong way because you will have problems until you die. The country is in trouble. There are many things in your future....You walk in the right way.” After more warnings, the conversation ended because a woman started possessing in the rear of the shrine.

Later during that hot afternoon, I returned to the mediums’ shrine and met a typical occasional medium, 53-year-old Khun Pratana. She had been a medium for 31 years and was a Buddhist like the other women I met in the shrine. Her clients were mostly female relatives who come to her for ancestor related illnesses, to make a vow with the spirits, or to find a lost item. They do not ask her about problems about mistresses or black magic. Pratana never charges a fee and has some difficulty contacting the spirits due to lack of experience. Although she fits the occasional medium category, the rest of her story about illness was typical for both occasional and professional mediums. Her symptoms were mental disturbances, which occurred when a nora master came to town. She trembled with fear, had difficulty walking, and forgot how to enter her own house. Doctors in mental hospitals could not cure her.

“I was sick from 22 to 28 years old. I was sick for six years before being a spirit medium. When I became a spirit medium, my illness disappeared.” She learned that the spirit of her nora aunt wanted to possess her. Yet even today, the mantle of mediumship sits uneasily on her. “I am fearful all the time. My husband...doesn’t believe in it. And I don’t want to make problems with my family,” she said. Because Pratana possesses rarely, it is difficult for her to contact the spirits. She said:

So I have to ask many times to communicate with [the spirits] about problems of relatives. I have to light candles to invite them, but I do not know where they are. I wai, pray and say to the spirits, “I don’t know. Do you exist or not? There are
people who want help. Please help them. Please possess me.” I believe some parts and don't believe some parts.

Pratana became convinced of the spirit’s existence when it punished her husband and her friend’s husband. Her story provides insight into gender conflicts that occur when married women take such a demanding religious path. Referring to a friend sitting next to us in the Khun Sii Satthaa shrine, Pratana said, “At that time, she was married, but she seldom came here because her husband didn’t accept it. Then her husband didn’t believe, but he died. That is why I believe.” The friend’s husband went to a bull fight and on returning home, he died from an apparent heart attack. But Pratana attributed the death to his lack of faith in the spirits. Her husband was also a disbeliever. Once he picked her up from a nora ceremony and became annoyed at waiting while she spoke to a friend.

And he took me to the car and blamed me all the way to my house. He blamed me for gossiping too much, and then he said there were no ancestors. And I was afraid that he would beat me. And I told him not to blame me and not to say that there were no ancestors. When we came back home, he caught the banister of the stairs and he went unconscious….And I went to get medicine for fainting and gave it to him. Since that time, he never blamed me again.

In another incident, they quarreled over another woman, and he kicked her.

“Nearly a month later, his leg he kicked me with was broken when he crashed into an electrical post and his knee was broken. I didn’t want them [spirits] to do that to my husband. But I can’t see the spirit and I don’t know whether the spirit exists. I don’t know if it happened by chance or not.”

The last sentence illustrates again Pratana’s continuing ambiguity about the spirits, which I argue is related to her limited experience with possession despite her many years as a medium. Possessing daily, professional mediums do not express such skepticism. By punishing the husband, the spirits have supported Pratana, strengthened
her independence, and given her spiritual strategies for resistance. I argue that female mediums, in combination with their spirits, have developed a gendered epistemology, a knowledge of the world that at times challenges Thai cultural concepts of proper gender relations while not straying too far from accepted values.

In summary, the _nora_ mediums – occasional and professional – demonstrate how the genre is providing links to other mediumship traditions. Mediums gain status and legitimacy by associating with this southern symbol (see Irvine 1982). In turn, the _nora_ community gains followers and expands its network to people treated in home shrines. Mediumship is a way for women to establish their own religious knowledge and be connected with a higher and possibly dangerous power.

**Services Valuable to Women**

The services provided by _nora_ are particularly beneficial to women in their roles as wives, mothers, family caregivers, and small business owners. Women seek help finding medical cures, fighting magic used by mistresses, halting a husband’s drinking and gambling, and promoting their children’s education and careers. I asked the follower of a spirit medium, why women don’t get this assistance from monks. For practical help, women prefer to visit vision doctors or spirit mediums, she said. “The [monks] don’t know the way to help. They just learn the Buddhist words and try to stay isolated….That is not the business of monks.” She also strongly warned that some monks use Cambodian black magic, which can harm the client.

Some of the following rituals already have been described, so here I will only elaborate on the aspects that are particular to women (see Chapter 2).
Fulfilling Vows Ritual (gae bon). Most clients for this nora service are female, according to Saruup. “Most of them are women because it is related to the women’s role in the family. If there are any problems in the family, women have to be responsible for them. Women always promise and men always pay off the promise.” My assistant Tananan Turetapol explained it this way, “Women will promise to the spirit and men will contact the nora group to pay off the promise because the connection with the nora group is related to society or the public…. Society believes that men take care of things like family problems that have a connection with people in the society. It is not suitable for women to do everything by themselves.” Nora Chalerm confirmed her observations by saying that a wife must get her husband’s permission before hiring a nora group to gae bon: “If women want to invite me, their husbands have to accept [my coming].” Nora Awuth said that his clients for gae bon were equally divided between men and women but that women usually used the ritual for medical problems.

Sompoch provided an illustration of how women turn to nora for concerns about family health. His first personal experience with making a vow was when his mother took him to nora for illness. “For me, when I was very young, I was sick. My mother took me to see the doctor, but I could not get better. So my mother vowed. And she promised to the spirit that if I could get better, she would fulfill the promise with nora. After that she gave an offering.” He subsequently recovered. Nora spirit medium Ratchada also verified that most women are worried about their own health, like knee aches, and their children’s futures, such as passing school entrance exams.

Stepping on the Mark Ritual (viap sen). The clients for this service are usually women with babies with a lesion. Female nora performers are not allowed to enact this
ritual because they would be standing over the possessed spirit medium involved in the ceremony. "It is not suitable (mawsom) that women sit higher than the spirits. Women cannot yiap sen," Nora Awuth said. However, possessed female mediums can play an important role due to the power of their spirits. At one yiap sen ritual, a female medium sat on a chair and was possessed by a key female character from the Phatthalung Legend. But only men can step on the sore. In another gender difference, the male nora leader calls boys to be treated before girls.

**Getting Rid of Minor Wives.** A common problem that women bring to professional home-based spirit mediums concerns husbands and their mistresses, known as minor wives. For many Thai women of all classes, the issue of minor wives is a real emotional and financial threat that can destroy a family (Packard-Winkler 1998, Van Fleet 1998). But women frequently feel they have little recourse. They are often dependent on the husband's income, and society frowns on women who marry more than once. Packard-Winkler (1998: 403) suggested that Thai women's tensions are negotiated through various avenues. These include silence (or "withholding voice") and more active resistances, such as staying single, complaining to husbands, and even cutting of a man's penis. I would add to this list that some wives seek spirit assistance to fight mistresses. Nora leaders tend to shy away from this request because it borders on black magic. Also, the client may be lying to trick the nora leader into breaking up a legitimate marriage. I asked Nora Chalerm whether wives ask for help in fending off mistresses. He said, "They
do, but sometimes minor wives lie to me and say they are major wives. So, I don’t want to be involved with this problem. I argue they go to another place.”

This was also a morality issue for Nora Plaeg, according to his niece. In 2001, she said:

If minor wives want him to help them to snatch the major wife’s husband, he won’t help them. But he has to ask first whether that woman is a minor wife or major wife. The major wife has to bring her birth date and name and her husband’s birth date and name. Seven days after that the husband will come back home. He [Nora Plaeg] hardly ever helps people who have family problems because it is a sin. But if a major wife asks him for help, he will help her. He is illiterate but the ancestors know everything and they can do everything.

Although professional nora mediums also have qualms about dealing with this contentious matter, they must assist with this common request. Ratchada (R), the medium I described earlier, has a well developed ethical philosophy based on the Buddhist framework of karma:

R
If the major wife comes to ask for help, the spirit will help. But if the minor wife asks for help, the spirit will deny her immediately. If they [minor wives] come to make the husband love them, the spirit will deny them. If the major wife asks whether her husband was attacked by black magic or not, the spirit will help but they [major wives] seldom come here. The spirit doesn’t want to do this; the spirit does not want to make trouble. Mostly I will cure people. Were they attacked by black magic? Why don’t they have success in their businesses? What is the cause of the problem? What is in their bodies? The spirit does not like the story between minor and major wives because he doesn’t want to make trouble for the medium [myself].

MG
Mostly, what suggestion does the spirit give to the major wives?

R
If the major wife thinks about revenge, the spirit will tell her not to do that and not to do anything because the major wife still has her own sins (bad karma, gam). The spirit tells the wife to make a lot of merit and give offerings (e.g. give to the needy, tham bun tham thaan). If the wife thinks about revenge, the spirit will tell her to be resigned to her fate (plong), to do good things, have mercy, spread kindness and pray. The spirit

143 Professional spirit mediums regularly deal with this marital problem. Techniques include symbolically tying the husband to the wife, making the husband impotent with any other woman, and harming the minor wife.
recommends the person not do wrong things but instead pray and make her heart comfortable. And she should think that the husband who left did so because of her karma and her bad fate (duang mai dii). So let him go. She should do only good things but not think like that [of revenge]. But if she wants to take revenge, she should go to another place [another medium] because here the spirit does not do that. Here the spirit suggests only that she not think about killing him and taking revenge and not curse (yaa pai daa). We should make merit and spread kindness, so our bad karma will be reduced. If someone curses us, do not curse back.

**Requesting Beauty and Popularity.** Nora Plaeg gave my assistant Tananan a secret magical prayer and instructed her to memorize it and destroy the paper. He said, “You use it to bless powder and put it on your face so everyone will love you. Don’t let anyone see it. Other people will use this prayer if they see it. I only give it to you. You have to repeat the prayer three times. You should use this prayer especially when you have to meet senior people.” Known for his many incantations, Nora Plaeg was sought out by female contestants in beauty contests and transvestites alike. His oldest daughter said, “A lot of transvestites from Malaysia come here too.” And his niece added, “They ask him to make them have an inward radiance. Women who have wedding ceremonies will come here too [for the same thing]. Clients can ask him to make love potions (yaa sane)” (for very similar Thai love magicians in Malaysia, see Johnson 1999).

In this romance game, women are especially vulnerable. The use of love charms by village spirit doctors, particularly for men pursuing women to make them love slaves, is legendary (Terwiel 1994: 123). Also the hierarchical structure of Thai society generally places women in a subjugated position in relation to men, notably their husbands (Lyttleton 1999: 37). As the country develops rapidly and social norms change, Western concepts of beauty are disseminated into the smallest villages. With emphasis on make-up, whiteness of skin associated with upper classes, and straightened hair, women’s
bodies are commodified at the same time that their traditional base in villages is undermined by economic changes (Whittaker 1999: 44). Sociologist Erving Goffman (1956) developed the concepts of producing the body for public view to convey certain messages and being embarrassed by uncontrollable aspects. I argue that beauty and being charming are tools that women use to sell themselves to men -- lovers, bosses, and predominantly senior people -- in an attempt to reduce the gender inequality inherent in the society.

**Conclusion: Four Central Findings**

The first and most significant finding is that the number of girls and women involved in *nora* ritual performances has significantly increased in the past few decades so that commonly 70-80% of the participants and from 10-30% of the leaders are female. Before the historical arrival of Hindu-Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism in present-day Thailand, women may have held positions as priestesses and conducted similar ancestral ceremonies in the region (Andaya 1994). But in the remembered past, only men were allowed to head *nora* troupes and pass the spirits to male offspring. Increasingly, women are taking over these roles today. This transition is a quiet one, rather than being characterized as strong resistance to the gendered system. In this case, gender articulates with power, the power to lead and formulate the relationship between a community and its ancestor spirits. Therefore, the feminization of *nora*, meaning an increase in the number of women, appears to have resulted in some role changes.

Second, the doctrine of Buddhist ordination has been used to create androcentric rules that exclude women from becoming the principal *nora* performer. Rather than challenging this structure, women are adapting the rules to run their own groups and pass
the spirits to daughters as well as sons. This is possible partly because southern rural Buddhism has syncretically mixed with Hindu-Brahmanism, Animism, and other faiths, and therefore is quite flexible. Also Thai culture promotes a non-confrontational style so finding solutions by other methods is an accepted practice.

Third, the nora community includes occasional and professional home-based spirit mediums. Throughout the country, urban professional mediums are the newest group of spiritualists; their population has exploded since the late 1970s (Irvine 1982, Morris 2000, Pattana 1999). This linkage between nora performers and spirit mediums provides reciprocal benefits for both groups in terms of legitimacy, sharing of knowledge, and an expanded client base. It is also illustrative of the growth of religious sects in the south and of their interconnections.

Fourth, although nora rituals serve the needs of both men and women, the services are particularly valuable to women clients. Women are often the main support of their families and culturally are expected to shoulder the parenting role. Although Buddhism administers to the spiritual needs of many women, some feel it is difficult to turn to revered male monks for personal help. Taking that observation further, I am arguing that mediumship is growing partly because the state religion, administered through monks, does not sufficiently address female problems. Through nora religious practice, women are strengthening kinship and ancestral ties and finding solutions to “misfortune and suffering” (Sered 1994: 103). Nora women strongly believe in Buddhism but also function in a separate realm with spirits and rules outside of the

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144 Irvine argued that the reasons for the decline in northern matrilineal sects and increase in city professional mediums were “unequal development and modernisation” in the changing economy (1982: 318).
national religion. They dance for the ancestors and the ancestors dance through them in a direct mediation with the deities.

I have used the term “quiet revolution” in the title of this chapter to convey the idea that women have moved from the margins to the center of the art, from the backrooms making costumes and food offerings, to the center mat where they now address the ancestors directly. But in other ways, this is far from a revolution. Men are not being overthrown nor their jobs seized. Rather they are revered even more highly because fewer remain as leaders. Also this gender transition is occurring in a rather safe arena, not in the male-dominated professions of business and politics. Nora is based on village life and agricultural production, where women have long had their strength.

Using a once popular theory of complementary roles, academics have argued that women’s roles in the household are not inferior to male roles in the community. “In fact however, the household level is extremely important in terms of production, reproduction and socialization; without these, the higher levels would collapse” (Bencha Yoddumnern-Attig 1992: 17). (The use of the term “higher levels” rather ironically reveals the androcentric perspective latent in this argument, although probably unintended.) Therefore, the Thai concept that women are rooted in the village and represent the best of tradition fits well with the nora discourse based on rural family lineages and ancestors.145 The gradual increase of women into numerical dominance appears to have met little resistance, probably due to the need for performers. But I will retain the term “revolution” because this is still a major gender change in a genre that in the past rested on the prowess of male masters and their superior magic. In the face of modernity, both

145 However, I would note that recent capitalist expansion appears to have diminished women’s power in rural communities, particularly their economic situation in relation to men (Whittaker 1999: 43).
masculinity and femininity are being redefined in the gendered power structure at the local and national level. Although women remain marginalized in the national religion, they are center stage in this local religion.

The next chapter examines what people say about the religious influences on *nora* and what these claims of legitimacy mean.
CHAPTER 5

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF NORA

Introduction

Nora is part of the syncretic fabric of folk religion, sometimes called “folk Buddhism,” which is the most widespread belief system in the country. This chapter explores the meanings attached to different religious components of nora -- Theravada Buddhism, Animism, Hindu-Brahmanism, Taoism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Islam. This analysis investigates the construction of narratives on origins and how claims to truth are invoked, rather than attempting to verify historical facts.

In my thesis, I argue that nora is iconic of the south and has associated itself with the culture and religion of the nation-state. Although the drama is not actually considered to be Buddhist by participants, nora families have greatly benefited from this link to the national faith. Nora gains legitimacy by separating from other forms of discredited spirit mediumship, which are seen as based on superstition rather than modern science (Bangkok Post 13 Oct. 2004). While other types of mediumship are threatened with being outlawed, nora is culturally defined as a historical performing art grounded in idyllic rural communities and respected ancestors. Likewise, the government benefits by having a popular, attractive symbol to mark its territory in the ethnically and politically divisive south.

Internationally, the concept of religious nationalism has constructed the modern state with an ideal religion, which is central to national identity (Bowen 1998). However, world religions historically have adapted to local belief systems creating a symbiotic
relationship that serves both parties. These belief systems operate on the concept of pragmatism, which allows worshippers to fulfill different needs without pledging exclusivity to one faith (Reader and Tanabe 1998). The nora drama follows this Eastern syncretic model of integrating several religions.146

The Significance of Asking: What Religion is Nora?

The purpose of identifying constituent variants is to understand the historical significance of different religions and how they serve to bind or separate southern nora from the nationalist project today. By asking the question, “Is nora Buddhist, Animist, or Brahmanistic?” I am asking where it fits in the discourses on nationalist Buddhism and regional pluralism. The answers I received from nora informants were something like, “All of the above.” When I asked this question of spirit medium Fung, his reply was, “It is Thai culture (watthanatham thai).” I understood his answer to mean that nora represents the blending of many religious elements typical of popular Thai culture (see Keyes 1995: 68). Historian Sarup described this southern religious blending in 2001:

Phatthalung is the border between Buddhism and Islam. Nora is not absolutely Thai. Most of nora is Buddhist, but there also are Brahmanistic elements in nora. In the past, the entire south of Thailand was Hindu before it was changed to be Buddhist. It is believed that nora came here at the time of the change from Hinduism to Buddhism. The south changed to be Buddhist in the 19th Buddhist century [mid 13th to mid 14th centuries in the Christian calendar]. So this kind of entertainment cannot be determined whether it is Buddhist or Islamic. It has been adapted all the time.

146 Nora members argue that the different religions are related or share a common origin in India. Academics seem more concerned about this issue than the practitioners do. However, participants still set outer limits. At some point, the nora performance might stop being what people consider “the way it should be” or “our tradition” and might assume a foreign character. One example of a potential threat to this boundary occurred when Chinese Mahayana Buddhists and Taoists joined a roong khruu ceremony in Phatthalung to provide self-mortification spectacles. Although the nora performance benefited from the new attractions, some members questioned the eroding of their own rituals. The nora community has continued to accommodate these new performances, rather than expel them. But the Chinese rituals are restricted to time slots outside of the nora ritual schedule, particularly at night.
Pittaya (1995) also saw many religious traces. He wrote that Buddhism, Hinduism, and Animism were all evident in *nora* rituals, but Buddhism was particularly strong because it solved problems:

The *nora roong khruu* ceremony relates to society because it is the ceremony of the Buddhist beliefs at the villagers' level. It is the beliefs about Buddhist teachings (*thamma* or *dhamma*), Hinduism, and the supernatural arts or ghosts and angels. The beliefs also include the act of giving respect to the ancestors, possession, and other rituals in the ceremony. The rituals in *nora roong khruu* can show the beliefs of villagers, especially the Buddhist beliefs, because humans established religions to solve their problems. The problems are both individual and social problems, which relate to the basic desires of human beings (Pittaya 1995: 70).

This religious syncretism is illustrated by an influential man who had 12 wives from different ethnic and geographic backgrounds in the Phatthalung Legend. At the 2001 *roong khruu* at Wat Thakhae, I saw the possession of Nora Thiang, the adopted adult son of Nora Plaeg. His possessing spirit was Phra Muang Thawng, who was described as a leader of *nora* spirits and a relative of the founder. One of his legendary wives, Mae Khaenawn, was a well-known assistant to the king’s daughter. Phra Muang Thawng had 12 wives who were Lao, Chinese, Burmese, and Malay and followed Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist faiths. I never learned all 12 identities, but the number 12 is used symbolically in *nora*, rather than being a literal number (mentioned in Chapter 2). According to *nora* people, the meaning of this man’s story is that many diverse groups and beliefs were related to the genre.

At that Wat Thakhae ceremony in 2001, a fire walking ritual was held. I learned that the spirit medium who ran across the burning coals was possessed by both Chinese and Muslim spirits. I asked Nora Jop Chanabaan (NJC) about these two spirits. He said
Chinese and Muslim spirits possess because they are part of the legendary history, and he made reference to the 12 wives:

NJC Phra Muang Thawng is the leader of nora spirits. He has 12 wives. The nationalities of his wives are Chinese, Muslim, Thai and also Christian and Malaysian. This is mentioned in the legend. We are not sure whether it is true or false. The ship wrecked in the Andaman Sea so everybody in the boat went ashore. All of them are nora ancestors.

MG [Asked later] Is nora Buddhist?
NJC Nora is coupled with Buddhism. Religions have to have some performance or play to entertain people. So when religions are founded, performances will follow. This is the way to attract people to be closer to religion. Every part of nora is Buddhist, but there are also other religions. You can see from the story. Taa (grandfather) Muang Thawng's wives are from many religions.

MG Are some parts of nora Hindu?
NJC Hinduism has never appeared in nora. Hinduism may have a relationship with nora but no one has studied about it. But I think that it is related to nora because everybody in the world is related each other.

This theme of 12 wives, or 12 ethnicities, was mentioned by an older woman named Khun Daeng at the same roong khruu. Referring to the 12 wives, she said the Chinese spirit mediums had come to help the ailing Nora Plaeg. This demonstrated the close relationship between the earlier Thai residents in the south and the later Chinese arrivals. Daeng said:

Many people danced [yesterday] because the ancestors came to possess them. The group, which did firewalking, was different. Taa [grandfather, referring to Nora Plaeg] was sick for a long time. He cannot eat and sleep. This roong khruu ceremony began in 2518 [1975]. Now he is 88 years old [actually 81]. The spirit mediums, who come here, come to help the ceremony. Some of the spirit mediums are possessed by [Chinese Goddess] Jao Mae Guan Im. Of the 12 wives of Taa Muang Thawng, the first wife is Thai and the last wife is Chinese. So that is why Chinese spirits came here. Some of the 12 wives are Lao and Burmese.

These Chinese spirits behaved like a younger wife helping an older wife, she explained. Therefore, contemporary nora families use the tale of the 12 wives to provide a legendary basis for inter-ethnic cross-border cooperation. This view stands in stark
contrast to the nationalistic discourse in which neighboring countries, especially Burma, are often painted as historic enemies of the Thai nation (Thongchai 1994). In summary, *nora* participants identify with both Buddhism and local faiths. This is an accommodating position that involves negotiation, compromise, and some tension.

**Theravada Buddhism**

*Nora’s* relationship to Buddhism is crucial to the drama’s identity as a cultural symbol of Thailand. For *nora* to claim legitimacy as part of the Thai nation, it must seek approval from Buddhist institutions, namely local monasteries. Buddhism is an extremely important part of constructed Thai identity and the nation-state. It permeates all aspects of life – education, business, media, politics, the arts, architecture, and the legal system. I would suggest that if the organized Buddhist hierarchy rejected the *nora* tradition, the drama might be marginalized to extinction. “It is well known among scholars of Thailand that the monarchical institution and Buddhism are the most important elements of the nation” (Thongchai 1994: 4). Therefore, of all the religions, which have influenced *nora*, Buddhism will be given the most space in this chapter due to its significance to the drama.

However the practice of Buddhism is quite diverse from the margins to the center. The Buddhism that was practiced in the outlying provinces in the first half of the 20th century was more attuned to daily life and local customs than the organized bureaucratic Buddhism of the nation’s center in Bangkok, according to historian Kamala Tiyavanich (1997). Having studied wandering meditation monks in the northeast, she argued that Buddhism in Southeast Asia was successful because it adapted so well to local beliefs. She wrote, “... Theravada Buddhism, has displayed an extraordinary ability to adapt to
local customs, languages, and cultures” (Kamala 1997: 3). The following section explores this adaptation of Buddhism to nora’s ancestral belief system in the south.

The Opinions of Two Monks. Two monks, who participated in nora ceremonies, explained well the complex inter-relationship between nora and Theravada Buddhism. Phra (honorific title given to monks and deities) Khajawn Bunsong, who I met at the roong khruu at Wat Thakhae in 2001, was a middle aged monk who had ordained only about ten months previously. He joined six other monks to give the opening blessing to the nora ceremony. Phra Khajawn said the temple’s monks always opened this ceremony and gave the usual Buddhist blessing, not a special one for nora. After the opening ritual, he left the nora stage, and I did not see him during the remainder of the three-day event. Later I found him sitting at the back of the monastery near the monks’ quarters, away from the stage and merchandise booths.147

Illustrating the ambivalent relationship between nora and Buddhism, Phra Khajawn said it was not appropriate for monks to watch nora. While the basis of the performance was Indian Brahmanism, the nora genre was connected with Buddhism through the nora founder buried at this temple, he said. Founder Khun Sii Satthaa had been a Buddhist and cremated here. But when I asked if nora was a Buddhist ceremony, the monk said, “That is not true. It is Brahmanic religion (saatsanaa phraam)….Buddhism is not related to entertaining performances.” I further asked about the Chinese-style fire walking ritual held that year, which I had never seen in a Theravada Buddhist monastery. His reply showed flexibility in acceptance of other religious practices, a hallmark of folk Buddhism. Phra Khajawn (PK) said:

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147 While monks usually stay aloof from commercial activities, temple fairs (ngaan wat) are very common in the country and considered a source of fun, as well as income for the temple.
PK That is a special ritual. They did it to attract people to the ceremony.
MG Will they have it in the future?
PK It depends on the people who would like to help in the ceremony [referring to the Chinese spirit mediums]. If they want to do fire walking (lui fai), they can do it.
MG Can monks come to this kind of ritual?
PK Monks can do the opening ceremony to chant, but after that, it is not suitable for monks to participate in the ceremony because it is related to entertainment.

For many monks, such spirit medium rituals are unusual and fascinating, and they cannot resist taking a glance. At the same nora ceremony in 2003, a teenage novice monk from Phatthalung walked around the sacred area for the Chinese hot oil ritual, looking intently at the large wok and other paraphernalia. He said he had never seen this ritual before and added that monks are not supposed to watch nora performances.

The second monk to be interviewed played a greater role at an initiation ceremony for Nora Wan’s female students in Khok Pho, Pattani Province in 2001. Seven monks from different local temples blessed the ceremony, and the head monk cut the students’ hair as a key element in the rite of passage. Deputy Abbot Phra Khruu Palat Panyaa from nearby Makhruut Temple said the organizers invited the monks so the public could make merit (tham bun) and receive auspicious blessings. I would point out that in this way, nora performances combine dual religious functions, satisfying Buddhism and the ancestors. The abbot said two parts of the ceremony were Buddhist: showing respect to the monkhood and Lord Buddha at the beginning and committing to obey the five moral precepts. The precepts are to “refrain from killing, stealing, wrong sexual conduct, lying, and alcohol” (Terwiel 1994: 164). Phra Khruu Palat (PKP) also said that nora was not Buddhist but was part of the supernatural arts.
PKP Monks only come to the ceremony to chant and bless people. Monks are not related to the other things.

MG What part of the ceremony is Buddhist?

PKP Before the ritual, they have to show respect to the monkhood and the Buddha (*wai phra*) and commit to obey the five rules (*samaathaan siin*).

MG Do you think that *nora* is Buddhist?

PKP No. It is the supernatural arts (*sai* - short for *saiyasaat* meaning magic). It is the way that people can show their respect to parents or teacher spirits (*khruu maw*). This is the way that people repay for the kindness of their ancestors.

MG Are there other religions involved?

PKP No. *Nora* is the way to repay for the kindness of some people.

To summarize the two monks’ remarks: (1) the *nora* ceremonies were definitely not Buddhist but related to Hindu-Brahmanism and magic; (2) the use of monks at the event allowed Buddhists to make extra merit; (3) the Buddhist rules did not forbid the use of monastery grounds for folk practices, but there were limits on monks participating; and (4) *nora* was a moral practice concerned with “repaying kindness” to parents and ancestors, a belief that is also central to Buddhist ideology. Therefore, the monks felt that Buddhism could accommodate other faiths with similar moral values. But the entertaining parts of *nora*, which keep the drama popular in rural villages, did not fit with the monks’ rules on austerity. Monks could not enjoy the singing, dancing, and ribald humor of *nora* so must excuse themselves after giving the blessings. Yet, the participation of monks gives a strong endorsement by symbolizing the approval of Buddhism in the beginning rituals.

**Performances at the Wat.** *Nora* has long been associated with Buddhist monasteries, which served as performance grounds for early traveling troupes. In the past, monasteries had many functions beyond religious services. They were the heart of the village for recreation and for education for boys, and today many monasteries still run
schools but for both sexes. The monastery was as an essential part of the rural social structure (Tambiah 1970). For entertainment in the south, shadow puppet shows, wicker ball games (tagraw), and even greased pole climbing are still enjoyed in the shadow of aging white temple walls.

However, nora is not just another secular amusement in the monastery grounds. Rather the drama is religiously connected to this sacred space. For example, when the roong krueu was held at Wat Thakhae, the performance incorporated many of the monastery’s religious symbols, clearly invoking the spiritual power of Buddhism. Statues of two monks in a nearby shrine were connected to the stage by a holy string. A permanent small shrine, built to honor the nora founder, was the home base for mediums entering possession. The large bodhi tree (ton phoo) in the compound was annually wrapped in white cloth because the nora founder’s ashes were buried there. Since the Lord Buddha received enlightenment under a bodhi tree in India, these trees are planted in Thai monasteries and are considered sacred. All these structures and rituals connect nora with the Buddhist monastery.

Yet, between nora and Buddhism there are areas of dissonance, like the ambivalent roles of monks mentioned before. For instance, the Wat Thakhae nora performance was not completely integrated with the monastery because the rituals occurred outside the sacred temple buildings of the ubosot and viharn, which were closed to the public during the ceremony. (There was one exception that I know of, when the nora ceremony occurred inside a temple building. Nora Somphong told me that in 2001 the new statue to Khun Sii Satthaa was consecrated in the ubosot by nine monks with government officials present.) Nora’s position between Buddhism and local beliefs and
between religion and entertainment is seen in the holding of performances in secular areas such as homes, colleges, and municipal fair grounds. Symbolically nora is connected spiritually to Buddhism, but it is also situated on the periphery.

Respect for the Buddhist Calendar. Nora ceremonies involving possessions are not held on Buddhist holy days, which occur four times a month, because the ancestor spirits will not attend. During those days, it is believed that the ancestors are participating in Buddhist rituals in heaven because they are Buddhists. Also out of respect for the national religion, nora rituals are not held during the eight lunar month (in July to August) when monks enter seclusion in monasteries at the beginning of Lent.

Monks Bless the Nora Ceremony and Bring Merit. In groups of odd numbers considered lucky, monks open the nora ceremony by chanting in Pali language for auspiciousness, to make the area sacred, and to ward off evil spirits. I observed monks chanting two prayers -- to donate merit to other spirits and to give respect to monks. Since monks bless many diverse ceremonies in Thailand (Swearer 1995: 19), their attendance should not be considered a full endorsement. For instance, I saw monks bless the spirit teachers of a tattoo master in Thonburi near Bangkok and a similar ritual for a female spirit medium in Songkhla. In both cases, the monks left after chanting and possibly taking a morning meal but did not participate further. As mentioned by Phra Khruu Palat above, the presence of the monks makes the event meritorious for the audience.

Nora Leaders Honor Buddhism and Use Buddhist Religious Items. At the beginning of the rituals for opening the stage (gaan beug roong) and inviting the teacher spirits (gaan gaat khruu), the nora leader gives respect to a variety of gods and angels.
High on the list is the Buddhist Triple Gems consisting of the Lord Buddha, his teachings, and the monkhood. A statue of the Lord Buddha is put on a high altar at the ceremony. A holy or auspicious string (*saai sin* or *say sincana*) encircles the statue and the outside of the stage for protection from bad influences (Terwiel 1994: 66). The typical ritual items used in Buddhist temples are also used in *nora* ceremonies -- candles, incense, flowers, and holy water. These are also employed in most local rituals involving spirit mediums and tutelary spirits.

**Making Merit.** A concept used in *nora*, making merit or doing good deeds, is usually associated with the monastery. This is one of the most important and prevalent concepts in Thai Buddhism, often expressed through feeding the monks and giving contributions (Tambiah 1970: 141-151). Writing on karma in popular folk Buddhism, Keyes (1983: 267-268) identified two meanings of merit -- a social status for being virtuous and a kind of "spiritual insurance" for a good existence in the next life. "Throughout Buddhist Southeast Asia....merit is conceived almost as a substance that can be possessed in variable quantities and that can be translated into this-worldly virtue or power as well as stored up to be used at death to ensure a good rebirth" (Keyes 1983: 270). Several researchers have suggested that merit is part of Southeast Asian social ranking and hierarchy. Those who have merit, represented by wealth, beauty, and power, are able to make more merit (Lehman 1996). Yet the idea of merit is understood differently by the educated and by the less tutored, argued anthropologist Terwiel (1994: 3). He wrote that farmers connected merit with magical power.

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148 This white cotton string is used in Buddhist rituals to demark the area that is protected by Buddhism, where evil spirits are not allowed to enter. Monks hold the string and chant the protecting prayers (*paritta suttas*). The string is also used in making holy water (*nammon*) and pieces of it become protective amulets (Wales 1931: 73).
This Buddhist concept is employed extensively by nora leaders. Throughout the nora ceremony, the audience is encourage to donate money to “make merit” for the ancestors. The spirits do not ask for any set amount so the public can donate anything, even ten baht (US 24 cents), I was told. The money is used for the nora ceremony, rather than the monastery. Donations are often tied to a planned project or an expense like funding the building of a shrine or paying for electricity for the show. Nora leaders use the merit concept throughout the year in other ritual activities too. For example, Nora Plaeg performed a ritual to make merit for a newly built house (tham bun baan). People suffering from black magic could give donations to Nora Plaeg to make merit, which would relieve their pain. Nora leaders also need to make merit for themselves. For example, Nora Plaeg offered reduced prices for ceremonies, thereby donating some of his labor for a good cause. By using this belief in merit, nora leaders functioned like Buddhist monks, who are known as fields of merit.

Transferring Merit to Ancestors. The idea that one can share merit is common throughout Southeast Asia and is significant in funerals when merit can help the deceased be reborn under favorable circumstances (Keyes 1995: 119). Sending merit to family members functions to keep kin together despite the individualism in the concept of karma (Keyes 1982: 283, citing Gombrich). I attended a Buddhist funeral in Songkhla in 2004 in which the Thai widow poured water from one vessel to another (gruat nam) to send merit to her late husband after the monks had chanted. After this ritual, the water may be poured on the ground by a tree. A prayer is said to the Goddess of the Earth to take the merit to loved ones. The belief is that this ritual transfers merit to ancestors, hungry ghosts (phii pret), and others in the spirit world, providing them with merit to be reborn.
quickly. When monks chant in a nora ceremony, it also becomes a merit making event. Therefore, monks perform this water ritual and chant a dedication in Pali for the nora ancestors to receive the merit. In a rather unusual ritual, nora leaders also perform water pouring for the soul of the crocodile, which is stabbed and will reputedly be reborn, even though the animal is a model made of woven rattan around a banana trunk.

**Following the Five Buddhist Precepts.** Buddhists, who attend temples on holy days, usually follow a monk in reciting the five precepts, in which they agree to behave morally (Tambiah 1970: 89, Terwiel 1994: 161). This ritual is also performed at nora ceremonies. Speaking through a microphone, a monk at Wat Thakhae opened the 2001 roong khruu ceremony by saying two monks had brought nora to Thailand during the time of the Ayutthaya Empire. Through this narrative, he linked nora with Buddhism and the early Thai kingdom, although most accounts tied nora to India, Srivijaya, and Hindu-Brahmanism instead. Then he gave the five precepts:

The host of this ceremony invited me to chant for the auspiciousness of the place of nora. Ajaan Jop and Ajaan Somphong are the leaders of nora groups. Everybody, both men and women, young and old, please come here to support manora, manorah and manorii. Today, Ajaan Somphong invites the monks to perform the ritual to chant for blessing the nora stage. Now everybody please concentrate to receive five blessings (phawn). They are not to kill, steal, commit adultery, lie, or drink alcohol (phaanaa, athinnaa, gaame, musaa, suraa). If you do all these bad things, you will go to hell (narog).

One of the five rules is against killing any creatures. Thai Buddhists often try to shoo away insects rather than kill them. Although monks and other Buddhists eat meat, more people are coming to believe that it is sinful to eat large animals like cows, which seem more closely related to humans. Therefore, the performance of killing a crocodile is undertaken carefully. Nora Somphong explained how the model crocodile has a spirit:
Nora people in the past had a lot of spells (aakhom); they studied about supernatural arts. It is strange that the crocodile in the stabbing ritual is unusual. We have to open the eyes and open the mouth (beug net beug phaag) [to bring it to life].\(^{149}\) When we stab it, it will become rotten. Normally, a banana trunk will not get rotten. We will float the crocodile in the water. We cannot leave it just anywhere because anyone who has bad luck can get bad luck from the crocodile....For me, before I stab the crocodile, I have to repeat the magical prayer that I have learned before. This prayer can help me to do everything. Great-grandfather [an elder nora leader] will write a mystical design (yan) on the crocodile's feet. He writes yan to dedicate merit to the crocodile. Even though we stab the crocodile which is made from a banana trunk, in the past if we had this ritual a crocodile in the sea would die. The crocodile in the sea died because we called his spirit into the model. When we have the stabbing crocodile ritual in nora roong khruu, a crocodile in the sea will die. It is a sin [to kill it]. We have to do some rituals to chant to dedicate merit for the crocodile. And we have to have the water pouring ceremony (gruat nam) also.

