Reproduced from *Capitalism Magic Thailand: Modernity with Enchantment*, by Peter A. Jackson (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022). This version was obtained electronically direct from the publisher on condition that copyright is not infringed. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the prior permission of ISEAS Publishing. Individual chapters are available at <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>.

CAPITALISM MAGIC THAILAND

The ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) is an autonomous organization established in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are grouped under Regional Economic Studies (RES), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS). The Institute is also home to the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), the Singapore APEC Study Centre, and the Temasek History Research Centre (THRC).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued more than 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

CAPITALISM MAGIC THAILAND

MODERNITY WITH ENCHANTMENT

PETER A. JACKSON

First published in Singapore in 2022 by
ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614

Email: publish@iseas.edu.sg
Website: bookshop.iseas.edu.sg

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

© 2022 ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the author and his interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publisher or its supporters.

ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Jackson, Peter A., author.
Title: Capitalism magic Thailand : modernity with enchantment / by Peter A. Jackson.
Description: Singapore : ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: ISBN 9789814951098 (soft cover) | ISBN 9789814951975 (pdf) | ISBN 9789814951982 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Magic—Economic aspects—Thailand. | Wealth—Thailand—Religious aspects. | Cults—Thailand.
Classification: LCC BF1623 F55J12

Typeset by ISEAS Publishing
Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

Contents

List of Images	vii
Note on Transliteration, Referencing and Honorific Titles	xi
Introduction: Modern Magic and Prosperity in Thailand	1
Key Terms: Debates, Theories and Contexts	37
Part One • Why Religious Modernity Trends in Two Opposing Directions	
1. Fundamentalism against Magic: The Contradictions of Religious Modernity	57
2. Buddhist in Public, Animist in Private: Semicolonial Modernity and Transformations of the Thai Religious Field	87
Part Two • Thailand's Cults of Wealth	
3. Context, Hierarchy and Ritual: Theorizing the Total Thai Religious Field	131
4. Thailand's Cults of Wealth: Royal Spirits, Magic Monks, Chinese and Indian Deities	174
5. Empowered Amulets and Spirit Possession: Material and Ritual Dimensions of the Thai Cults of Wealth	211
6. The Symbolic Complex of Thai Cults of Wealth	239

Part Three • How Modernity Makes Magic

7. Capitalism, Media and Ritual in the Enchantment of Thai Modernity 279

Conclusion

Conclusion: The Thai Cults of Wealth into the Twenty-first Century 315

Glossary of Thai and Buddhist Terms 327

Bibliography 331

Index 357

About the Author 381

Images

1. Ritual Products Advertised in 7-Eleven Mail Order Catalogue 12
2. "I Like Cash": The Magic Monks Chorp, Ngoen and Sot 19
3. *Phra* Siam Thewathirat 117
4. *Thao* Hiranyaphanasun 119
5. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha's Amulets 123
6. Hindu and Buddhist Incantations for the Erawan Brahma 143
7. Spirit Medium Shrine 1 146
8. Spirit Medium Shrine 2 147
9. Nang Kwak *Pha Yan* 177
10. King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol New Year Card 184
11. Kuan Im *Pha Yan* 185
12. *Luang Phor* Khoon Souvenir Fan 190

13. "Eat, Pray, Shop" – Ratchaprasong Skywalk, Bangkok. 195
14. The Erawan Brahma in Bangkok 196
15. Streetside Shrine to Ganesh 199
16. Advertisement for an Amulet of Rahu 201
17. *Somdet* To and King Chulalongkorn Greeting Card 203
18. Devotional Poster of Ten Auspiciously Named Magic Monks 205
19. *Luang Phor* Khoon DVD 208
20. Chinese Dragon Dance at the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok 213
21. BTS Skytrain Tenth Anniversary Amulet 217
22. Jatukham-Ramathep Stamps 228
23. Magical Numerology of Kings Rama 5 and Rama 9 249
24. Thailand Post Stamp of Kuan Im 251
25. Signs for Computer Equipment and Amulets at Pantip Plaza, Bangkok. 261
26. *Luang Phor* Khoon Lucky Banknote 266
27. Stamp Set of the Benjaphakhi Amulets 270
28. CD of *Khatha* Magical Incantations 297
29. *Thep* Than-jai 318
30. Thailand's Erawan Brahma in Singapore 319

Note on Transliteration, Referencing and Honorific Titles

There is no generally agreed system of representing Thai in roman script, and all systems have some limitations because the twenty-six letters of the roman alphabet are not sufficient to represent all the consonants, vowels, diphthongs and tones of Thai. In this book I adopt a modified version of the Thai Royal Institute system of romanizing Thai. This system makes no distinction between long and short vowel forms, and tones are not represented. I differ from the Royal Institute system in using "j" for the Thai "jor jan", not "ch", except in accepted spellings of royal titles and personal names. Hyphens are used to separate units of compound expressions that are translated as a single term in English, such as *latthi-phithi*—"cult". Where a cited author uses a different system of transcribing Thai, that spelling is retained in quotations.

I follow the Thai norm of referring to authors by given names, not surnames, and all citations by Thai authors are alphabetized in the bibliography and elsewhere by given names. I follow authors' preferred spellings of their names in English when this is known rather than following the transliteration system used elsewhere in this book.

Thai has a large number of honorific titles that are used before the names of respected persons and revered deities, spirits and religious figures. In this book honorific titles are italicized, such as *Luang Phor* Ngoen, for "Reverend Father Ngoen". Some of the most commonly used titles in this book and their translations are:

Ajan — A title for a respected Buddhist monk or lay specialist regarded to be a teacher, religious instructor or adept in ritual lore.

Jao — Lord.

Jao Mae — Lord Mother.

Luang Phor — Reverend Father.

Luang Pu — Reverend Grandfather.

Phra — An honorific for a Buddhist monk, Buddha image, deity or royal figure.

Somdet — A royal-conferred title for senior monks in the administration of the Buddhist sangha or monkhood. Also a title for senior members of the royal family.

Thao — Lord.

Introduction

Modern Magic and Prosperity in Thailand

> When Asia's major religious traditions are commodified, they do not lose their symbolic power and efficacy. They intimately embrace the … forces of the market. (Pattana Kitiarsa 2008a, p. 8)

Growing numbers of anthropologists and religious studies scholars have detailed the rise of diverse new forms of both fundamentalist and magical religiosity in Southeast Asia over recent decades.[1] They have also outlined the ways that these phenomena fundamentally challenge the predictions of Weberian sociology—still influential in fields such as history and politics—that modernity is a process of ineluctable rationalization and a condition of unavoidable disenchantment.[2] But these empirically based critical studies have not yet presented integrated accounts of how modernity produces new modalities of enchantment. While we have excellent critiques of Weberian sociology, we have comparatively few positive accounts that theorize the productive relationship of modernity to magic and enchantment. In this study I argue that since the end of the Cold War the performatively productive role of ritual practice operating in the specific conditions of neoliberal capitalism, new visual technologies and digital media have been engines of modern religious enchantment in Thailand and across mainland Southeast Asia. The performative effects of ritual practice (Tambiah 1977, 1981, 1985) provide a frame for bringing separate accounts of the enchantments of neoliberalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) and the auraticizing effects of new media (Morris 2000a), as well as the retreat of rationalizing state power from the religious field

(Hefner 2010), into a fuller account of how modernity makes new forms of magic.

My analysis is built upon a study of cults of wealth centred on a range of Buddhist, Hindu, Chinese and Thai spirits and deities that have become prominent features of the religious landscape in Thailand since the 1980s. While having diverse origins, these cults are not isolated instances of ritual innovation but rather form a richly intersecting symbolic complex that is now central to national religious life, including monastic Buddhism. Emerging from multiple religious and cultural origins, I detail the many similarities among the cults of wealth, their close relationship with cults of amulets and professional spirit mediumship, and I trace how these prosperity cults intersect symbolically in a wide range of settings and ritual products. I explore how movements that began as expressions of popular devotion outside of official Buddhism have moved from the sociological margins to the mainstream of Thai religious life.

An important aim of this book is to bring the significant transformations of ritual magic into the history of modern Thailand. I do not argue for the objective reality of magic. But I do argue for the sociological, economic and political reality of magic as a core dimension of modern Thai society and political economy. I present an alternative history of Thai modernity, arguing that neoliberal capitalism and new media operating across a religious field that is primarily oriented towards ritual practice are together actively producing new forms of enchantment. I focus on prominent instances of modern Thai magic—the symbolic complex of cults of wealth, amulet cults and professional spirit mediumship—as case studies of the processes that have produced new modalities of enchantment at the apexes of the Thai economy and political system over the past four decades.

Understanding the importance of the symbolic complex of cults of wealth requires rethinking the place of Buddhism in the Thai religious field and fashioning an expanded analytical vocabulary that enables us to appreciate the interpenetration, and also the tensions, between these cults and Buddhism. I propose several contributions to the collaborative endeavour of developing a body of concepts that does full justice to the distinctiveness and expanding diversity of Thai religious life.

The Thai cults of wealth, together with their material expression in cults of amulets and associated rituals of spirit possession, are examples of much broader phenomena of efflorescing religious enchantment across mainland Southeast Asia and beyond. While

drawing empirically from Thailand, the arguments presented here speak to religious developments across Asia. In recent times, much academic and media attention has been directed to the growth of fundamentalisms in different religious traditions. A parallel and equally significant expansion of magical cults has also been taking place. Over the past several decades, religious modernity has trended in two apparently opposing directions, with fundamentalisms and magical cults both being equally contemporary phenomena that together reflect inherent divisions and tensions within the modern condition.