By professing religious values, like not killing animals, nora adheres to Buddhist ethics.

**Performance of Buddha Life Stories.** Tales of the Buddha’s reincarnations are regularly performed as part of the nora ceremony (on jatakas see Swearer 1995: 177, fn 8). As a Buddha rebirth tale, the Suthon-Manora Story gave the drama its name in the past. At the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century, other stories from the lives of the Buddha were introduced to the drama. And still today, scenes from these morality tales are enacted. For instance, in 2004 at Walailak University in Nakhon Si Thammarat, I watched Nora Chin Chimpong play a well-known scene in which young Prince Siddhartha tearfully leaves his wife and baby to seek enlightenment (Ringis 1990: 5). This episode was based on murals at the royal Wat Phra Mahaathaat in Nakhon Si Thammarat.

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\(^{149}\) Nora Somphong mentioned opening the eyes and mouth of the crocodile to bring it to life. It is interesting to note that newly cast Buddha statues are also imbued with life by having their eyes opened. One scholar identified this as Hindu in origin (see Swearer 1995: 32), but I have also seen a ritual to open the eyes of a cloth dragon held up by performers in Hong Kong.
Nora Initiation Modeled after Monk Ordination. As discussed in Chapter 4, nora leaders in Thailand and Malaysia have created initiation ceremonies modeled after a Thai Theravada Buddhist monk’s ordination. Golomb wrote about a nora initiation in a Thai community in Malaysia attended by Buddhist monks: “The three-day ritual wherein the apprentice receives his full costume from this mentor, and thereby becomes a master himself, is closely modeled after the ordination ceremony for a Buddhist monk” (1978:60). The new nora performers received purification, followed eight precepts (a few more rules than the lay Buddhist obeys), and showed respect to their masters.

The following is a comparison between a nora initiation in Khok Pho, Pattani Province and a Buddhist ordination. The head nora person is called nora upatchaa while the head monk for an ordination is called upatchaa. Nine nora leaders were required for the initiation ceremony just as nine monks are needed for many Buddhist ceremonies. The nora novitiates’ hair was symbolically cut. Nora Awuth said the hair is first cut by the highest spiritual persons, who are the monks, then by the ancestor spirits through mediums, and finally by the nora leaders. The ritual to call the soul back to the body served as a morale booster for the nora persons as it does for would-be monks. The nora novitiates also gave clothes to the monks and received clothes in return, like in the ordination. In the nora initiation, parents gave their children to the officiating monks just as parents give their sons to the monks in ordinations. Persons preparing for both fields go through rituals that discard their old lives and enter a liminal stage before gaining new status, in a classic rite of passage (Turner 1969). Nora Awuth Chaichana (NAC) explained the procedure:
NAC We have monks do it [the ritual] first because monks are the head (upatchaa) of every ordination. Monks who are able to cut the hair have to be able to perform ordinations for other people. After the monks cut the hair, they have to tie cloths around the students’ necks, which is like giving a costume for auspiciousness. After that we have the ancestors [the spirits who are possessing spirit mediums] cut their hair. They are invisible, but they are the witnesses to the ceremony. It is the day to tell them that these people are going to be nora. After that, it is the duty of nora people [to do the cutting]. This [procedure] is related to the levels in the people's beliefs. Monks are the highest level.

MG What does the monk, spirit medium and nora leaders do that is different?

NAC Monks will cut hair like in the ordination and they have incantations (or spells, khaathaa). When the ancestors cut it, they also have khaathaa. And nora leaders who cut hair also have khaathaa too.

This initiation symbolically replicates the Thai spiritual order by having the monks perform the rituals first, as representatives of Lord Buddha. The ritual can be seen as dramatizing the historical coming of Buddhism to Thailand, which took precedence over ancestor spirits and their mediums. The initiation does not simply copy a monk’s ordination. Instead, both monks and nora persons perform the rituals together, thereby intertwining the Buddhist and nora rites of passage. Although usually monks leave the stage after the opening blessing in the roong khruu ceremony, in this initiation ceremony, monks performed the cutting ritual and then watched the mediums possess before retiring for lunch at 11:30 a.m. Since Buddhist ordinations are common events in Thailand, the nora initiation gains status and recognition by duplicating familiar and respected Buddhist rituals.

_Nora Leaders Compared to Monks._ Nora and Buddhism are often viewed as parallel traditions with nora leaders being compared to monks. In Chapter 4, I have described the similarities between nora leaders and monks in terms of knowing spells, being pure, and having supernatural power. Golomb found these same likenesses in both

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Thailand and Malaysia. About southern Thailand, he wrote, “The *manooraa* dance-drama tradition, replete with magical-animistic curing rituals, has continued to be intimately associated with the monkhood” (Golomb 1985: 63). He gave the following examples of Buddhist involvement: monks presided at *nora* initiations, married persons must become monks before *nora* initiation, and *nora* is commonly performed at Buddhist events.

His observations about *nora* in Malaysia are relevant because the dance-drama contributed to the identity of the small Thai community in the Malaysian state of Kelantan. Golomb (1978: 57-61) reported that *nora* performers gained social status and passed on local literature, much like monks. Learning the *nora* performance was considered as difficult as studying religion in the monkhood, and both paths could be careers for men. However, the two roles differed greatly in their gendered ideas on masculinity. The *nora* performer was considered a romantic figure, adept at love charms and wooing women, while the monk remained celibate and withdrawn from society. I would add that all these observations hold true for male *nora* leaders in Thailand who are respected for their religious powers and knowledge of literature but also are considered adventurous and charming to the opposite sex.

**The Spirits of Monks Possess.** The ties between Buddhism and *nora* are further cemented when the spirits of monks possess *nora* spirit mediums. A shrine at Wat Thakhae houses statues of two deceased monks, Taa (or Phaw) Luang Dam and Taa Luang Phum, who were respected as followers of *nora*. Nora Somphong said, “The spirit who possessed [a man] yesterday was the abbot of this temple in the past. His name is Phaw Luang Dam. He has his statue in the shrine. He liked *nora* very much and some of his followers are *nora*. He had some spells to make himself invulnerable (*khong*...
Therefore, Buddhism and *nora* are not just related by doctrine but physically join together when this monk’s spirit enters the body of a *nora* medium.

In summary, from this extensive list of practices, it is evident that Buddhism plays a weighty role in *nora*. Buddhism contributes a moral structure, merit-making functions, and a model for leadership and initiation. *Nora* gains legitimacy by having monks give the blessing and by holding the ceremony on monastery grounds. In turn, Buddhism benefits by maintaining its relevance to the community’s indigenous beliefs as part of the local social structure. The difference between the two systems is evident in the departure of the monks after the opening ceremony, but this negotiated solution seems satisfy everyone. (More differences are described below regarding reincarnation beliefs.) Because *nora* is identified with organized Buddhism, it gains religious and national legitimacy and can claim identity as a symbol for the nation.

*Nora* families also follow other belief systems, which pre-date the influence of Buddhism. Animism is not an organized religion, but it is the foundation of *nora* ancestor propitiation.

**Animism**

Academics have argued that Animism was the religion of early Tai-speaking people:

All general reports of the religions of the Tai-speakers mention practices indicating a strong magico-animism, upon which world religions, such as Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, or Hinduism have grafted themselves. Writing about the Tai group as a whole, the compilers of a gazetteer on the region notice that the fundamental religion of these people is centered upon the propitiation of ancestors and a multitude of spirits (Terwiel 1994: 16).
In the south, Animism is called the doctrine of ghosts and angels (latthi phii phii, latthi thep thep or latthi phii saang thewadaa). The existence of spirits or ghosts is quite ancient and was described by King Ramkhamhaeng of the Sukhothai Kingdom in a famed 13th century stone inscription (Anuman 1986: 99). The King stated that the guardian spirit of a mountain must be propitiated or “this realm perishes.” According to H. G. Quaritch Wales (1931), who described court ceremonies in the early decades of the 20th century, this inscription illustrated the blending of Animism, Buddhism, and Brahmanism. “From this we see that the animism of the early Thai still enjoyed the royal protection, despite the fact that the Kings of Sukhodaya had adopted much of Khmer Brahmanism and were fervent Buddhists as well. But it appears that there was only one spirit who was thought worthy of the royal patronage, and it was a mountain spirit” (Wales 1931: 301).

Nora is based on Animism, according to several scholars. Researching the practice of nora among Thai immigrants in Kedah State, Malaysia, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (1982: 53) wrote, “It is possible, further, to discern in the Mesi Mala myth, in some of Nora Chatri’s characteristic features and in beliefs strongly connected with the genre an animistic or shamanistic base upon which the Sudhana-Manohara story has been planted” (1982: 53).

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150 As Phya Anuman Rajadhon stated the term phii today has been downgraded to mean an evil spirit or threatening ghost. Benevolent spirits, such as ancestors, are often called by the more respectful Buddhist term of winyaan, discussed below.

151 Considered the earliest written information on the Tai-speaking people, this inscription has been under attack by academics who question its authenticity and suggest it was produced under King Mongkut for political purposes (Wyatt 1994: 48).

152 Animism is the belief that a soul, or anima, produces life and that spiritual forces permeate the physical world. Early social evolutionist Edward Tylor (1832 to 1917) said Animism was the foundation of all religious systems based on the belief in a soul, which continues after death, and in a hierarchy of spirits and gods that affect life on earth (Langness 1974: 25). “The development of ancestor worship, according to
In Thailand, academics have engaged in debates on the relationship between Animism and Buddhism, particularly whether Thais practice one, two, or more religions (Tannabaum 1999). Terwiel argued that Thai society was divided into two economic class sectors with different perceptions, although both use the same basic Buddhist concepts. “The religion of the farmer is basically magico·animistic, while those among the elite who adhere to religion may be regarded as having organized an intellectual appreciation of their religion” (Terwiel 1994: 3). Among rural people with lower incomes, the dominant belief was in “syncretic Buddhism” in which Animism dominated and Buddhist concepts were adapted. This was in contrast to the urban elite’s “compartmentalized Buddhism” where so-called pure or philosophical scriptural Buddhism was valued over Animism, he wrote (Terwiel 1994: 4).

Terwiel is describing the power of organized Buddhism in Bangkok and other urban areas and the stronger beliefs in Animism in the countryside (see Kamala 1997). But I think this dichotomy is somewhat simplistic. I would point out that successful spirit mediums in large cities are financed by the nation’s upper crust, whatever their intellectual understanding of pure scriptures. Also I find his term “syncretic Buddhism” rather misleading as it gives more weight to Buddhism over Animism, despite his stating that an “animistic worldview prevails” (1994: 4).

Tylor’s theory, gave people the idea that departed spirits could exist permanently in a bodiless state, and could take possession of living people at will” (Smart 1991: 49). This belief that ancestors can influence their descendants is particularly prevalent among agricultural societies where land is inherited. In describing “ancestor worship” in China, John McCreery (2000: 286) stated that “filial piety” is valued in this hierarchical system of exchange between the older and younger generations. “Chinese ancestor worship extends this pattern of exchange to include the dead as well as the living” (McCreery 2000: 286). Animism is thought to help people deal with daily needs, which are not addressed by official scriptural ideology or by a distant, abstract god. Therefore, often Animism and world religions are linked together and described with the adjective folk, such as folk Buddhism (Halverson 1996: 37-43).
I understand *nora* to be basically an Animistic belief system, focusing on ancestors. (I will continue this discussion in Chapter 6 on the core cultural value of kinship.) Although at first glance, Buddhism and Animism appear to have joined rather seamlessly in the magico-animistic rituals of *nora*, there are tensions and conflicting beliefs. Sometimes *nora* services conflict with similar services performed by monks. For instance, people give food offerings for ancestors at *nora* ceremonies. But some people argue that they have already give food to ancestors through Buddhist monks (communication Thianchai 2004). Another area of disagreement lies in the understanding of reincarnation in Buddhist doctrine.

**Rejecting Reincarnation.** Theravada Buddhist doctrine subscribes to reincarnation, a cycle of life and death. The goal is to eventually escape the cycle and its suffering and reach nirvana (*nibbana*) where there is no ego. However, some *nora* practitioners have a different understanding of the afterlife based on strong Animistic roots. The belief is that when *nora* people die, they are not reborn but stay attached to the earth to help their descendants.

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153 Both Hinduism and its offshoot Buddhism believe in reincarnation. But unlike Hinduism, Buddhist doctrine states that there is no continual self that goes to the next life, since the person consists of five parts, which are separated on death. However, this doctrine is questioned by others who argue that one of these parts is consciousness (*vimmana*), a type of soul, which continues to the next life.

154 Important to the understanding of reincarnation is the Thai concept of souls. In this belief system, humans have two spirits or souls - first, the soul (*khwan*) that stays with a person during life and second, the soul of the after-life spirit (*winyaan*), which goes to heaven or hell and is reborn into a baby or animal. Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1968: 203) identified the *khwan* as an Animistic spirit that is the “principle of life” for humans, animals, plants, and some objects. The term is similar to Chinese words for spirit or soul. This living soul is believed to predate the after-life soul, which is probably a concept taken from Buddhism at a later date (Anuman 1968: 204). The term for the afterlife soul, *winyaan*, is from the Pali word for consciousness (*vimmana*) (Tambiah 1970: 57). With the proper sacred Buddhist rituals, the *winyaan* should leave the earth for rebirth, but some spirits become dangerous ghosts and stay attached to the world causing problems for the living (Swearer 1995: 61, Tambiah 1970). It is unclear how long it will take for parents and grandparents to be reborn, so their descendants continue to send them merit through the water pouring ritual at temples, hoping they will have a speedy and good rebirth. Many villagers believe rebirth will take
Several scholars have argued that Thai Theravada Buddhists do not practice "ancestor worship," partly because Buddhism preaches rebirth so there is no need to continue to communicate with ancestors.\textsuperscript{155} "While it can be said that villagers commemorate the dead, it cannot be said that they practice 'ancestor worship' in the sense of a systematized cult of propitiation of the dead and a formalized relationship by which the dead interact with the living" (Tambiah 1970: 191). Keyes also argued that so-called ancestor worship has not developed among Theravada Buddhists because of their less restrictive kinship structure and the doctrine of rebirth. "The idea of the dissolution of the 'vital essence' at death or within a short period of time thereafter and the belief in rebirth are ill suited to any well-developed system of ancestor worship" (Keyes 1995: 166).

However, I was surprised to find a belief system among nora families, which was directly opposite to that described by anthropologists Stanley J. Tambiah and Keyes. Contradicting Buddhist doctrine, nora has an established "formalized" system of communicating with recently and long dead ancestors through possession, including the ancestors' ability to reward and punish. These ancestors are not reborn but stay close by to protect the living. According to Thianchai:

The important basic belief of the ceremony is ancestor worship. It is believed that in fact the parents and grandparents who died already, didn't go anywhere else, but they still protect the descendants' lives to live well, be safe, and become

\textsuperscript{155} The term "ancestor worship" is used regularly by scholars (see McCreery 2000: 286), particularly in reference to Chinese and African religions. But as religion expert Ninian Smart (1999: 61) pointed out, "This is a typically Western way of misinterpreting other folk's experience." Since African ancestors are not considered gods, they are not worshipped. Instead, the term "communication" would be more accurate, she stated. She also referred to the "cult of ancestors." In nora, the relationship involves a great deal of cooperation, negotiation, and mutual benefit, rather than slavish obedience. Therefore, I will use the terms to propitiate and communicate with ancestors to indicate respect and sharing, rather than "worship."
wealthy. These ancestors will have chances to meet the descendants on various occasions and in various festivals during the year. *Nora roong khrui* is the ritual to open the door to the afterlife and link it with the present on the stage (Thianchai 2003b: 3-4).

The belief that ancestors refuse to be reborn (*pai phud pai kerd*) in order to care for descendants is considered a basic southern belief (Sutthiwong 1984). Nora Wan Chaichana (NWC) and his spirit medium associate Khun Fung (KF) explained the basic concept:

**NWC** The spirit (*winyaan*) of the *nora* person, who died already, still stays here.

**KF** [Speaking later] Everyone cannot become a spirit medium. It depends on the spirit. The spirit will choose one of his grandchildren who he likes most. The spirits who possess me are the past spirit mediums or past *nora* leaders, like Nora Wan. For example, Nora Wan is a *nora* so when he dies he won't go anywhere, except wait to be invited [to possess]. Like me, when I die, I won't go anywhere either. The spirits won't be reborn.....I'm the only one in the family who is a spirit medium. After dying, everyone is reborn, but not me. My spirit will protect my grandchildren.

Other categories of spirits are unhappy ghosts who died violently (*phii taai hoong*) and those who don’t have enough merit to be reborn. These spirits linger around the world and disturb the living. They are pitied or looked down upon. But I was assured by persons in the *nora* lineage that their ancestors were not in this class. At a 2002 ceremony, a female spirit medium told me, “She [my cousin] said the [*nora*] ancestors who built the [original] towns, who died already, still live here and didn’t go anywhere. This is different from normal humans who died and weren't reborn.”

In another explanation, Nora Awuth in 2001 said that *nora* people are indeed reborn but in a special group known as ancestors, not as humans. “So there are a lot of *nora* spirit mediums [around today] because when spirit mediums die, they will be born again to be *nora* ancestors. And the spirits will come back to possess the descendants.”
Disagreeing with this, Nora Chalerm (NC) in 2001 argued that there is a soul, which is
reborn.

MG A nora man said he could not be reborn. Is that true?
NC No. It is an individual belief. Human beings consist of four substances. When they
die, only one is left. But the one that is left can be reborn again. Every life has to be reborn.

Therefore, although they are Buddhists, some nora persons believe they will not
be reborn. This contradicts Buddhist doctrine but fits with Animistic philosophy that the
spirits of ancestors will influence the living. As Thai Buddhism is fairly tolerant of
different concepts within “folk Buddhism,” this difference was not presented as a
problem within nora families but as an “individual belief,” as Nora Chalerm said.

Making or Calling the Soul. Ethnologist Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1968: 213-4)
described a variety of ceremonies for “making the soul” (tham khwan) or “calling the
soul” (riag khwan) in which Brahmins or ritual specialists coach the soul to return to the
body to boost morale before important life passages (on the khwan in the early tonsure
ceremony for royalty, see Wales 1931: 131). This ritual is an Animistic element of the
nora initiation, as well as the monk’s ordination. A monk’s ordination is divided into an
Animistic part for calling the man’s personal soul and a later Buddhist ordination
(Swinner 1976: 164-165, Swearer 1995: 49-50). After the man has his head shaved and is
dressed in white, a ritual layperson will call the 32 parts of the soul back into the man’s
body and tie them in place with a string tied around the wrist.

The first is an animistic ceremony called propitiating the spirits or calling the
spirits…. During the ceremony the lay leader performs a ritual in which he ‘calls’
the ordinand’s thirty-two spirits (Thai: khwan) away from all previous attachment
to the pleasures of lay life so the youth will be unswayed and undivided in his
pursuit of the monastic life, especially the trials of celibacy (Swearer 1995: 49).
Modeled after ordination, the nora ceremony has a soul calling ritual before proceeding to the ceremony attended by monks the next day. Nora Awuth explained, “The first similar thing is that we have to invite a ritual specialist (or doctor, maw) to do the ritual of sat naam (to throw water), riag khwan (to call the soul), or tham khwan naag (to bring back the soul of an ordinand) at night time.” The last ritual to bring back the errant soul uses the term naag (from naga), the title given to a person preparing for monkhood. The word translates as “serpent” and relates to a tale about a water snake who became a monk through deception (Tambiah 1970: 107). The use of naag shows the link between the nora and Buddhist rituals.

Rice Goddess. During the opening invocation of the Wat Thakhae roong khruu in 2001, Nora Somphong invoked the Rice Goddess (Mae Phosop), an Animistic spirit indigenous to Southeast Asia. People in southern Thailand believe that she is “…the guardian deity of mankind. Whoever tills and cultivates the soil ought to worship the Mother, for she will endow him with health and wealth” (Anuman 1986: 136). Farmers believe that rice has a soul (khwan) which must be protected and honored in rituals so that it will become pregnant and give birth (Anuman 1986: 137-139). The concept of female deities for rice and the earth is common and ancient in Southeast Asia (Keyes 1995: 132). She pre-dates the world religions in many areas. With the arrival of Hinduism, the rice goddesses in Bali and Java were transformed into the wife of Shiva (Andaya 1994: 106).

Spirit Houses. The Animistic guardian spirits who reside in miniature spirit houses are included in the nora ceremony. The nora stage may be designed around the spirit house or linked to it with a holy string. These spirits are called the lord of the land.
or earth and protect homes, businesses, and temples. They are thought to be the first inhabitants of the land dating back centuries. The original land spirit, academics think, once protected a whole village but later evolved and diversified to guarding specific areas. Nine spirits of the land have been identified who protect the rice field, monastery, garden, barn, and other locations (Anuman 1986: 131). Tambiah (1970: 263) described these guardian spirits as being linked to Buddhism in complex ways. The house for the Brahmanic male angel of the earth (Phra Phuum) is usually a Thai-style palace in cement on a single post. According to Pittaya (interview 2004), the Phra Phuum spirit house is similar to the shelf (hing bucha) set up for nora spirits, as both provide benefits (khun) and punishment (thoot). However, the nora spirits are stronger.

**Divination and Charms.** Descendants regularly ask for winning lottery numbers from nora leaders. This might be discerned from wax drippings in water, which is a type of Animistic divination performed by local spirit doctors and some monks (communication Thianchai 2003). It is common for the ancestors to instruct their children not to fight over the family inheritance, particularly property, and for the descendants in turn to ask for lucky numbers and other magical assistance. Brahmanistic rituals also employ divination, as described below.

**Ancestors are Revered like Monks.** Although the nora ancestors are from an Animistic belief system, they are closely linked to Buddhist monks through symbolism in

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156 Some homes or businesses have two shrines for the earth god. One has a single post and looks like a palace. This contains Phra Phuum, who is considered a higher spirit from Brahmanism, and thus stands taller. Next to it at a lower level would be a wooden traditional Thai house on fours posts. This is also the god of the earth but called Jao Thii (the god of place or land) and is sometimes associated with the Chinese earth god found in red and gold shrines on the floor at the back of Thai-Chinese shops. Anuman (1986: 127) wrote that Phra Phuum is a Sanskrit Cambodian term and that sometimes the two terms are combined, as in Phra Phuum Jao Thii. For instance, at the roong khrui at Nora Plaeg' home in 2004, a ritual doctor (maw) asked permission to use the land of Phra Phuum Jao Thii.
the preparation of food offerings. As representatives of the Lord Buddha, monks are considered spiritually higher than nora ancestors, but both are respected heavenly beings. The ancestors and other presiding angels will be given food before noon, just as monks must eat the final meal of the day before noon, said Nora Chalerm. But there are differences that indicate the monk’s higher status. For instance, ancestors are given whole boiled chickens while monks receive food, which has been cut and prepared for human consumption. According to scholars, originally animals were sacrificed for guardian spirits, and today’s food offerings reflect this origin (Terwiel 1994: 17). Food given to the monks is thought to be offered to the Lord Buddha and therefore must be of the highest quality one can afford. Another difference is that ancestors are believed to like sweets more than monks do. Nora Chalerm said,

We have to cook food for the monk, but for the [ancestor] spirit, we can offer boiled chicken in its original shape. For the monk, we have to cut it up and cook it in curry or other food. We don’t prepare red and white sweets for the monk. This type of dessert [for the ancestors] is called khanom khoo. Moreover, we have to prepare red sticky rice and yellow sticky rice for the spirit and also banana and sugar cane. But for the monk we don’t prepare this for them. The monk is in the highest level. Before I begin the ceremony, I have to give respect to the monks.157

There is a continuum in food offerings so that lower Animistic ghosts are given raw food and liquor while higher spirits from world religions receive cooked and processed food and sometimes vegetarian meals. In the late 1960s, Tambiah found a trend to give vegetarian food to more respected spirits. Some northeast villagers gave meat to evil spirits but gave vegetarian food to guardian angels, using a “Hindu-type pure/impure distinction” (Tambiah 1970: 265). And in the north, Irvine (1982: 336-342)

157 Red and yellow sticky rice is also offered in the mayong ceremony in Muslim communities in the south. 284
found a food offering dichotomy between early “traditional” style spirit mediums and the more “modern” spirit mediums. The traditional mediums were possessed by non-Buddhist guardian spirits, who ate raw bloody buffalo meat, while modern mediums were possessed by Buddhist spirits, who ate cooked food and sometimes were vegetarian. The offerings indicate that nora families consider the ancestors to be associated closely with Buddhism today, although guardian spirits are not neglected.

Attracting Local Spirits. Nora’s association with locally important spirits increases its legitimacy and claims to southern identity. Annual nora ceremonies are a magnet for a variety of smaller religious sects for local spirits, which come to show respect. By being a central meeting ground, the nora performance serves a networking function similar to annual teacher respecting (wai khruu) gatherings of spirit mediums in the northeast and north (see Muecke 1992: 99; Pattana 1999: 187). Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter said, “Mostly we don’t invite them [other sects]. But the second Wednesday of the 6th [lunar] month, they will know that Nora Plaeg would do a ceremony. They all will come here, wherever they live.”

In 2003, a older female spirit medium wearing gold traditional pants joined the roong khruu ceremony at Wat Thakhae. Her spirit was an ancient Phatthalung mountain guardian. She assisted male Chinese spirit mediums from Taoist shrines to prepare a large metal wok for a hot oil bath. Shaking from being possessed, the woman wiped the empty wok with gold paper money and applied a wad of chewed betel quid to the wok’s lip to bless it. According to a person in the audience, this spirit medium was also possessed at times by the thousand-hand goddess Guan Im. Speaking into a microphone, the announcer said:
This is an ancestor who lives at Wang Niang Mountain. I want to introduce this to you. It is the way that sacred things [spirits] come to make merit. They come to do activities for people to watch. Some people have never seen an oil bath and don’t know if is real or not. If you want to examine it, you can do it after they finish the ceremony. If you want to take an oil bath, the sacred spirits don’t mind. This night we have added activities.

Another spirit who sometimes possessed mediums at this roong khruu was the legendary Lady White Blood, another local guardian spirit. Historian Gesick described the great significance of this figure in the south: “In the historical imaginings of the people of the Phatthalung region, the area has figured for uncounted centuries as a land copiously imprinted with traces of the life and deeds of Lady White Blood, the mythic ancestress with whom all histories of the region begin” (1995: 2). When I mentioned Lady White Blood to people in the south, they readily told me her life story and that her female descendant is living in Phuket today. I heard several different stories about Lady White Blood’s connection to nora. For instance, an elderly Buddhist laywoman at Wat Khian in Phatthalung Province said Lady White Blood is a relative of Mae Sii Maa Laa (discussed in Chapter 3).

Confirming this, Nora Plaeg’s daughter said the two women were like aunt and niece. Lady White Blood’s spirit was part of the nora lineage and had possessed people at Wat Thakhae before, she said. But now Lady White Blood cannot find a spirit medium because her medium died. “They are two different persons because they [nora leaders] invite Lady White Blood in the invocation. Nowadays she lives at Wat Thaa Khian at Baan Bang Kaeo [Phatthalung Province]. Mostly, if people have business with Lady White Blood, they will go to propitiate her there. She is a different person; she is not the same [as Mae Sii Maa Laa],” she said. But Nora Plaeg’s nephew, Songphuum
Chanabaan, argued that the lady was directly connected to the family of the Phatthalung Legend. He said:

Lady White Blood is the last life [reincarnation] of Mae Sii Maa Laa. It is like Phra Phutthajao [Lord Buddha] who died and was born, died and was born to be a monkey, langur, bird, snake.... Later, she died over there, which is near this temple [Wat Thakhae] and close to the river. The place and the post remain there. And Phaw Khun Satthaa died at that bush [near the stupas] at the mound of Khun Satthaa, but they took his bones to the bodhi tree.... Her spirit medium is a young girl. I don’t know if her father will let her come here because she is still young.

Thus, these nora people believe that Lady White Blood died in Thakhae and is now a nora teacher spirit. Pittaya (1992: 57, 87) described the relationship between Lady White Blood and Mae Sii Maa Laa as different incarnations of the same person. While possessing a spirit medium, Lady White Blood once told Nora Plaeg to support Wat Khian and return it to former glory. Therefore, nora people from Thakhae perform a ceremony yearly at Wat Khian to wrap a cloth around the chedi on the Buddhist Makha Bucha Day in the third lunar month. Being closely connected to this revered lady, the nora drama increases its prestige and coverage around Songkhla Lake and Nakhon Si Thammarat.

The invocation ritual (gaat khruu) shows respect to 34 guardian spirits from the region – 25 in Phatthalung Province, six in Trang Province, and three in Songkhla Province (Pittaya 1992: 100-103). Most these spirits are associated with nature – rivers, mountains, trees, and limestone formations. Two of the guardian spirits are former monks at Wat Thakhae and another monastery in Phatthalung. Some of the spirits are identified as female, but many are given the title of thuat, which means great grandparent on either

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158 Pittaya described this ceremony in 1992, and it was still being performed in 2005. But the date had changed to May, a few months after Makha Bucha Day.
the maternal or paternal side. Therefore, the spirit can be either female or male. Although sacred, these spirits are less meritorious than angels and might be partly animal. Pittaya suggests that nora troupes, being traveling artists, respected local spirits in other areas and included them in the invocation, such as the island spirits in Songkhla Lake (Pittaya 1992: 96, also reference to Suthiwong Pongphaibun 1986).

However, not all guardian spirits are invited to the roong krueu at Wat Thakhae. I asked Nora Plaeg’s daughter whether the significant Phatthalung tutelary spirit, named the Great-grandfather Three Brothers (Thuat Saam Phii Nawng), and the famous monk Luang Phaw Thuat in Pattani Province were invited. But she said those spirits are in a different line (saai) or part and not connected with nora. They may be invited but will not possess because this event is especially for nora (on village guardian spirits and Animism see Kirsch 1977: 258 and Tambiah 1970: 263).

This involvement of nora with local spirit sects holds true in Thai villages across the border in Kelantan State, Malaysia. Golomb wrote, “Although the nooraa plays no formal role in the local Buddhist temple organization, he may nonetheless function as a leading figure in animistic religious activities” (1978: 60).

Thus, due to its ability to address everyday problems, pragmatic Animism continues to blend with philosophical Buddhism in Asia. The nora annual ceremony is replete with Animistic spirits like the gods and goddesses of the soil, rice, and place, and practices like divination and food offerings. However, there are contradictions in beliefs - - some nora families believe their souls stay on earth to help descendants instead of being reincarnated. By blending these differing religions, nora families can propitiate ancestors and still call themselves Buddhists, which is central to Thai identity and nationalism.
Hindu-Brahmanism

Although interviewees denied that nora was Buddhist, most thought there was influence from Hindu-Brahmanism.\(^{159}\) Nora’s connection to Hindu-Brahmanism is quite evident in the invocation when the nora leader calls on the major Hindu gods – Lords Indra, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Also invoked is the Hindu lord of the underworld Yommabaan, along with Indian yogis (see Chapter 2). Nora Chalerm said the roong khruu ceremony differs from group to group, but for him calling the Hindu gods was essential: “For me, I have to sing and call all the spirits in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth -- Phra In (Indra), Phra Prom (Brahma), Phra Yom (Yommabaan), and Phra Kan.”

The nora community is based on Indian concepts of patriarchy, featuring male gods and male Brahmin priests (interview Pittaya 2004).\(^{160}\) Thailand received two significant androcentric influences from India -- men should be given extra opportunities such as in education, and men should be religious leaders, according to Pittaya (2004).

Explaining the significance of men as priests and deities, he said:

\(^{159}\) Indian culture brought by traders was seen in the south and neighboring countries in the early Common or Christian Era (discussed in Chapter 3). Later Brahmin priests were brought into the courts of Siam during the reign of King Trailok in the 15\(^{th}\) century. When the Thais attacked Angkor, Indian priests from the Khmer court were transported to the Siamese Kingdom. When Burma destroyed Ayutthaya in 1767, Siamese court dancers were taken to Burma in a similar fashion (Mattani 1996: 4). Court priests were knowledgeable about astronomy, astrology, and rituals relating to life cycles, but apparently did not compete with Buddhist beliefs (Terwiel 1994: 12). Still today a small group of Brahmin priests, who have inherited their positions through the male lineage, welcome Shiva and Vishnu annually at their temple next to the Giant Swing in Bangkok (Gerson 1996: 42, Guelden 1995, Wales 1931: 54). In the provinces, local ritual specialists, who serve many of the roles of Brahmin priests, are called soul doctors (maw khwan) or Brahmins (phraam). These talented Buddhist villagers are considered the “lay leader extraordinaire,” able to combine Buddhism, Animism, and other religious beliefs in a way not possible for monks (Swearer 1976: 151). The roles of the court Brahmin priests and of these village quasi-Brahmins have been greatly reduced today. Nora leaders serve some of these functions, such as blessing houses and propitiating deities (interview Pittaya 2004).

\(^{160}\) Indian culture left other legacies, according to scholars. See the discussion of patriarchal influences from Indian culture in Chapter 4.

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They [nora people] believe that nora leaders or the person who does the ceremony is compared to the Brahmin priest, who is a man who does ceremonies and knows about magical prayers. And the deities (theppha jao), such as Phra Isuan [Shiva] and Phra Naaraai [Vishnu], also are men. In the belief of nora, in fact, Thep Singhawn [also known as Khun Sii Sattha] is Phra Isuan or Siwa Thep [meaning Shiva]. So it is because of these two issues that it is believed that man is the representative of god (phra jao) who was born to be a human, to give entertainment and do rituals.

On the Brahmanic elements in nora, one nora leader looked to royal ceremonies in Bangkok to understand the blending of religions:

Nora is not Buddhist, but it is the way that the ancestors want their descendants to take care of them. If their descendants don’t do the ritual, they will become sick or die. Nora is not a Buddhist ritual….Buddhism and Hinduism are related. When we do the ritual, some people say that it is nonsense (rai saara). But why don’t they say that the First Ploughing Ceremony (phithii raeg naa khwan) [literally ritual for the soul of the rice field] is nonsense too. Why do they have to have that ceremony every year? The King is the president of the ceremony and he dresses in white, which comes from Brahmanism.

His point was that these two religions were joined in Thai history and are connected today. The First Ploughing Ceremony illustrates the historical symbiotic relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism. This 13th century Brahmanic ceremony for determining the coming weather and rice harvest is supervised by the king and his family. The day before, sacred rice is blessed by Buddhist monks and is anointed by the king. The divination ceremony the following day uses Brahmin priests to guide the white oxen in the royal field next to the Grand Palace Complex in Bangkok (Gerson 1996: 21-25, see also Sombat 1982: 39-55, Wales 1931: 256-264).

In the south, several Brahmanic elements appear in nora. For instance, nora uses the Brahmanic concept that angels guard over different directions of the world. During
the initiation ritual, norā leaders stand in geographical positions representing angels.\footnote{161 The gods of the geographical directions are also important in Chinese ceremonies in the south. The Chinese gods of four directions were represented by large paper models at a ceremony to cremate bones of persons without families at Tai Hong Jo Suu Shrine in Pattani in 2001. Also, the Nine Emperor Gods (Kiu Ong) of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival represent nine directions (Cheu 1993: 42).} They then walk among the students in the pattern of mystical designs (yan) (on yan, see Anuman 1968: 280-284). Nora Awuth said, "Thai people believe that there are ten directions. But you can see that we stood at eight directions. We don't stand under the ground and in the air. We stand at north, northeast, east, southeast, south, southwest, west, and northwest. We are the angels of each direction. Then we will walk in the shape of a yan around the students. There are four yan."

The concept of the directions can be seen in the Chakri dynasty coronation ceremonies in the Bangkok period, based on coronations from the Ayutthaya era. The coronation was Brahmanic but later modified by the Siamese. Sitting on an octagonal throne and accompanied by Brahmins and noblemen, the king anointed himself with water, faced eight directions and repeated prayers to the heavenly guardians of each direction. He symbolically pledged to protect all the regions of the kingdom (Wales 1931: 77-82).

Another Brahmanic element present at norā ceremonies is a tall banana leaf structure (baai sii or pai sri) as an offering to the ancestors. These beautifully decorated structures are often used in calling the soul ceremonies. Anuman suggested they are probably of Hindu origin (Anuman 1968: 218-219). Instead Wales suggested an Animistic starting point. He reported that offerings to the Hindu gods, spirits of the royal white umbrella, and city guardian spirits were all put on these tree-like structures which may have developed from "a primitive pile of leaf platters" (Wales 1931: 73).
Historically, the baai sii held spirit food for the souls of young Thai princes during the Brahmanic tonsure or topknot cutting ceremony (1931: 131). Today, professional spirit mediums in Bangkok present baai sii to their spirits in the annual ceremony to respect teachers and may keep the dried structures all year, from my observations.

Although Hindu-Brahmanism was quite pervasive in early southern principalities, today its influence has waned because it is not related to the national religion and southern identity.

Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism

Although Chinese immigrants in southern Thailand have practiced their religions for about two centuries, this influence on nora seems to be of a more recent vintage. Chinese rituals have seen a surge in popularity in the past two decades, as can be seen by the Chinese Vegetarian Festival, which has recently spread across the peninsula from its origins in Phuket and Trang to Hat Yai and other cities. Sociologist Erik Cohen (2001: 63) reported on the festival’s expansion since the 1980s. The new interest is due partly to increased religious tourism from Malaysia and Singapore and to a new respect for Chineseness as it is associated with finance in the globalized economy (Maud 2002). Nora and Chinese belief systems have a great deal in common regarding relationships with ancestors, although their rituals take different forms. Pittaya said both groups show respect for ancestors and ask them for direct assistance:

For nora people, whether they are nora [performers] or not, if they are nora descendants, they have to pay respect (khaorop napthuu) to an ancestor. Although they don’t dance nora, they have to have an altar shelf and give offerings because this spirit will give benefits and punishment. It is the same as the spirit at Chinese shrines. If the Chinese don’t pay respect to them, the spirit will become a bad ghost (phii raai) and make trouble for them, such as having a bad business and getting into various dangerous situations (interview 2004).
Partly due to this similarity in belief, an exchange relationship has evolved between *nora* families and Taoist and Mahayana shrines. Every year, the famous temple for Chinese Goddess Lim Ko Niau in Pattani hires a *nora* troupe to perform several nights for the goddess who is reputed to enjoy *nora*. Likewise, Chinese rituals have been performed at the *roong khruu* ceremony in Thakhae for the past few years.

Beginning in 2001, Chinese fire-walking was added at Wat Thakhae on the initiation of Songphuum, the younger brother of ceremony organizer Nora Somphong Chanabaan. Songphuum is possessed by a Chinese spirit. In 2003, he invited Aphisit Bunsong, the head of the spirit mediums at Taoist Jui Tui Shrine in Phuket, to assist at the Thakhae ceremony. This large, respected shrine has held the Vegetarian Festival for about a century and contributes the largest number of mediums to the festival. In 1998, the shrine supervised about 785 mediums, and there are many more today (Cohen 2001: 57, 119). The rituals at Wat Thakhae featured the mediums dousing their bodies with hot oil, running across burning coals (*lui fai*), and cutting and piercing their backs, tongues and cheeks. The public joined in another non-violent Chinese ritual of walking over a bridge to dispel back luck (Thai: *saphaan sadaw khraw*, Chinese: *glui han*). In 2004, the *nora* committee planned to show Chinese mediums climbing a sword ladder and rolling in broken glass, but instead repeated the hot oil bath and fire walking. Temple

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162 For this ritual, people form a long line and walk in a large circle three times. They cross a short raised platform, considered a bridge, while carrying certain offerings. I have observed this ritual at the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket, a ceremony at the Naja Shrine near Hat Yai, and the celebration of the Great-grandfather spirit of the Red Mountain in Songkhla. A ritual to get rid of bad luck is also performed by Theravada Buddhist monks, but it is simpler with the supplicant only giving an offering to the monk. The monk’s ritual is called either *sadaw khraw* or *tham sangkha thaan* (to give to the monkhood). I was told that in the Buddhist version, you cannot delete your bad karma (*gam*) but can increase your good deeds or merit (*bun*).
committee members told me they did not have the equipment for the new feats, which are better performed in Chinese shrines.

Before the hot oil preparations in 2004, I asked Aphisit why he was doing this ritual. He said he was related to Nora Plaeg. Employed in Phuket, he volunteers at the Jui Tui Shrine and is on the Vegetarian Festival committee. When I said I had never seen this performed at a nora ceremony, he explained he wanted to perform a new ritual to add merit (seum bun) to the ceremony, particularly a high form of merit called haaramii. Although the Chinese ritual was not related to nora, any money raised would be given to the nora committee, he said.

After our brief conversation, Aphisit began heating oil in a giant wok at 6:30 p.m. a short distance from the nora stage. Rapidly, he went into a trance sitting on a chair and shaking his head. Speaking through a microphone, an announcer asked if anyone could translate from the Hokkien dialect to Thai language for the Chinese spirit possessing him. In the excitement, I do not know if a translator was found, but usually spirits communicate well through gestures. The area was marked off by tall yellow flags with writing in red Chinese characters from Jui Tui Shrine. The Thai flag had been erected on a tall pole in the ritual area. On an altar made from a folding table, a small wooden red chair (giaw) decorated with golden dragons held three small statues of Chinese deities. The central figure was the youthful god Naja, who is quite popular now and serves as a protector to most Phuket shrines. Five triangular flags of black, white, yellow, red, and

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163 This type of red wooden chair is used to hold the statues of important Chinese gods in ceremonies throughout Southeast Asia. Larger chairs are carried by four or more young men who energetically parade them through the streets and attempt to control the movements of rocking gods at festivals. Smaller chairs, like the one at Wat Thakhae, can be possessed by a god. When this happens, men will hold the chair as one leg writes Chinese characters in sand or on a metal plate.
green protruded from behind the chair. Immediately recognizable as representing Chinese spirit mediums, these sacred flags are often auctioned off after the medium runs across the coals with them. Beneath the table was a wooden tiger, associated with good luck and fertility. Many religious items had been borrowed from a Phatthalung Chinese temple while the head medium’s ritual apron (possession suit - *chut song*) was from Phuket.

Referring to the Chinese mediums, the announcer spoke through a microphone:

I want to say that they are not normal people. We have to help each other the best we can. This is Aphsít Bunsong who is an important person. He told the [nora] committee to prepare the bridge tomorrow. If anyone is suffering, we will let them walk through the bridge to get rid of bad luck. Tomorrow it will be more fun than this. There will be stabbing of the mouth and tongue. It [the ritual] uses all the sharp things. It is the same as last year but you went back home before that because you thought after the fire walking was finished that we would finish the ceremony. In fact it was not finished. It was a pity that you could not see that event. This is Aphsít Bunsong who is the captain. This captain is not normal. He came to help build the monument for us. It will make Thakhae more famous and honored for the Thakhae people have to help each other.

The announcer was explaining that the audience would get merit by attending the ceremony and taking away the oil because the event was raising money to build a shrine for the Khun Sii Sattha statue. A group of Phatthalung youth, mostly teenagers, were dressed in white to act as helpers (*phii liang*), including Songphuum’s daughter. Several had been on vegetarian diets for a week and had previously participated in fire-walking at the Phuket Vegetarian Festival. A woman, 31, said she was both a helper and a spirit medium and described herself as Thai, not Chinese. She said, “Sometimes I feel like an angel is possessing me. He will float over my head about three feet. He will possess me from my head. If it is a Chinese spirit, it will enter from my head. But for Thai spirits, they will catch my shoulders, such as nora spirits.” Her spirits included Shiva and Uma Devi, who could divide into different parts. During possession, some spirits would speak
in Arabic or Chinese. She gave us a quick demonstration of these foreign words, which she could recite out of trance. I would note that this woman seemed to embody a syncretic mix of beliefs in different religions and gods, common in the south.

Meanwhile still in a trance, Aphisit used a carved snake’s head of his so-called demon whip to write letters in the ground. He held a black flag before his face and walked to four sides of the 
\textit{wok} to write more symbols in the ground. To purify the 
\textit{wok}, he placed yellow \textit{yan} cloths and papers in it. The announcer said:

At 10 p.m., they will take an oil bath for people to watch. Don’t be in a hurry to go home….The people wearing white are the helpers. Now they cut the oil bags and pour them into the pan….This is Songphuum, our descendant. He is in that team. He is also smart. For all sacred things, they know Songphuum well. This person, Songphuum, is an important person. Songphuum Chanabaan is our descendant. Thank you for being a respectful audience, for giving us the honor to come and watch this oil bathing ceremony. Tonight we only do the oil bathing for you to watch. It follows as I advertised it. Tomorrow there will be many activities that you never saw before. Sacred things will be done for us. This is real. Tomorrow you will see it. You can prepare a bottle to take away the oil to help with aches and pains in your body. Or if you are burned by water or fire, you can use this oil. It is not normal oil. It is the oil that is mixed with herbs.

At this point, Aphisit started hitting himself with a large bunch of lit incense sticks and then wiped off the cinders with gold paper. The mediums put red dots on the foreheads of the youthful helpers. Then suddenly and dramatically Aphisit fainted, indicating that he was no longer possessed and in a trance. Others grabbed him, and Songphuum sprinkled him with holy water using special plant branches. The announcer explained that the mediums had to go out of trance as the main ritual was several hours away at 10 p.m. (Going in and out of trance like this is fairly common in southern Chinese ceremonies.)
After this ritual, Songphuum, who also runs a car repair business at Baan Thakhae, spoke at length through a microphone to explain how he came to be involved with Chinese spirit mediums. In a previous interview, he said he was possessed by two or three spirits who were Chinese, Thai, and Arabic. The first Chinese spirit is named Tua Pae Gong, meaning the old man (khon gae) or the god of land (Jao Thii). The second spirit, Phraan Gae, or the old hunter, is actually two persons from different reincarnations. In one life, more than 900 years ago, he was a ritual doctor, a type of ruusii or yogi, who protected nora people. This spirit was Thai and from the nora lineage. In another life, the same spirit was an Arabic Muslim. Songphuum said that a nora story describes this spirit as a sacred person with two sides who could cure both Buddhists and Muslims.

Speaking to the night-time crowd of about 150, Songphuum explained the similarities between nora and Chinese beliefs. He said Taoist doctrine (latthi tao) is similar to the doctrine of ghosts or angels (or Animism) and much like the nora belief in ancestors. An example of this connection was the fact that Aphisit and Songphuum were possessed by both nora and Chinese spirits. Because he channeled a Chinese spirit and was from the nora lineage, Somphuum could join the Phuket self-mortification rituals and register there as a medium. He said:

He [Aphisit] asked which sacred thing possessed me. I said that I was possessed by nora ancestors (taa yaai nora). He said he was possessed by nora ancestors too. And I said I was possessed by a Chinese spirit also, and he said he was possessed by a Chinese spirit also. He came to my home because his boss let him come here from a Phuket organization. So he took me to do the ceremony at the temple in Phuket. The first time that I went there, I ran across the fire in Phuket until Phuket people accepted me. Of all the sacred people from Phatthalung, I am
the 830th person to have a name card from the Jui Tui Temple.\textsuperscript{164} The name of the spirit medium [referring to him] is Songphuum Chanabaan. The name of the deity is Pui Thao Gong or Pae Gong. I did the fire running ceremony completely and I did the oil bathing ceremony last year on the 16th of Oct, as I can remember. There were possessions and oil bathing. Do you believe that there were more than 1,000 spirit mediums in that temple? I am the over 800th person. But when they possess to do the oil bathing, 100 people possessed but only six or seven people can really do the oil bathing which includes me, who is the sacred person from Phatthalung province and descendant of Phaw Khun Satthaa, Thep Singhawn, and 12 ancestors, which I told you already.

Songphuum explained that his reason for hosting the Chinese rituals at the roong khruu was to introduce Taoism as a different doctrine. He feared that some nora descendants might observe Chinese ceremonies and consider them more sacred and interesting than nora. Some might think that in nora, the ancestors only chewed betel nut. This would lead the descendants to denigrate nora and be punished by the ancestors.

Songphuum said:

For the matter of stabbing the mouth (thaeng paag), I did that more than ten times. They really do that. It is not a mirage. It is not a magic trick (maayaagon). They use sacred things and magical prayers. It is the doctrine that I really believe in. If I am pure and sincere, they [the spirits] will come to me with purity and sincerity....So I can do this [hot oil] ceremony and the teacher [spirit] has to come to possess really. They [the spirits] didn’t lie to us. If they say that they will come, they will really come. For example, the spirit Phraan Gae will really come.

He continued to promote the idea of nora people showing they can accomplish amazing feats too: “Tonight we will do the oil bathing ceremony. It is like I came to disseminate this religion. I promote it for people to know that I am a Thakhae person, who can do that. If next year another person comes to do that ceremony and intimidates our people, you can say that our descendants can do that too, and he can really do that.

\textsuperscript{164} Jui Tui Temple and other large temples in Phuket keep lists of spirit mediums participating in the Vegetarian Festival parades. The temples issue identity cards for mediums (bat prajamtua maa song) to keep some control over the large parades. Songphuum had earlier shown me his card, which simply contained his name and address.
And it is like another sacred thing in the world.” As an eclectic practitioner of several doctrines, Songphuum explained he has the ability to read and write old Khmer language, taught to him by his spirits in dreams.\textsuperscript{165} With this knowledge, he can read body tattoos, written in this language used for supernatural protection. I would note that this is no minor claim. Anyone who can read tattoos can undo their protective powers with counter-magic (Guelden 1995). At the beginning of this 2004 roong khruu, in a possessed state, Songphuum had written such letters on a large white cloth which was then hoisted onto the stage ceiling to protect the ceremony. Later the cloth was hung at his home above his own diverse altar table where he possesses regularly.\textsuperscript{166}

Despite Songphuum’s enthusiasm to educate nora descendants on other faiths, some academics and nora people at the 2003 ceremony felt that adding the Chinese rituals was not in keeping with their traditions. At the same time, other long-time participants welcomed the Chinese rituals as a way to attract a larger audience. The people in this latter group stated that the crucial factor was whether the traditional nora ceremony was preserved or altered. And for them, the ancient rituals were the same as in years past. So as not to interfere with the regular schedule, Chinese rituals were held in the evening when the main nora events were over. The following is a glimpse of the discussions among nora mediums about the addition of Chinese rituals. Spirit medium 1 (SM1) is male and spirit medium 2 (SM2) is female.

\textsuperscript{165} This writing was also used to mark the toe of the nora leader in the “stepping on the mark” ritual (see Chapter 2).
\textsuperscript{166} These beliefs are part of what he called the Lightning Religion (saatsanaa saai faa) which included branches of the doctrine of angels and of the underworld, Songphuum said. Reflecting many faiths, his home shrine contained Buddhist statues of monk Luang Phaw Thuat and Lord Buddha, a statue of Goddess Guan Im, and shrines to earth gods, in addition to nora crowns and a Chinese spirit medium apron and flag.
SM1  I think it is OK because they [Chinese mediums] come having good relations with us. It is not bad because they don’t take anything from here. They come here to help in a good way. They don’t request anything. They come to help because it is Khun Sattha’s ceremony.

SM2 (Speaking a few minutes later.) The ritual of getting rid of bad luck over a bridge (saphaan sadaw khraw) is Chinese tradition, not Thai tradition.

MG  What do you think about mixing them together?

SM2  They are not related together. Chinese tradition is Chinese tradition. Thai tradition is Thai tradition.

SM1  They are related together because they are all Thai people, Muslim people, and Chinese people. For nora they do the invocation for all, Thai people, Muslim people and Chinese people, when they do the awg gaat [calling the spirits] ceremony.

Whether the mediums took an inclusive or exclusive view, they were aware that outside rituals were being introduced and had considered the effects on their culture.

Nora Jop thought the new rituals were good for the genre, which desperately needed more followers. He said that this was not the first time an eye-catching event had been introduced. A local spirit group had provided similar bizarre attractions before.

MG  Why did you decide to have fire walking this year?

NJC  They come here to help the roong khruu ceremony. Actually we don’t have this fire walking [as part of nora]. They came here to make this ceremony more famous. If there is any strange ceremony, it can attract people to come. Last year we had a group who came here to carry boats with their mouths. They came from a spirit medium shrine (tamnag song). They came here to help. They didn’t ask for anything from us.

MG  Where were they from?

NJC  I don’t know. They came here by themselves and they also brought all the instruments here. No one told them to come here. They were pleased to help us. It is like someone volunteers to carry us across the canal to the other side.

Nora Jop explained that the group lifted boats with their mouths and carried them onside the stage to show supernatural power. He likened this spectacle to dramas put on by shadow puppet plays or likay shows for the nora ceremony.
Reflecting on the introduction of Chinese displays at Wat Thakhae, Pittaya said organizer Nora Somphong hoped the rituals would boost the show’s popularity:

He [Nora Somphong] brings the Chinese activities to help his ceremony become bigger and attract more people. There might be Chinese people who participated a few years ago, but before there weren’t these people. Only _nora_ people participated. For Chinese activities such as fire walking, it is the new popular values (_khaa niyom mai_) or new style, which has improved and spread from Phuket to Trang to Hat Yai. In fact Nora Somphong thinks it is not related to _nora roong krnu_ at all but he doesn’t mind if they want to be involved. If you ask why those people want to participate in this ceremony, it is because this ceremony can gather people from many places such as _nora_ people and Chinese people. So more people will come to participate. So it is good for some income. So in fact, they are not related to each other. But Nora Somphong doesn’t think it will be a bad thing. Anyone can be involved if they don’t destroy the ceremony. Maybe in the future other things will be added (interview 2004).

Pittaya described the arrangement as a “sharing” rather than integration of rituals. On the positive side, the additional activities might attract Chinese tourists from Malaysia and Singapore, expand the interest beyond the small _nora_ community, and interest the younger generation, he said. Pittaya also made another significant point -- that _nora_ families are mostly lower income and less able to put on big festivals than some Thai-Chinese who are involved in profitable southern businesses:

At the beginning when Chinese came to live in Thailand, the ceremonies of Chinese people were small following their beliefs because their economic base was small. But now Chinese people control the business fortunes of Thai society. Because of their high economic base and wide network and more opportunities, they can be big businessmen. So they can do large ceremonies because they are more able to do that. Meanwhile the _nora_ group is a small group of villagers. They don’t have much of an economic position, although they are _nora_ performers for entertainment. So the base, which depends on Thai people and folk culture, is the matter of a small group of people (interview 2004).

I had never heard of fire-walking at a Theravada Buddhist monastery and wondered how the monks viewed the event. There was a rumor that the abbot had not been happy about the fire-walking held at the _roong krnu_ in 2003. When I presented this
rumor to Songphuum, he said the abbot just wanted to keep the smoke away from the temple buildings. I asked Thianchai, who also attended, about the abbot's possible concern. He said there was strain between nora and Buddhism because Buddhism did not teach Animism or spirit possession, which were also part of the fire-walking.\(^{167}\)

In conclusion, the Chinese influence on nora appears to be rather recent, part of a heightened expression of Chinese identity and religion in the south under modernity. The rationale for adding Chinese rituals has been discussed by nora followers and is framed in terms of mutual support. Some nora people say the feats provided a high quality of merit as well as additional income by attracting a larger audience. According to Songphuum, nora families should be proud to have a member who was able to undergo the hot oil ordeal and be accepted among mediums in Phuket. As suggested by Pittaya's comments, the nora community will benefit from being associated with more wealthy Chinese and established Phuket shrines, famous for mediumship throughout Thailand. However, several nora participants themselves judged the added attractions on whether they interfered with the sacred nora heritage. Some felt Chinese rituals were inappropriate and others welcomed them.

I would argue that nora benefits from some cooperation with Taoist and Mahayana Buddhist shrines because of its location in the south close to the Chinese religious strongholds of Phuket, Trang, and Hat Yai. But within centrist Thai culture, the Chinese form of Buddhism is still rather marginalized. Meanwhile, the nora families long ago aligned themselves with Theravada Buddhism and the Thai state and monarchy.

\(^{167}\) Buddhist monks themselves do not become possessed because Buddhist spirits are on a higher plane than the possessing spirits. However, monks are known for their exorcism abilities when spirits invade someone without permission. I have witnessed such exorcisms in monasteries near Bangkok.
Therefore, I would anticipate that nora families would work with the Chinese shrines but be careful not to be overwhelmed by them. The main issue raised by nora participants was whether the Chinese rituals diverted attention from scheduled nora rituals or changed the character of the ceremony. I would expect nora members to watch the boundaries of their tradition for erosion from the economically and religiously powerful Thai-Chinese. Although syncretic religions are inclusive by definition, in this case the basic nora identity might be threatened. In comparison, the influence of other religions, such as Islam, is rather mild.

Islam

Early Muslim Influence. Although rulers in the Siamese-Malay peninsula officially converted to Islam in the 15th century, I found only a few traces of this ancient religion in the nora performances observed in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, Phatthalung, and Pattani. The power of Buddhism in Thai nation-building has overshadowed other world religions professed by minority groups. And the fairly recent introduction of text oriented Islam appears to have reduced Malay involvement in the nora performance. Also, I would speculate that Malay interest in the drama was channeled into two other similar ceremonies featuring Malay-Muslim actors with less mixing between Thai and Malay communities. The first is a totally Malay drama called mayong practiced in Malay communities in Pattani Province and southward into Malaysia (see Chapter 3). The second is a version of nora, which mixes both Buddhist and Muslim elements and is called Malay nora or nora khaeg (Kruun 1999).

I found three aspects of Islam in nora. First, one wife of the legendary Phra Muang Thawng was Muslim. Unfortunately I can find no more information on her and
am not sure if she represents a real person or is a symbol of the ties to other societies.

Second, some nora persons have mixed religious and ethnic backgrounds, resulting in being possessed by Muslim spirits. For example, Nora Chalerm said, “I’m Thai but some of my ancestors are Muslim and Chinese. My wife is also Thai but some of her ancestors are Chinese too. I have to serve all my ancestors on every special occasion such as Hari Raya [an Islamic holiday in Malaysia to celebrate the end of the fasting month of Ramadan]. I have to prepare sticky rice for them, so I can live happily.”

Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter said the vast majority of nora ancestor spirits are Buddhists, but a few ancestors might be Muslim from intermarriage between Buddhists and Muslims. Songphuum said he was possessed by a Muslim spirit and had the ability to heal Muslims. At a nora initiation, one middle aged female medium was Muslim but her spirit was ethnically Thai from the town of Sai Buri, Pattani Province. These examples show some intermarriage and blending of traditions between Buddhists and Muslims, although these two groups live fairly separately today due to differences in food, religion, and customs (Chaveewan 1986, Chavivun 1980).

Third, a small number of Muslim clients use the magical services of nora leaders. I asked Nora Chalerm about his clients in Malay Muslim dominated Pattani Province. He said, “Most of the clients are Thai-Buddhists. Some are Thai-Chinese. But they hardly ever are Muslim. During the last three years, there was a Muslim client who hired me to perform. When the spirit possessed [the client], the spirit could speak Thai clearly, even though the spirit was Muslim. There were three times that I performed for Muslim people.”
Thai and Malay Interaction in Nora Khaeg. One type of nora blends both Thai and Malay ethnicities. But this blending is not always smooth, particularly around offerings to ancestors. At the 2003 Thakhae roong khruu, a female nora spirit medium told me Muslims were involved in nora in Satun Province, a predominantly Malay Muslim region, but they would not prepare pork. This is no small matter for nora Buddhists who believe pork is a necessary offering to make the ritual complete, without which the spirits will be angry. The medium said:

For Muslim people, they have nora too. They also set up the group of nora at Satun. The village headman set up that group. But we are different from it. There are [Muslim] people who don’t eat pork too. They cannot eat and look at pork. But we cannot do anything. We [all ethnic groups] have to live together because we have to relate together. For example, a woman at my home when she saw the head of a pig, she wanted to throw it away. I said that she cannot do that because it is an offering.

During this conversation, a male spirit medium added that ducks, chickens, and pigs’ heads would be put on the offering shelf the next day. Then the previous female medium said, “For the vow fulfillment ceremony, we have to have offerings like that. If we don’t offer those things, it is not complete.” Some nora Buddhists with Muslim ancestors have solved this problem by setting up a separate offering shelf to Muslim and other spirits, minus the pork. 168 Reputedly fond of chicken, some Muslim spirits have been known to kill a live chicken while possessing a medium (Pittaya 1992: 153, 288).

Although I could not verify it, the nora performance with Muslim adherents in Satun might well have been the so-called Malay nora (or nora khaeg), as described by academic Kruun Manichoot (1999). In describing nora khaeg, I am very reticent to use

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168 Pittaya (1992) mentioned two female Muslim ancestors – Mae Janjuri and Mae Sijuraa.
the term *khaeg*, which can be translated as Malay, Indian, Arab, or guest.\(^{169}\) It is considered derogatory for Thai-Malay Muslims to be called guests, since many have lived in the south for centuries, long before most Thai settlers (Cornish 1997: 1). But Kruun speculated that Muslim people invented this name to differentiate their hybrid style of drama in the deep south. In the provinces of Songkhla, Phatthalung, and Trang, people called their performance *nora*, but in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, people called it *nora khaeg*. Dating back more than 50 years, *nora khaeg* became less popular as the Thai Buddhist *nora* spread farther south with improved transportation, he wrote. So today there are few remaining troupes. The *nora khaeg* musical instruments and costumes were similar to *nora* ones but with some variations. The singing and dancing were a mixture of the *nora* style and the all-Malay performance of *mayong*. The stories were from Thai literature about royal dynasties and from the Suthon-Manora story, which was often performed for vow fulfillment rituals (Kruun 1999).

One *nora khaeg* leader, Nora Cheu Nogyuung Thawng, was famous in competitions against *nora* troupes in the genre’s heyday. Leaders usually were male ethnic Thais who sang and teased the dancers in Thai and Malay languages while the other performers often were female Malay Muslims who sang replies in local Malay language.\(^{170}\) These troupes were hired by both Buddhists and Muslims to perform at fairs,

\(^{169}\) Dorairajoo (2002:53-54) reported that Thai Buddhists thought *khaeg* persons were poor, lazy, spoke Thai badly, and had many children. When the prime minister visited the south over a militant uprising in 2004, he asked a Muslim girl why their families had so many children.

\(^{170}\) The Malay dialect in the south is called Pattani Malay by academics and differs somewhat from the Malay language used across the border in Kelantan State. However, recently this dialect has been labeled Jawi (or Yawi) and has become a symbol of Malay Muslim identity in southern Thailand. Actually, Jawi is Arabic writing of the Malay language. It is a script rather than a spoken language (Cornish 1997: xiii, Dorairajoo 2002: 53).
weddings, monk ordinations, and Muslim circumcision rituals (*khao sunat*). Over the years, troupes had to modernize to survive, employing Malay and Indian music and performing scenes from modern movies. *Nora khaeg* today is mostly performed for vow fulfillment and to show respect to teachers (Kruun 1999). I would speculate that the existence of this integrated drama possibly indicates a time of greater interaction among ethnicities in the past.

*Nora Brought Thais and Malays Together in Malaysia.* Golomb argued that *nora* - along with boar hunting -- served an integrative function in Thai villages in Malaysia’s Kelantan State. He wrote, “During the last century, the two major categories of adventurer (*nagleeng*) in Siam Village, the boar hunters and the *manooraa* performers, have continued to serve as crucial elements in cementing enduring social relations between the Thai community and surrounding Malay communities” (Golomb 1978: 54). He found 20 *nora* masters in Thai villages in Kelantan in the 1970s. *Nora* performers were hired to fulfill vows to spirits, much the same as in Thailand. *Nora* was distinctive in using Malay language for the important improvised comedy parts while employing Thai language for prayers and songs. The comedy role was often played by a Malay person to entertain for Malay hosts and audiences. Historically in Malaysia, these ethnic groups had been well integrated in performances. Thai *nora* groups and Malay *mayong* groups shared performers and comedy skits, and both entertained in the Kelantan royal courts. For the minority Thais, performing together with the majority Malays provided a bridge to better relations (Golomb 1978).
Conclusion

The effect of participants identifying certain parts of nora with different belief systems is that the drama is draw closer to or distanced from discourses on national identity and religion. Nora is basically an ancestral communication system based on Animistic beliefs, which is not subsumed under any organized religion but contains elements of many. The national religion of Theravada Buddhism is the most pervasive and respected, according to nora families. This tie increases the legitimacy of the dance-drama as a national art. However, comments by nora participants reveal some tensions between Buddhism and Animism, particularly around the concepts of reincarnation and possession. Hindu-Brahmanism plays largely a historical role contributing Hindu gods, religious objects, and some rituals. Although Hindu gods and goddesses are less significant, this may change as the south is experiencing a small revival of Hindu deities especially goddesses, such as Uma Devi.

Chinese Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism seem the closest in doctrine to nora regarding filial piety and ancestor relationships beyond the grave. Despite these commonalities, nora family members clearly differentiate between what they consider ethnic Thai and ethnic Chinese rituals and hold strongly to their own traditions with rather minimal boundary crossing. According to nora participants, as long as the more affluent and numerous Thai-Chinese want to help the poorer nora villagers by providing audience pleasing spectacles, the assistance will be welcome. But the main program must remain faithful to past nora practices, to nora identity. However, as expressions of

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171 The central doctrine is that when humans die, they become ancestor spirits who look after their offspring by rewarding, protecting, and punishing. This two-way exchange relationship between humans and spirits is transmitted through spirit mediums. Anthropologists have described similar systems in Africa and China (Carter 2000, McCreery 2000).
Chinese identity, today proudly called *jek*, are now more acceptable and trendy in modern Thailand (Chang Noi 2003), *nora* might be drawn closer to this other form of mediumship with its growing political and economic capital. On Islam, the existence of several types of *nora* involving Malays and Thais indicates a certain flexibility in identity on the borderlands in the past. But today these integrated performances are less common in the south, possibly due to heightened nationalism on both sides of the border and text-based religious changes.

The next chapter addresses the core cultural themes of *nora* identity in this world, focusing on kinship and the legitimizing elements of place, past, performing arts, and monarchy.
CHAPTER 6

CORE THEMES I: NORA IDENTITY IN THIS WORLD

Introduction

This chapter and the next are about the essence of nora identity as understood by participants. They describe and analyze core cultural themes. These emerged from interviews with informants on the emic meaning of nora. Although these themes may appear disparate at first glance, there is a common thread of individual and group identity, which runs throughout. Put briefly, the themes based in this world are the bonds of kinship and the importance of past, place, performance, and monarchy in making nora a southern symbol. In Chapter 7, the themes related to the other world are human agency in communicating with ancestors and a moral system that resists the dark powers.

Many of these themes can be found in an early definition of identity by anthropologist Geertz. Identity relates to "givens" or primordial attachments consisting of blood ties, race (today described as ethnicity), language (or dialect), place, religion, and custom (Geertz 1973). Complexifying this early definition, theories on relational identities of kinship, power, and gender explore how identities are constructed, manipulated, and contested (Maynes, et al., eds. 1996). Part of the flexibility of identity is the construction of kinship categories, which go far beyond the biological. Although they

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172 Core themes refer to topics, which appeared frequently in these discussions and thus were relevant to the informants.
173 These attachments play valuable roles in creating the identity of the nora lineage that goes beyond genealogical relationships. Geertz described this concept of identity as the connection with other people, which is more than the individual elements: “One is bound to one’s kinsman, one’s neighbor, one’s fellow believer, ipso facto; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself” (1973: 259).
appear natural, these systems are created from culture and history (Maynes, et al. 1996: 1-2). Concepts of belonging are often complex, based on national and local discourses relating to birth, land ownership, citizenship, and morality (Maurer 1996: 356). Therefore, kinship discourses involve contradictions, counter discourses, power differentials, and change. The *nora* drama violates kinship rules by encompassing southern persons outside the blood-based lineage in a type of symbolic kinship. This chapter provides many examples of the inclusiveness and flexibility of the *nora* group identity as well as contestations.

**Theme 1: Kinship That Goes Beyond Blood**

Discourses on the Family and Village. Kinship is the overriding discursive theme that gives *nora* its strength in rural settings and sets it apart from other forms of Thai mediumship. 174 According to historian Tony Day, the family network has long been the force behind governance in the region. “I argue that extended family-like networks and the ideologies that give these networks coherence and longevity constitute a characteristically Southeast Asian mode through which relations of power have assumed statelike form... throughout the region’s history” (Day 2002: 38-9). Applying the concept of “familial states,” Day noted that several kings in Southeast Asia served as spirit mediums for their ancestors. 175

174 For a description of similar rural kinship relations in northern Malaysia, see Janet Carsten 1997.
175 According to Day, these monarchs became more powerful through Hindu religion and the *devaraja* cult in which the king was a reincarnated Hindu god. With the assistance of Brahmin priests, monarchs grew in prestige as “men of prowess.” The public worshipped the kings as gods when monarchs joined the ancestors on death (Day 2002: 49-50). Family dynasties in Thailand were powerful in the bureaucracies that developed in the 17th to 18th centuries and were also important in southern monasteries (Day 2002: 40, 56, citing Gesick 1995). Day argued that today there is still evidence of ties between kinship and the state, even from bygone kingdoms. For example, the followers of a spirit medium in Chiang Mai use kinship terms to describe their indebtedness to the spirit lord, acting much like commoners in the old Lannathai kingdom (Day 2002: 76, citing Morris 2000: 85-86).
Just as connections between family and government exist on a macro level, on the micro level, kin-based relationships are equally important for unity and identity in many societies. Anthropologist Jeffrey Carter (2000) described the role of ancestors in African religions. His description resonates with *nora* beliefs particularly on issues of punishment and rewards. Referring to the early research of Meyer Fortes on Ghana, Carter wrote:

...Fortes concludes that ancestor worship is an extension of ordinary filial piety, a continuation of expected social relations between parents and children. Just as children respond to the punishment and protection of their parents, adults likewise treat their ancestors. Not quite gods, but certainly no longer mere human beings, ancestors are family-specific superhuman agents who, when remembered and treated appropriately, can provide substantial benefits in the material world (2000: 181).

In southern Thailand, the same enduring relations exist between ancestors and the living community. In studying the *roong khruu*, Pittaya (1992) found that community residents performed the ceremonies together because they believed they were descended from the same ancestors and teachers (*taa yaai nora ot khruu maw nora*). When they met, villagers mentioned these common ancestors. “So the beliefs about the ancestors function to build the community power and the strength of the community as well” (Pittaya 1992: 66). Pittaya (1992: 253) identified six ways in which the *roong khruu* ceremony affected people: by creating jobs through performing, controlling behavior of individuals and society, curing illness through vows, inheriting the dancing, promoting knowledge, and creating unity in society. *Nora* controls behavior by promoting gratitude to teachers and parents, both living and deceased, and creating community solidarity. The villagers work together, sacrifice their labor and money, and prepare food for performers and monks. So they grow tired together and sympathize with each other, which is the “way of life and culture” in rural areas. Without the involvement of government or
private organizations, the community creates pride, unity, and stability, he wrote (Pittaya 1992: 262-3).

Thianchai also argued that the rituals pull the community together and help resolve conflicts with relatives. "It is like opening a law court at the house courtyard to let people in the community know the matters in the family.... So nora roong khruu is a play, ritual, and belief and includes a local administrative system of the original culture of southern people" (Thianchai 2003: 5). When family members are arguing over money or land inheritance, the ancestor spirits order the descendants to solve the problem or be punished in front of local witnesses. The ancestors also re-assert their position as family heads and create a sense of identity, once they have possessed the living. He stated:

Then ancestors would talk, ask, give advice, and teach the descendants just as when they were still alive. They would remind the descendants that the relationship still is the same, although in real life they couldn't meet together. There would be hugging, patting on the face and back, consoling lovingly, and showing love together in the midst of the public. It creates a picture of love, attachment, and delight in the eyes of people in the area. It also makes them have more confidence that they have an origin (Thianchai 2003: 8).

Although Thai research on nora tends to stress its positive functions in local society, as in the above description, many rural communities today are the site of real conflicts especially when there are wide disparities in income due to capitalist development. This discussion about nora and community values is part of a larger discourse on Thai identity and the traditional village (baan). The iconic idyllic village is presented in opposition to the modern city (muang), influenced by foreign capitalism and consumer values. Respected Thai social activist Sulak Sivaraksa (1991) is the country's main proponent for the existence of a basic Thai identity, which he claims was based on rural values and developed before Western contact. He wrote:
We should first of all learn to be ourselves from the success and failure of our ancestors and we must understand our indigenous culture critically. We should build up the *baan* concept to be self-reliant, and it should be strong enough to safeguard itself from the *muang*, which has become the agent of the multinational corporations as well as consumer culture (Sulak 1991: 56).

Sulak and other scholars have argued that there is a village worldview or culture based on kinship, belief in spirits, local wisdom, and resistance to Western values (Hirsch 1991: 336). The discourse that villagers represent the real Thai identity emerged after the political turmoil of the 1970s. This voice has grown louder as the urban middle class engages in global consumerism but feels nostalgic for lost traditions (Jeffrey 2002: 141-2). Presenting a different view, development expert Philip Hirsch persuasively argued that the idealized “Thai village” was really a constructed concept that is used in state discourse to further government ends, such as development projects. In addition, Hirsch stated that the village is not a unified entity but is a “contested space.” He wrote, “The idea of a harmonious rural community has always been something of a myth, contradicted by the cleavages based on kin, faction, and unequal access to resources” (Hirsch 1991: 334).

Since the 1930s, the government has formed many cultural boards to define and promote Thai identity. But these boards conceive of Thai identity as an opposite, a “negative identification” based on resisting qualities considered un-Thai (Reynolds 1991: 5, Thongchai 1994: 5). However, the cultural construction of a stereotyped ancient East and modern West is as fallacious in Thailand as in other Eastern countries, which have embraced capitalism with gusto. This dichotomization is ambivalent, according to anthropologist Christine Yano who stated that the line between Japanese and Western

176 The biggest grossing movie of 2003, “My Girlfriend,” used this theme of disappearing family life and deep childhood friendships in a small town.
cultures consists “...of admiration and distain, envy and contempt, infatuation and fear...” (Yano 2002: 13).

In summary, nora is a belief system that serves many functions in village life, but the traditional village itself is a multi-faceted discourse with contesting forces and areas of resistance. In the next section, I will discuss how this complexity is reflected in the many meanings of the term nora.

From Ascribed to Achieved Identities. People who have nora identity often have a blood relationship to a remembered relative in the lineage. As such, their social position is inherent from birth as an ascribed status. People know they are in this lineage from their own family history or a spirit informs them of this forgotten status. I asked a nora family member, “Do all the people who are possessed have nora in their family?” She replied, “Yes because nora ancestors don’t possess people who don’t have nora in their families.” In this case, the ultimate authority are the spirits who identify who is nora. But there are many exceptions. Some nora persons are not related by blood to the original founding nora families. Actually being nora is based on a broad self-definition, which can range from actual blood ties, to dancing nora, to having a belief in the spirits that comes from a revelatory experience. Therefore, this social identity can be achieved through special qualities, particularly dancing, singing, and having the ability to communicate with spirits.