The two analyses presented here—the symbolic complex of Thai cults of wealth and the production of magic in global modernity—are intimately interrelated. By studying Thai prosperity cults, I explore the conditions under which capitalist modernity produces novel forms of enchantment, not only in Southeast Asia but more generally across the globe. The symbolic and ritual intersections of the multiple cults of wealth in Thailand provide a basis for understanding how new forms of enchantment have emerged in a wide number of societies. While drawing on an analysis of post–Cold War cults of wealth in Thailand, this study presents broader conclusions that are relevant beyond Southeast Asia and that provide insights into processes of neoliberal mediatized enchantment at the global level. And while methodologically based within anthropology and cultural studies, the results of this study also have significant implications for all fields of the humanities and social sciences.

To appreciate the central importance of the prosperity cults in Thailand's contemporary religious field requires a theoretical frame based on an understanding of the radical modernity of these ritual enchantments of the market and media. The cults of wealth have at times been misunderstood as residues of premodern "superstitions" and they have been critiqued by doctrinal Buddhists as perverse commodifications that debase Thai religion. These views, which position doctrinal Buddhism as an ideal religious form, hinder the development of a balanced appreciation of how the cults of wealth have emerged and the important roles they play in the religious lives of large numbers of Thais from all social strata across all regions of the country. Accounts that dismiss the cults as premodern residues and religious perversions also prevent us from appreciating the importance of these phenomena beyond Thailand in understanding the production of magical enchantments within global modernity.

Many critiques of the cults of wealth are based on implicit if not explicit assumptions that modernity has a direction that is necessarily

rational. These views are so strong in some fields that they have not been overturned even in the face of decades of research demonstrating that they are not valid. By itself, the accumulation of empirical findings of modern magical enchantment—based on several decades of research by dozens of scholars from around the world and published in volumes of monographs and journal articles—has not been sufficient to overturn the teleology of rationalist modernity. It is also necessary to challenge the theoretical foundations of the assumption that modernity has a necessarily rational direction for the results of anthropological research to be taken seriously and to have their full due influence. The critical task is both empirical and theoretical. Theoretical frameworks are needed by which the accumulated empirical evidence of modern enchantment can achieve the force that it warrants.

Furthermore, just as a theoretical frame is needed to give valence to the empirical findings of the international expansion of novel religious forms of enchantment, so too we need a conceptual context to appreciate the full import of the cults of wealth within the Thai religious field. There are two interlocking theoretical projects in this book. One is to present a set of concepts that enable us to appreciate the place of the cults of wealth within the Thai religious field and in relation to Buddhism. I describe the hierarchical dominance of Buddhism in a ritual-centred amalgam composed of multiple, contextually distinct cultic forms that are drawn from diverse cultural sources and which, while cohering into an overarching religious field, do not merge according to current models of hybridity or syncretism. My aim is to provide a set of concepts to better appreciate a religious system that is founded upon irreducible, and expanding, diversity rather than a unitary cosmology or notions of doctrinal orthodoxy. The second theoretical task is then to understand how these diverse cults instantiate processes of modern enchantment at the global level.

Drawing on Bruno Latour (1993), I understand modernity to be a dual condition of ideological rationalization alongside, and in parallel with, practices of ritual-based enchantment. Weber's sociology provides an account of one half of the "world historical process" of modernity; namely, the rationalization of social processes and the disenchantment of world views. What Weber's sociology did not do, and which remains to done, is to fully understand the other half of the world historical process, which has seen the proliferation of multiple alternative modernities based on magical practices and rituals of enchantment. While overlooked, devalued and disparaged in accounts that mistake rationalization for the totality of modernity, processes of

modern enchantment are just as globally significant as the rise of new forms of religious doctrinalism and fundamentalism.

To present my intersecting arguments I bring several fields of research into conversation: anthropology, religious studies, history and political studies. I am keenly aware of the risks involved in writing a book that develops two broad sets of arguments that, although related, draw on different disciplinary fields and emerge from distinctive intellectual histories. The real world, however, rarely stays within the safe bounds of the issues and methods of a single academic discipline. While there are risks involved in multidisciplinary research, cross-fertilization between fields of inquiry also has the potential to open up perspectives that remain beyond sight in single-discipline studies.

To make the steps that I have followed across disciplinary boundaries clear I at times summarize past studies. For some readers this might seem that I am covering familiar ground that has already been reported elsewhere. Scholars in different fields, however, do not always read the work of colleagues in other disciplines or appreciate the significance of findings in other fields for their own work. For example, in Chapter One I revisit critiques of Weberian sociology of religion presented by anthropologists of religion because their world-level importance has not yet been fully appreciated in some other disciplines. Much social research continues to operate on the assumption that disenchantment is the inevitable end point of modern processes, if only we are patient to wait long enough.

The chapters in this book are arranged into three sections, which respectively focus on the broader comparative setting and conclusions and the specific case studies of the Thai cults of wealth, amulets and spirit possession. Part One—"Why Religious Modernity Trends in Two Opposing Directions"—outlines critiques of Weberian sociology of religion and Bruno Latour's account of the "modern constitution" as a condition fractured between rationalizing purification and hybridizing practice. In the second chapter of Part One I detail how this fractured modern constitution underpinned the expansion of Western colonial power in Southeast Asia and created lasting divisions within the Thai religious field. Part Two—"Thailand's Cults of Wealth"—is the empirical core of this study, bringing together detailed studies of the cults of wealth as well as outlining conceptual frames to analyse the character of these ritual forms, their amalgamation into a symbolic complex and their close relationships with the cult of amulets and professional spirit mediumship, two other emergent forms of modern enchantment in Thailand. Part Three—"How Modernity Makes

Magic"—presents my conclusions on the imbricated set of forces that are actively producing and remaking new forms of magical enchantment within global modernity.

In this book I further develop some of my earlier work in relation to insights gained from more recent study and from productive conversations with scholars working on religion in Thailand and across the region. I relate my earlier work on Thai religion and forms of power to other studies of Thai magical ritual and place it within a broader narrative of the multiple transformations of religion wrought by global modernity. In several chapters I refer to the doctoral studies of Erick White and Benjamin Baumann, members of a new generation of scholars of urban and rural religiosity in Thailand whose work, at the time of writing, is in the process of being published and is bound to have transformative influences in the years ahead. The work of Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière on spirit cults in Burma and collaborations with networks of scholars researching the efflorescence of spirit mediumship across mainland Southeast Asia have also led me to see the close association of the cults of wealth with possession rituals. I have collaborated with Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière in comparing the rise of new spirit medium cults across the Buddhist societies of mainland Southeast Asia (see Brac de la Perrière and Jackson 2022). And Benjamin Baumann and I have detailed dramatic changes in the gendering of spirit possession rituals in Thailand and Myanmar, where gay and transgender ritual specialists are increasingly assuming roles traditionally held by women (see Jackson and Baumann 2021). Conversations and collaborations with these and other colleagues have helped me see connections I had previously overlooked and have guided me in addressing omissions in my previous studies.

After first reporting the emergence of new cults of wealth during Thailand's decade-long economic boom from the mid-1980s until the onset of the Asian economic crisis in 1997 (Jackson 1999a, 1999b), I waited some years to see if these cults might decline or disappear in the aftermath of the economic turmoil of the late 1990s. I also waited to see whether, as predicted by modernization theory, they might be overcome by forces of rationalizing disenchantment in the face of the transnational supremacy of neoliberal capitalism and globalizing media in the early twenty-first century. However, over two decades after first writing about the cults of wealth, they remain just as important, if not more so, to Thai religious life. It is clearly time to take the cults of wealth seriously and to acknowledge their significance both within Thailand and internationally.

This book does not present the full story of Thailand's cults of wealth or of modern magic within global modernity. By and large, I have bracketed out the role of politics on the efflorescence of the cults. The place of prosperity cults within Thai politics and their relation to state power are such significant questions that they deserve a full separate study. The political roles of the cults also became more visible in the period after 2000, while this present study focuses predominantly, but not exclusively, on the sociological transformations of the Thai religious field in the final decades of the twentieth century. There is a historical sequencing as well as a methodological focus to this book, which concentrates on the impacts of markets and media on ritual within Thai vernacular religion while leaving the politics of the cults to a separate study to follow. In that related study I aim to detail how the cults of wealth were appropriated to an increasing range of state projects after the turn of the twenty-first century.

The Dualities of Religious Modernity

In terms of theories of religion and modernity dominant through most of the twentieth century, the period since the end of the Cold War has produced a spectrum of counter-intuitive results. The international efflorescence of diverse forms of magical religiosity and the spread of doctrinalist fundamentalism in a number of religious traditions not only challenge the secularization thesis. The simultaneous flourishing of spirit mediumship, faith healing, and magic also challenges the view that a disenchantment of the world is the end point of rational modernity. As Niels Mulder wrote towards the end of Thailand's economic boom decade in the 1990s:

> We find fundamentalism, reform, new sects and new interpretations, religious reflection of all sorts; but also a resurgence of magic, mediumship, faith healing, esotericism. All are flourishing and vying with each other to attract the devotee in Southeast Asia at present. (Mulder 1996, p. 25)

The rise of magical movements is perhaps the most unexpected aspect of the post–Cold War worldwide resurgence of religiosity. According to Weberian sociology, modernity leads to a rationalization of social life and the disenchantment of magical views of the world. As Antônio Flávio Pierucci writes:

> For Weber, the disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberung der Welt*) takes place precisely in more religious societies, and it is an *essentially religious process*, because it is the ethical religions that provide the elimination of magic as a means of salvation.… Which