Both the ascribed and achieved definitions of nora were discussed by Gesick (1995). She described the importance of blood relations in nora identity: “Mrs. Khiat was said to be of ‘Manora lineage’ (trakun nora). What does this mean? As far as I can tell, people like her just know they are trakun nora because their ancestors were. It is almost a
genetic trait. *Manora* lineage is passed down bilaterally, I was told, so if either parent is *trakun nora* so are [is] all their children" (1995: 67). In this understanding, being *nora* is based on blood kinship. But Gesick also described other ways to join the *nora* family, without being born into it, through spirit selection. In this next example, she tells of a leader who was chosen by the *nora* spirits who saved his life:

People of *manora* lineage need not be *manora* performers themselves, and *manora* performers, including fully initiated *nai nora*, need not be of *manora* lineage. For example, the *nai nora* who performed the *manora long khru* I witnessed told me he was not *trakun nora*. As a child he had suffered a severe illness and had been given up for dead, until a medium, after dancing for two hours in trance, told his parents that the *manora* spirits wanted him and if he were dedicated to them he would live (Gesick 1995: 67).

Gesick defined *nai nora* as a Master Manora, which is a *nora* leader. Thus, in this case, the man who was a *nora* leader was not in the *nora* lineage but instead had been chosen by the spirits. So here are two ways to become *nora*, but actually, there are more. Through interviews, *nora* people explained four types of people who are considered part of the kinship group: (1) persons who have blood ties to a remembered *nora* relative; (2) persons who are not in the lineage but are possessed by *nora* spirits especially from the legend; (3) persons who dance *nora*; and (4) southerners who are ethnically Thai and Theravada Buddhists. Therefore, the definition of being *nora* is rather ambiguous, allowing for persons outside the genealogical family to join and create a symbolic kinship. The *nora* drama is very inclusive, spreading its identity to a large population of southern Buddhists as quasi-kin. I argue that this openness and flexibility allows the tradition to grow, change, and cross boundaries into other religious groups.

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177 It is interesting to note that although the spirits saved his life, they may have made him sick in the first place to get his compliance, as is commonly the case in this carrot and stick approach.
As part of this kinship elasticity, the nora person has some agency in selecting the level of commitment to the spirits.\(^\text{178}\) The greatest involvement is to be initiated as a full-fledged performer, but only a few chose this demanding path. How often ceremonies are held is also variable. Although nora descendants should give offerings to the spirits once a year, they can request a delay of years in sponsoring a major ceremony. Due to other work and home obligations, some nora people perform a ritual to ask the spirits not to possess them at all, thereby divorcing from the heritage. Thus, the nora tradition is varied in its meanings and duties, an adaptability that helps the tradition survive and expand.

**Blood Relatives.** The importance of ancestors was explained by historian Saruup, who emphasized the significance of kinship throughout Thailand. But she noted that the nora lineage is unique in having mediums to communicate with descendants. She said:

> Actually the ancestors are not only important for nora but for Thai society. Showing respect to the ancestors is the way to repay for the ancestors’ kindness. The way for Thai people to show respect to the family is not as obvious as the Chinese way. It seems that both nora and the Chinese traditions are similar because the descendants have to follow their ancestors.

Nora performing troupes are usually comprised of kin. Referring to his group, Nora Awuth said, “They all are relatives. They are cousins. We have the same ancestors (taa yaai).” The nora spirit is believed to be passed through the blood of ancestors, both male and female. Mostly men pass it to their male offspring who might be sons, grandsons, or nephews, but there are no definite succession rules. The ancestor’s sex and side of the family is made explicit in Thai language. The nora ancestors fall into a

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\(^{178}\) I am defining agency as “the ability to act or perform an action,” putting aside post structuralism questions about whether language, ideology, and discourse have already constructed the person’s subjectivity (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998: 8).
continuum from specific persons who can be remembered, such as a grandfather, to a
more generalized group of long deceased forebears who are considered teachers or
guiding spirits.

The ancestors in this system include those who died a few years back as well as
those who lived hundreds of years ago. Most nora persons I interviewed describe their
nora lineage by naming specific relatives, some going as far back as great-great-
grandparents. The persons interviewed could easily recall which relatives were nora and
provided information on that person’s residence and nora instructor. By readily recalling
which family member was nora, the informants showed the continuing significance of
lineage connections for identity. I asked genealogy questions of ten persons in the nora
community, most being troupe leaders. Because more leaders are men, seven of those
interviewed were men and three were women. These figures, of course, are not meant to
be statistically representative of all southern nora families. Altogether, the interviewees
had 36 nora relatives living or deceased, including siblings. (This does not include their
children who were initiated into nora.) Of the 36 relatives, 24 (66.6%) were male and 12
(33.3%) were female. Most nora relatives were on the father's side of the family. The
interviewees listed five nora fathers but no nora mothers. However, some described
women in the lineage including nora grandmothers, a great-grandmother, and a great-
great-grandmother. As far as living siblings, there was an equal balance between nora
brothers and sisters. These figures illustrate the emphasis on the male side of the family
through the male descent line, when looking at a majority of male informants. But the
information also showed that male informants had nora women in their lineages and that
siblings are more balanced by sex today.
The informants described themselves as ethnically Thai and Theravada Buddhists; with several people making a point of saying, they were "absolutely Thai." In the south, this statement means the informants do not consider themselves to be Chinese or Malay. However, there has been a fair amount of intermixing with Chinese, and often an informant would mention a Chinese relative, like a grandfather. A few people also recalled Malay Muslim relatives, but still defined themselves as Thai Buddhists.

The following are examples of nora persons who recalled their ancestry. Sitting on the linoleum floor of a large airy room with grey cement walls in his country home in Pattani Province, the distinguished gray-haired nora leader, Nora Wan, explained his heritage. Although his mentors were all male relatives, he is now training his daughter as well as his son. "I learned from my grandfather on my father's side....I practiced nora with my uncle and we lived together. After my uncle died, I practiced with my older brother. And after my older brother died, I set up my own nora group." Looking at photographs of a nora ceremony, he added, "That is my daughter and my son. I am nora and I trained them to be nora."

The husband and wife team of Nora Chalerm and Nora Prapa also describe a complex heritage of nora from both their families. At his home at PSU, Pattani, the retired campus janitor described his family history:

My grandfather on my mother's side was nora, as was my great-grandfather on my father's side. My wife's father and uncle are nora too. I don't know the beginning of nora in my family. I only knew that I was sick and a nora teacher took me to train to be nora. And after that, I got better. Then a nora teacher gave up his group and I formed my own group. I cannot give up being nora because I will be sick again. All of my children are nora.

179 This idea of being one hundred percent Thai is challenged by Grant Evans 1997, who discussed Chinese influence in Thailand.
Sitting with her husband, Nora Prapa told her history, which also included illness: I observed my grandfather on my father’s side who is nora. Since I was born, I saw my grandfather and also my uncle dance nora. I became nora because I was sick. And the vision doctor told me that my grandparents’ spirits, who were nora, wanted me to be nora too. After that, my mother brought me to practice to be nora. My great-grandfather and my grandfather, both of them were nora. So I cannot give up being nora.

They illustrate how being nora is like being surrounded by family from long, long ago.

*Persons Outside the Blood Lineage.* Recent scholarship on kinship worldwide has found that the practice of defining family relationships is often inconsistent and changeable, based on culture and history, rather than biology (Maynes, et al. 1996: 1). As a prime example, the nora lineage has expanded the definition of kinship beyond blood ties. At first, it would seem that being related to nora ancestors would be an obvious pre-requisite for being nora. But in fact, several informants said they were not biologically related to the nora families. Their status was achieved rather than ascribed. For instance, a person can become part of the heritage by being possessed by a nora spirit from the Phatthalung Legend. Nora Plaeg’s adopted son described two types of spirits -- those from the historic legend and those from the personal families of nora people. “The spirits [from the legend] are the ancestors of nora; they are not the ancestors of the people who are possessed,” he said.

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180 The study of kinship has been fundamental to anthropology since its inception from the theories of Lewis Henry Morgan to Claude Levi-Strauss. Scholars believed that political, economic, and social organization developed out of the biological family. “In one way, then, kinship has always been regarded as a system that provides for the solidarity, trust, and cooperation that are functionally prerequisite both to group living and to sociocultural life” (Schneider 1997: 269). However, David Schneider (1997: 270) qualifies this description by saying that early anthropologists used Western culture as their basis for understanding the family systems of other cultures on such issues as racism.
Although a most revered nora leader in the south, Nora Plaeg did not have relatives from the nora lineage. Rather, as a small boy he was possessed by the legendary founder of nora, Khun Sii Satthaa. According to his niece, Nora Plaeg was the “highest level of nora.” This direct connection to the legend gave Nora Plaeg the legitimacy to conduct initiation rituals for more than a thousand persons in the south. His mother was also possessed by a Phatthalung legend figure, Mae Khaenawn. And after his mother’s death, the spirit passed to Nora Plaeg’s daughter Sujin, and in 2004, she passed the spirit to her niece. Speaking at a break in the Thakhae roong khruu ceremony in 2001, Sujin told me:

I am Sujin. I am Phaw Plaeg’s daughter. My grandmother on my father’s side was the last spirit medium of Mae Khaenawn. When my grandmother died, the spirit didn’t pick anyone to be her spirit medium. The spirit started to possess me again. The spirit has to find the person who she likes the most. I am possessed only to do this ceremony every year.

So although their relatives were not in the nora lineage, this family was selected by spirits from the legend for possession. There is no apparent separation between persons who have nora blood and those who have been picked by nora legend spirits. For example, at a roong khruu ceremony in 2001, Nora Jop spoke into a microphone, “We are in the same family. I’m sure that if you are not in the family, you won’t come here.” He referred to the audience as descendants and urged them to help each other to make the ceremony a success.

Another quality that earns one a place in nora is simply “belief.” According to the granddaughter of Nora Wan, belief in nora is sufficient to join the community. Nora family member Nanthida Koolkua relayed the story of the king’s daughter, Mae Sii Maa Laa, from the Phatthalung Legend: “At first only her descendents inherited nora, but later
people who believed in her inherited it. So today there are spirit mediums who have her
tradition but are not blood descendants." This is a very inclusive definition of descent that
brings a large group under the umbrella of trusted family members.\(^{181}\) Also, several
informants told me that learning to dance and sing entitled a person to identify as nora.

While attending the roong khruu of Nora Oamjid in Phatthalung Province in June 2005, I
asked her who could become nora. She said even a foreigner like myself could join if I
truly believed in the tradition and accepted the ancestors' guidance in my life. My desire
to join meant that I had some connection to nora, possibly through a past life or through a
forgotten ancestor. Drama teacher Thianchai said he thought it was relatively easy to join
the community.

Also, I learned that being a southerner entitles one to a certain insider status.

Some southern Thai-Buddhists believe that people in the south were descended from one
original family, a type of southern Adam and Eve. Nora Awuth said:

> Every southern person, who lives from Chumporn [Province] on down, which is
the door to the south of Thailand, is a descendant of the ancestors. Nora was born
in Phatthalung in Baan Thakhae. Every southern person who is Buddhist is a
descendant of Phaw Khun Satthaa. Some of them have altars at home to give
offerings to the nora spirits.

His broader view encompassed a large family tree of southern Thai Theravada
Buddhists that went beyond actual blood relations. I asked a Songkhla native, who
teaches at a technology institute, about this idea. Ajaan Tak, my insightful "native
informant," confirmed that there was a belief in a southern lineage. When I inquired,
"You mean southern Thais didn't come from Bangkok?" She burst out laughing and said,
“No.” The idea of being descended from central Thais, who moved south, struck her as

\(^{181}\) Kinship terms such as aunt and uncle, and younger and older sibling are commonly used in Thai culture
for strangers like waitresses and tuk tuk drivers, pulling them into a family circle.
humorous because of the obvious differences in character—personality, behavior, temperament, dialect, and even food preferences. I presented this viewpoint to several southerners. Some confirmed it while others had not heard of the idea, indicating that the concept might not be widespread.

Communicating with Remembered Ancestors. Some researchers have interpreted the spirit domain as a positive or negative metaphor for the human domain (Boddy 1989, Crapanzano 1977). Anthropologist Boddy stated that the performance of the spirits was a cultural text that was produced by the living and could be read and provide insights into human issues and understandings. She described the parallel world of spirits in northern Sudan as both “metasocial,” when spirits dealt with human conflicts and as “metacultural,” when the spirits were “an intellectual resource located at a remove from everyday meanings, an allegorical production” (1989: 8-9).

Although I am not ready to argue this analysis myself, I have observed some situations in which the spirits served to resolve difficult conflicts. From the following incident, I would surmise that the spirit realm is invoked when disagreements have deep cultural and religious meanings, requiring outside supernatural arbitration.

A roong khruu ceremony was held in May 2004 in a small town in Sathingphra District, north of Songkhla. The family had not held this ceremony previously because the nora tradition had died out with the great-grandparents. The nora line (saai) was broken. As a sponsor of the event, a male member of the family hoped to resolve kinship conflicts over marriage and land ownership and bring the family together. Grandparent spirits took over the bodies of a mother and daughter and helped them discuss a disagreement, which had been smoldering. The daughter, 30, wanted to marry but the
mother forbade it. The grandmother spirit explained that the daughter and her boyfriend were soul-mates in a past life so should marry. Meanwhile, these two spirits were also fighting over jealousies from their former lives in the human world. The spirits engaged in a loud and emotional argument that went on for several hours and involved rolling on the stage floor, waving arms, and crying. But the dispute also had its humorous moments when the mother kept going in and out of trance every few minutes and changing her behavior, to the laughs of observers. The nora families fed the spirits local food and urged them to stop the old argument that had continued into death.

When is it necessary to invoke the spirit world, for what kinds of problems and solutions? In this case, the spirit world was the appropriate place to resolve this conflict, which could not be resolved in the village cultural context. The young woman was the last daughter in the family so it was her responsibility according to Thai culture to care for her mother at home. It would be difficult for the daughter to break this tradition in a small farming community, but the spirits provided a karmic justification for the marriage, invoking Buddhist doctrine. Also, the daughter was lower down in the generational hierarchy and must be dutiful to her mother. But the spirits were siblings and therefore about equal in age and status. Therefore, the daughter was represented by a spirit who was in a higher ritual position than herself. The spirits tried to resolve the dispute by using their special knowledge of karma in the afterlife and powerful status. Meanwhile the personal bickering between the spirits provided a moral lesson. The audience found it humorous that this angry spat lasted into death, despite a strong Thai belief in having a cool heart and resolving or hiding differences. Therefore, the living learned the foolishness of holding grudges by observing the mistakes of the spirits.
When I left the ceremony, I thought the daughter had received the spirits’ blessing and all was well. But later I learned the possessions and arguing continued for the next year because many of the relatives were against the marriage on a number of grounds. While the spirits could help to a certain extent by providing a different perspective, ultimately the descendants had to make the decision based on their cultural views.

The male host provided another view of the experience, addressing the issue of validity. He said this dispute was like flashy wrestling programs from the West, which are quite popular on Thai TV. Many people understand that the violence is not real, but they accept it. At nora rituals, older people don’t think about whether it is true or not. It is just the process. The question of truth or falsity only comes up for academics, not for the community, he said.

While this particular ceremony was very emotional, verging on violent when family members held down the two possessed mediums, from my observations ancestor spirits have a variety of communication styles. These styles appear to reflect the closeness of the relationship and status of the spirit. Some more recently deceased ancestors talked directly to their offspring through a medium, while some ancestors who died long ago chose to dance through the human bodies without communicating specific messages. In addition another category of spirits, the personalities from the Phatthalung Legend, tended to be quite outspoken, giving advice and controlling the ceremony due to their authoritative positions.

In 1998, I observed a grandmother spirit give her granddaughter advice with the mother acting as the medium. The spirit world was invoked to provide continuity to the family, to reinforce the loving concern and protection from past generations. On this
occasion, a nora troupe from Songkhla performed an evening ceremony for an upper middle class family in Hat Yai. The host, a woman in her 50s, had paid 5000B (US $119) to have a troupe perform roong khruu and invite the spirits to possess. A tent and stage were set up at her suburban home on the outskirts of the city. The all male troupe consisted of seven musicians playing drums, flute, and cymbals, two initiated nora performers, and a young technician to adjust the five microphones and loud speakers. The performers and musicians were in their 50s and 60s. The host's daughter, who had a master's degree in Thai Studies, told me her mother hired the group every three years to please the ancestors.

When her mother put on a beaded nora costume and began to dance holding a lighted candle, the daughter whispered to me, “That is not my mother,” rather a chilly revelation. The mother put a lit candle in her mouth and then spat water, as she was alternatively possessed by her own mother and her father, who the daughter recognized from their voices. Using branches to sprinkle holy water on the audience, the possessed mother called the descendants, her five children, to her one by one. The daughter said her deceased father’s spirit would not appear because he had only died a year before which was too soon. The noisy crowd swelled to 200 people including a group of teenage boys who played a dice game of “high-low” in the rear. The grandmother spirit in the possessed woman pointed to her granddaughter and yelled for her to come. The granddaughter crawled forward, showing deep respect with a deferential wai hand gesture. The grandmother hugged her and talked intently giving advise on the young woman’s career, while the musicians listened with interest. This clearly was a serious and
emotional day for the family. The ritual reinforced family loyalty, love, and obligations that reached beyond the grave.

**Passing the Spirit.** The movement of spirits into and out of their descendants' bodies is a momentous process that illustrates the strength of kinship, the potentially dangerous power of spirits, and the agency of humans in dealing with the invisible world. There are two particularly dangerous junctions – when the spirit possesses for the first time and when the spirit leaves the human body for the last time.\(^{182}\) These are major rites of passage involving moving from one status and stage in life to another (Turner 1969). When the spirit finally leaves the body, the human may die and cross over into the spirit’s sphere. Between this beginning and end, the human and spirit learn to accommodate each other for mutual benefit.

I first became aware of this crucial transference stage when a Thai-Chinese professor at PSU, Pattani told me about his family medium. We had been talking about the Phuket Vegetarian Festival when he said, “There is one thing that I didn’t tell you about. In my family, we also have this kind of heritage.” His elderly uncle was a spirit medium, possessed by an ancient Thai monk from Songkhla. He served only family members in a private room in the family home. Originally, the spirit possessed the professor’s great-great-grandmother, then was passed to his grandfather, and lastly to his uncle. The family was concerned because the uncle had been hospitalized. Once he passes the spirit onto someone else, he will die. A woman who wanted to become a medium heard of this spirit and went to the hospital to convince the uncle to transfer the spirit to her. “But my auntie-in-law just yelled at her because if my uncle passes this on to

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\(^{182}\) For the process of accepting a spirit and having it speak, see anthropologist Michael Lambek 1993.
her, he will die. We want to keep him, so we said, 'No, go away. We will keep him for a while, until the end, the last minute of his life. And we will keep this as a family tradition,'” the professor said.

Although that situation related to Chinese religion, the nora community has a similar belief that the human will die when the nora spirit leaves the body. This life transition disrupts the comfortable, negotiated stability between the medium and spirit. It is a dangerous time for all persons in the area when the veil between the two worlds is torn apart. I observed this transition when Nora Plaeg passed the spirit of Khun Sii Satthaa to his son at Wat Thakhae and died only a few months later. Although Nora Plaeg was very ill and had almost died earlier, he could not pass away until the spirit was ready to leave and select a new medium.

Preference for Male Offspring. Male nora spirits are thought to prefer male descendants for mediums, although women are sometimes chosen. One reason is that females are considered ritually impure during menstruation. They are also less knowledgeable about sacred rituals, having never been ordained as monks. Ginsburg explained the patrilineal descent system in nora:

Manora troupes generally form family groups, at least in the nucleus of the company, but there is no clear transmission of a mantle from father to son. The expression of having ‘nora blood’ (mi chua nora) is as likely to mean a player whose great-uncle or grandfather was a player before him, as one who inherited the sacred crown and masks and costumes in direct succession from his father and his father’s father (1972: 178-9).

In the case of Nora Plaeg, his adopted son, who had cared for the ill leader, was willing to accept the spirit of Khun Sii Satthaa.183 In my first interview with the family

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183 Nora Plaeg had six adopted children, in addition to his five children by his surviving wife. Of the adopted children, one was adopted as a child and had more legitimacy. The rest were adopted as adults.
shortly before the *roong khruu*, some members suggested the adopted son might be chosen. Nora Plaeg had only one living son, Nora Jop, 56, who long ago married and settled in northern Malaysia after touring there as a teenager with his dad. So today it is difficult for him to organize the annual ceremony in Thailand. Two months later at the *roong khruu* ceremony, some family members voiced preference for a direct descendant, not an adopted son. And, in fact, the spirit selected Nora Jop as predicted.

Nora Plaeg’s daughter Sujin explained in 2001:

I think that my older brother, who lives in Malaysia, who is the master of the ceremony, may be picked by the spirit to perpetuate the spirit. But it depends on the spirit whether it will pick him or not. If the spirit doesn’t pick anyone to perpetuate it, the *roong khruu* ceremony will stop. The spirit can make people do anything, such as dance or do the ceremony. The spirit has to choose a person who is in father Plaeg’s family to be the descendant.

When Nora Plaeg was ready to die, his male heir had to prepare a special tray of betel to invite the spirit to come to him, otherwise, Nora Plaeg could not die. Nora Plaeg’s nephew, Nora Somphong, also described this inheritance process in 2001:

... the *nora* spirits will possess people in their families. If you have any relatives who are possessed by *nora* spirits, when they die, the spirits will find other people in your family to possess. This is the same as for me. I am a *nora* man. When I die, I have to perpetuate being *nora* to someone in my family. Now I have that person who will perpetuate it; he is my nephew. His name is Buen. I was initiated to be *nora* from Ajaan Plaeg. He is my father’s younger brother.

Another *nora* leader described a somewhat different procedure. Nora A wuth said the spirit will possess again five years after the former medium dies. He told me in 2001 that the chosen recipient will become ill. In order to be cured, this person must promise to accept mediumship. Nora A wuth said:

They came to Nora Plaeg when they were sick and made vows to become his sons if they recovered (interview with the family of one adopted son at Wat Thakhae in 2004).
We have *roong khruu*, which is the possession of ancestors in certain months. The spirit will pick its own spirit medium and possess until the spirit medium dies. Five years later, the spirit will find another person in the family to possess. Selection by the spirits is called *thuang khruu maw*. The spirit will pick a person in the family and make her or him sick. After that, the person has to make a vow to the spirit. In the ritual to pay off the vow (*gae bon*), we will have the person who has been picked by the spirit sit on the floor. We will cover her or him with white cloth and sing a song to invite the spirit. Sometimes the spirit doesn’t possess that person. It possesses another person, maybe the cook at the ritual. Or it possesses a person in another place. We cannot guess who will be the next spirit medium of the family.

Demonstrating some agency, many *nora* leaders prepare a male relative for this role years in advance, but the final choice belongs to the spirit. Although only 47-years-old, Nora Somphong had already decided that his teenage nephew would carry on the spirit for him. The nephew, who danced elegantly in a trance-like state, was the featured young male dancer at the ceremony for several years. Nora Jop had also selected a successor. He said, “I have seven children.... One of my children is a *nora* performer because he has to perpetuate *nora* in the family. The ancestors want him to be *nora*. I want him to be the leader of the group, but he said he was too lazy to do that.” Nora Jop’s comment illustrates the attitude of many young men who are ambivalent about carrying on the tradition with its responsibilities and uncertain compensation.

As noted, the passing of a *nora* patriarch and his spirit can be a chaotic and unsettling time. This event may also change the social structure of *nora* families in the village. The person who receives the spirit may be too young or not able to take command of the ceremony, creating an opportunity for other respected leaders to take charge. At Wat Thakhae after the passing of Nora Plaeg, the new leader Nora Somphong stepped in with innovative, modern ideas for enlivening *nora*. As a result, deep conflicts
developed in the lineage. When the spirit moves to a new human body, it is a period of unpredictability and also a chance for change.

_Possession Outside the Immediate Family May Be Fraud._ As mentioned, the spirit can sometimes select unlikely candidates for possession. In the Khun Sii Satthaa shrine in 2002, a lively discussion among _nora_ female spirit mediums swirled around an event, which took place two days before at the _roong khruu_. A woman had claimed to be possessed by a spirit from the Chanabaan family, possibly the deceased Nora Plaeg.\(^{184}\) This woman, about 30, was frying noodles at the time she was possessed. Shortly after, she attended the _roong khruu_ to seek help. But Nora Sompong, who was running the ceremony, did not believe that his deceased uncle would possess someone outside of his family. A female medium, 51, told me Nora Somphong was disturbed by the allegation.

She said:

_Nora Somphong said, 'It is not true. It is not true (_mai jing, mai jing)._ So it made Nora Somphong feel ashamed. A woman claimed that the spirit is her relative. So the spirit should possess her. But Nora Somphong said that the spirit is not her relative. Why does the spirit come to possess her? If they are relatives, such as a brother or father who died, they can. If we [the human and spirit] don’t know each other, why would the spirit come to possess us? We don’t know what the spirit wants -- what kind of food and things to give to the spirit. When the spirit came to possess, they [the _nora_ leaders] said it was a lie.

She added that there are many fake mediums nowadays. But another female medium disagreed. She said the spirit may have selected the noodle seller because he could not find any of his children to possess. And possibly the noodle seller had a weak or soft mind (_jit awn_), which was open to penetration. The spirit could pick a man or a

\(^{184}\) Just to clarify, the spirit of Khun Sii Satthaa had possessed Nora Plaeg and this spirit passed to his son, Nora Jop. But Nora Plaeg also has an after-life spirit, or _winyaan_, that is capable of staying on earth and possessing a medium.
woman, she said. “I believe her [the noodle seller] because she went to Nora Plaeg’s house and went up to the shrine on the wall, and the spirit left her.”

As can be seen from this discussion, usually a nora spirit goes to a relative as a first choice because the relative will know the personal preferences of the spirit. But unrelated people can be possessed too when no family member is available. While the discussion illustrates the types of evidence used in determining a valid possession, more importantly, it shows that questions of credibility and fraud are openly debated.

**Violent Spirits and Unwanted Ghosts.** During nora rituals involving possession, many spirits are thought to congregate around the stage. Spirits can act aggressively without warning, so a strong nora leader is needed to control them. At Nora Plaeg’s roong khruu, a man in his 20s became possessed, violently thrashed about, and climbed the outside poles of the stage. He lit about ten candles and inserted them in his mouth flame first, spat out wax and smoke, and lit them again. Speaking into a microphone, Nora Jop tried to reason with the spirit to calm down, “You can do what you want, but you should be careful. It is like when you drive a car, you have to be careful. You cannot break the law, and you have to avoid accidents. Now Nora Plaeg is not here, so no one can control the spirits.”

Another concern is that many spirits are invited out of respect, and potentially all might come and want to possess. The oldest Plaeg daughter said, “If we invite 50 spirits, we have to prepare 50 people to be possessed.” Nora Plaeg’s niece added, “Sometimes when the spirit comes, and it cannot find someone to possess, the spirit will possess the audience members who stand in the front. But the spirit has to consider about the person
who it wants to possess because the spirit can possess only the suitable person. That person has to have nora in his or her family.”

It is widely known in the south that spirits can unexpectedly possess audience members. When I asked my teacher friend Tak about going to spirit mediums, this was the first concern she voiced. “It is very scary,” she said. In addition, the nora ceremony attracts both good spirits (winyaan) and bad ghosts (phii) of the deceased. These dangerous unwelcome ghosts may try to crash the ceremony, according to Sujin. But powerful ancestors can protect nora families from ghosts during sacred ceremonies. She said:

Sometimes the bad ghost (phii) may come to possess instead of the real ancestor spirits. But for this roong krueu ceremony, bad ghosts cannot do that because the ancestors will know. Bad ghosts are like phii taa hoong [people who died violently and suddenly, possibly by being murdered]. But these ghosts cannot enter the stage. The ancestors will automatically know whether the spirit who is coming is the real spirit or the bad ghost. Sometimes some people will claim that the spirit is not real. They will say that the spirit medium pretends to be possessed by the real spirit, but isn’t. Those people are drunk.

However Nora Chalerm warned that some rituals do not involve inviting the ancestors, and so other ghosts are more likely to turn up:

When we are performing for a funeral, we don’t do the roong krueu ceremony, so if we are possessed, we are possessed by the other ghosts. This possession by ghosts happened with another nora group, not mine. During the performance, the dancers went mad (baa). They screamed and ran around on the stage. Sometimes ghosts possess the audience and the audience becomes mad.

I asked how he could chase away the ghosts. Nora Chalerm replied, “Sometimes the ghost goes away by itself. Sometimes, the possessed people have to go to a spirit doctor (maw phii).” To safeguard his group, Nora Chalerm does a secret protective ritual each time he performs. He presents a dichotomy between the good spirits of the ancestors
and the potentially harmful spirits of immoral or dissatisfied ghosts. Potentially wild creatures, these ghosts can be tamed by nora masters who have their ancestors’ powers.

_Nora Leaders Continue their Powers in Death._ The passing away of a nora leader is simply a transition from the physical to spiritual form. For the family, the deceased patriarch continues to protect and even fulfill wishes, using the magical power he had in life and stronger powers obtained in death. Whereas while living, the male leader was empowered by his ancestors and legendary spirits, now the leader becomes a spirit himself. One sunny morning, Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter guided me upstairs through her old natural wood home to a backroom where light filtered through a small window into the brown darkness. Along the left wall was a simple offering table. Above it, a white cloth hung by four corners, a well-known symbol of _nora_ ceremonies used by spirits to descend to the stage. On the floor was a padded bed with a gold brocade cover - - Nora Plaeg’s bed. I asked, “Do you feel that the spirit of Nora Plaeg is here?” She said:

Yes. He lives here all the time. If you have any business, his descendants will make a vow any time...If we have any business, I can ask him. He is very smart. He won’t go anywhere. While we were dancing _nora_ [yesterday], he came to the stage to lie down on the sacred shelf. If he comes, we will get the smell of perfumed water...Nobody dares to stay here. Sometimes people have heard him call them. And sometimes they heard his raspy voice and him hitting the pair of gongs. I don’t dare to come up here at night too. I am afraid too.

When Nora Plaeg was alive, his spirit would force him to fast, taking no food for a month but drinking bottles of a Thai perfume called Jevalin Giffarine. So now when the smell of perfume drifts in, his daughter knows he has arrived. Today the offerings on the table of rice, flowers, incense, and candles are his spiritual sustenance. They are renewed every Buddhist holy day, four times a month by the moon’s cycles. The presence of his spirit is a bit frightening even for the family. But it is also the potency of this kinship, a
resilient connection with the past, that ties the family members together and pulls them back here every year.

"Nora Will Never Die." Nora is promoted by a network of families that fiercely defend its continuing existence, but the challenges ahead are many. The high costs of the performance and the lack of interest by young men are worrisome issues. According to Nora Chalerm, 60, who has been a nora leader since he was 17, the expense of the roong khruu means it is only performed when necessary. And only the wealthier can afford to hire a nora performance, for monk ordinations for example. With few bookings, performers must have other jobs to survive, he said.

Another difficulty lies in the genre's oral tradition. Keeping nora alive requires extensive training in the dance and rituals. Brandon described orally transmitted arts:

"Unlike text-based Western drama, which can be transmitted by published books and stored for centuries, the art of traditional performance resides in the body of the living performer-teacher. Hence the critical nature of training: if even one generation fails to learn, a theatre genre will be lost irrevocably" (1993: 6). Nora Chalerm said the youth must be taught the sacred rituals, not just dancing for entertainment. He said:

Nora is coming back. I trained all my children to be nora. If not, nora will fade. The grandparents' spirits will force their grandchildren to be nora. But I'm sure that nora will not disappear. In Phatthalung, Songkhla, and Nakhon [Si Thammarat], there are many nora groups. But they don't perform ancient nora. They can only dance and sing.

Nora Chalerm's statement that he trained all his children brings up the question of resistance. Can anyone refuse the obligation and what are the consequences? This topic is particularly relevant to the meaning of kinship because people are motivated to continue the practice by both rewards and punishments, making ancestral ties a double-edged
sword (Sawaang 1999). Nora is not just a performance; it is a form of communicating with authoritative ancestors who both reward and penalize, like real parents and grandparents. More than three decades ago, Ginsburg wrote about the dark side of the art: “A young player in a modernized troupe spoke to me of his need to play in the manora lest a curse fall upon him for abandoning a family tradition” (1972: 179). Those fears continue today, but the power of the ancestors seems to have diminished since there are several avenues for escaping obligations with the spirit’s permission. Descendants have some agency to refuse and may do so due to the demands of jobs outside the rural area and new consumer lifestyles.

Still the consequences for rejecting the tradition can be harsh. The coercive ability of the spirits to demand offerings and obligations is often demonstrated through illness. Nora Wan said:

When the grandchildren organize the performance, they have to offer some food for the spirit, and the nora [person] will invite the spirit to possess. When the spirit wants to eat, it will make the grandchildren sick. So they [the family] have to prepare some food for the spirit and ask the nora [person] to invite the spirit to possess the medium and eat the food. The spirit can eat when it is in the human being.

He added later, “The spirit can make us die if the spirit wants to eat, but we didn’t prepare food for it.” Sickness can also be used as a tool to convince nora performers to do their duty. Suffering from a childhood illness, Nora Prapa was cured by her grandparent spirits. But after she married and had five children, she wanted to quit the obligation but could not. She said:

I was sick since I was born. My parents faced many difficulties to look after me (deg thii liang yaag - a difficult child to rear). My grandparents’ spirits possessed the spirit medium and told my parents that I was sick because they wanted me to be a nora. If I were not nora, I wouldn’t get better. So then, my parents lit joss
sticks and wished for the great grandparents' spirits to cure me. And after I got better, they would bring me to practice to be nora. At first, I didn't like being nora because I was very shy. So I stopped, but I got sick again. I had pain in every part of my body, especially at my breast. I had to go to the hospital and the doctor said that they would cut off one of my breasts. But the doctor didn't cut off my breast. After that, my relatives asked me, "Haven't you been nora? Why don't you continue to be nora?" I said that I wanted to give it up because I had five children and it is hard work to look after all of my children. But my relatives told me that I cannot give up [being nora] because I will die. So I have to light joss sticks and tell my grandparents' spirits that I will be nora. After that, I got better and I became nora from then on.

Although using force to demand acceptance appears cruel, the spirits also offer advantages to offspring who comply. Pittaya told me in 2004:

Besides the nora spirit giving punishment, the spirit also gives benefits. This is the same as for the Chinese spirit. The spirit will give benefits to the people who pay respect to it. Nora descendants can vow and ask for help such as when they lose things, want to get a job, and want to escape from enlistment in the military.

Behind this reward and punishment system, the ancestors' intentions are good— to continue the community, according to Nora Chalerm. He explained the motives of his wife's powerful spirit. "She [Mae Sii Maa Laa] came to the earth to possess nora [people] because she was afraid that nora [genre] would fade, and she wanted her grandchildren to further the nora dancing."

In summary, despite challenges to rural communities from modern development, the nora kinship system provides a group identity rooted in the past and in the south.

Theme 2: Legitimizing the Symbol of the South

More than other types of possession spectacles, nora has achieved public legitimacy as iconic of "the south" for Theravada Buddhists. When southerners speak of nora, they express strong feelings of nostalgia for the long ago past and feelings of loss under modernity (see Ivy 1995). In an interview in 2004, Pittaya said he feared the loss of
folk culture would result in the loss of being southern. I told him that I had met an officer from the Ministry of Education in Bangkok who said the government wanted to standardize nora, to eliminate all the different styles and practices of the many lineage families. Pittaya responded:

I don't agree with him. It is like destroying the folk culture, which has its own characteristics. They [the families] are nora but if they live in different areas, they would have their characteristics, which were inherited. If we adapt to be the same standard, the interesting parts will decrease. The folklore will disappear and the important things will disappear. Being with nature and being southern will disappear (khwaam pen thammachaat lae khwaam pen pagtai).

In another example of this symbolism, national artist Nora Yog Chuubua, in a speech at the nora competition in Songkhla in 2003, stressed the significance of the drama in southern identity. He began by explaining why he spoke in local dialect, very unusual for a formal occasion.185 "Please let me speak in southern dialect because I want to preserve the [southern] identity." Although uncommonly harsh in Thai culture, his speech began with strong criticisms of several competing groups who failed to preserve the correct singing and dancing. He concluded, "It [nora] should be right, pure, and fair. For southern people, we have shadow puppetry and nora. If you are not protective of nora and don't think about the future, nora will be lost. This is the art of southern Thailand....It is useful for society and useful for every person in every country."

For Nora Yog Chuubua and others, the drama is considered an authoritative art form worthy of study by university scholars in the social sciences, history, and dramatic arts. Research has been done by respected Thai academics (for example, Pittaya 1992, Preecha 1995, and Suthiwong 1999), and a collection of papers on nora by graduate

185 A Songkhla teacher from Bangkok is regularly requested to give introductions at important southern events because her central dialect is considered melodious and lovely, unlike the reputedly choppy, impolite southern dialect.
students at Nakhon Si Thammarat Teachers College was produced as a book (Chaw Thapthimthong, ed., 1995).

When southerners speak with emotion about *nora* and its meaning in southern identity, they cite five factors about the ritual art: (1) an original sacred space and homeland, (2) a glorious past, (3) an association with royalty through the classical performing arts, (4) the relationship to ancestors, and (5) connections to Buddhism. The last two factors were discussed in Chapter 5. In discussing the first three elements, I am not trying to prove or disprove these claims. Rather I am exploring the significance of people identifying certain elements to demonstrate the drama’s legitimacy as a southern symbol.

**Sacred Place and Homeland.** Place of origin is important to the discursive argument regarding southern identity. While Wat Thakhae has persistently claimed the honor of being *nora*’s consecrated birthplace, other regions have promoted their own *nora* histories. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (1995) defined sacred space as ritual space, which is produced through symbolic acts of worship, sacrifice, ceremony, and pilgrimage. Rather than the space being selected by gods, they argued that it is constructed by humans and tended to be influenced by “…the entrepreneurial, the social, the political, and other ‘profane’ forces” (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 17). Sacred space is invariably contested through strategies of “appropriation and exclusion” involving issues of authenticity, legitimacy, purity, and defilement (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 19). Informed by this theory, I argue that the authenticity of Wat Thakhae as the birthplace of *nora* was constructed by creating many sacred symbols that identify the place with the drama. Participants have built monuments and sacralized a
large religious tree at the reputed burial place of the founder’s ashes. The work of defining this as the drama’s sacred home continues with fundraising activities and planned additional structures. However, the recent desecration of the founder’s statue, discussed later, illustrates the ongoing process of defending the purity of the site from other interests.

_Nora Comes from Phatthalung_. Origin stories are part of the discursive practices that legitimize the genre. These stories are used by _nora_ families and villagers to tie themselves to this important heritage and authenticate their southern identities. For many, but not all _nora_ families in Pattani, Songkhla, and Phatthalung provinces, the birthplace of _nora_ is Phatthalung Province. This belief places _nora_ in the region surrounding Songkhla Lake, known for being an ancient center for foreign trade and religious study. Although now living in Pattani Province, Nora Wan, 69, said he learned _nora_ from his grandfather who formerly lived in Phatthalung. His _nora_ associate, Fung, 64, also said Phatthalung was the “original place of the culture of the south,” where both _nora_ and shadow puppetry emerged. Likewise, whenever I mentioned to people in Songkhla that I was studying _nora_, they referred me to Phatthalung as the place to get information. Because Phatthalung has this reputation in the south, in 2001 a Phatthalung _nora_ group was hired to perform at one of the most eminent Thai-Chinese religious ceremonies in the south, the annual Lim Ko Niau festival in Pattani.

Within Phatthalung Province, Thakhae village (Baan Thakhae) and the surrounding subdistrict (Tambon Thakhae) are identified by residents and local mini-bus (_tuk tuk_) drivers as the place to find _nora_. The Thakhae subdistrict includes ten villages with more than 7000 persons (Pittaya 1992). Most are small farmers, who primarily grow
rice, and secondarily are involved in rubber tree cultivation, gardening, and raising animals. With four temples in the area, they are considered rather strict Buddhists who attend many southern religious ceremonies. Pittaya (1992: 7) wrote:

Tambon Thakhae is related to the history and legend of nora because it is the place that is believed to be the original source of nora and of the nora teacher Khun Sii Satthaa. It is the place, which has a statue of the nora teacher. And the nora roong khruu ceremony in Baan Thakhae has been held continuously for several years, until it became a main custom of the villagers in Tambon Thakhae until the present day.

Five places and structures are used to claim the Thakhae area as the legitimate home of nora through legend and oral history: (1) a sacred site where a shrine was built to hold statues of Khun Sii Satthaa and Phraan Bun in Wat Thakhae; (2) the burial place of Khun Sii Satthaa’s bones formerly marked by a pillar (Lag Khun Thaa – pillar of Khun Satthaa) next to a bodhi tree in Wat Thakhae; (3) a large mound where Khun Sii Satthaa practiced the dance and may have held ceremonies; (4) a bathing area for Khun Sii Satthaa and his dance students; and (5) a Buddhist temple built by Khun Sii Satthaa, named Wat Aphayaaraam or Wat Phai, near the reputed burial ground of Lady White Blood (Patise 2004: 11, Pittaya 1992: 59-60). I discuss some of these symbolic structures later.

Sacred space and legend come together at Thakhae in a discourse, which testifies that once there was a holy man, our ancestor, and this was his sanctified ground. Nora Plaeg and his family cited the Phatthalung Legend to show that Khun Sii Satthaa taught dancing here and was cremated near the sacred tree of Buddhism. Every year, the Plaeg family must go to that bodhi tree to show respect. I asked Nora Jop why Baan Thakhae was the home of nora. He said, “We believe that Khun Satthaa of Thakhae died here. He
died at the bodhi tree. So every *nora* group has to identify with the name of Khun Satthaa of Thakhae.” During the annual *roong krueu*, this tree becomes the center of a ritual. About 50 *nora* performers and spirit mediums wrap it with white cloth and give an offering of incense and candles. The monastery monk Phra Khajawn also confirmed that this was the home of *nora* because Khun Sii Satthaa was believed to have died and been cremated there. From this hallowed place, the Plaeg family claims to have spread its spiritual influence through the whole south. Nora Plaeg’s adopted son, Nora Thiang, said, “Every *nora* group in the 14 provinces of the south has to invite the spirit of Khun Satthaa of Thakhae.” And since Nora Plaeg was possessed by this spirit, Nora Plaeg’s role in the community and annual ceremony was pivotal for decades until his death. Therefore, this origin narrative is used to legitimate a particular *nora* family and location as an annual pilgrimage site.

But academics and residents of other provinces challenge this story by claiming their own ownership of *nora*. At least one historian voiced doubts about the origin place. Although most *nora* groups live in Phatthalung now, Saruup noted, “We don’t know the real original place of *nora* exactly.” And *nora* groups in neighboring provinces, for instance Nakhon Si Thammarat and Trang, also assert the importance of the genre in their locations. The popular television soap opera *Nora*, featuring the dance performance, was situated in the historic city of Nakhon Si Thammarat, a few hours north of Phatthalung City (mentioned in Chapter 3). In 2004, I saw a *nora* performance at Walailak University by Nora Chin Chimpong from Rajabhat Institute Nakhon Si Thammarat. He had trained under another influential teacher, the famed Nora Phum Thewaa. Although Nora Plaeg
initiated many performers, nora leaders in other provinces have done likewise. Nearby, Trang Province also has celebrated nora troupes.

Even within Phatthalung Province, other areas have asserted claims to nora sacred space. At Wat Khian south of Phatthalung City, the laywoman I met proudly said her monastery was located near the burial place of the mother of Mae Sii Maa Laa, a queen named Khun Nuan. She asserted that although Wat Thakhae was associated with this queen’s birth, she was buried at a palace near Wat Khian marked with a city pillar from the Ayutthaya era. A government sign at Wat Khian stated that this area was probably the site of a 14th century Phatthalung town because of the many Buddha statues and laterite stone ruins discovered. Thus, while most informants identified nora with Wat Thakhae and Phatthalung Province, other regions also argue for historical association with the performance.

Such authenticity claims can have major repercussions on monasteries where development monks promote local histories for Thai and foreign tourists. For instance, in Sathingphra Peninsula, along the east side of Songkhla Lake, there are four Buddhist monasteries, which claim historic connection to the mystical monk Luang Phaw Thuat. On a trip there in October 2004, I spoke to monks at these monasteries who showed me the locations where his placenta was buried after birth, a giant snake gave him a crystal ball, his parents and uncle were buried, he was ordained as a novice monk, and he studied Buddhist teachings. These monasteries are in competition with Wat Chang Hai in Pattani Province, a major tourist destination for Thais, Malaysians, and Singaporeans who arrive by the busload (see Gesick 2002, Jory 2004). With increased militant activity in the

186 Another original name for Mae Sii Maa Laa was Naang Nuan Thawng Samlii; therefore, it is unclear if this person was the queen or the princess.
Malay Muslim dominated provinces like Pattani, some tour companies are opting for safer areas farther north. This is a prime example of contested sacred space between Songkhla and Pattani provinces over this spectacularly popular monk.\footnote{Since Buddhist temples in the four southern-most provinces are situated in primarily Muslims regions, nationalist religion also is a factor. For instance, Wat Chang Hai was promoted by a Chinese family with government connections around WWII, when the Malay separatist movement and Chinese communist party made the south a hotbed of dissent. Historian Patrick Jory suggested there could be a connection between the state's agenda to expand its influence in unruly areas and the promotion of a regional figure identified with the state and its religion (Jory 2004: 34-6). Like Luang Phaw Thuat, other local cultural heroes have become important for national identity during times of unrest in outlying regions (Jory 2004, he cites Saipin 1995 regarding the Thao Suranaree Monument in Korat).}

Just as Wat Chang Hai developed as a major religious draw for foreigners, the promoters of nora would like Wat Thakhae to become a tourist mecca and have built a few monuments to make it a pilgrimage center. Abbott Ajaan Thim in the 1940s to 1950s promoted Wat Chang Hai as the home base for the Ayutthaya era monk and his miracles. In a similar manner, a few influential men have promoted Wat Thakhae as the home of the performance and supernatural activity since the 1970s. I would not describe these traditions as “invented” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) since all traditions are invented or culturally constructed. But I would point out that the promotion of both these Buddhist monasteries is relatively recent considering that they honor men who lived centuries ago. The timing may relate more to the political situation in the south. Both monasteries disseminated national identity through religiously powerful male icons during an unstable period due to a Chinese communist insurgency and a Malay Muslim separatist movement (see Jory 2004: 34-6).

However, the development at Wat Thakhae has been very modest. The only permanent structure to the nora tradition is a one-room shrine for the Khun Sii Satthaa statue. But most significantly, the shrine was established by royalty about 35 years ago.
who designated this monastery as the origin place of *nora*. Nora Plaeg performed the first *roong khruu* next to the shrine, and later his ashes were temporarily interred inside.

Although the small cement structure is cramped for the ten or more spirit mediums who rest here during the annual event, it is given great prominence and meaning in Thakhae history. At the 2003 ceremony, a *nora* leader spoke to the crowd at length about the shrine’s origin. He said in the 1970s, this area was completely jungle. As a young monk at the time, he received permission to set up a small shrine for *nora* in a specific space. It was funded by a royal family member from Songkhla named Phra Ong Jao (His Royal Highness) Chalermpol Thikhampon, whose father was Prince Yukol Thikhampon (Patise 2004: 11). As a devotee of *nora*, the benefactor also built statues of Khun Sii Satthaa and Phraan Bun. With the construction of the shrine, His Royal Highness “…made official declaration of the Takhae Community as the origin of *nohra* dance performance” (Patise 2004: 13).

Sitting on the floor of the shrine, an elderly male medium told me that the royal benefactor had seen Nora Plaeg win a competition among 60 groups. He subsequently invited the spirit of Khun Sii Satthaa to live at his institute. But the spirit refused to go, so the donor built the shrine in the Thakhae monastery in 1971. It was named Sala Phaw Khun Satthaa Phra Ong Jao Chalermpol Thikhampon, using the name of the spirit and the royal sponsor in the title. I also heard tales that the benefactor in a dream saw the bones of Khun Sii Satthaa at this monastery so decided to build the shrine and was himself possessed by the spirit. 188 The relevance of this folklore is not its truthfulness or falsity

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188 The dream story has some similarities with the narrative about Luang Phaw Thuat. In that tale, Ajaan Thim dreamt about an old monk who said Luang Phaw Thuat was buried at Wat Chang Hai in Pattani
but the use of a powerful royal endorsement to authenticate Wat Thakhae as the official home of the nora tradition.

The second symbolic structure is a new life-sized statue of Khun Sii Sattha to replace the small old one, which is still in the shrine. The sacralizing of the statue in 2001 by political and religious authorities further added the weight of important endorsements to define the monastery as a consecrated space. As noted by Chidester and Linenthal, diligent work “...goes into choosing, setting aside, consecrating, venerating, protecting, defending, and redefining sacred places” (1995: 17). The black statue greeted visitors as they entered the monastery for the roong khruu. It depicts a man in a classic nora dance pose, wearing an authentic beaded costume, long nails, and crown. Gold leaf has been applied to the body by supporters. At first it was placed under a temporary shelter at the entrance and offerings of lotus, incense, and gold leaf were available for a donation. These offerings, along with the application of gold leaf to the statue, are typical of Buddhist offerings at any temple. The statue’s consecration was held a few days after the 2001 roong khruu. According to the program, the Phatthalung governor, nora groups that had been initiated by Nora Plaeg over the years, and monks were invited. One year a bent over, betel chewing possessed spirit medium took the nora leaders to the statue to show respect. During the ceremony, Nora Somphong announced that the Thai Fine Arts Department would help build a proper shrine to house the statue, but he still urged the audience to contribute. Although the figure remained somewhat of a side attraction, a distance from the nora stage, its symbolic significance was evident after the Chanabaan family split into two factions and held separate ceremonies. Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter

Province. The dream established that temple as the home of the Buddhist saint, over another temple in Sathingphra peninsula, Wat Pha Kho, which claimed to be the birthplace of the monk (see Gesick 2002: 6).
said some people chose to go to the monastery ceremony rather than her home because
the Khun Sii Sattha statue was there. For many devotees the statue authenticated the
monastery as the official pilgrimage site, rather than the nearby home of master Nora
Plaeg.

Although creation of the statue was an auspicious beginning for those trying to
revitalize nora, their efforts were slowed when the statue was vandalized in 2003 with the
hands and feet broken and face damaged. The costume, crown, and hunter’s mask were
stolen from the shrine where they were stored. Also, the base of the nearby spirit house
was knocked over. Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter said “people in white,” identified as a
cult group near the Hat Yai airport, were rumored to be the culprits. It was thought that
the costume had been stolen for ritual purposes. Other religious sites in the region were
also reportedly defiled. However, other sources speculated that the incident related to
family conflicts. The work of making a place sacred and maintaining its purity apparently
was being contested by outsiders. For safekeeping, the Chanabaan family removed Nora
Plaeg’s ashes from the shrine and interred them in a new chedi in the monastery grounds.

Another indication of difficulties in defining this sacred area was the delay in
construction of a new shrine to protect the statue. Finally in 2005, the temple committee
for the nora performance had a shrine built for about 140,000B (US $3333) with the
same name above the entrance. The money came from people at the annual ceremony
who gave to make merit and for the key rituals of gae bon and yiap sen, a committee man
told me. At the same time, an artist carved an elaborate pillar with images of the 12 nora
dancing positions and a crocodile. It will replace the old Lag Khun Thaa, which was lost
about 50 years ago. The committee next will save money to build a foundation for the pillar.

While all these structures make the monastery a ritual space worthy of pilgrimage, the statue is particularly relevant. In Thai culture numerous such statues are believed to contain holy spirits of respected persons, such as King Taksin and King Chulalongkorn. These kings are reputed to possess mediums to guide the public through the challenging modern age. Similar statues to the sacred and profane have been erected around the country, including one to a famed female country music singer named Phumphuang Duanchan. Her wax figures in a Buddhist monastery are thought to reveal winning lottery numbers by flashlight (Pattana 1999: 277).

Jackson (1999: 246) has argued that the worship of these icons is part of the new religions of prosperity, which “emphasize wealth acquisition as much as salvation.” In the south, numerous statues have been built in the past five years as central attractions for Malaysian and Singaporean tourists on spiritual pilgrimages or a day’s outing from the commercial city of Hat Yai. The most popular shrines are for Goddess Guan Im, Lord Buddha, and Luang Phaw Thuat. Nora Somphong’s vision is that nora at Wat Thakhae will also attract more visitors and financial support from both inside and outside the community. Such tourism might be considered profane, but as Jackson argued, faith and economics are entangled in the modern age.

The Significance of Birthplace in the South. Today the Thai “geo-body,” defined as a nation in a bounded territory with certain values, is considered the motherland. But in the past, the home soil was an area occupied by a tribe with a shared mythology of origin or a sacred region demarcated by temples, according to historian
The homeland, soil, or mother earth are all early basic concepts in Southeast Asia that tie a people to a place. "For most Southeast Asian cultures, the soil is a crucial part of human genesis and civilization. Either the naga, the underworld serpent, or the goddess of the earth (soil) is the mother of humankind" (Thongchai 1994: 133, see also Geertz 1973: 259). Despite the unifying elements of nationalism, many southerners identify with their local regions and rely on family connections. The importance of personal relations based on a kinship model is a noteworthy feature of Thai culture, although not particularly unique among agriculture based societies.

Place is also important to nora groups. As remembered in verse by the people of Trang, Nora Teum won a famously intense competition battle against Nora Wan of Nakhon Si Thammarat. Nora Teum was rewarded with the hands in marriage of both the daughters of Nora Wan (Ginsburg 1971:18). The simple phrase, "My name is Teum. My hometown is Trang," revealed the master's pride in his birthplace and love of his origins. According to a Thai academic, the meaning of this phrase was that Nora Teum's feet would always adhere to the home soil, and he would follow the Trang lifestyle in eating the local vegetables (Prathum 2002: 237).

This attachment to home seemed to be borne out by nora groups that I interviewed. Most had not moved far from the hometowns of their parents and grandparents, limiting their residences to a few neighboring provinces. For instance, Nora Wan's grandfather was from Phatthalung Province but moved to Pattani Province, which is a few hours farther south. Nora Wan and many of his relatives still live in Pattani Province today. The grandparents of Nora Lim Keawklap were also from Phatthalung.

189 The date of this event is not stated but Nora Teum (also spelled Toem) died in 1970 at middle age, so the contest probably occurred in the 1950s to 1960s (see Ginsburg 1972: 174).
and moved to Pattani Province. His great-great-grandparents and most of his nora siblings live in Pattani Province. Also, many nora troupes performed within limited geographical areas. Nora Prapa and her husband Nora Chalerm were born in Pattani Province. He described their travel patterns: “I formed my own group since I was young, and I was not yet ordained [as a monk]. I used to travel with my group to many provinces, but I didn’t go far away from my hometown, only to Phatthalung, Songkhla, Nakhon [Si Thammarat], Yala, Narathiwat.”

The importance of place can also be seen in the nora dancing positions considered unique to the south, according to researcher Prayat Gasem (1995). “Nora postures have an identity. People who have already practiced dancing in the central region cannot dance nora beautifully because the setting up of the arms or other various styles are different.” He explained that students had to live with their teachers from ten years of age. The students’ backs have to be bent into a semi-circle, which is considered more beautiful than a straight back, hunched back, or extreme saddle back, he wrote. To be physically able to do the dance, a person has to be raised and trained in the south, so the body is tied to the place.

Thianchai, whose family once followed nora, believes there is a distinctive southern personality as seen in the performance (Thianchai 2003: 12-13). His central argument is that the rituals relate to the southern personality trait of having strong feelings of love and hate toward friends and enemies. He noted that many rituals fall into symbolic categories for tying things together and untying or cutting off. These actions relate to families connecting with their ancestors and later sadly, but resolutely, sending them off.
Each ritual can be identified with an emotion and meaning. For instance, the possession ritual is frightening to the participants, but it means the ancestors have power and the family must believe in them. The ritual to send the ancestors back requires calm and stability, he wrote. It means the living relatives also must return to their homes, but their relationships with family will continue. On the last day, vagabond ghosts come to eat the offerings and are driven out. This symbolizes that people not in the nora community are in a lower status and should not get involved. The pattern of these rituals “.....relates to the southern people who have strong love and strong hate, confidence, firmness, love their friends and obviously respect their relatives” (Thianchai 2003: 12). By applying culture-and-personality theory, Thianchai elaborates on the discourse presented by Prayat that southern identity is in the blood of rural southern people. I find Thianchai’s views particularly interesting, as he is a southerner and avid promoter of nora. However, I find his analysis is based on assumptions about essential characteristics of southerners, which is a faulty way to analyze human behavior and results in stereotyping.

A Glorious Past. Today Phatthalung province, the reputed birthplace of nora, is a rather poor region known mostly for its limestone mountains and Taleh Noi wildlife bird reserve. But local people believe that both the region and nora had a more glorious past. Nora Plaeg’s adopted son Thiang said, “Nora began about 2000 years ago.” While historians do not date the drama back that far, Thiang’s proud statement illustrated his belief that nora is ancient. This concept of a golden area, when long, long ago the region was the center of international trade and wealth, does not require specific dating. It is a significant part of people’s identity today, especially weighty since the region has fallen
on hard times. Saruup said, “According to the landscape of Phatthalung in the past, this area didn’t have a lake. This area was a port and large ships docked here.... Historians said that Phatthalung was very powerful in ancient times. The area of Phatthalung covered both sides of the peninsula.” The exalted image of ancient nora is connected to this concept of a glorious earlier age, when the south was more than an unruly appendage of the Thai government with so-called backward provinces and divisive minorities. Only now are histories of the south being written in a search for legitimacy (Munro-Hay 2001, Sujit 2004).

Nora has been able to straddle the fence, serving both local beliefs and the state, partly because it can call on its pastness. In national debates, things that are ancient (booraan) are revered as traditional and part of Thai identity, to be preserved against the

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190 Claims to cultural identity are grounded in perceptions of history, according to Thongchai (1994: 12): “Fundamentally, history is a prime database of what may be regarded as Thainess. Most interpretations of Thainess proudly claim to find support for their views in history. In this sense, history also becomes an authority of what is, and is not, Thainess. There is hardly any interpretation of Thainess, which does not use history to authorize its validity.” Many southern provinces are seeking those histories today to claim cultural and political capital. A comparison can be made between Phatthalung and the three Muslim dominated provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, also mired in poverty. Recently historians and area Muslims have been writing on the independent Muslim kingdom that existed in Pattani before the founding of the 13th century Thai kingdom at Sukhothai. Later Thailand’s nation-building, particularly during the 1940s to 1950s, erased most of this southern history (Sujit 2004). Now some Muslim communities are seeking to reclaim their versions of history and maintain a cultural identity separate from the national culture.

191 These southern histories describe major principalities with international trade, only loosely connected to the powers in Ayutthaya and later Bangkok. According to historian Chuleeporn Virunha, as early as the second century, the region that is present-day southern Thailand and northern Malaysia: “...already formed a geographical unit supporting a number of ancient settlements that functioned as an important transpeninsular route linking the great market of India and China. A meeting place of peoples from diverse racial and ethno-linguistic origin, it nevertheless developed into an economic entity with strong Hindu-Mahayana Buddhist cultural traits” (2004: 4). From the 15th to 17th centuries, new important commercial cities arose, primarily Pattani, Songkhla, Phatthalung, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and also Kedah, now part of Malaysia. Due to the arrival of Islam and Theravada Buddhism, the region broke into two spheres but still the residents had much in common in trade and agriculture, wrote Chuleeporn. Challenging a “nationalist/centralist view of history,” Chuleeporn argued that historians need to rethink their understanding of local history. Although there has been new attention to regional histories since the 1970s, outlying areas are still viewed from the perspective of the early central Thai nation and the Malay empires, she stated (see also Gesick 1995, Thongchai 1995).
threat of spreading Western culture. This idea of nora being ancient is further enhanced by contrasting it with the modern adapted nora (nora samai mai) used for entertainment. In this discourse, nora’s early origin contributes to its prestige compared to other forms of mediumship. For instance, nora predates the early 19th century Hokkien Chinese ceremony from China’s Fujien (or Fujian) Province that evolved into the well-known Vegetarian Festivals in Phuket and Trang with flamboyant mediums (Cohen 2001: 50). And nora’s age distinguishes it from the most recent urban professional mediumship first described in the 1970s (Irvine 1982). Thus nora gains legitimacy from both its own history and association with nationalist culture. The drama’s connection to the Thai classical performing arts is also invoked to elevate its status.

**Ties to Monarchy and Performing Arts.** On an overnight train from Bangkok to Hat Yai, I met a professor of veterinary medicine and her mother from the south. I told them I was studying spirit mediums, particularly nora. But the mother said she did not consider nora to be related to spirit mediums, rather it was a performance. I had heard this perspective before – that nora is dance, not communication with ancestors. Although nora began as a way to appease ancestors, it later was accepted as one of the nation’s historic art forms performed for royalty and government officials. Nora performers continue to show strong loyalty to the monarchy and, by extension, patriotism to the nation.

When Thailand was still an absolute monarchy in the early 1900s, kings and officials traveled to the south. Nora performances welcomed them (discussed in Chapter 3). Performing at such momentous occasions raised the stature of both nora leaders and

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192 The term ancient (booraan) is itself rather ambiguous, referring to the way things were done in the past. Even coffee that is made of ground beans put in a cloth bag, is called ancient coffee (goafae booraan).
the genre, and linked them to the emerging nation. Today famed nora masters still dance for the royal family and proudly describe this honor that legitimizes their genre. Nora Plaeg felt the climax of his career was performing for the King and Queen for the Queen’s birthday at Chitlada Palace in 1975 (described in Chapter 1). When he passed away in 2001, his family produced a funeral booklet about his life and love for the King. The booklet is titled “Remembrance of the Cremation Ceremony from the King for Father Plaeg Chanabaan.” The first page shows a letter from his surviving wife, Pian Chanabaan, 75, and her family:

Appreciation for the Royal’s Kindness. With appreciation for King Bhumibol’s kindness for graciously giving us the royally sponsored cremation for Father Plaeg Chanabaan at the cremation at Wat Thakhae….This is the kindness of your most gracious majesty. If Father Plaeg Chanabaan could know anything about this gracious kindness, he would have been very glad and appreciated the King’s graciousness that he received the highest honor for the last time in his life. We would like to ask your majesty for permission to prostrate ourselves at your feet with great appreciation. We overwhelmingly appreciate your kindness. We will hold your mercy above our heads for the auspiciousness of the Chanabaan family forever (Pian Chanabaan and Family. 2002: 1).

The parts of the letter referring to the King are in old raachaasap language, used for addressing royalty. On the next page, the family copied the King’s order from the Bureau of the Royal Household granting the Chanabaan family the royal cremation flame sent by airplane to Hat Yai. The Phatthalung governor attended this significant funeral. Other nora leaders have also proudly performed for royalty and received honors, such as Uppatham Narakorn (Nora Phum Thewaa) (described in Chapter 3). One nora leader was honored as a national artist -- Nora Yog Chuubua in 1987. Nora Chalerm and Nora Prapa

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193 Commonly these small books are printed to commemorate a person’s life and serve as valuable records of history and literature.
felt honored to perform for the King at Wat Chang Hai in 1977 and for a daughter of the Crown Prince at Thammasat University in 2001.

Long before the Bangkok Rattanakosin period and Chakri dynasty, the drama had a relationship to a southern monarchy described in its founding narrative. According to Pittaya, nora dancing was performed for “…the important rituals, such as the rituals for the king, governor and high class people in the village. We can see this role from the costume which is similar to the king’s costume in ancient times” (1992: 3). Despite this connection to central and southern royalty, nora people told me that they were proud of their humble rural backgrounds. Nora Plaeg said, “Even though nora people dress like a king, they can sleep on the ground and eat on the sand,” in other words, live a simple life.

Patriotism to king and country are essential parts of the nora discourse. Pictures of the Thai King and Queen often adorn the walls of the stage during roong khruu ceremonies, and often a Thai flag is flown from a tall pole. Although several improvement projects are planned for the annual performances at Wat Thakhae, Nora Somphong said the shrine for Khun Sii Satthaa would be replaced first because it was established by royalty and had priority. At the first nora competition at Rajabhat Institute Songkhla in 2003 (discussed in Chapter 4), displays of dedication to the monarchy were obvious. In addition to a hefty monetary prize, the winner received a trophy conferred on behalf of one of the King’s daughters, Princess Sirinthorn (also known as Phra Thep Rattana Raatchasuda). On the stage, a life-size cutout of the Princess in red military uniform stood behind tables holding the silver trophy and gold and silver cone-shaped objects (phaan phum ngeun phaan phum thawng), symbols of the King and Queen. All performers respectfully bowed to this display after ascending the stage.
Nora Oamjid began her presentation by singing that the people of Thailand live under the merit of the King and Queen: “I want your majesty the King to receive the phra’s blessing [this word refers either to the blessing of the Lord Buddha or monks] and receive happiness…. I admire all of the kings and queens in the Chakri family. Long live all the queens.” Later Nora Lamai of Songkhla Province, who took the championship, sang out her sincere sentiments to the royal family to whom she feels a personal attachment:

[This is] for the Queen who is the benevolent person. And we have the King who takes care of and solves the problems of the people. He is like a benevolent father who makes people safe. He has a lot of responsibilities. During the 50 years that he ruled the country, our country was safe. Nobody in the world can be like him. Every country admires our King. Our King has intelligence, great merit (baaramii) and ability. Our country is developed because of the King. Every province has developed a lot. I hope he will live happily.

Also a female singer from Nakhon Si Thammarat praised the King and Prime Minister for working to eliminate drugs and then urged religious unity:

We are Thai people. We should keep doing good deeds. Please remember that our flag has three colors [red representing nation, white for religion, and blue for monarchy]. Please unite together although you are Buddhists, Christian or Islam [Muslim]. You live in the golden ax land [the shape of Thailand]. Please love each other and rule our country. Don’t let our country become the country of others (khawng khoa – of him or a third person). Please protect our country.

Heartfelt patriotic thoughts have also appeared in another song genre influenced by nationalism. Anthropologist Annette Hamilton (1991: 369) reported similar sentiments in the country music called luug thung (described in Chapter 3). She said that for decades Thai governments have used many forms of media to make the culture homogeneous, but now different foreign images were entering the country. The foundation of these patriotic feelings, she argued, was the nation’s control of the media, which resulted in a
constructed image of the country. She described the image as, “The Thai nation, officially
depicted as a site of unity, infused with Buddhist values, upheld by a proud military
tradition, and under the beneficent influence of the monarchy ever-responsive and
compassionate to the needs of the people…” (Hamilton 1991: 368).

In addition to reverence for monarchy, nora performers gain legitimacy from
being closely related to the classical court genres particularly concerning teacher spirits
(see Appendix G: Teacher Spirits in Classical Arts). Teachers (khruu) are the foundation
of the Thai performing arts centered in Bangkok – they are also essential to nora. The
broad term “teachers” encompasses Indian Hindu gods of the arts, like the dancing Shiva,
as well as Thai ancestors skilled in performance. Much like the nora lineage, the classical
arts were founded on ancestors passing their skills and knowledge to descendants.
Without this inspired and religious knowledge, performers cannot perform. Respect must
be shown during ceremonies and initiations, particularly in handling costumes and masks.
Tattoo artists, engineers, boxers, spirit mediums, performers, students, and many others
regularly hold ceremonies to honor their teachers (wai khruu). By doing so they enhance
on northeastern spirit mediums, explained the meaning of past and present teachers:

‘Teachers,’ in the Thai cultural context, range from parents, who give a person
life, to elementary school teachers, who first introduce basic literacy, professional
teachers, who provide professional training, and Buddha and other highly revered
deities, who give spiritual well-being. Therefore, no Thai person can live his or
her life without a teacher. It is culturally unacceptable if one shows disrespect to a

By showing reverence to their spirits as teachers, nora performers are closely
identified with the nation’s respected early arts, rather than ancestral possession. The
view of the woman on the train is commonly held, that *nora* is a performance rather than a religious community.

**Conclusion**

In explaining their group identity, *nora* participants refer to the core cultural themes of kinship, sacred space and homeland, a glorious past, and ties to monarchy and performing arts. All these factors contribute to the legitimacy of the ancestral ceremony. Family, homeland, history, and king are strong themes in the Thai national identity and pull *nora* to the center of respected Thai society. The next chapter continues with discourses on identity but this time exploring other-worldly concepts relating to human agency and discourses on belief and morality.
CHAPTER 7
CORE THEMES II: NORA IDENTITY IN THE OTHER WORLD

Introduction

This chapter explores two additional themes on identity that emerged from interviews with nora participants. Theme 3 discusses the agency of nora spirit mediums in dealing with the spirit world, and Theme 4 looks at issues of belief and morality. Compared to the last chapter, these themes focus more on spirit mediums and relate more to individual identity with the other world. In Theme 3, mediums gradually negotiate a higher status both with the spirit and the community through their own subjectivity. In Theme 4, mediums define their ethical position in contrast to less moral practitioners. These discourses permeate discussions by nora families because they go to the heart of what it means to be a spirit medium living on the margins of Thai society.

Theme 3: Human Agency in Dealing with an Invisible World

The Relationship Between Human and Spirit. This theme explores bodily possession and the agency of mediums to assert some control over the spirit world. The following sections describe the coercion of the spirit but also the understudied agency of the medium. Through this mystical tie, mediums use their bodies to gain supernatural epistemology and establish themselves as locally respected conduits to the invisible world. The body is also a contested area between the human and spirit, where the subjectivity of each struggles to assert itself. Although mediums function within a
marginalized religion, they are not without power or control in negotiating with ancestors and other powerful deities.\textsuperscript{194}

Yet, for mediums there is a contradiction -- how can the medium assert any power when unconscious during possession and claiming no knowledge of the event afterward? Being unconscious is key proof of the medium’s truthfulness because it demonstrates lack of complicity. However, I found that many mediums reported some interaction with the spirit in a shared or negotiated model, as seen in some Western countries, rather than a model of passivity.\textsuperscript{195} In the following section, \textit{nora} mediums discuss their complex and evolving interactions with ancestors and other spirits. I begin by describing the initial stages of possession when the human tries to come to terms with a spirit wishing to.

\textsuperscript{194} In other cultures, mediumship groups utilize the body in a comparable fashion. For instance, the Brazilian Umbanda cult has many similarities to the \textit{nora} genre regarding the use of the medium’s body to address bodily needs. In studying this possession cult, Fernando Giobellini Burmana and Elda Gonzales Martinez (1989) described a “subaltern religion” of marginalized lower income persons. When possessed, another power takes over the medium’s body. The researchers argued that the body is the logical place to express a mystical code for disorders relating to the body such as “illness, desire, economic survival” and that dispossessed people have “…little more than their bodies with which to control the world…” (Burmana and Martinez 1989: 51). This description can be applied to \textit{nora} where descendants seek cures and fulfillment of desires in the possessed body of a medium. The theory that the body is a site for controlling the outside world resonates with the work of Foucault and Bryan Turner, described previously.\textsuperscript{195} This matter was first brought to my attention by a study on spirit mediums in Los Angeles, California. Researcher Dureen Hughes (1991) argued that trance states were culturally constructed, and that there was an American style of transmitting spirits called “channeling.” This style differed greatly both in concept and language from the practices of mediums in other cultures. The Los Angeles mediums or channels said their experience was a merging or blending with the spirit rather than possession. The term “possession” by definition described a hierarchical relationship and domination by the spirit that the channelers rejected. She wrote, “It might be noted that ‘blending’ suggests parity between the channel and the entity, which is consistent with ‘democratic’ ideals symbolic of American society. Trance channeling is seen as a cooperative venture between the channel and the entity, with benefits in the form of new experiences in consciousness to be gained by both” (Hughes 1991: 167). The Los Angeles trance channeling took place in secular environments such as private homes or public halls. It was characterized by calm behavior without drumming. The channels expressed the desire to grow personally from the experience, in line with Western self-help movements. The channels were not poor marginal women, as in many other countries, but mostly middle class men and women. The influence of culture on mediumship is quite apparent from this study, especially when juxtaposed with much of southern Thai mediumship. Generally in Thai society, the possessing spirits are respected and feared as sacred holy beings, not just “entities.” For most Thai mediums, the spirit is a superior powerful being capable of causing harm. However, I did find a common thread between the cultures; many southern Thai mediums also had a working relationship with their spirits rather than one of blind submission. Another interesting study on American religious practices is Michael W. Cuneo’s \textit{American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty} (2001) which researched exorcism among middle class Christians, both Protestants and Roman Catholics.
possess. Then I discuss how the medium is able to assert agency to gain some rights and rewards in the spiritual union.

*From Intrusion to Accommodation.* There is a common narrative of the experience of spirit possession among many ethnic groups and religions in Thailand, which also resonates with practices in other countries. The introduction to the spirit world typically starts with a long illness that cannot be cured by Western or Eastern medicine (for possession illness in Sudan, see Boddy 1989: 145; Pattana 1999, White 1999). This is a crucial time when the strange behavior of the human could be interpreted as madness. The public asks the question -- are the spirits real, imagined, or invented? These questions go to the credibility of the medium. The issue of whether others believe a spirit is actually possessing becomes crucial at this early stage.

The *nora* performance includes two types of spirit mediums with different credibility issues. First, there are persons who are initiated into the drama, wear the costume, and may earn their livings as performers. This group is considered credible as identifiable *nora* performers in the southern tradition. Second, there are the uninitiated who dress in traditional pants, white or yellow blouses, and shoulder scarves. They fall into a gray area and their truthfulness is open to question. They have much in common with professional urban mediums who serve clients out of home shrine and earn livelihoods from public donations.