> is why Weber more than once adds the adjective *religious*: '*religious* disenchantment of the world [*die* religiöse *Entzauberung der Welt*]'. (Pierucci 2000, p. 136; emphases in original)

According to this account, the doctrinalism that we see in many contemporary fundamentalist movements should be leading to an even greater elimination of magic from the modern world. Yet in fact we see the opposite. At least in parts of Mainland Southeast Asia such as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, we are seeing the rise both of doctrinal reformism (see Jackson 2003) as well as new forms of magical ritual. Since the 1970s, anthropologists have pointed out that late modernity has been associated with a higher degree of magical ritual expression in Thailand. Anatole-Roger Peltier (1977), Niels Mulder (1979, pp. 51–52) and Stanley Tambiah (1984, p. 374) were among the first to note the growth of supernatural rituals among a wide range of groups in Thailand. In 1979, Mulder argued that sociological modernization in Thailand was producing more "animism", not less:

> The … Animist concept of power, such as it is comprehended in the Thai world view, can only be strengthened by [the] changes towards modernity…. The world of modernity is a world of increasingly rapid change filled with self-seeking impersonal power and the experience of powerlessness for most. No wonder that the old Animist perceptions of power are strongly revitalised, not only in Thailand but worldwide…. According to the research of Peltier (1977), the number of magically gifted *Luang Phor* monks who are famous for their protective amulets has spectacularly increased over the past fifteen to twenty years…. Certain shrines, such as the Brahma at the Erawan Hotel, enjoy a steadily increasing popularity in this time of modernity that erodes the expectations of stability…. The concept of power has not changed and is strengthened by the experience of disorder and insecurity…. Thai Animistic perceptions are strengthened and validated by the experience of 'modernity' and are very timely indeed. (Mulder 1979, pp. 51–52)

In the early 1980s, Tambiah wrote of the relations between capitalism and the expansion of the cult of amulets, describing how in October 1978 the Bangkok Bank of Commerce sponsored a *kathin* robes offering ceremony at the mountain monastery of the magic monk *Ajan* Chuan in Northeast Thailand. Tambiah argued that a metropolitan Thai bank's sponsorship of a religious ritual in a regional area of the country represented a novel situation in which Buddhism and "high finance come together in a direct partnership in which the banks do well by doing good" (Tambiah 1984, p. 274). Tambiah also reported that in 1978, at the instigation of a businessman who

supervised the Bangkok Bank of Commerce's branches in five north-eastern provinces, the bank sponsored the minting of "a large quantity of amulets with *Ajan* Chuan's head on one side and the bank's insignia on the other" (Tambiah 1984, p. 274). Tambiah went on to argue that "[m]odernization theorists should contemplate this new conjunction between religion and commerce in the context of the spread of capitalism in the Third World" (Tambiah 1984, p. 274).

The triumph of Asian capitalism since the end of the Cold War has not been associated with a rationalizing demythologization or disenchantment of social life. Rather, we have seen an integration of religiosity and economic practice within an expanding field of magical ritual. Why should magical forms of religion have proved so popular in an increasingly marketized world? Why has Thailand's cultural production in recent decades been filled with growing numbers of supernaturalist prosperity movements that glorify consumerism, and not with "Protestant ethic" Buddhist movements that emphasize reason, order and self-control? Thailand has no paucity of ascetic Buddhist reform movements (e.g., Santi Asoke; see McCargo 1993, 1997 and MacKenzie 2007) or of doctrinalist philosopher monks (e.g., Buddhadasa; see Jackson 2003). In recent decades, however, their influence and impact on Thai religious life has considerably declined.

In looking for answers to the questions posed by the rise of the Thai cults of wealth an important starting point is the observation that they are not unique. Irene Stengs argues that "the effervescence of the Thai religious realm should be understood in the wider context of the global proliferation of religious movements that characterized the final decades of the twentieth century" (Stengs 2009, p. 24). Charles Keyes et al. (1994, p. 9) observe that a number of "new religions" have emerged in various parts of Asia in the context of rapid economic growth. Indeed, the Thai prosperity cults bear many similarities to what James H. Foard (n.d.) has called Japanese endemic religion, which emerged in the context of that country's rapid industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s. Summarizing Foard, Keyes et al. describe Japanese endemic religion as

> a kind of minimal religious practice that absolutely every Japanese participates in to some degree and which helps bind the Japanese together.... Japanese endemic religion is nurtured by mass media and an elaborate commercialisation of ritual goods and services.... Endemic religion derives its authority from its practice, which generates 'tradition' as an ongoing process. Because endemic religion is pervasive, representatives of the state may manipulate its rich associations to bolster national identity. At the same time, the

> diffuse authority of endemic religion can be invoked by a variety of different interests and used to generate new meanings, including ones that run counter to those promoted by the state. (Keyes et al. 1994, pp. 10–11)