The public discourse on trustworthiness is a recurring theme in discussions about professional mediums and is even addressed by mediums themselves. Maud (communication 2001) described this question of veracity as the "discourse of disbelief." Professional mediums bolster their legitimacy by rituals, religious paraphernalia, handout
literature, lists of donors, and testimonials by clients. They may also show evidence of their spirits’ powers, such as photographs of unusual phenomenon. Mediums readily admit that some people in this profession are fakes and offer suggestions for determining the valid ones. Mediums have told me that a real medium is a moral person, who is effective in curing and does not use black magic or seek money. As mentioned, the mediums’ amnesia is crucial proof that possession is not faked. They merely act as vessels or vehicles for the spirit, reflected in the northern Thai term for mediums, maa khii, meaning mounting the horse. According to Morris, “...the authenticity of possession may be said to depend on the degree to which claims to forgetting are sustained and made believable to audiences” (Morris 2000: 84).

As another proof, the medium and spirit display distinctly different personalities. The human is a simple, humble person who becomes articulate, commanding, magically powerful, and fluent in foreign languages when the spirit is in control. This contrast is taken as evidence that the spirit is really present (Bilmes 1995: 238). Boddy found that possession by Sudanese zar spirits also involved similar convincing transformations and inversions of identity, in which local people became foreigners and women changed into men. “The spirit makes keen use of signs that proclaim its identity. It swaggers, struts, is impolite, gives commands and refuses to answer when addressed, none of which are typical for Hofriyati humans, and women least of all” (Boddy 1989: 149, 306).

Despite these convincing transformations, I would argue that the relationship between the powerful spirit and the humble human servant is neither so black-and-white nor so hegemonic. Contrary to the accepted narrative about amnesia, several professional mediums reported some awareness during possession. In fact, I would argue that to make
the mystic tie functional, the human and spirit must teach each other. While the medium at first may be poor with little education, over time the spirit instructs in spells, rituals, language, organization of the shrine, and selection of appropriate costumes. The medium’s assistants, who are usually friends and family members, listen to the spirit’s pronouncements during possession and tell the medium afterward. Through this indirect teaching, the medium learns more of the spirit’s story and is able to explain the spirit’s needs, methods, and genealogy to clients before and after possession. However, clients who want to know more are directed to ask the important questions of the spirit.

The relationship between human and spirit undergoes stages. At first, the selected mount becomes ill and cannot find a cure. At this point the person may appear mentally unstable and go to a mental hospital or be committed by relatives. In search of a cure, often the afflicted person will seek out a medium, nora leader, or vision doctor who can identify the ailment as spirit induced and name the spirit. But the person may not want to accept the fearful intrusion and life-long commitment required of a regular mount. The person goes through a “long-drawn resistance” to the spirit because society devalues mediums as having weak souls and because there is a general fear of ghosts, according to Irvine (1982: 360). In addition, mediumship is not such a savory profession, as some mediums have been discredited for cheating the public. While some people are able to negotiate an exemption from the calling due to personal hardship, others comply when they see the power of the spirit to punish. This process of accepting the spirit can take months or years until the medium is considered fully possessed. Gradually the person and spirit accommodate each other. The spirit will take care of everything and can bring a certain level of wealth. The relationship may continue for decades until the medium dies.
or negotiates a release due to old age or other factors. For example, many of the *nora*
mediums I met were in their 50s to 70s and had been possessed as young adults. Some
female mediums, like Sujin, are granted permission to pass the spirit onto a relative when
they marry.

Pittaya said:

If they are chosen to be possessed by Mae Sii Maalaa, Mae Khaenawn or Khun
Sii Sattha, these people have to be a medium forever until some period in their
lives, such as when they get old or for women, when they marry. Then the
ancestor will change to possess another medium by choosing another…. The spirit
may choose them when they are young, but the spirit doesn’t possess yet. The
spirit just informs them that when they are 20-years-old, they will become a
medium (interview 2004).

Therefore, the process of the relationship with a spirit is complex and develops
over time to mutual benefit.

*Coercing and Punishing through Sickness.* The first communication from
the ancestors is through sickness, which is both confusing and ultimately effective as
coercion. *Nora* spirits cause illness (*taa yaai yaang* or *khruu maw yaang*) for two
purposes. In the first case, the ancestor spirits punish descendants who are not respectful.
“These people become thin and weak. When they go to see a modern doctor, the doctor
cannot determine the cause. So they have to go to a *nora* leader who is possessing and see
if they are being punished by *nora* ancestors. If they are punished by *nora* ancestors, they
have to make a vow and follow through” (interview Pittaya 2004). The illness was
described as an invisible burning of the body, which causes the person to waste away and
die (Patise 2004: 15). Symptoms include numbness, swelling, headache, stomachache,
loss of energy, inability to eat, and loss of weight (Pittaya 1992: 82). Vows can include

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196 However, many of the mediums I interviewed continued to be possessed after marriage.
promising to set up an altar shelf at home, dancing in front of the altar, dancing at a nora performance, or holding a roong khruu ceremony as an offering. Then the person should recover.

But in the second situation, the ancestors want descendants to inherit (suupchuasaai) or catch their spirits to be regular mediums. Although the ancestors might cause the usual body pains, some of the symptoms may be different. They might reveal miracles or control the person’s mind to hear nora flute and drum music and to dance.

In my research, nora mediums described a variety of ailments that communicated a spirit wanted to possess. Some people had several symptoms, but I have divided them by the primary sickness. Of the 12 persons interviewed on this topic, 67% depicted ailments that did not appear to have specific medical causes, such as feeling angry, fearing impending death, and not being able to eat, drink, sleep, or concentrate. Some of those interviewed thought they had mental problems. The remaining 33% described having only medical illnesses such as leg pains, vomiting, and high temperatures. The afflicted tried a variety of solutions -- going to hospitals, taking traditional medicine, and visiting a vision doctor or spirit medium. Usually through a spiritual doctor, they discovered that a spirit wanted to possess them on a regular basis.

The following are quotations from nora people describing the illness that communicated the wish to possess. Also in these narratives, nora people describe other illnesses related to showing disrespect or not fulfilling a promise. The experiences show the continuing persuasive power of ancestors.

Nora Wan said, “Before I was nora, I was sick unexpectedly. Then the vision doctor came to cure me. But I couldn't continue studying. Then the vision doctor said that
I was sick because of _nora_ ancestors, and I have to be _nora_. After I was _nora_, I got better... (Before) I had fever and vomited, vomited after eating anything."

Nora Lim described a longer, more contentious initial relationship with the spirits that involved being cursed:

When I was young, I got sick so my relatives begged the _nora_ spirit to cure me. I got sick because the _nora_ spirits said something bad to me, an evil curse... My knee hurt. My relatives begged for the spirits of _nora_ to help me, so I had to be a _nora_ actor for three years. When I got well, I didn’t believe in the spirit, so I didn’t want to be a _nora_ actor. So I got sick again.

As a result, Nora Lim was in the hospital for three years. He said, “I was very thin, and everybody thought I would die.” The cause was that he had forgotten his promise to the ancestors to build a stage for them. “When I was sick again, I realized that I had done that, so I said to the _nora_ spirit that I would construct the stage.” Nora Lim fulfilled his promise and became a _nora_ performer and spirit medium.

A female _nora_ medium in 2002 told me about her first illness and later punishment for not dancing. Khun Oi was possessed by Mae Khaenawn and by a male grandfather spirit. “At first I didn’t believe. I was sick and couldn’t eat for 12 days. I could not drink also. I went to see a vision doctor and I went to see [the spirit medium for] Mae Sii Maa Laa.” Mae Sii Maa Laa told Oi that a _nora_ spirit wanted to possess her. “I started crying and I felt uncomfortable in my body. I couldn’t cry out or call out, but inside I wanted someone to help me. When I knew [about the spirit] and came home, I drank half a big pot of water. I am not lying to you. I could eat also, while previously I could not eat. I could not swallow before.”

Aside from this initial possession illness, Oi also had a near death experience for showing disrespect. The previous year at the _roong khruu_, Oi had not danced for the
spirit. She recalled, “Last year, I was naughty (duu). I didn’t enter the nora stage. I just brought things to them [the spirits] but didn’t enter. When I came back home, I couldn’t sleep. I felt like I had died. When I lay down, my eyes were open. I told my children that I nearly died.” The next day, she saw a vision doctor. “The doctor said the ancestors were angry because I didn’t go into the stage and didn’t dance. So I asked [the spirits] to let me recover this year. I brought my clothes from last year, and I went to dance inside. I danced but I didn’t know that I had danced. So then I recovered.”

These examples give vivid descriptions of the powerlessness of humans when faced with the spirits’ ability to inflict pain and disorientation. However, some can escape the duty.

*Breaking the Nora Obligation.* Nora persons can ask the ancestors to release them from obligations without punishment. It is called the ritual to untie the cloth (*phithii phuug phaa plawy*) or the ritual to cut thoroughly the commitment (*phithii tat khaat*). It is usually held during the *roong khruu* on a Thursday night. The nora person has to prepare a footed tray with joss sticks, flowers, candles, and 12B (US 29 cents). The supplicant must ask for forgiveness and tell the reason for not wanting to perform. The person then dresses in costume and dances one last time. Afterward the nora leader says a prayer to break the obligation. The person leaves the stage, takes off the costume, and with back turned to the stage, gives the costume to the nora leader. If the person turns and looks at the stage, the ritual is nullified (Pittaya 1995: 61).

Pittaya explained that some educated people, who believe in science, want to cut their ties with nora. However, I would note that they believe enough to hold the ritual, rather than just discard the tradition. Pittaya said:
The people who are *nora* performers can do the ritual for releasing them from being *nora* without punishment. For the people who have a high education, such as a nurse, they often don’t want to dance *nora* or don’t want to relate to *nora* anymore. They can release themselves by having the *nora* leader do the ceremony. The interest and belief in *nora* has reduced following the development of science. Also it was reduced following the development of the modern mass media because people have more choices [for entertainment], so the interest is reduced (interview 2004).

A historian and member of a *nora* family, Saruup explained that she did not receive the spirits because she wanted to devote herself to her education. This opportunity was not available to women in her grandmother’s generation. She said:

I also have *nora* ancestors in my family but I didn’t do the ceremony to show respect to teachers (*wai khruu*), so I didn’t receive the inheritance.¹⁹⁷ Now my maternal grandmother is still a *nora* person. Some Phatthalung people have *nora* ancestors in their families, but they don’t receive it. They are not punished if they can make an agreement with the spirits. My grandmother used to dance *nora* for the *roong khruu* and for paying off the vow (*gae bon*) 12 years ago. While she was dancing, she told the spirit that she wanted to stop the performance for 12 years because she faced economic problems. But after that everybody forgot the agreement. When the 12 years were over, a member of the family, who was the closest to the spirit, became sick. Then the family went to see a spirit medium. The spirit medium said that the family forgot to give respect to the spirit and to dance. The family had to pay off the promise by dancing *nora* and then that person got better. I didn’t receive the legacy because I don’t dance. There is a student in this school who is a *nora* person. That student has to dance *nora* and also study.

I asked why she refused the spirit, and Saruup replied:

For me, I was a student and I wanted to study. The changes in society began in my mother’s time. People turned to be interested in Western education. In the past, for education, women had to study at home, so they were able to perform *nora*. Men had to study at the temples, and they could perform *nora* too because *nora* was performed in temples. When Western education came, people had to study at schools, and they had to spend time studying. So people had to choose between *nora* and education. Some people chose both, but they cannot do either well. For me, I chose education because my parents did so also. My great-grandmother and my grandmother studied at home. So they had enough time to perform *nora*.

¹⁹⁷ Other *nora* persons said it was obligatory to give respect to the ancestors even if one did not agree to be possessed.
Therefore with the spirit’s permission, the nora family member has some agency to limit her involvement with the spirits. However, it is interesting to observe that Saruup chose a career over obligation to the spirits but does not deny their existence or power.

*Sensitive or Weak Minds?* There is a belief among nora families that persons with so-called weak minds or soft hearts (also translated as souls) are selected by spirits for possession. This sensitivity to spirits is partly determined by astrology, personality, gender, and karma. This issue is relevant to agency because it deals with the person’s ability to participate in a possession relationship or refuse it. How much of this sensitivity is pre-determined by the planets or biology? One belief is that persons born on certain days are soft-hearted and more susceptible to possession. Nora Somphong said:

People who were born on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday cannot be spirit mediums. Jao [deities, lords or high spirits] don’t possess people who are born on those days. Jao will possess people who are born on Mondays or other days because those days are the weak days. And people who are born on those days are weak/soft-hearted (*jai awn*). But for nora people, the nora spirits will [primarily] possess people in their families.198

The concept of having a soft heart was discussed by two female spirit mediums at the Wat Thakhae in 2002. The mediums speculated on why the spirit of Nora Plaeg would choose the unrelated noodle seller to possess, as described earlier. Khun Pratana (P) spoke to Khun Oi (O) about the selection process in terms of science based on the physical makeup of a person:

O If the spirit waits for a long time to find someone to possess and his children cannot do it, it will find someone else.

P Especially [the spirit will look] for people who are weak/soft-hearted (*jit awn*), so the spirit (*winyaan*) can enter and possess, like a rule of science. I have a cousin who is a researcher in Bangkok in the Agriculture Ministry. And she believes that possessing is real....My cousin said I have a soft

198 This means the spirit will first select a lineage member and then consider the day of birth.
heart so the spirit goes in and possesses me. There is a space for the spirit to come in sometimes.

In this case, the entrance or insertion of the spirit (khao saeg song) is described as a scientific rule (lag witthayaasaat). And the person who is an authority is a researcher in the distant national capital. This positivistic argument is used to explain the behavior of spirits crossing into the physical realm. Here the spirit medium puts a beneficial spin on having the ability to accept spirits into a bodily space.

There are two issues I would like to address on this topic: the meaning of being soft-hearted and the role of gender and sex. Nora informants used the term jai awn for someone who is open to spirit possession. In English the term translates as weak, soft-hearted, squeamish, feeble or frail, rather than having a more positive connotation of being sensitive to the spirit world. Irvine’s research in Chiang Mai clearly defined professional spirit mediums as having soft souls and weak boundaries. Irvine wrote, “The quality of a person’s soul can be determined by astrological configurations at birth; or it can be the expression of karmic status. However the single most important determinant is said to be a person’s sex, the ideology stating that ‘soul softness’ characterizes women, while ‘soul hardness’ typifies men” (1982: 111). People with thin spiritual boundaries and soft souls, primarily women, were easy targets for spirits to enter. This softness also meant that women did not have the spiritual power to control the more threatening spirits. But men with hard souls could handle such masterful spirits

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199 The term jit jai (or commonly just jai) is translated as mind, mental, thought, thinking, or heart. The word jai is combined with many other words to describe a variety of states and feelings. Foreigners are most familiar with these words in relation to having a hot heart (jai rawn), meaning to get angry easily, or having a calm, cool heart (jai yen), which is much preferred.

200 Irvine said people are born with either hard souls (khwan khaeng) or soft souls (khwan awn). According to my informants, the concept of the soul (khwan), which exists in the living person, is equivalent to the concept of the mind-heart (jit jai or jai) in today’s understanding. For information on the ceremonies for the soul, tham khwan, see Ruth-Inge Heinze 1982.
without giving into madness. The contradiction that most modern spirit mediums are women, who deal with hot strong magic, has led some female mediums to deny being physiologically female to assert their ability to cope with magic, Irvine (1982: 381) argued.

I would recommend that more research be conducted on the meanings attached to being soft-hearted. Those interviewed described male and female nora leaders as strong, competent people who ran demanding troupes. Some of these leaders were spirit mediums who transmitted key spirits. Informants said possession ability was mainly a condition of birth and astrology. It did not seem to carry the value judgments of strong-weak, hard-soft inherent in English language dichotomies. Both nora mediums and home-based professional spirit mediums described themselves as being blessed for being chosen by a deity. Spirits only selected people who were pure vessels, rather than those with inherent weaknesses. For professional mediums, their good karma and maybe a past life relationship with the spirit caused them to be chosen. I suggest that perhaps the phrase “sensitivity to spirits” might be more appropriate. In regards to nora identity, I think that the ability to transmit spirits, especially for women, has been devalued in research by the use of this terminology. A re-examination of the indigenous understandings of possession might show more agency and status than previously thought.

*Possession or Insanity?* In addition to physical ailments, nora ancestors can cause spirit induced madness. The power of the human is reduced to comply with the
spirit to return to sanity. I first became aware that some mental patients thought they were attacked by nora spirits when reading research by the Department of Psychiatric Nursing at PSU, Hat Yai. Until that point I thought nora spirits were benign ancestors who protected their families, rather than caused harm (discussed in Chapter 1). This study and an earlier one showed that many patients and their families believed psychiatric illness was caused by supernatural powers such as nora spirits, ghosts, past lives, curses, and bad luck. I discuss this research at length because it provides the context for understanding nora ailments and remedies in the community. Also the research revealed the agency of families to deal with possession and appease the spirits.

The 1999 study (Tippa, et al.) was based on a sample of 433 people, who were family members of mental health patients at two southern hospitals, Suan Saran Rom Hospital in Surat Thani and Songkhla Mental Hospital. The research found a significant increase in mental patients at public health centers in one year from 1991 to 1992 both nationwide (up 25,867 people) and in the south (up 4,954 people), which might be due to several causes. Most patients had sought traditional care before going to the hospital, and almost half had been treated by a hospital for five years or more. The government was looking to families to help provide care the extra care. The purpose of

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201 Community and family members decide whether the person is really possessed or mentally deranged and in need of psychiatric hospitalization. A debate on this issue took place in a village in Taiwan (Wolf 1992). Trained under Western medical models, some Thai doctors neglect to consider the patient’s perspective or the traditional methods using ritual and magic, according to Golomb. Western medicine is a “...somewhat culture-bound system originally tailored to the needs of Western middle class society” (Golomb 1985: 160-163). This Western approach relied on functional or psychological explanations for mental illness. For instance, a person might feel rejected by family and imagine being attacked by ghosts. This disturbing behavior caused the family to pay attention to the patient who then improved. But an Eastern model, which considered spirits to be real, would involve spirit appeasement to eliminate the assaults. (Of course, this is an over simplified description. People in the East and West have different views on spirits and their existence.)

202 The name for a mental hospital in Thai is roongphayaabaan prasaat, the nervous disease or neurosis hospital.
the study was to learn more about traditional family healthcare, enabling nurses to combine Western and local treatments for a more rapid recovery. Patients sought two kinds of treatments. The first related to beliefs in the supernatural and the second to beliefs in balances in the body. These imbalances concerned the four elements of earth, water, wind, and fire and the Chinese system of hot and cold foods. Herbs were used to treat those problems.

With the help of families, patients tried more than one treatment for supernatural problems. They took holy water by taking baths or drinking (70%), went to spirit mediums or vision doctors (31%), went to meditation doctors (maw nang thang nai) including monks (27%), sucked or ate betel over which a spell had been pronounced possibly by an older monk (21%), accepted nora as a teacher (14%), became a monk or a lay nun (12%), and joined Buddhist temple activities (5%). These cures were used for different problems. For instance, holy water was used to prevent bad luck and for a blessing. Patients sought out spirit mediums, vision doctors, and meditation doctors to learn the cause of illness and find a cure. Becoming a monk or lay nun served to calm the person down, make merit, and improve bad karma. The families of patients were generally Buddhists and poor farmers with a primary school education. They often felt Western doctors did not cure patients completely because the cause was actually a supernatural power. Seeking Western treatment required paying for transportation to a clinic and buying expensive medicine, which poor farmers could ill afford. In contrast, traditional doctors were skilled at using psychiatric talk therapy to relieve stress, in

203 Family members were 64% female, 88% Buddhist, 54% farmers, 73% with a primary education, and 40% with incomes of 2000B - 5000B (US $28-119) a month. Also, a few Muslims were in the study.
addition to holy water, spells, and other aids, according to the study (see Golomb 1985: 160).

Due to the costs involved, only 14% of the families hired a nora troupe to perform the complex and lengthy roong khruu. The ceremony was performed to protect from black magic and expel it. According to the study, “Southern Thai people believe that black magic is a cause of sickness and also the effect of bad fortune. So they will ask the ancestors who are nora to help them by protecting them from bad luck. The descendants will invite nora spirits to possess…they believe the nora spirits are powerful and holy” (Tippa, et al. 1999: 32). An earlier study (Sa-nguansii 1994) at PSU Hospital in Hat Yai also found strong beliefs that mental illness was caused by spirits. That study found that 72% of the families believed that psychiatric illness was caused by a former life, and 45% of the families believed it was caused by ghost possession and magic spells. (Obviously, some families believed in both causes.) Forty-six percent of them used magic (saiyasaat) for cures (cited in Tippa, et al. 1999). This research illustrates that nora spirits are considered part of a cosmology of other worldly beings who can harm humans.

Coincidentally about the time I found this study, I learned that a Thai Buddhist man, 26, disturbed by nora spirits, had threatened to jump off the third floor of an upper class apartment building in Pattani. This incident vividly demonstrated a nora induced mental illness. The manager said at 8 p.m. on Christmas night, December 25, 2000, a resident said he would jump if not allowed to watch a nora performance and a shadow puppet play. He began throwing things out of his window -- a television, furniture, and clothes. He yelled at the crowd below in an unknown language. To keep him from jumping, the crowd of about 60 people promised to provide the performances. Police and
firemen came and contacted his family in Phatthalung, about three hours north. The audience kept the conversation going with him in shifts until nearly midnight when the parents arrived, promised to provide the performances, and talked him into coming down.\footnote{It was a full moon night, which Westerners relate to increased mental problems. But the manager said that Thais consider these nights beautiful and hold many rituals on full moon night, such as Loy Kratong and Makha Puja. The resident, who had only lived there a month, normally was quiet and polite, but the possession made him large and powerful, she said. The police took him to the psychiatric hospital in Songkhla but the next day he acted normally. About eight years before, the man had a similar episode but had a medical certificate stating he was cured and able to work for the government.}

After the tenant was taken away, the apartment staff found mashed limes and incense in the room. They concluded that these were part of a \textit{nora} ceremony to pay homage to teacher spirits, as the man was related to a \textit{nora} leader and possibly was possessed by ancestors. When the room was inspected, there was blood on the walls probably from the man cutting his hands on broken window glass. I asked if a ceremony would be held to purify the room, but the manager said, “No, because it isn’t concerned with anything about Buddhism. It is a local belief [regarding ancestors].” She said, “My family lives in Songkhla. They believe in \textit{nora} too. One year \textit{nora} came to my mom, and she danced and danced. Maybe someone in my family knows about the limes.” Later I learned that \textit{nora} performers stepped on limes for certain rituals.

Madness is considered one of the weapons in the arsenal of \textit{nora} spirits, but \textit{nora} masters can cure it. Nora Plaeg said he was familiar with the ancestors’ power to cause insanity. “I can cure the clients who are mad because of their grandparents’ spirits,” he assured me. A \textit{nora} spirit medium, Khun Pratana, told me of her long battle to fight \textit{nora} induced mental illness through the hospitals. Her symptoms were a combination of
physical and mental disorders including trembling, paralysis of the arm, and inability to eat, drink, or walk. She told me:

I used to go to the mental hospital in Songkhla and get some medicine. I thought maybe I was mad (baa), and when I took medicine, I slept for a long time. When I woke up, I thought I already was possessed by nora spirits and by the grandparents. When I came back home, I asked myself all the time why I was like this. I went there [to the hospital] several times. I thought it was impossible to be a spirit medium nowadays. I still ask myself what happened to me. In the past, half of me believed in it, but another half didn’t believe in it. When I knew that I was a spirit medium for the grandparents, I got sick for a long time. And I went to see a doctor at that mental hospital and told the doctor, who never saw anything like this. The doctor could give me medicine correctly. My older brother took me to the Surat Thani [mental] Hospital. I thought, how am I? Sometimes when I sat, I trembled, but I didn’t know why. When I went to Surat Thani hospital, my older sister told the doctor that I was a crazy person and trembled a lot. And the doctor examined me and found nothing. So he didn’t give me any medicine. When I came back home, I thought I nearly died because the doctor had not given any medicine to me.

Pratana finally recovered when she attended a nora ceremony. Now she comes yearly on the encouragement of her family. She said her husband and daughter told her, “You will feel comfortable when you come here once a year.” Another person in the nora community also said the ancestors caused her psychological discomfort. One of Nora Plaeg’s daughters, told me, “I don’t have a comfortable heart/mind. I have mental problems. I have problems with my heart/mind.” I asked, “What caused the problems?” She said, “It is because I know that I have nora ancestors. At that time, I felt that I had mental problems. I know that the ancestors made me sick so I promised them. I told them that if I could get better, I would dance nora for them. I promised at home because nora families must have altar shelves for the nora spirits at home.”

These women testified to a variety of symptoms, which they attributed to nora spirits. Instead of blaming spirits, Pittaya described the many economic and social
problems that can cause mental distress. But, he pointed out that *nora* is thought to be one cure:

There are many problems, which become mental problems. For example, economic problems, social problems, political problems, and health problems, and the lack of friends or family to support you, and lack of stability. These can all change to become mental problems. These can relate to *nora roong khruu*. This is because the ceremony is the way to show people's belief in supernatural powers. People may think that *nora roong khruu* is the way in which they can solve their problems (Pittaya 1995: 69).

In summary, determining the difference between insanity from possession and insanity from other causes is difficult, even for the afflicted. Many patients sought Western cures and psychological therapy before looking to the ancestors. If *nora* could cure the problem, then the *nora* spirits were probably the cause, it was reasoned. In my interviews, I did not detect anger at the spirits for using this rather heavy-handed approach to gain respect and propitiation. Rather the victims seemed relieved to locate the source of their long-term disabilities. In this situation, the human is at the mercy of the spirits and must follow the correct ritual to regain normal mental functioning.

*Agency: The Medium’s Control Over the Spirit.* The relationship between the *nora* person and the ancestors is not totally hegemonic. While the spirit obviously has more power, knowledge, and sacred status, the human's cooperation is essential. The spirit needs a reliable earthly body and voice to communicate with descendants. In return, the mediums benefits by increasing their own magical powers and economic position. I will be addressing *nora* mediums here, but I found similar evidence among home-based professional mediums outside the *nora* community.

The relationship between mediums and ancestor spirits is similar to the interaction between Buddhists and monks. While the Buddhist faithful give offerings to monks, in
Buddhists appropriate power by such acts as renting Buddhist amulets, taking pilgrimages, and engaging in ritual acts. Swearer (1995: 19) described this process as “gaining access to power” in a “reciprocal exchange and appropriation.” I would argue that similar exchanges occur between nora mediums and spirits in and outside the possession state. Although spirits can punish and have ultimate power, mediums are able to negotiate their own needs and minimize or avoid retribution. For example, mediums can refuse to invite the spirit for possession. At the beginning of the relationship, the medium is typically bewildered and unhappy about the new spiritual obligations and is not considered fully possessed. But later the medium matures into the position and can negotiate duties, such as the hours the spirit will possess for clients. Spirits are thought to have sympathy for the daily life problems of their mounts and will possess at reasonable hours. To assist the spirit, the medium agrees to perform numerous tasks, such as hosting yearly ceremonies to show respect, establishing and improving a home shrine, and purchasing appropriate clothes for possession.

What emerges is a two-way interaction in which spirits are mentors to novice mediums. Mediums often say that before possession they knew nothing of these matters, but the spirit taught them special powers that could be used independently outside of possession. For stronger magic, possession is required. Mediums gain other benefits in exchange for donating body and time. They move from being part of the general nora community to becoming insiders in the more exclusive magically empowered nora elite. Being selected by the ancestors is an honor reserved only for pure, kindly persons, and thereby their status is enhanced. Mediums can assist relatives and the public with
problems throughout the year. They learn inspired dancing and singing from the spirits and can perform at entertainment venues any time in the year. Mediums also receive protection from harmful enemies and get assistance in recovering lost property.

*Types of Trance and Levels of Possession.* There are many types and levels of possession, which can be confusing to the observer (discussed in Chapter 1) (Bourguignon 1973). *Nora* spirit medium Fung had a rather extreme reaction to his first possession. In Western understanding, this might be described as a classic possession trance, where the spirit took complete control of his body and even caused him to be violent. Fung remembered:

When I was first possessed, I was 23-years-old. After I finished being a monk, there was a *nora* performance at my house. I felt uncomfortable when I did anything. The *nora* person invited the spirits outside the house but I became unconscious. Then I confined myself in my bedroom, and I asked my sister to lock the door from outside. But when I became possessed, I destroyed the wall and ran to the performance. The first spirit who possessed me is Thuat Sua (Great-grandfather Tiger). After that other spirits came to possess me and also my uncle possessed me.

When I discussed possession with Nora Plaeg and his family, his niece said, "*Nora* performers are possessed all the time." The oldest daughter added, "The performers are possessed all day." During the three days of the ceremony, *nora* persons appeared to be were in and out of trance states, sometimes dancing and looking distracted or speaking in unusual voices, but at other times behaving normally. I was told that during this ritual, they were highly sensitive to the spirits, who invisibly hovered around. When possessions occurred, the drummers played loudly and the audience gathered around to listen to the spirit's speech. When not possessed, the same *nora* performers

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205 Within this group of *nora* mediums, there is a continuum of involvement. Some mediums only possess a few minutes once a year while others have regular practices at home seeing both family and strangers as a profession.
would take the microphone in their own personae to joke with the audience and raise funds. So possession was something you could slip into and out of, as the spirit demanded.206

Novice mediums go through an orientation period, which may take years before the medium is mature in the relationship, has valuable spiritual knowledge, and is known as fully possessed. At one roong khruu, I saw four teenage girls who were in different stages of trance and was told that some were too young to be fully possessed, which could occur at age 22. On another occasion, a 16-year-old nora dancer, Khun Griangdet, told me his possession was only partial. This teen for several years had stolen the show with his graceful dancing. As one of the adopted sons of Nora Plaeg living in Baan Thakhae, he became nora at age 11, an experience he found difficult to describe, “I cannot explain. I trembled. My mind-heart (jit jai) knew. My mind was not normal.” When I asked if he was possessed during dancing, he said, “Maybe a little,” but added that he was not possessed every time. “I know myself when nora possesses, but I cannot do anything then. I cannot control my mind-heart.” A female medium assisting in the hot oil bath at Wat Thakhae also described her different types of possession. “It is like there is a kind of energy (phalang-ngaan) to touch my body. Some people are still conscious, but some people are not. It depends on if they are possessed fully (song tem) or not. But if they are possessed completely, it is very good.”

Nora Lim Keawklap (NLK) in his Pattani home explained the different levels of his awareness, which seemed to fluctuate. At first, he is conscious when his father spirit comes. Nora Lim knows this spirit is his father from a sixth sense (thip phayayaan).

206 In African societies, Carter found a similar situation where, “Possession states exhibit different levels of dissociation and lucidity, persist for various lengths of time...” (2000: 189).
Later, his grandfather spirit talks to him, warning about enemies and black magic. At one point, Nora Lim can have a mental conversation with the spirit, but at another time, he is completely unaware of his behavior as if his mind had receded. Thus when Nora Lim does feats like eating lit candles, he is not aware of his behavior.

NLK My grandfather will come to help the people who beg me to help. My father will come too and will help people. If they are sick, he will cure them. If you want to know anything, he can tell you. If you want to know if there is any bad thing in your body, he can tell you. I know when my father comes.

MG Do you remember this when it is happening?

NLK I am conscious and I know when it is the spirit of my father, like a sixth sense. He [the spirit] does not say anything to family members, but he will come to help another person who is sick.

MG Many spirit mediums become unconscious.

NLK When I am possessed, I am unconscious. I can eat candles on fire. Other people know what will happen, but I don’t. My grandfather will tell me about the enemy, will warn me about enemies, and who used the bad magic with him. My grandfather said, ‘Don’t be worried.’ He will help Khun Lim (himself).

MG How do you find out later what the spirit said? Who tells you?

NLK My wife and another person will tell me after.

Nora Chalerm Gaew Pim (NCGP) and Nora Prapa Gaew Pim (NPGP) also described a variety of levels of agency under possession: being unconscious, being able to request the presence of certain spirits, and being able to remember afterward some of what transpired. Nora Chalerm said he can do some rituals to get rid of black magic curses without possession, but his ancestor spirits often assist him. The couple is possessed by about seven spirits each. The spirits are figures from the Phatthalung Legend, great-grandparents, and other ancestors.

NCGP Each spirit will take a turn to possess.
NPGP The spirit who possesses will tell us about the number of the spirits who come to possess. If we want to ask another spirit, we can call the spirit’s name. And then we can talk with that spirit...
The spirit will possess another nora [person] and tell us who the spirit is. When the spirit possesses we will know the name because the spirit will tell us.

The spirit will help us to do everything during the performance.

Do you remember what the spirit tells you or does someone have to tell you? While you are possessed, do you go unconscious?

I can remember but I cannot control my body.

As soon as one [patient] asks me a question, he gives me a lighted candle and I can see through the flame to his mind.

Sometimes, I cannot remember all that I say.

It is like a person who fainted.

Sujin Chanabaan (SC) reported that during nora ceremonies she had moments of being only partially possessed when she was aware of her surroundings. This occurred when her spirit expanded to become larger. But when she danced, she was completely possessed, unlike some other performers. She said:

Most of the people inside the stage are the spirit mediums. But today, they are not possessed completely. But for me I was completely possessed. Tomorrow you will see a lot of spirit mediums and also the day after tomorrow. They will get dressed the same as today. There are many spirits who will come to possess. The people who have nora ancestors in their families will come to be possessed tomorrow too.

What do you feel before you are possessed?

I feel unconscious. It is like the spirit would like to take my mind away and will replace my mind.

Did anyone tell you what happened today and yesterday when you were possessed?

No. For me, I don’t know what I did. The spirit inside me can do everything. No one told me about my behavior.

Do you know what role Mae Khaenawn [her spirit] played in the ceremony?

Sometimes I felt conscious during the ceremony when I sat on the floor. But when I danced, it meant that I was possessed completely. At that time I didn't feel anything. If the spirit expanded (kha yaai) herself, I would feel conscious for a while.

Can you tell me anything about the other women who are possessed here?

I know some of them, but some I don’t know. When we all are possessed, we will know everybody. The spirit inside us will know the spirits inside other people.
These dialogues illustrate the many different kinds of trance and possession, which are influenced by the medium’s maturity, the purpose of dealing with the supernatural, the character of the spirit, and the type of performance.

*The Medium Must Invite the Spirit.* Using the invitation ritual, the medium can have some control over when possession occurs. Nora Wan said, “Before the spirits come to possess, I will invite them. The spirits can't come if no one invites them. The spirits are *nora* [ancestors] or spirit mediums who died and their grandchildren still respect them.” The medium has the agency to tell the spirit not to possess at problematic times. Spirit medium Oi said she was working with her ancestors to find stolen property after a robber took a mobile phone and a considerable amount of money from her house. Because she was upset by this occurrence, she asked the spirits not to possess her at the *roong khruu* that year. She said:

This year I told my ancestors not to possess because I am sick and I just lost my property, more than 100,000B. So I told my ancestors, “If I can get my property back, I will come to join next year.” I prepared everything for this ceremony but I asked my ancestors not to possess this year. I have an uncomfortable heart (*mai sabai jai*). And my ancestors are upset [or have a sad heart] (*sia jai*) that I lost my property.

Her spirits were sympathetic and complied with her wish although they normally would want to possess and dance yearly.

*Speaking Abusively to Spirits.* At times the *nora* leader can use strong language in addressing the spirits. When a *roong khruu* is held at a private home, a *nora* medium will invite the ancestors to possess. These spirits include the Phatthalung Legend ancestors down to recently deceased *nora* teachers (Chatchai 1995: 89-90). The medium sits on the floor in front of a candle, makes a *wai* gesture, and begins the lesson to invite
the spirits (described in Chapter 2). The host of the house will provide mediums from the family to accept all the spirits invited. If the nora medium calls for a long time but the possessions don’t occur, the nora leader might step in and use the following "scathing" speech, recorded by researcher Chatchai:

Please come here quickly. Come follow the string. Please come follow the silk string to possess. Please come quickly. Why don’t all of the great teachers come? I called you a lot. Where are you and why don’t you come here, Phaw Muang Thawng? I called you great teacher. It’s like calling pigs and dogs. Or are you a ghost who died a violent death so you could not come into the nora stage? Because we believe in you, people admire you. If you don’t possess this night, we won’t believe in you any more. Oh my kindness, I want you to come quickly (1995: 90).

Chatchai added, “When nora says this lesson, in only a moment, the ancestors will possess very quickly. It is surprising.” Although such strong language is unusual, it shows that the nora leader, in this case, can be assertive even against powerful spirits.

*Gaining Magical Knowledge.* Nora spirits are called teachers because they teach their descendants about many things in life, principally rituals, spells, dancing, and singing. Initiated nora performers and spirit mediums are respected as depositories of this epistemology, not just vehicles who become unconscious during possession. Nora Plaeg was well-known for his numerous magical prayers (khaathaa), love potions (yaa sane), and blessed face powder. But to cope with strong black magic, he had to be possessed to gain the spirit’s power. Surrounded by his family at home in 2001, Nora Plaeg Chanabaan (NPC) spoke of the spirit’s power, but he described it as his own power, an indication of how the man and spirit had blended. His oldest daughter (OD) and adopted son, Nora Thiang (NT), added explanations:

NPC  When I am possessed, I will know everything about the patient’s sickness.
OD  Women cannot touch his body.
NT He doesn’t behave strangely.
OD He can sing for a very long time.
NPC If you are disturbed by a ghost, you mention my name and you can get better. My name can chase the ghost away.
OD Some people are sick and as soon as they come here, they can get better. When taa [Nora Plaeg] is possessed, he has supernatural power (mii palang). He can make holy water to cure the patient.
NPC I know what I have not known before. I’m unconscious while I’m possessed.