Like Japanese endemic religion, Thailand's cults of wealth have contributed to social cohesion, involve the commodification of religious products, are based more on ritual practice than doctrine or teachings, are nurtured by the press and mass media, and have also become intimately linked with the state. Comparative research across Asia suggests that prosperity religions are associated with periods of rapid economic growth in capitalist Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist societies that have a relatively unfettered press and electronic media. Robert Weller identifies several factors behind the religious efflorescence in capitalist Asian societies. He regards one of the most important trends related to market-oriented modernity almost everywhere in Asia as being "the decline of state-supported religious monopolies" (Weller 2008, p. 22), arguing that we "see the most pluralisation where institutional control over religion is relatively weak" (Weller 2008, p. 22). He also observes that "religious celebration of market amorality … is most likely in periods that combine rapid economic transformation, opportunity and frustration" (Weller 2008, p. 23). All these factors were present in Thailand in the 1980s and 1990s, with a retreat of the Thai state from its historical role in managing religious culture at the same time that the market economy boomed, rapidly expanding wealth in highly uneven ways across the population. The Thai cults of wealth are religious expressions of the impact of new economic arrangements and communications technologies upon a highly complex Buddhist culture and reflect shifting notions of cultural and national identity as large numbers of people in Thailand have reimagined their society's position within global networks over a very short period.

Introducing Thailand's Cults of Wealth

Until the onset of the Asian financial crisis in July 1997, Thailand experienced a decade-long economic boom when average annual GDP growth rates at times exceeded ten per cent. This explosion of wealth and commercial opportunities was unprecedented in the country's history and created a euphoric mood of national confidence that influenced social and cultural as well as religious life. Writing at the height of Thailand's boom years, Jean Comaroff noted the relationship between economic and symbolic productivity in this period, describing Thailand as a society "where the dynamism of capitalist production

is rivalled only by the drive of diverse forms of ritual creativity, both within and outside Buddhism" (Comaroff 1994, p. 301). One of the most prominent aspects of this ritual creativity was the development of a wide range of what Richard Roberts (1995, p. 2) has called "prosperity religions"—popular movements that emphasize wealth acquisition as much as, if not more than, salvation.

New forms of magical ritual associated with a diverse range of divine personalities—who are also at the centre of efflorescing forms of professional spirit mediumship and are represented on sacralized magically powerful amulets—are linked to prosperity and wealth and have become significant features of the Thai religious landscape in recent decades. Wealth constitutes the basis, the practice and the objective of these religious movements, and as they rose rapidly to prominence in parallel with Thailand's economic boom decade they accentuated established patterns of symbolic blending and prosperity-enhancing ritual by drawing from the Thai, Chinese and Indian religious traditions.

The most prominent prosperity movements in Thailand are the worship of the spirit of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V; r. 1868–1910) and, more generally, the Thai monarchy; devotion to the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist bodhisattva Guan Yin, called Kuan Im in Thailand; cults of Hindu deities such as Brahma, Ganesh and Rahu; and movements surrounding Theravada Buddhist monks called *keji ajan*, or "magic monks", who are believed to possess the ability to magically empower wealth-enhancing amulets. The spirits whose blessings are sought in the cults of wealth are viewed as repositories of potency and special knowledge about the modern world. They are believed to have privileged access to esoteric knowledge of lucky numbers in lotteries, how to succeed in business, and auspicious days and times to conduct economic and political affairs, including when to stage military coups. The meanings of the new movements are not found in any explicitly presented statement of doctrine. There is no prophet for the cults of wealth, although there is much financial profit associated with them. Rather, the meanings of these movements develop from informal information flows, from conversations amongst the faithful and, most importantly, from the symbolic representation of the cults in mass media, including the national press and digital communication technologies. These trends by no means exhaust the phenomenon of commercially oriented religiosity in modern Thailand. The controversial Wat Phra Dhammakaya movement, widely criticized for adopting a direct marketing approach based on the Amway model to promote

IMAGE 1. Ritual Products Advertised in 7-Eleven Mail Order Catalogue
"Belief" (*khwam-cheua*) page from the December 2017 mail order catalogue of the 7-Eleven convenience store chain advertising ritual products of the Oom Maharuai ("aum super-rich") Company associated with cults of wealth. Images of seven magic monks believed to possess the power to sacralize amulets appear above the company name. **Top:** locket of the magic monk *Luang Phor* Ngoen ("Reverend Father Money"); **middle:** watch of the Hindu monkey deity Hanuman holding a "flag of magical power" (*thong song rit*); **bottom:** lip gloss cream magically empowered (*pluk sek*) by nationally famous tattoo master *Ajan* Nu Kanphai to be spread on the lips to "call in money, good luck and wealth" (*riak sap chok lap*). 7-Eleven is Thailand's largest chain of convenience stores and it markets ritual products from its thousands of stores across the country.

its teachings among Bangkok's middle classes, is another prominent Thai prosperity religion.[3]

In 1973, Tambiah wrote that in terms of then-current theories of modernization, laissez-faire capitalism and the accumulation of goods by individuals for their own benefit could not be expected to become a universally acceptable activity in Buddhist societies such as Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand (1973, p. 16). This is no longer the case in Thailand. Wealth accumulation has come to the fore, and magical ritual has proved to be a highly amenable symbolic system for unfettered capitalism in a neoliberal economic setting centred on consumerism. Thai capitalism has broken free of the religious restraints that Weber, Tambiah and others believed constrained it. Christine Gray argues that religion in Thailand played "an active if not dominant role in the promotion of capitalism" in the 1960s and 1970s (Gray 1986, p. 62). This has remained the case in subsequent decades. In contrast to earlier views of the incompatibility of Buddhism with capitalist development, Jovan Maud observes that the relationships among magic, religion and the marketplace that are so visible in Thailand today reflect "the fact that capitalist modernity has produced a proliferation of enchantments" and that "neoliberal economies, supposedly characterised by 'economic rationalism', have produced novel forms of 'irrationality'" (Maud 2007, p. 11). Pattana Kitiarsa notes, in contrast to Thomas Kirsch's (1977) prediction in the 1970s that Thai religiosity was trending in the direction of "Buddha-isation", that twenty-first-century religious observance is defined by a "fragmented worship of various popular icons and cults" (Pattana 2012, p. 112). Seeking supernatural intervention to achieve success, wealth and power, the Thai cults of wealth have continued to grow in popularity despite the setback of the 1997 Asian economic crisis and the intense political conflicts that have destabilized Thai society in recent decades. Furthermore, these cults have moved rapidly from the sociocultural margins to the centre of national religious life, being incorporated within state projects as well as being brought within the orbit of state-sponsored monastic Buddhism.

From the Margins to Mainstream: Magical Cults among Thailand's Middle Classes and Power Elites

A central argument of this book is that Thailand's cults of wealth are not marginal phenomena but rather have become central elements of twenty-first-century religious life that, in many ways, are as sociologically and religiously significant as institutional Buddhism. Significantly, some of the key constituents of the complex of prosperity cults, such

as the movements centred on the worship of Kuan Im and the spirit of King Chulalongkorn, did not emerge from Theravada Buddhism. Indeed, many of the prosperity cults began outside the Buddhist sangha hierarchy, although since the boom years of the 1990s many Buddhist monks and monasteries have participated as one arm of these popular wealth-oriented movements. Nidhi Eeoseewong argues that the cults of wealth began moving from being heterodox and marginal to mainstream phenomena in the mid-1990s:

> They have arisen and developed outside the monastery [i.e., outside Buddhism] and also tend to be followed outside the monastery. Nevertheless, even though the cults of King Chulalongkorn and *Jao-mae* Kuan Im arose outside the monastery, they have very quickly spread extensively within the monastery, which makes these two middle-class cults so exceptionally interesting. (Nidhi 1994, p. 106)

In 1994, Nidhi predicted that despite their non-Buddhist origins the King Chulalongkorn and Kuan Im movements would ultimately be incorporated within "official" (*thang-kan*)—that is, state-sponsored—Thai religion (Nidhi 1994, p. 79). Nidhi's prediction had in fact come to pass by the time of the onset of the economic crash in July 1997.

From the late nineteenth century, modernist state projects in Thailand based on essentialist constructs of "Thai culture", "Thai religion", "the Thai nation" and "the Thai people" were invoked to suppress local identities, cultures and languages as well as to critique magical religiosity. Within these modernizing projects, folk religion was often labelled as "superstition" (*khwam-ngom-ngai*) or "black magic" (*saiya-sat*) and was devalued in the name of promoting reformist versions of Theravada Buddhism (see Jackson 1989, 2003). Since the 1980s, however, so-called "superstition" has reasserted its presence in the centres of Thai cultural life and political power in the form of cults of magically empowered amulets (Tambiah 1984; Jackson 1999a), a growing prominence of Chinese and Indian religious ritual in the lives of ethnic Thais (Nidhi 1994; Jackson 1999b), an efflorescence of spirit mediumship (Morris 2000a; White 2014), and cults of revered kings and related historical figures (Jackson 1999b; Stengs 2009).

In his study of Christianity in the postmodern West, David Lyon argues that while institutional religiosity is "in pretty poor shape … the religious *realm*, including faith and spirituality, is far from dormant, let alone dead" (Lyon 2000, p. ix; emphasis in original). Lyon relates

an Australian Aboriginal legend that tells of a mighty river that once flowed across the land:

> Many generations living on its banks were sustained by the river, until gradually it ceased to flow. The people watched aghast as the symbol of their security dried up and disappeared. Some waited for it to return while others went to find out what had happened. It turned out that the river still flowed, but had changed course upstream, creating a billabong on the curve where the Aboriginals still sat.… In the Australian story, the river still ran, but elsewhere. (Lyon 2000, pp. 20–21)[4]

Indeed, the river of religiosity still flows strongly through modern societies such as Thailand. But it now often takes novel forms that might not be easily recognized in terms of established definitions of what constitutes religion. Research and scholarship need to go where the river of Thai religion now flows, which is often far removed from temples and monasteries and may be found in marketplaces and department stores as well as in diverse forms of new mass media and digital internet platforms.