Later in the interview, the oldest daughter described her father as an illiterate man who had gained intelligence through the spirit’s teachings:

OD He has been nora since he was young. He didn’t go to school. Taa said that he didn’t want to study any more. Taa’s father and grandfather were not nora. He didn’t know how he could be nora. He has never been sick. Other nora have to practice singing. But taa can sing the whole month [of the ceremonies]. We hardly ever find a nora like him. He is smarter than Ph.D. students. He used to dance at the National Theater and won the first prize. He could answer the questions of the director general, Phra Ong Jao Ekkaphawn.
NPC I have to answer all the questions the committee asked.

To illustrate her point about his intelligence, the daughter then named two other high level government officials with royal titles who had come to visit Nora Plaeg in the village regarding Thai arts. Thus, the spirits can change the life of their mount by providing highly respected knowledge.

**Inspired Dancing.** One of the primary skills passed from the spirit to descendants is the graceful dancing style. Dancing is more than a skill; it is a devotional offering and also evidence of the close relationship between spirit and human. Nora Prapa said she learned to dance as a child from her relatives, “Since I was born, I saw my grandfather and also my uncle dance nora.” The spirits are believed to inspire the dance or to dance themselves in the medium’s body. Nora Chalerm said, “The spirit will
possess a person in the family. People cannot normally dance \textit{nora}, but when they are possessed, they can.” When he was first possessed, Nora Chalerm was informed by another medium that ancestors had begun to use his body. “After that I practiced to be \textit{nora}. And I got better. I can dance \textit{nora} comfortably (\textit{sabaai}) because the ancestor spirits helped me.” While this spirit connection gives legitimacy to \textit{nora} dancers in the ritual context, today many young people learn the dancing in secular schools. Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter suggested such performances were not authentic, “In general, people who don’t have any \textit{nora} in their family are afraid to practice to be \textit{nora}. If there is not any \textit{nora} ancestors in the family, members of that family cannot dance \textit{nora}.”

In conclusion, Theme 3 has complexified human agency by illustrating ways in which mediums can declare their needs to the spirit world and gain valuable skills. This relationship is not hegemonic but is negotiated with both sides exhibiting powers and weaknesses. The next theme addresses the morality of \textit{nora} mediums as an essential component of their identity.

\textbf{Theme 4: The Discourse of Belief and Morality}

\textbf{Fake Mediums and Credibility.} Claims of truthfulness are a common topic both inside and outside of spirit medium shrines (discussed in Chapter 1). Morris found that northern mediums brought up the issue themselves to promote their own credibility:

Mediums themselves sustain their claim to relative authenticity by raising the rumor of duplicity among others and by keeping open the question of veracity. Indeed, it is my experience that every stranger who visits a medium will at some point face the question of belief, often in a blunt interrogation: ‘Do you believe or not?’….To respond skeptically, and even evasively…by claiming to believe only sometimes, is to demonstrate a capacity to distinguish between fakery and genuine possession…(Morris 2000: 101).
Here I am addressing *nora* mediums with home-based shrines. These mediums are more on the societal fringe than initiated *nora* performers. The issue of 'belief' is quite complex. In some cases, words do not match actions -- people say they don’t believe in spirits but still give offerings at a spirit shrine. Anthropologist Jack Bilmes found in a northern Thai village that, “...almost all the villagers believed in mediums, and it was commonly believed that all mediums were genuine, that no one faked it. They said if someone faked it people could tell and that anyway no one would dare to fake for fear of retaliation from the spirits” (1995: 233). Bilmes was surprised that his assistant seemed to gloss over evidence of deception, which would have caused a Western skeptic to question the whole performance.

In my research however, I found people expressed a complex array of beliefs based on both the spirit and medium involved and other factors. One quite common saying indicates that belief is almost irrelevant -- “Even if you don’t believe, do not disrespect [the spirits] (*thaa mai chua, yaa lop luu*)” (Pattana 1999: 3). This phrase means that spirits can be dangerous if disrespected, whether you believe in them or not. Sometimes Thais would tell me that they believed in mediums who channeled a particular favorite spirit, like the now popular Goddess Guan Im. In one case, an informant told me that she would not believe in a 21-year-old female medium who claimed to be possessed by King Chulalongkorn. She was too young and female. The revered King would not have chosen such an inappropriate vessel.

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207 For an analysis of these belief practices in Rotuma, see Alan Howard 1996.
208 In his early study of the Azande (1937), E. E. Evans-Pritchard described different types of belief and disbelief in witchdoctors.
209 Pattana translated this saying as, “You may not believe, but never offend spirits” (1999:3).
The question of credibility in possession is rarely raised in regard to nora performers because they share a more elevated group identity.\(^{210}\) In the main, nora mediums are seen as a different class of spiritualists who dance to show respect to forebears. They are not thought to be motivated by fame and fortune but by a desire to continue the community. However, nora spirit mediums with home shrines are more open to scrutiny if they live on donations from the public. In an interview in 2004, I asked Pittaya about this belief in mediums. He compared nora mediums with Thai-Chinese mediums:

The belief of nora people is stronger....Chinese people always have questions [doubts] about possession (gaan song jao). Meanwhile the nora villagers believe thoroughly that this is real....People will believe in nora spirit mediums more than in Chinese spirit mediums. Meanwhile for the Chinese ceremony, people think it is a magic performance (gan sadaeng maayaagon) because in nora they don’t have much action. They just possess and meet their descendants and talk to descendants to ask for offerings. If we observe, people will believe in nora spirit mediums more than Chinese spirit mediums.

Here Pittaya described the devotion of many nora families to their tradition.

Considering this, I was surprised to find a family member who admitted to skepticism about the spirits. In his 20s, this man had spoken passionately about the role of nora in the south. He said in the future, “There will still be nora in the south. Nora is the local tradition of the south, which has been performed in the south for a very long time. They will do it every day, every year for their whole lives in the south. Other spirit mediums only help with people’s problems; they don’t act like nora.” Despite this strong endorsement, the man confided later that he only believed in nora 50%. He believed strongly in the southern nora tradition to help people psychologically and socially, but he

\(^{210}\) However, the topic sometimes arises humorously. For example, at a ceremony Nora Jop spoke to the spirit of a Buddhist monk who possessed a medium and quipped to the audience, “I cannot guarantee if this is real or fake.”

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wasn't so sure there really were spirits after all. His comment illustrates that even within nora families, beliefs vary on the existence and effectiveness of spirits.

So in this atmosphere of belief and disbelief, nora mediums construct an identity by separating themselves from the Other, the false profiteering mediums. One nora medium, Ratchada, cast aspersions on the reputations of many professional mediums working today. Ratchada told me she cures people at her home and has no other occupation. So she would be considered a professional medium herself. Reflecting on the proliferation of other professional mediums in Thailand, Ratchada immediately suggested that many are fake and only interested in profiteering. She said nowadays there were lots (yeu! yae! laew) of spirit mediums:

When I was possessed, I asked my spirit why there are a lot. And the spirit told me that it is up to them. I cannot do anything about that. It is their business. People who do good things will receive good things, and people who do bad things (gam – bad karma) will receive bad.211 If there are real or false spirit mediums, I am not involved. I have no right to talk about this. I went to see a spirit medium who possessed this god and that god. But it is not like me; it is false. But we cannot talk about it. We only know it and should not show disrespect (mai lop luei).

Mediums proliferate because they want to make money during hard economic times. She said:

In the past, there were a few spirit mediums, only grandparents, not people in our generation. In the past, there were not many spirit mediums because the economy was good. It wasn't hard to earn a living. But now it is modern times. This person possesses in this style, that person possesses in that style, to earn their living. But they do the wrong things, the spirit said. Now there are many spirit mediums. Even small children become possessed. It is impossible. Which spirits will possess small children; only a few spirits. In our grandparents' time, there were only old people who possessed, and they did not possess very much.

211 This is a common saying among Buddhists referring to the results of karma (tham dii dai dii tham chua dai chua).
She said that previously mediums needed to have an outside shrine or be possessed at home, but nowadays many people even become possessed in the public markets. Thus standards have dropped in this field. "Now and the past are not the same. Now there are a lot of mediums like the flowers on the pathway (dawg mai rim thaang)."

To differentiate herself from others, Rachada stressed the importance of ethics and morality among practitioners. Her spirit instructed her to keep her mediumship a secret and not boast like other mediums or be ambitious or greedy (thayeu thayaan). She warned me about their tricks and cheating, "We can go to see them but should not talk about it. When I see them, I will know if it [the practice] is real or not because I have a mental current (grasae jit - like telepathic insight)." The real proof of a medium is her ability to heal people, Ratchada explained. Because of her success in curing, she has expanded her practice through word-of-mouth referrals.

Through such discourses on authenticity, mediums distinguish themselves from unethical practitioners who trick the public. But they are careful not to mention the names of other mediums or shrines. People who deceive will suffer from their bad karma in this life and the next, they say. This approach fits with the Thai philosophy of avoiding confrontations and seems wise considering the rather small world of southern mediumship.

This making of derogatory remarks about some mediums, but not others, recalls the analyses of E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937). He proposed that limiting disbelief to specific people or cures actually supported the overall magical system. I agree with his analysis regarding how mediums frame others in their field. I further maintain that mediums who separate themselves from less ethical practitioners are employing a Thai
religious discourse on morality to their own advantage. This discursive dichotomy places
the national religion, civilization, and science in opposition to superstition, magic, and
backwardness. Jackson (1989) stated that the government promoted a type of reform
intellectual Buddhism as a unifying force in nation-building. “Reformist middle class
Buddhists thus reject saiyaasaat [belief in mediums, spirits and magic] because of the
unpredictability of its supernatural source of power makes it unsuitable as a legitimating
ideology for a highly structured technological society” (Jackson 1989: 60). This
government discourse -- to promote science in the “technological society” and discredit
superstition – argued that mediums were con-artists taking advantage of ignorant
villagers (Pattana 1999: 199). Applying this discussion to my research, I argue that nora
mediums construct identities of themselves as ethical persons who eschew trickery,
although they use supernatural powers. Ratchada’s self description – that she cures
people, believes in karma, and holds to the highest standards – ties her to the
establishment discourse on morality and Buddhism.

Black Magic as a Signifier of Immorality. 212 Early Western anthropologists
framed the discourse on occult practices as conflicts between morality and immorality.
However, more recent ethnography in Africa found that witchcraft or sorcery were
methods for gaining power useful in the modern world. 213 Nora mediums define

212 Black magic in Thai has several translations: saidam (saiyasaat – magic, dam –black), saiyawet, and
khunsai.
213 According to anthropologist Peter Geschiere, “It is striking that, among these classical anthropologists
and later among many of their followers, a highly moralizing view of the occult forces prevailed. Most
anthropologists still tend to reduce discourses on witchcraft to an unequivocal opposition between good and
evil, even when the local terminology hardly lends itself to this” (Geschiere 1997: 12). Geschiere took the
Western paradigm of science and modernity and turned it on its head by arguing that witchcraft/sorcery and
modernity go together. Although witchcraft and sorcery were “loaded terms,” he used them because local
people spoke in these terms but with a variety of meanings, not necessarily referring to evil forces
(Geschiere 1997: 14). In postcolonial Africa, he found that witchcraft/sorcery is a way to both gain power
themselves as good persons with good spirits, who do not use black magic but are powerful enough to fight against it. This claim to morality is an essential element in nora identity, which separates nora people from sinful persons motivated by greed, jealousy, and unseemly profits. Buddhist monks often lecture against these same sins.

**Nora Fights Black Magic.** Nora and black magic are intertwined on many levels. For instance, unwanted ghosts are attracted to the nora offerings and rituals and can cause harm. Nora performers must keep out ghosts and invoke the ancestors' protection of the stage. Nora Wan said, “The first dancing is...for chasing away the ghosts. After that we surround the place with auspicious string. Then we open the stage [begin the ceremony] with dancing before building the open air rest area (sala). Next we do the invocation ritual (gaat khruu). It is for inviting the nora spirits to protect the sala.”

According to Nora Jop, both evil and benevolent spirits come to pay respect to the ancestors. Skilled nora leaders must have magic of their own to combat these forces.

In addition, due to their supernatural powers, nora leaders are sought out by individuals suffering from curses. Some unethical people dispatch sorcery motivated by jealousy, competitiveness, anger over perceived insults, and desire for profit. They can cause sickness, madness, business failures, and unfaithfulness in spouses. Nora leaders help the victims to discover the cause and apply a cure. I asked nora medium Fung what questions people asked him during possession. He said, “They ask about their fortune or...and undermine power within modern society, such as in business and politics, rather than a traditional backwards belief based in rural villages. Geschiere also argued that black magic continues to be widespread because rumors of it cause “thrill and excitement” (1997: 218). In Thailand, witchcraft/sorcery and power also combine. For instance, witchcraft was used for political purposes in Chiang Mai in 1992 when a black magic cursing ritual was performed for the press against General Suchinda (Morris 1994: 196). In southern Thailand, the term “black magic” is more widely used and means magic with an evil intent. From my research on urban professional spirit mediums, I found that many clients visited mediums to deal with black magic curses. Perhaps tension about black magic may have increased in the past three decades due to the multiplication of mediums who use and defend against dark forces.
black magic. For example, if someone in the house is hurt without knowing the cause, they will ask the spirit about what happened to him. A child couldn’t walk for a year. His parents took him to nora and asked the spirit to cure him. After that he could walk.” In some cases, nora leaders require their spirit’s power to fight black magic, and sometimes they can combat it with their own supernatural abilities. Nora Chalerm said he did not require possession to get rid of black magic. “Because I have my own magical knowledge, I have to do it myself. I am the leader of a nora group so I have to know some magical knowledge.” I asked about his ritual to defeat black magic. He said:

I cannot tell [you the details]. But I have to prepare the doctor’s knife (miit maw) to get rid of black magic. I am not possessed, but the nora ancestors will stay with me. I have to prepare a bowl of betel, a doctor’s knife and magical prayer (khaathaa aakhom), which I have learned from my teacher. For example, if you receive black magic, and you have a bad headache, I will make some holy water for you.

As should be noted from his last sentence, the effects of black magic can be minor, such as a headache, or major causing illness and death.

Jealousy is often the motive for using unscrupulous magic, even between nora troupes. Nora Chalerm recalled when some people did not like a nora medium, so they hid a black magic object in a building to prevent his ancestors from possessing him. “They hid something in the building. So his relatives had to ask a spirit doctor to make holy water to chase away the black magic. The people who used black magic with that person may be jealous of him,” he said. Also relating to jealousy, Nora Chalerm said sometimes a family will hire him to perform a nora ceremony. But the family’s spirit may feel insulted that an outside group is using its own spirits. In this instance, the jealousy is between spirits. I asked spirit medium Ratchada whether a lot of people in the
south use black magic. She replied, “Yes they do. We have lots.” She explained that spirit mediums who are jealous are actually frauds. “If it is sacred, the mediums will not be jealous. They will help each other and spread loving kindness. But this is not the case. They fight and are jealous and say not to go to the other person's house because it is not good, and there is something hidden there. Southern people play dirty (*len sograprog*).”

Although today few *nora* persons would admit to using black magic, in the past this ability was considered essential to winning competitions. Lecturer Sompoch said, “There are a lot of people who use black magic, and spirit mediums are famous for black magic. There is a lot of black magic in the *nora* competitions.” Forty years ago in Pattani, there were frequent *nora* competitions (*prachan nora*), but today they are less popular because people cannot afford to hire many groups, according to Nora Chalerm. These events got very heated because the groups would talk to each other before the performance, get angry, and want to kill each other. Using magic to win was not only common but also an important display of the *nora* group’s powers. Nora Lim said the competitions pitted one person’s spiritual strength against another, and the loser might die. “One night I dreamt that a person came to tell me not to join the competition in Phatthalung or a member of my group would die,” he recalled. Knowing he had stronger powers, Nora Lim proceeded with the competition and won.

*Raising Helper Ghosts.* Nora Chalerm said some immoral *nora* groups raise helper ghosts who can fraudulently substitute for ancestor spirits in a pinch. He said, “For other *nora* groups, if they cannot invite the patient’s grandparents’ spirits to possess, they will force the ghost who they raise to possess instead. It is a sin because they lie. For me, if the grandparents’ spirits don’t possess, I will just give the offering to them and call
all of them to eat. We are nora so we cannot do that.” But for this transgression, the nora group will be punished. “The members of that group will die or will have accidents,” he said. Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter said some spirit doctors use helper ghosts to harm their own clients. Then the clients must return for more treatments and pay more money. “Some doctors raise ghosts and order them to harm the clients who come to see them. But taa [Nora Plaeg] doesn’t do that,” she said. She is defining her father as behaving morally, a key component of the nora identity linked to the ethical rules of national Buddhism.

*Madness from Black Magic.* Although the ancestors are basically good, they can force their will on descendants. The supernatural insanity caused by ancestors is differentiated from black magic because the intention is good. Also there are separate cures for the two kinds of madness, according to Nora Plaeg’s oldest daughter (OD). When ancestors cause madness, the patient must join a roong khruu to be cured. When evil people cause madness through sorcery, Nora Plaeg does a special ritual called phet khun. Sitting next to Nora Plaeg (NPC), the daughter explained:

**OD** Some clients receive black magic and are mad. After taa [Nora Plaeg] helps them, they can get better like normal people. The madness from black magic and from the nora spirit is different. And the solution is also different too. The clients who are mad because of nora spirits will come here in May to participate in the big ceremony (roong khruu).

I asked her about the illness from sorcery, which requires the phet khun ceremony, and she said:

**OD** The clients have to prepare offerings. Taa makes holy water (nammon) for the clients to dispel ill fortune (sadaw khraw -- to unlock bad fortune by magic). The women who receive black magic behave strangely. They don’t speak with their husbands or their children.

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Then I asked her to describe the ritual:

OD  He [Nora Plaeg] doesn’t know about it because the spirit inside him does all the ritual. The clients have to prepare the offerings for the spirit, and the spirit will make holy water. For the offerings, the clients have to prepare flowers, joss sticks, candles, betel, and money.

NPC  The clients should put in some money because I can use that money to make merit (*tham bun*).

OD  He has to be possessed when he helps people who receive black magic.

From her description, the world of malevolent magic is involved, requiring the help of experts who can identify the cause of the malady before applying a remedy.

Again the *nora* community is distinguished from practitioners of immoral magic.

*Magic of the Other.* Adding to tension about black magic is the existence on the southern borders of different ethnic groups, known for their powerful outside mysticism. In describing the formation of the Thai geo-body, Thongchai discussed how borders divide ethnic groups arbitrarily into one country or another, while at the same time creating a national identity that excludes those considered outsiders. “The geo-body and history have become powerful technologies of nationhood. The most powerful effect is their operation in the identification of Thainess, or We-self, as opposed to otherness” (Thongchai 1994: 164). From the perspective of the nation-state, the Malay Muslim minorities in the south have been the Other for centuries and certainly since the border was determined in 1909. Along with this Otherness comes magic. “In Thailand, as in many other parts of the world, people consistently attribute the most powerful magic to members of groups living along the periphery of their social world” (Golomb 1985: 204). Golomb correctly observed that both Buddhists and Muslims perceive each other to have stronger magic and to be less ethical about applying it. In this way, ethnic groups define themselves as superior to the Other, he wrote.
The previously cited mental hospital study (Tippa, et al. 1999) found that both Buddhists and Muslims were concerned about protecting themselves from bad luck and obtaining cures for black magic. The report said that ethnic Thais in the south based their beliefs on Brahmanism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, which involved the supernatural arts. But Muslims believed illness was determined by Allah. Yet they had much in common.

"However both old Thai people and Malay people also have the same tradition, culture and beliefs. When people get sick, they will exchange, go to be cured by the other side: Thai-Buddhist southern people will go to the Malay sorcerers, while Malay people will use the same service by the Thai-Buddhist traditional doctors" (Tippa, et al. 1999: 34, citing Suphaap 1994). So although fear of black magic is divisive along ethnic lines with outside groups being blamed, this fear is also a reason to seek help from the Other. Some nora people respect Muslims because of their power in this area. Nora Chalerm said, "There are a lot of Muslim spirit doctors using black magic with the people.... Muslims are clever, and they use very strong magic so it is effective. Muslims also believe in black magic."

Theme 4 explored discourses on morality as part of nora identity. The issues are credibility with regard to possession and the use of black magic. These qualities are more sharply defined by being juxtaposed against the rather ambiguous, unscrupulous outsider.

**Conclusion**

In Chapters 6 and 7, nora persons elucidate their concepts of identity, which include both personal and group qualities in dealing with this world and the invisible world. Kinship, place, agency, and ethics all figure into this concept of the self and the nora community. By identifying with these qualities, nora families gain social, cultural,
and religious legitimacy as upstanding Buddhist citizens who represent the traditional kinship community and act morally in communicating with the ancestral world.
CHAPTER 8
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This research investigated the expanded development of spirit mediumship within marginalized religious groups at a time when national Buddhism appears to be weakening under the forces of modernity. The study focused on the ritual aspects of the nora dance-drama in southeastern Thailand, particularly the possession of nora members by their ancestors and legendary spirits. The research question explored the articulation between traditional spirit mediumship and Thai nationalism in the 21st century.

I argue that nora, as a symbol of the south, has been absorbed into national culture, based on monarchy, Buddhism, history, and language. For the purposes of the nation, the nora genre serves to expand the internal boundaries of Thainess into the ethnically and religiously mixed far south. Meanwhile on the margins, the nora performance struggles to maintain its own subaltern identity, heritage, historic kingdom, language, and religion under contemporary pressures. The forces of the center work to co-opt nora for nation-building while the forces on the periphery straddle the fence between sharing a spot in the center and maintaining some separateness. This research explored the significance of the drama in three discursive areas: nationalism and identity, religion, and gender.

Nationalism and Identity

On the topic of nationalism and identity, I am arguing that nora is a symbol of southern Thailand in the national discourse on culture. I deconstruct this iconic status by
asking whom this symbol represents and why people grant *nora* this status over other performance arts and spiritual traditions. I also examine why *nora* is representative of the south at this time in history. I argue that *nora* has been designated because it represents the basic pillars of nationalism in a deeply divided region where the concept of the sovereign nation is under siege. The south is marginalized through geography, ethnicity, religion, and history. The region has been a contested religious and political space for centuries largely due to Malay Islamic independence movements, which were particularly strong in the 1970s to 1980s and again in 2004 to 2005. Although more accommodating to Thai leadership, ethnic Chinese patriarchies have also asserted their own cultures and the religions of Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism. Drawing on the argument that Thailand has pushed for homogeneity and stronger borders under globalization since the 1980s (Tanabe 1996), I propose that *nora* serves to extend and affirm the internal boundaries of Thai culture.

In addition to representing the nationalist religion and state authority in the borderlands, *nora* is also symbolic of constructed Thai mores and morals. Because *nora* is grounded in agricultural communities, it fits easily into the current national discourse on traditional Eastern versus modern Western values. Thailand is experiencing a massive change from an agricultural to an industrialized, global economy. A dominant discourse holds that the modernizing society is threatening family and community structures based on rural lifestyles. Academics, politicians, and the media blame Western culture for pulling youth away from family protection and Thai values into the lure of big cities and consumer capitalist culture.
Within this debate, different interests use mediumship to illustrate both the good and ill in contemporary Thai society. As a respectable type of mediumship, nora has government recognition for being part of the nation’s history and the traditional arts. Other kinds of mediums – of Thai, Chinese, and Malay lineage – are sometimes praised as insightful traditional doctors, who use a much-touted “local wisdom” to help the community. But more often, these mediums are considered unethical frauds preying on the uneducated poor for profits. The intellectual Buddhist discourse from Bangkok maintains that such practitioners harm, not only their clients, but also the Buddhist religion, the reputation of the country, and the tourism industry. Therefore disreputable mediumship is pulled into the national discourse that capitalist greed is seriously eroding Thai core values, resulting in a myriad of social and environmental problems (see Horstmann 2002: 64-5). In contrast, nora is set apart as a performance linked to the idyllic traditional village as part of national identity, while its religious side is downplayed.

Although I argue that nora is emblematic of the south, I identify several areas of difference and resistance to the dominant ideology. For example, nora embodies belief in magic, which is considered superstitious and backwards in the discourse of the civilized, scientific nation. Also the essence of constructed Thai culture is based on a linear history of kings and capitals in the central region, while the nora history is based on southern kingdoms, thus undermining the national narrative. In these ways, nora groups assert their local identities in the face of homogenizing central Thai culture (see Hall 1993).

On an individual level, the identity of the nora performer is ambivalent, as the performer is both respected as an artist and feared as a communicator with another world.
Nora spirit mediums generally enjoy a higher status than other mediums because they are associated with respect for ancestors and teacher spirits, the dramatic arts, and southern identity. However, the public generally has a wary attitude toward mediums. While the status of nora identity is ambiguous, the Thai national identity is also undergoing change as modernizing forces challenge the basic pillars of monarchy, Buddhism, and nation. The definition of Thainess is usually ascertained by its opposite -- what is Un-Thai -- understood to be the enemies on the borderlands (Thongchai 1994). There are fears about tears in the social fabric under modernity that appear in the form of nostalgia for the long ago past and feelings of loss (see Ivy 1995). During this time of social upheaval, the nora performance serves the national interest by representing an imagined traditional Thainess based on rural kinship bonds and love of king and country in the south.

Religion

Nora is a practical religion that intersects with two powerful religious forces -- Buddhism, as the embodiment of the nation, and spirit mediumship based on local beliefs and Animism. These spiritual discourses in Thai history have developed a complex and fluctuating relationship. Bureaucratic Buddhism and the nora community differ greatly in structure and size. The Buddhist institution is a hierarchical structure, which oversees more than 32,000 monasteries and 460,000 monks, compared to the few thousand persons in scattered nora families. As a world religion representing the government, Buddhism historically absorbed and blended with many local belief systems, including nora. By tying itself to Buddhist and the nation, nora pulled closer to the center and avoided the marginalized status of other forms of mediumship and outsider cults. Because Buddhism is an essential pillar of Thai nationhood, rejecting it would put nora
into an outcast category much like southern Muslims. In a similar move toward the center, urban spirit mediums in Chiang Mai have professed loyalty to Buddhism, king, and country and once fought communism on the borders that threatened the national body (Irvine 1982).

Although nora and Buddhism have a symbiotic relationship, there are strains. Nora is syncretically comprised of numerous constituent parts – Buddhism (Theravada and Mahayana), Animism, Hindu-Brahmanism, Taoism, Islam, and other beliefs. As an ancestral propitiation system, nora is in many ways distinct from orthodox Buddhist philosophy, as illustrated by the departure of the monks after opening the roong khruu ceremony. The relationship exhibits tensions as nora is drawn to the center for religious legitimacy while also being pulled from the periphery. Potential conflicts can be seen in disagreements over the meaning of reincarnation and the use of direct access to spiritual power outside state authority (see Firth 1970). Despite these areas of potential discord, the working alliance between nora and Buddhism is extensive, including the use of monastery grounds for ceremonies. Nora might be considered a small insignificant tradition while organized Buddhism has the power of the state. But the country is comprised of many such local webs of belief needed for negotiating meanings in daily life.

Today there are competing discourses on the “proper” religion for the Thai people. Reformist Buddhists, using the media as a government technology of power (Pattana 1998), have challenged the “superstitious,” magical, and unscientific beliefs particularly strong in the outlying provinces. This religious discourse takes place in the context of capitalist globalization as the national religion appears to be losing its
relevance. Meanwhile small religious sects, promoting local healing and wisdom, have emerged throughout Southeast Asia (Keyes et al. 1994, White 1999). Based on ancestor propitiation and possession, nora is part of this debate. While other forms of spirit mediumship have been threatened with being banned (Pattana 1999: 199-200), the government has bestowed a privileged status on nora as a historic performing art. I attribute this to nora's role as a symbol of the south in a religiously diverse border region.

**Gender**

Gender articulates with nora in numerous ways. I observed a transformation in gender roles related to changes in Thai society under modernity. While young men seek jobs outside the rural area, village-based women assume more of the nora ritual roles. Because Thai society defines women as natural dancers and objects of beauty and the male gaze, women have easily slipped into positions as nora performers, dance teachers, and sometimes troupe leaders. The feminization of nora has provided religious empowerment for women, defying the accepted gender construction that men are more powerful in handling dangerous spirits and hot magic. The changes are made subtly so as not to offend respected elder male leaders. But I argue that the change is significant because women are bypassing the patriarchal structures of both traditional nora performance and Buddhism to communicate directly with spirits.

Although information about the ancient past is scarce, some scholars suggest that women in Southeast Asia once had important religious roles, which were usurped by the arrival of world religions (Andaya 1994, Brewer 2001). Therefore, the current female participation in nora might be a return to an earlier ancestral system. In nora, female spirit mediums play a significant role and are associated with another major group,
professional home-based mediums. Such informal networks serve to connect religious women, allowing for information exchange and shared legitimacy.

I found that many Thai women benefit from mediumship – both as mediums and clients – but to what extent is debatable. Investigating women’s religions worldwide, Sered (1994) asked whether these religions provide only immediate assistance or make deeper structural changes in gender equality. From my observations, female nora mediums, as well as other spirit mediums, tend to support the status quo, rather than criticize gender norms based on Buddhist and Hindu-Brahmanic practices. Despite this, I would argue that mediumship is growing partly because the state religion, administered through male monks, does not sufficiently address female problems around motherhood, health, polygamy, and poverty. Therefore, female dominated mediumship is in demand for answering critical needs.

Although it might be premature to do so, I am suggesting that the nora genre could develop into a “woman’s religion” based on the definition by Sered (1994). Within nora, there is contestation and change of gender meanings. Women are resisting and disrupting the dominant ideologies of masculinity that define only men as leaders, public decision-makers, and masters of the supernatural. Women are renegotiating the representations of femininity, which define them as nurturers of religion but not active directors. In this system of inclusion and exclusion, women dominate spirit mediumship at the local level but do not have access to spiritual knowledge within the national religion.

Within this contest of gendered spiritual discourses, women’s strategies of resistance are ambivalent as gender articulates with power, ethnicity, and class. Nora
women are daughters and wives of nora men, and share the same Thai ethnicity, Buddhist religion, cultural assumptions, and rural class with men. While nora women are subalterns in this gendered construction of power and identity, female spirits are starting to dominate the invisible kinship landscape and challenge the privileging of nora men in myth and genealogy. The patrilineal nora structure appears to be transforming into a matrilineal one. Female spirits from the Phatthalung Legend are gaining reputations for their powers as they possess more female human vehicles. Women on the periphery are moving toward the center by obtaining "spiritual capital" (Ong 1989: 298) once reserved for men who could become monks and travel. Women communicate directly with ancestors and deities, bypassing Buddhist organizational structures. But this taking of spiritual power is not without resistance by both men and women who police women's bodies and behavior. Nora women monitor their own behavior so they do not offend male leaders. Southern nora women occupy the periphery in a number of ways – by existing in a patriarchal society, by being spirit mediums in a Buddhist world, by being poor and rural in a region considered violent and underdeveloped. Therefore, women demonstrate their spiritual potency (Errington 1990) carefully and subtly within culturally prescribed gender limits.

Conclusion

This dissertation breaks new ground in Thai religious studies by exploring the under researched area of mediumship and how it articulates with the national religion. In the paradigms of the ancient monarchies and 20th century nation-builders, Thai citizens had one religion formulated from the center. Early anthropological research accepted this master narrative and tended to gloss over the significance of local belief systems.
Research on women also emphasized their religious roles within Buddhism and paid scant attention to the powerful female spiritualists practicing on the so-called margins. I found that some Buddhist women also had rich spiritual lives through communication with nora ancestors and legendary figures. These women and their spirits played pivotal roles in holding communities together by promising benefits and warning of punishment.

This study brings the edges to the center by first exploring the local meanings of an old ancestral ritual and then tracing its iconic status to the national level. Just as anthropology has moved beyond small bounded communities, this dissertation seeks to understand nora in the wider context of southern mediumship and religious nationalism. The usefulness of this research goes beyond Thai borders, as many nation-states in Southeast Asia and beyond grapple with the voices of religious diversity in the post-modern age.
APPENDIX A

THREE TYPES OF SPIRIT MEDIUM PRACTICES

I am framing this study of nora within the context of two other major types of possession in the south -- Thai-Chinese spirit mediums within Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism and home-based professional mediums in cities. I originally planned to study the latter group -- the new urban mediums -- to understand the roles of women as religious experts and as clients in modern mediumship during the current transition to a globalized industrial society. But during fieldwork, I became aware of many types of mediumship, which differed from the home-based groups but also overlapped with them. Three southern ethnic groups -- Thai, Thai-Chinese, and Thai-Malay -- practice mediumship as an integral part of their identities and traditions. Therefore the phenomenon of spirit relationships forms a complex network of beliefs integral to southern culture. These practices go back several centuries and have influenced each other.

The following is a brief overview of three types of mediumship. I will mention issues of gender, class, ethnicity, and organization. First, nora has already been discussed as an early ritual complex based on ancestral possession. Thai-Chinese who practice Mahayana Buddhism or Taoism in shrines (saan jao) follow the second type of mediumship. Some mediums in this group use extreme self-mutilation and physical feats at the annual Vegetarian Festival and other religious ceremonies. The third type is comprised of urban professional mediums who act independently to serve clients in
domestic shrines. These mediums and clients are from the three main ethnic groups—Thai, Thai-Chinese, and Thai-Malay.\footnote{For this study, I am only looking at Thai-Malay Muslims in the context of home-based shrines. However, Malay Muslims practice distinctive forms of mediumship in the south, which are outside the scope of this research.}

The social structure of nora appears to be the most complex of the three due to the age of the drama and its division into ritual and entertainment forms. Key families within certain villages organize the genre. The ritual aspect is struggling due to the many economic and social pressures on villages in contemporary times, but government educational institutions and cultural groups are supporting its revival. From a gender perspective, males dominated nora in the past but today more females are participating. As far as economic status, nora supporters are largely working class and middle class people, from rice farmers to school teachers. As mentioned before, nora families state they are Thai and Theravada Buddhists. On the question of marginality in Thai culture, nora is the most mainstream of the three types of mediumship.

On the second form of mediumship, Thai-Chinese rituals are expanding in attendance and geographic coverage partly due to an influx of Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese tourists who financially support and even build religious shrines in the south (Maud 2002). Also there has been a major attitude shift by the Thai government toward Chinese immigrants and citizens over the past century. Officials and the general public now view Thai-Chinese as a major asset to the capitalist economy rather than a political threat as communists (Pasuk and Baker 1998: 14-16). This change has permitted southern Thai-Chinese communities to express their identity more openly through religious ceremonies.
Dating back about two centuries, entrepreneurs and young male workers emigrated from southern China and set up patriarchal communities complete with family shrines to Chinese gods and goddesses. Today Thai-Chinese businesses dominate southern cities and play a pivotal role in politics as well (Cushmann 1991). The historic shrines are still revered and wealthy sponsors support elaborate ceremonies. But their young male mediums generally come from poor backgrounds. Although Chineseness is more acceptable today, the general public expresses conflicting attitudes toward these mediums due to their bizarre self-mutilations. Of the three possession groups, Thai-Chinese mediums are the most organized because they are backed by established, sometimes wealthy shrines with large committees that keep some control.

The third group consists of home-based mediums who devote part-time or full-time to this practice. A number of mediums say this is their career. Having first appeared in ethnographies in the early 1980s in Chiang Mai (Irvine 1982), this style of mediumship is the most recent permutation. Its rapid growth has surprised foreigners and Thais alike and even mediums themselves. Scholars believe these city mediums emerged due to the industrialized economy when many rural residents moved to cities for work. City mediums set up small shrines in the domestic sphere and served clients, both relatives and strangers, who gave small donations (Irvine 1982, Morris 1994, Pattana 1999). They replaced the services of village specialists who dealt with lineage spirits (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984, Davis 1984, Rhum 1994).

Working out of individual shrines, home-based mediums have no written doctrines and no central organization, although some networking groups have emerged in the north and northeast (Muecke 1992a, Pattana 1999). Most mediums and their clients
are female and working class, but a few mediums have gained noteworthy reputations and wealth. Mediums and clients come from all three ethnic groups and thus practice various religions including Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, Animism, and Islam. As the most marginalized, home-based mediums are more wary of strangers, including foreign researchers. Generally their client contacts are made by word-of-mouth and they do not advertise openly, unlike Thai-Chinese mediums connected to shrines.

Despite the introduction of rationalism, secularism, and Western medicine to Thailand, all three spirit medium groups are either surviving or flourishing. As a spiritual practice, mediumship provides grounding in kinship during times of social change, connects people with their ethnic roots, and gives practical assistance.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUAL MEDIUMS

I. Spirit Medium – Out of Trance
   A. Most Important Questions
      1. Identity of spirit medium
         a. What is your name? (explain confidentiality policy)
      2. About the spirit
         a. How many spirits possess you?
         b. What are their names?
         c. What are their sexes?
         d. What are their ethnicities and religions?
      3. The process of becoming a spirit medium
         a. How old were you when a spirit first tried to possess you?
         b. How did you know a spirit wanted to possess you?
         c. Were you ill? For how long?
         d. Did you resist? For how long?
         e. What was happening in your life then (e.g. married with children, going to school)?
         f. What did you do to get better?
         g. Who said that it was a spirit (e.g. monk, another spirit medium)?
         h. Did you undergo an initiation ritual? With whom?
         i. Do you have a family member who is a medium?
      4. Occupations of spirit medium
         a. What occupation did you have before you were possessed?
         b. What other occupation do you have now?
         c. Do you practice mediumship most of the week? What days?
      5. Residence, Age, Marriage, Family, Ethnicity, Education
         a. Where were you born?
         b. How long have you lived in this city?
         c. How old are you now?
            (e.g. The person was a spirit medium from _____ years old until _____ years old, for a total of _____ years.)
         d. Are you married?
         e. What is your spouse's occupation?
         f. Do you have children? What are their ages?
         g. What are the occupations of your adult children?
         h. What ethnicity are you (e.g. Thai, Thai-Chinese, Thai-Malay)?
         i. Are you Buddhist, Muslim, or another religion?
         j. What is your education?
      6. Clients Problems
         a. Are most clients men or women?
         b. Are most clients Thai, Thai-Chinese, or Thai-Malay?
c. What problems do clients have?
   1) Are there problems from the economy?
   2) Are there special problems in the South?
d. How does the spirit help with these problems?
e. What problems do women have?
   1) Are mistresses (minor wives) a problem?
   2) How does the spirit help with mistresses?
f. Are there many spirit mediums in Thailand today? Why?

7. Monkhood (for male spirit mediums)
   a. Have you ever been a monk?
      1) For how long?
      2) In what city?

8. Money
   a. Some people criticize spirit mediums for asking for a lot of money.
      Have you ever heard of that?

B. Less Important Questions (to ask if there is extra time)
   1. Close Followers
      a. Who helps the spirit medium?
      b. How many people?
      c. What is their relationship (e.g. sister, mother, friend)?
   2. Selection
      a. Why were you selected by the spirit?
   3. Teacher Respecting Ceremony (*wai khruu*)
      a. Do you hold a Teacher Respecting Ceremony?
         1) When?
         2) Where?
      b. How many times a year?
      c. How many people attend?
      d. Do monks come?
      e. Name of the monks’ temple?
      f. Do you attend these ceremonies for other spirit mediums?
         1) How many times in a year?
         2) Where are they held?
   4. Offerings
      a. How was the offering decided (e.g. candles, money)?
   5. Support of Buddhist or Muslim institutions
      a. Do you contribute to any particular temple or mosque? How?
   6. Services for clients
      a. What items are provided for clients (e.g. holy water, amulets, medicine)?
      b. Does the spirit provide special help for difficult cases?
         1) Can you give an example (e.g. like extending life)?

II. Questions for Spirit
A. Most Important Questions
   1. Identity of spirit
a. Can you tell me your name?
b. Were you a human once?
   1) When did you live?
   2) Where did you live?
c. What was your occupation then?
d. How did you die?
e. Do you possess other mediums?
   1) How many and where?

2. Heavenly or earthly residence
   a. When you are not here, where do you stay?
   b. What is it like there?
   c. What do you look like there (e.g. do you take a different form.)?

3. Helping Thai people
   a. Why have you come to Thailand now?
   b. What problems do clients have? Which are the worst problems?
   c. What problems are facing Thailand today?
      1) Are there problems from the economy?
      2) Are there special problems in the south?
      3) How do you help with these problems?

4. Women
   a. What problems do women have?
   b. What is the worse problem?
   c. How do you help them?
   d. Should women change their behavior toward their husbands?
   e. Should women accept mistresses as part of Thai culture?
   f. What advice do you give to a woman who is thinking of divorce?
      What if she has children?

5. Politics
   a. What do you think of the current political leaders?

6. Number of spirit mediums
   a. Are there many spirit mediums in Thailand today? Why?

B. Less Important Questions
1. Possession of other spirit mediums
   a. Do you possess other spirit mediums?
   b. How many and where?

2. Fake mediums
   a. How can a person judge if a spirit medium is real?
   b. Have you ever heard of a man named Khun Suchart, who used to be a spirit medium? I saw him on TV saying he deceived people. What do you think of him?

3. Buddhism
   a. Do you give instruction on Buddhism to clients?
   b. Do spirit mediums have to behave in certain ways, such as following restrictions?
c. Some people say spirit mediums are not good Buddhists. What do you think?

4. Islam
   a. Do you give instruction on Islam to clients?
   b. Do spirit mediums have to behave in certain ways, such as following restrictions?
   c. Some people say spirit mediums are not good Muslims. What do you think?

Observations of Spirit Mediums
Fill in after session. Repeat questions should be left blank if answered in first part.

A. Description of spirit medium
   1. Sex of spirit medium (M/F)?
   2. Sex of spirit (M/F)?
   3. Sexual orientation of spirit medium?

B. Description of session
   1. Location?
   2. Length of time?
   3. How many clients attended?
   4. How many clients treated?
   5. Length of treatments?

C. Description of clients
   1. Sex (M/F, what percentage)?
   2. Ages?
   3. Ethnicity (Thai, Thai-Chinese, Thai-Malay)?
   4. Where are clients from?
   5. Client groupings (individuals, friends, couples, families)?
   6. Interactions of clients (e.g. do they overhear problems and contribute, chat with each other)?
   7. Income level and how determined (e.g. their dress, cars)?
   8. Educational level and how determined?
   9. Are there repeat clients?
   10. Who are the helpers?

D. Description of shrine area
   1. Location in house?
   2. Description?
   3. Compared to others (rate for size)?
   4. List the religions represented in shrine and percentage (e.g. Theravada Buddhism __%, Mahayana Buddhism __%, Taoism __%, Hinduism __%, Islam __%, Animism __%)?

E. Offerings
   1. Cash offering required?
   2. Money given aside from the required offering?
   3. Religious items for sale (rent)?

F. Services provided
   1. Items sold or given away (e.g. holy water, pictures, amulets)?
2. Normal services (e.g. exorcism, blessings)?
3. Special services (e.g. extend life, holy water bath, blessing pictures)?
4. Is any medicine given?
5. What are clients asked to do at home?
6. Are clients asked to return? Why?

G. Religious content
1. Does the medium lecture clients on religion?
2. How much and in what form?

H. Description of medium’s trance
1. Describe type and length of possession?
2. How is the change of clothes made?
3. Description of dress?
4. Behavior and voice changes?
5. Use of humor?
6. Use of foreign language?
7. What is eaten and drunk?

I. Income level of medium
1. Size of village or city?
2. Description of neighborhood?
3. Description of house?
4. Household possessions (e.g. TV, refrigerator)?
5. Vehicles?
6. Personal accessories that show wealth (e.g. jewelry)?
7. Income of other family members (e.g. husband, children, parents)?
8. Summary of income level:
   (a. low -- low, middle, high; b. middle -- low, middle, high; c. high -- low, middle, high)

J. Miracles performed
K. Summary of medium’s messages to women
L. Tension felt
M. Miscellaneous observations
APPENDIX C

NORA MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND COSTUMES

Traditional Instruments

1) two long tapered drums that fit together in opposite directions (*thap*) (hit with hands).

2) a double-headed barrel drum (*glawng*) (hit with short sticks).

3) a flute (*pii*) that is similar to an oboe and is the only reed instrument.

4) a pair of gongs in a wooden box (*moong*).

5) a pair of small cymbals (*ching*), often attached to the gong box.

6) a set of wooden bamboo clappers (*trae*) used like castanets.

Costume

1) layered gold crown that comes to a point (*seut*).

2) beaded ornaments divided into separate pieces (*khruang luugpat*).

3) hanging chest ornament (*sap suang* or *thap suang*).

4) shoulder sash with metal decoration called swallow’s wings (*sang waan*).

5) metal belt (*panneng*).

6) front cloths that hang from the waist and represent wings (*naa phaa* or *phaa hoi naa*).

7) swan’s tail made of buffalo horn (*haang hong* or *piig*).

8) tight fitting white trunks (*naa phlao* or *sanap phao*).

9) sarong made of small patterned cloth wrapped tightly around lower body (*phaa nung*).
10) undergarment of colored cloth in the shape of an elephant trunk (*phaa nguang chaang*).

11). undergarment of white cloth with small pockets for ritual objects (*phawg*).

12) long curved backward nails of silver, tin or brass for four fingers (*lep*).

13) brass or silver arm bracelets (*gamlai*).
APPENDIX D
THAI CLASSIC FOLK TALES

The following stories are commonly performed during the ceremony for nora roong khruu. Other stories performed include Chaiyaachet, Darawong, Janthakhorop, Khawi, Khobut, Laksanawong, Maniphichai, Phra Aphaimani, Phra Suthon - Nang Manora, Sangsinchai, and Sinuraat (Committee for Compiling the Document 1999, Ginsburg 1972: 170 fn, Pittaya 2003). [For these titles, I am using transliteration spellings from Mattani (1996).]

Khun Chang - Khun Phaen

Two men, Khun Chang and Khun Phaen, were rivals for one woman, Wan Tong (or Pim). She marries Khun Phaen, who is handsome but a womanizer. While Khun Phaen is away at war, Khun Chang spreads a false story that his rival has been killed in battle, and he quickly marries Wan Tong. When Khun Phaen returns, the truth comes out. But complicating matters, he has been given the daughter of his military foe as a minor wife. In a significant episode, Khun Phaen acquires a magic sword and makes a golden boy spirit child (gumaanthawng). To obtain the baby, he kills another mistress, who is pregnant, and takes her unborn child. After more romantic and royal intrigue, the Ayutthaya king gets involved in the triangle and orders Wan Tong to choose one man, since women cannot have two husbands. When she cannot decide, she is executed, despite a last minute royal reprieve. Dated at the time of the Ayutthaya Kingdom, the story in poetic verse had several later authors and contributors, including King Rama II, King Rama III, and poet Suthorn Phu. It was translated by Prince Prem Purachatra (Prem 1955).
The bawdy story of Khun Chang - Khun Phaen and another popular tale, Phra Aphaimani, were published by a Western Christian missionary, Dr. Smith, during the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851-1868). Because the stories were considered very secular, the English Consular Court stopped the Christian publisher from producing them. These stories continued to be widely read during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868-1910) as classical drama (Mattani 1996: 73). Khun Chang - Khun Phaen has been the subject of several university theses because of its insight into life during the Ayutthaya period. Also some feminists have questioned the authors’ view of women regarding the unfair fate of Wan Tong, forced to choose one man while men were allowed many mistresses.

Kraithong

A crocodile king named Chalawan kidnaps the daughter of a wealthy man, and many men are killed trying to rescue her. Using magic spells and a spear, a man named Kraithong kills the crocodile king. He is given the wealthy man’s two daughters as a reward. But not satisfied, Kraithong returns to the crocodile king’s underwater cave to capture the reptile’s lovely widow, who can take human form. Back on earth, conflicts between the three wives erupt culminating in the crocodile wife changing back into a reptile and hunting the other two women. Considered a great poet, King Rama II wrote a version of this story as well as contributing to Khun Chang - Khun Phaen. He probably also wrote the story Sangthong (Prem 1981: 3-5). The well-known Kraithong story has blended with the Phatthalung Legend, which similarly involves killing a crocodile. In the roong khruu ceremony, nora performers ritually stab a model of a crocodile.
Phra Rothasen - Nang Merii

The mother of Prince Phra Rothasen has her eyes stolen by a female giant. The prince tricks the giant's daughter, Nang Merii, into revealing the location of 23 stolen eyes taken from several women. He recovers the eyes and is able to re-insert them into the eye sockets of the blind women using traditional medicine. This imaginary story is still popular among today's young adults who, as children, watched it on television (story told by my assistant Phatharatharawan Singkheeprapha).

Sangthong or Hawysang

The major wife of a king has a son who is born inside a conch shell. Mother and son, named Prince Sangthong, are exiled due to the influence of a minor wife. Prince Sangthong disguises himself to look ugly and meets the youngest daughter of another king. She is able to see his true handsome appearance and marries him. The king banishes the couple, but in the end, the prince saves the empire and discloses his royal heritage (Segaller 1989: 243, Siraporn 2000: 9).
APPENDIX E

FOUR PERIODS OF NORA DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

By the end of the 19th century, most of Southeast Asia except Thailand was colonized by the West, and royal sponsorship of the arts declined. “The impact of the West was felt on the theatre of every country of Southeast Asia, including Thailand. One of the most disastrous consequences was that court theatre declined everywhere” (Brandon 1967: 35). Plagued by economic problems before his abdication, King Rama VII (r. 1925 to 1935) made major cuts in government spending including temporarily eliminating the department for performing arts. Despite that, in 1930 he invited a nora group of 12 actors to perform in Bangkok. When the King abdicated and a constitutional monarchy was established, the classical arts lost their royal support (Pittaya 2003). However, the new government established a Fine Arts Department, and later Colleges of Dance and a National Theatre Company were set up with emphasis on the masked dance (Brandon 1993: 239).

In the far south, the nora performance underwent a number of changes influenced by Bangkok and the times. The following summarized history of nora and the shadow play was largely taken from a paper in Thai by scholar Pittaya Butsararat (2003) presented at a conference in Songkhla Province. Covering the era of national expansion under King Chulalongkorn to the present, Pittaya identified four historical developments: (1) the period from the buffalo oil lamp to the pressure lamp, late 1800s to

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215 His paper was titled, “The Change and Relations between Society and Culture at the Low Lying Areas of Songkhla Lake. The Case Study of Nang Talung and Nooraa after the Government Reformation in the Period of King Rama the Fifth to the Present Day.” Although both genres are covered by Pittaya, I will only mention the shadow play where it relates to the evolution of nora.
World War II, (2) the period of the electrical generator from the mid-1940s to mid-1960s, (3) the period of electricity and the introduction of Western music from mid-1960s to early 1980s, and (4) the period of competing modern entertainment from the early 1980s to the present. At that time, most traditional theater lost popularity and was reorganized, he wrote.

The following description emphasizes the public world of nora entertainment, which became stronger, more visible, and more profitable over time. Eventually a clearer division appeared between so-called traditional and modern nora. But parallel to the public shows were more private village ceremonies to communicate with ancestors. Without the ancestors’ backing, the public nora troupes could not dance beautifully, sing poetically, or enjoy success, according to performers.

The First Period: Buffalo Oil Lamp to Pressure Lamp

This early period is from the end of the 19th century to WWII. The sweeping administrative reforms of King Chulalongkorn affected the south particularly in the 1890s and early 1900s. Provincial governors were sent into the south to tighten the central government’s rule, administrative units were set up such as districts and precincts, and law courts were established. Commercial businesses were introduced. Buddhist reforms were passed and decisions made to organize education in the provinces. According to Pittaya, these changes meant an external force was introducing a modern way of life, which affected community artists. At the time, the few nora and shadow puppet groups that existed traveled from town-to-town by foot, which was called walking the stage (Pittaya 2003). Later when transportation improved, groups traveled by car, bus, boat, or train.
Over time nora groups grew from three performers to about 14 to 20. Buffalo oil was used to light performances until the pressure lamp was developed. The musical instruments and literature performed also changed for both nora and the shadow play. The first recordings of both genres were made in 1908. As an indication of government recognition of the arts, the shadow puppet groups had to pay a nightly entertainment tax. The government wanted artists to be an example of high morals in the community and therefore gave titles to the most accomplished ones and exempted them from government labor. The presence of nora families can be traced back through memory to 1831 around Songkhla Lake. By the 1920s, the nora community had divided into smaller families, located in Songkhla, Phatthalung, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Trang provinces (Pittaya 2003: 23, citing research by Udom 1993).216

Nora dance was also influenced by King Rama VI (r. 1910-1925) early in the new century. He wrote a book titled Phra Pharot Begins the Dancing featuring a hero and other characters who danced in a certain nora style, a blending of central and southern dances. These steps were later performed by master Nora Phum Thewaa, born 1891. This style became the standard in the south, particularly after Nora Phum Thewaa taught many students through local colleges (Suthiwong 1999: 3875). In this way, the arts of the central region and royal court influenced nora. In southern rural communities, nora actors had important roles performing rituals and entertaining, while also providing education and local news. They were respected as leaders with knowledge and ability, while sharing the same lifestyle as other villagers. Reflecting the community culture,

216 These included the families of Nora Phum Thewaa (Uppatham Narakorn), Nora Rung Phanurat, Nora Khlaiduugnuan and Nora On (Thuakhiaw), and Nora Mianaaling, all from Phatthalung Province, and Nora Wat Janruang from Songkhla Province.
nora leaders were strict in following rituals, believed in magic, and were serious about winning competitions. In the 1920s and later, competitions were held to attract larger audiences, which increased profits and made some groups famous. Groups would perform all day, and the winner was decided by the size of the audience that gathered for each show. At a later time, the group that collected the most money from viewers in the last ten minutes of the performance was declared the champion. This led some groups to impress the audience with spectacle and magic at the end of the show, such as putting lighted candles or incense in their mouths, stabbing their cheeks, or climbing a ladder of swords (Prayat 1995). (It is interesting to note that today these feats are performed by Chinese mediums at the Vegetarian Festivals in Phuket, Trang, and Hat Yai.)

Nora groups had their own ritual specialists who would construct a protective fence around the stage with a holy white string (saai sin) to keep out black magic from other troupes. These specialists would chant day and night and sprinkle holy water in front of the dancing performers. At monasteries, the public would carry the nora leader around the temple building three times and around the stage one time to ward off evil magic. This parade also attracted area residents to the show.

In a ritual called “whipping the spirit” (khian phraai), the nora leader would write the name of the competing group on a piece of paper with sacred letters. The leader would hit the paper with a stick while doing a specific dance and then step on three limes (yiap luug manaao). For this ritual, the leader would wear a white cloth with magical lettering on his head, rather than the normal crown. The purpose of the ritual was to destroy the arrogance of the competing troupe. This ritual almost disappeared sometime in the 1970s (Prayat 1995).
Second Period: The Electric Generator

This era covers from WWII to the mid-1960s, when electrical generators were used in nora and shadow puppet shows to power microphones and some Western musical instruments. Thai country music and movies began to have an impact. Puppet plays went one step further and started using tape recorded dialogue and singing of famous groups, instead of real people, to save costs and for convenience in the 1960s to 1970s. The nora repertoire changed to perform novels with roles, scenes, and stage backdrops based on the styles of central performances, such as the masked dance and popular likay drama. Improvised poetry was emphasized rather than the earlier nora dance positions and poetic songs.

The famous Nora Teum from Trang was a pivotal figure who adapted his show to fit the new demands in the 1960s. He made the following alterations: (1) using impromptu poetry and down playing traditional dancing, (2) adapting novels to fit into short skits for the stage, and (3) wearing Western or so-called universal clothes (chut saagon) rather than the royal clothes (khruang ton), which had been the hallmark of nora. While Nora Teum dressed in fashionable Western clothes, his group dressed in costumes influenced by the likay dance. When his group performed modern literature, the men dressed in suit coats and women in full skirts (Prayat 1995, Pittaya 2003). Other groups followed his lead. Local business people arranged programs for entertainment and profit rather than competitions. The central drama of likay and the country singing of luang thung were added to the performance bill and strongly influenced nora.²¹⁷ According to

²¹⁷ Luang thung and “music for life” (dontrii phua chiiwit) are indigenous country genres, which reflect relatively new rural concerns about industrialization. Employing a distinctive style, luang thung was brought to Bangkok by poor workers who migrated to work in low paying jobs in factories. It expressed nostalgia
Pittaya (2003), the admired and powerful culture of Bangkok enveloped and assimilated *nora* through these changes. On the political front, government policies reached into the south when in the 1940s to 1950s, the right wing regime of Prime Minister Pibulsongkhram promoted nationalism. He passed a number of controversial cultural edicts to make the country more progressive, including the wearing of Western clothes (Wyatt 1984: 255). *Nora* was included in this patriotic project with a change of costume.

According to Mattani:

> New, modern costumes with embroidered shirts and socks were added to the original shirtless costumes to make the indigenous dramatic dance form more civilized. These new additions have been left on until today. They made the southern ‘nora’ look closer to American and South American Indians wearing beaded shirts (2002: 1).

The art of shadow puppets was also changed during this regime. Some performers discarded the Indian epic *Ramayana* and made puppets that looked like Westerners in dress, hair styles, and shoes (Dowsey-Magog 2002: 8).

**Third Period: Electricity and Western Music**

From the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, *nora* and shadow puppetry had regular use of electricity, performed Western music, and increased competitions. In some ways, this was a golden era as both genres were admired and popular. Older actors in their 60s for rural life in the face of the commercial draw of the large “primate city” (Rigg 1991: 139). The style became so popular that large recording companies and television stations joined the business with cassette sales and concert tours bringing in huge profits. Some celebrity singers, like Ekachai Srivichai who is also a *nora* performer in the south, have their own entourages of up to 100 musicians, dancers, and other performers. But the image of the poor farmer has changed drastically. Today more songs are about city life while male lead singers wear Western suits and are backed by female dancers wearing headdresses and skimpy glittery outfits. The genre experienced a boom in the 1960s to 1970s especially with the invention of cassette tapes. Today it is having another “golden era” as a business venture. A large part of its continuing draw is the subject matter, which talks of the traditional community lifestyle versus the modern city culture (*Bangkok Post*, 21 Feb 2001). When the renowned queen of *luang thung* died at a young age in 1992, she became a religious cult figure at a Buddhist temple in central Suphanburi Province (Pattana 1999: 273).
and 70s, such as Nora Yok Chuubua, were still in demand and performed many vow fulfillment ceremonies. Middle aged actors were also busy. In addition, an up-and-coming group of teenage performers, like Nora Somphong, appeared on the scene. In the 1970s, incomes were high enough to allow the owners of well-known troupes to purchase cars for transportation. Nora Chaleumthawng, Nora Chaluay, Nora Teum, Nora Priichaa, and Nora Siiwiang were famous *nora* leaders with automobiles and year-round bookings (Prayat 1995).

For competitions, large celebrating fairs (*ngaan mahagam*) were held. Businesses hired entertainment promoters to arrange programs, which might include *luug thung* country music, *likay* drama, an impromptu exchange of poetry called *lam tat*, and outdoor Thai movies on a big screen. Also these fairs featured discothèques, motorcycle circus performers, and merry-go-rounds along with dozens of traveling merchandisers. Educational institutions, temples, and government bodies sponsored fairs to make money for worthwhile causes, called making public merit.

More sophisticated vaudeville type shows were produced with light-and-sound (*saeng siang*), electrical instruments, and country music for better quality entertainment. Both traditional and modern instruments were used in the same show but not at the same time. Performers danced to old instruments at the beginning of the show and later switched to modern singing with electrical instruments, such as the keyboard organ and Western style drums. The addition of loudspeakers made it possible for leaders to do more improvisational poetry and singing rather than trying to shout the words (Prayat 1995). *Nora* continued to use modern novels for stories. For better viewing, stages were
built off the ground with painted scenery. Both nora and the shadow puppet shows made tape recordings and videos and appeared on radio and television.

Having been born in a village in Sathingphra District of Songkhla Province, drama teacher Thianchai said that he considered the arrival of electricity and microphones to be the downfall of ritual nora. The audience no longer had to gather around closely to hear the ceremony but could wander around the grounds. Now 39, Thianchai said his village did not have electricity until he was about five-years-old (communication Thianchai 2003). As an experiment in 2004, he organized a roong khruu in Sathingphra District with an evening session involving possession without electricity. The audience liked the change and paid more attention at least for the first hour. Electricity was not needed for microphones because the spirits wanted to have personal conversations with descendants and did not want others to hear. But one possessing spirit requested the lights be turned on again because her dancing could not be seen by the audience. This was a show and she wanted it viewed properly. There were also problems when someone stepped on a neon light in the dark and broke it. Thianchai said, “We were performing to the villagers. Chaos and excitement surely were expected” (communication Thianchai 2004). In response to my asking how the experiment went, he said it illustrated the difference between the outside and inside, meaning as an outsider now living in Bangkok, he had not anticipated the local viewpoint. He concluded that electricity made the performance stronger for the spirits.

\[218\] Many villages in Thailand were not connected to a power grid until the 1980s and 1990s, although some more wealthy farmers purchased home-operated generators to use a few hours a day (communication Breazeale 2003).
Although this may have been a golden era, the 1960s to 1980s was also politically turbulent. *Nora* and shadow puppetry became politicized and served as public forums for current events. The revolution of October 1973 and the crackdown in October 1976 occurred (Pittaya 2003: 25, Wyatt 1984: 298, 302), tearing the country apart over issues of democracy and military dictatorship. The Communist Party of Southern Thailand actively looked for recruits and developed the guerilla dramatic arts (*ngaan naattasin jawrayut*). Some puppetry masters, such as Nang Mun Awnawn of Trang, satirized the government and criticized corruption. Puppetry gained the nickname of “political *nang talung*” or “*nang talung* for life.” Muslim activists tried to create a separate state through violent resistance.

The south, along with the rest of the nation, seemed to be changing dramatically as capitalism and consumerism were felt in family village systems, according to Pittaya. He wrote, “The communities which used to live by themselves, lacked their confidence and lost their balance. The system of relatives and relationships (*khwaam samphan baep khua yaat*) began to disappear. The resources were used by external people, and the community lost being owners and managers” (Pittaya 2003: 28). He added, “The new way of life happened because of development, spread of Western culture, and new value judgments that made people depend on urban society more.” *Nora* and puppetry were products of their local cultures. To preserve a space for themselves alongside other performing arts, they had to change. “It is impossible to stand firm against that tendency to change” (Pittaya 2003: 28). Dramatic schools and teachers colleges started to graduate professional *nora* dancers who were more successful at combining traditional dance with modern elements, called hybrid drama (*lakhon phanthang*).
Fourth Period: Competing with Modern Entertainment

In the late 1980s, Gesick said she believed there were people of nora lineage (trakun nora) in almost every village in the south, especially older villages inhabited before 1850 (Gesick 1995: 67). But from the early-1980s to the turning of the century, interest in nora and shadow puppetry declined, and many groups stopped performing. Nora fared a bit better than puppetry because nora families continued to perform to satisfy the ancestors. Also nora has a more varied repertoire including both music and performing stories on stage. Both genres turned more to a “talk show” format with a comedy style presenter. Some groups took on sponsors to advertise products like tape cassettes and soft drinks. But few troupes could survive faced with the onslaught of competing pleasures. Movies, TV, radio, pubs, bars, and karaoke entered local communities. Many of the young students, who were needed to sustain the arts, moved to cities for work (Pittaya 2003). Village competitions continue today although less frequently and with less fervor. In May 2003, two nora groups competed at Wat Chatingphra in the Sathingphra District, according to Thianchai. However, he observed that the competition seemed more for show and lacked the energy of earlier events.

To combat this decline, nora and shadow puppetry groups organized into confederations to promote the arts. This type of cooperation is the hope for the future, according to Nora Somphong of Phatthalung Province (interview Somphong 2003). Headquartered in Nakhon Si Thammarat, one confederation has more than one million baht to assist folk artists. Each southern province has an organization lead by someone well-known in the field. The network includes other types of performances, such as likay.

“It makes nora bigger, to be part of a group in southern Thailand...All provinces in
southern Thailand will cooperate together," he said. Some nora masters, who have a keen sense of marketing like Nora Somphong, are using technology to their advantage. He arranged to have video companies tape the annual ritual at Wat Thakhae in 2003 and 2004 to put on the market.

Although for decades there have been warnings about nora dying out, it seems be surviving and is possibly on the upswing. Grassroots ritual performances continue, private and public dance classes abound, schools promote the art, and fairs regularly employ troupes. A retired southern Thai woman, who spent many years in the United States, told me she was impressed by the many young people taking nora dancing which was not popular in her youth. Also a national movement to return to cultural roots and resist Western influences has added to recent interest in nora. At a roong khruu in 2003, I met several middle class Thais in their 20s and 30s who were returning to their hometowns to see nora. Some were accompanied by their southern parents. One member of the Thai diaspora, a middle aged professional man from Los Angeles, watched the performance with keen interest and said he wanted to learn more about his southern heritage and brush up on the dialect of his youth.
APPENDIX F

SUTHON-MANORA AS BALLET

The Suthon-Manora Story has had an impact on Thai culture. This in turn created a higher profile for the nora performance and tied the genre more closely to the national arts. The bird-princess story has long been popular in Thailand and abroad. In the past, the dance was exported to Russia for ballet, and today it is marketed as the logo for products from magazines to hotels. The Thai Airways magazine is titled Kinnaree. Golden statues of these half female or male creatures greet tourists to the Emerald Buddha Temple at the Grand Palace Complex. A Koh Samui hotel is named the Nora Beach Resort and Spa, where southern Thai dancing is shown to guests.

The story figures in royal activities of the early Bangkok court. Nora’s costumes and movements influenced the court ballet, which in turn inspired Russian choreographers and designers, according to Mattani (2002). King Rama V sent a royal ballet troupe, which performed this dance, to St. Petersburg, Russia in 1900. The new performance led renowned ballet dancer and choreographer Vaslav Najinsky (1889 to 1950) to create his own movements imitating birds. A Russian designer later applied some of these styles to the costumes for Stravinsky’s The Firebird Ballet in 1910. Mattani wrote, “Our Southern Thai dancers and scholars should be proud of this cross-cultural phenomena and the influence of southern ‘Nora’ (Manohra)…” (2002: 3).

Sometimes the Suthon-Manora Story is related to the nora performance, but more often it has a life of its own. The Thai government has combined Eastern and Western styles in many revisions of the story over the decades. For instance in the 1950s, the Thai Fine Arts Department sponsored a Suthon-Manora performance which highlighted
sensuality and the dance of the Fire Ordeal when Manora is faced with being sacrificed by burning. This performance was influenced by the Western ballet Swan Lake with its scene of the dying swan and was more popular than the original southern version, according to Mattani. But not everyone appreciated the new version, which was seen by some as ahistorically constructed. According to Ginsburg, the Fine Arts Department had attempted to preserve nora and a number of other genres but by using “…artificially reconstituted versions of the supposed dance of 13th century Sukhothai and 10th century Srivijaya. These revival attempts have naturally involved a great amount of reworking and invention in the style of the restorers” (1971:28).

King Bhumiphol in 1962 had the play’s episode of hooking the swan turned into a Western ballet under the direction of a French choreographer. The King composed the music and designed the sets for the popular performance. As a nostalgic gift, Queen Sirikit hired the same choreographer 30 years later in 1992 to reproduce the ballet for the King’s birthday (Mattani 2002). The popularity of the story continues today, although in some cases tradition is shunned for a contemporary look. Dubbed the “Thai Swan Lake” and Thailand’s “first original ballet,” the Suthon-Manora ballet was performed again in 2001. The Company of Performing Artists in Bangkok produced it to raise money for UNICEF and a nursing college (Pichayanund Bangkok Post, 22 August 2001). The sets were designed by the same group that produced the elaborate River of the Kings show, a recent light-and-sound display on the Jao Phrya River, according to a Bangkok Post review. Southern nora melodies, Thai bells, and Khmer drums were combined with a number of modern elements including Western ballet, electric guitars, and synthesizer sounds. The effect was to “…dazzle and surprise a new generation of ballet audiences.”

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According to set designer Akarapan Pansamrit, the goal was to “...shun away from overtly ‘Thai’ motifs or unnecessary gaudy decorations – the final product should be contemporary with only an air of tradition” (Pichayanund *Bangkok Post*, 22 August 2001).

The ballet was also featured in the Thai Airways magazine, coincidentally named *Kinnaree*. Again the performance was considered a successful combination of East and West, “…without having to sacrifice its traditional flavour…” (Chanettee 2001: 73-74). The music and dance steps were identified as uniquely southern Thai, but the demon was definitely Western. “Meanwhile, the demon movements were inspired by modern dance, being aggressive and abrasive in the style of western hard rock” (Chanettee, 2001: 74). The writer heralded the performing school, formed in 1985, for adapting many classical Thai tales to modern dance and creating attractive versions of traditional culture (see Kittisak 2002). “The audiences’ responses concur that such creativity offers an easy approach to root Thai culture in the hearts of Thai youths” (Chanettee 2001: 76).

Photographs of the ballet heroine showed her in tight fitting white spangled leotards with feathers on her ears and body. The sleek gold headgear was reminiscent of a Star Wars movie.

Long ago the *nora* genre was influenced by this bird-princess tale and adapted its dress and name. But today the Bangkok modernized versions of the Indic tale have little in common with the performance in the deep south. However, the regular re-invention of Suthon-Manora in central culture through plays, ballet, and television contributes to the national awareness of a small ancestral ritual in the distant south.
APPENDIX G

TEACHER SPIRITS IN THE CLASSICAL ARTS

The following is a discussion of the history and meaning of teacher spirits in the central performing arts to provide a comparison with nora teachers (see Chapter 6).

During the “Golden Era” of dance-drama performances in the reign of Rama II (r. 1809-1824), a number of artistic masters became well known and their names have been repeated down through the ages at wai khruu ceremonies (Mattani 1996: 56). Today persons who train in the masked dance (khon) or as traditional musicians (piphat) undergo an elaborate initiation in which they pay homage to these teachers. 219 A major government ceremony is sponsored by the School of Dramatic Art of the Fine Arts Department. It begins with blessings by Buddhist monks. Masks, called teachers’ heads, are arranged on an altar. They include headdresses from the masked dance, masks of Hindu gods associated with the arts such as Shiva and Ganesh, and a mask of the Indian yogi teacher of the dramatic arts named Ruusii Bharotmuni. The ceremony has heavy Brahmanistic elements with only men allowed to perform the sacred roles, although girls and women are also initiated. “According to tradition the presiding teacher who leads in the homage and performs the actual initiation must be a man. It is believed that the female touch will not bring success to an initiation: only misfortune will befall either the initiated or the initiator or even both” (Dhanit 1990: 6). 220

As established by King Rama IV in the 19th century, specific musical tunes are played to give respect to the Buddhist Triple Gems, to invite Shiva, Vishnu, and deceased

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219 For more information on the masked dance and the piphat orchestra, see Mattani (1996: 6-10).
220 This lineage of teacher spirits is similar to elder respected monks who pass on power through ordinations, according to Dhanit (1990).
teachers, to mark the consuming of the offerings, and to send the spirits off. The leader of
the initiation dresses in white wearing traditional *joonggraben* pants much like a Brahmin
priest. This man is inspired or possessed by the *ruusii* of the performance. The late Kukrit
Pramoj, who was both a prime minister and a dancer, was believed to be temporarily
possessed by a *ruusii* when he led this homage ritual. The importance of the initiation
ceremony was underscored in 1984, when the King participated in the ritual in the
Chitlada Palace in Bangkok.

Providing a theoretical perspective on the teacher respecting ritual,
ethnomusicology professor Deborah Wong (1991) argued that the ritual actually makes it
possible for the power of the original teachers to be passed to modern performers. The
dance and music enable the deities to enter the human world. Certainly the same could be
said about the music and dancing in *nora*, which bring the spirits to the stage.

Musical works and dances do not simply reflect or act out these realities, but
actually make them happen. Playing certain pieces or dancing certain dances
manifests divine beings and powers in the human world. When performers enact
these special combinations of bodily movement and instrumental sound, the
boundaries of the human and sacred realms blur (Wong 1991: 7).

Many similarities can be found between *nora* and the central classical arts
because *nora* is believed to be the oldest dance form that influenced much of Thai dance.
Both *nora* and the classical performing arts are based on the belief that power is passed
down from early teachers to new students. Both employ blessings by monks, putting on
of crowns (the classical crown: *chada*; the *nora* crown: *seut*) in the initiation, presenting a
banana leaf offering (*bai sii*), giving offerings of fruit and meat including pigs’ heads,
sprinkling holy water, showing respect to musical instruments, and sending the spirits
back at the conclusion. Both respect the dangerous powers of spirits, as can be seen by this warning for those who dare to be absent from the Fine Arts' *wai khruu* ceremony, “Those who consciously stay away from this rite are sinning and drawing upon their heads the curses of their teachers. They also go to hell after death” (Dhanit 1990: 9).

*Nora* leaders also show respect to their teachers every time they perform, even if it is for entertainment. Classical artists pay homage to teachers on Thursday, considered the Teachers’ Day, while in *nora* ceremonies, Thursday is also the main day for ancestors to possess and to hold essential rituals. Both art forms place limitations on women in leadership roles, although these rules have been relaxed in *nora* in recent decades. The initiation for the classical arts is often called the *phithii khrawp* meaning the ceremony to put on the headdress while the *nora* initiation is called *phithii khrawp seut*, to put on the *nora* crown. In the *nora* initiation, both present and past teachers are especially honored. For instance, young students bring notebooks to the *nora* leaders and monks, who sign them as living teachers. Nora A wuth said, “All the monks and *nora* leaders have to sign this book. The new *nora* members have to keep this book because that way they can know who their teachers are. They have to pay respect to their teachers.”

There are also differences between the classical arts and *nora*. The arts depend on written texts, whereas *nora* is an oral genre. Also the costumes in the two genres differ greatly, except for the similar crowns, thought to be influenced by *nora*. However, some *nora* spirit mediums dress in the style of Brahmin priests, much like classical dance.
leaders. Therefore, the mutual beliefs and practices regarding teacher spirits unite nora performance with the central Thai royal arts.

221 Other forms of spirit mediumship also respect teachers. The aforementioned rituals, offerings, and dress are also employed by urban professional spirit mediums. In the northeast, Korat spirit mediums hold annual ceremonies to pay homage to teacher spirits in establish networks. “It symbolically enhances personal charisma of the host medium and registers hierarchical bonds between senior mediums and novices....the wai khruu ritual appears to show collective efforts to organize professional spirit mediums in urban Thailand” (Pattana 1999: 166).
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