While, as detailed in the following section, reformist Buddhists have often critiqued the cults of wealth as *phuttha phanit*—commodifications of Thai Buddhism—I take a converse perspective and regard Thailand's prosperity movements as an expansion of religious symbolisms to envelop the market. The prosperity cults integrated Thailand's newly marketized social formation within religious symbolisms and became the productive core of a new highly popular expression of Thai religio-cultural symbolism and ritual. This analysis also presents a corrective to the dominance of Buddhism in many histories and political studies of modern Thailand. For several decades, anthropologists have detailed the importance of non-institutional ritual and belief for all strata of Thai society, rich and poor, urban and rural. But when historians and political scientists address questions of religion they tend to focus on institutional Buddhism and overlook or dismiss ritual as "premodern residues" of "superstition" and "mysticism".

The elision of non-institutional religiosity from narratives of modern Thai history reflects a much broader problem affecting understandings of the direction of religious change in contemporary societies, and indeed of what constitutes modernity itself. Appreciating the significance of Thailand's new cults of wealth involves overturning misconceptions about the place of ritual and spirit possession in modern religious life. Even more importantly it requires critically reassessing theories of

the place of religion in modernity that dominated social and political analysis for much of the twentieth century. As Keyes et al. point out, "Western theories of modernisation ... presupposed the liberation of people from superstition and time-consuming and expensive rituals so that they could participate in a new rationalised order oriented toward the attainment of self-sustaining economic growth" (Keyes et al. 1994, p. 4). In a dramatic repudiation of these theories of modernization, in the 1980s and 1990s Thailand achieved historically unprecedented economic growth at the same time that more time and money was spent on magical rituals than in previous periods of the modern era.

In Southeast Asian religious studies, magical ritual has tended to be studied as a form of religious expression located outside the state and national bureaucracy, whether in rural villages or, more recently, as emerging from and practised in the spaces of the expanding market economy and mediatized popular culture. Supernatural cults and magical ritual have often been seen as being in opposition to the religious forms of Southeast Asia's ruling elites and official expressions of national religious culture, with many studies representing them as expressions of popular devotion among rural peasants and urban underclasses regarded as being politically disenfranchised and economically dispossessed by capitalist expansion. These studies follow accounts from Southeast Asia (e.g., Ong 1988), Latin America (e.g., Taussig 2003) and South Africa (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 2002) that describe how those marginalized by global capitalism have turned to the supernatural to adapt to the challenging economic conditions confronting them.

Indeed, one group of scholars argues that prosperity religions have emerged among underclasses in times of crisis in capitalism. These analysts describe market-induced religious resurgence as a response to the precaritization of life under neoliberalism among those dispossessed by the commodification of ever more domains of social life (see for example Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2000). Alan Klima has studied gamblers, spirit mediums and informal moneylenders in Thailand, who, he states, collectively engage in "seemingly irrational, superstitious, and corrupt practices of money" (Klima 2006, p. 35). Drawing on Comaroff and Comaroff (1999, 2000), Klima labels these groups "a fractured international underclass trying desperately to make sense of, and gain access to, the mesmerizing exchange of money" (Klima 2006, p. 36). In a comparative study of religious change across modern Asia, Thomas Reuter and Alexander Horstmann emphasize religion as responding to "displacement and insecurity", "disenfranchisement",

"cultural crisis and fragmentation" (Reuter and Horstmann 2013, pp. 1–2). They regard "religious revitalisation" in modern Asia as aiming at "remedying certain aspects of a changed life situation that are considered undesirable" and as arising when people have "a sense of being under threat or having … suffered a great loss" (2013, p. 2).

Another group of analysts contends, however, that new magical cults of wealth emerge during economic booms among the beneficiaries of capitalism (e.g., Keyes 2006, p. 6). These accounts have studied gospels of prosperity (e.g., Lyon 2000) among rising middle classes and the new rich in economies undergoing rapid growth, especially but by no means exclusively in East and Southeast Asia. In these accounts, new forms of religious expression are seen as responses to the experience of success among the winners, rather than the losers, from neoliberal capitalism. In contemporary Thailand an opposition between an ostensibly elite, national form of Buddhism, on the one hand, and non-state, subaltern magical cults, on the other, is inaccurate. The Thai cults of wealth are followed not only by those from lower socio-economic strata but are also central to the religious lives of many members of Thailand's economic, social and political elites. In Thailand (see Pattana 2005b) and elsewhere in East Asia (see Weller 1994), the middle classes as well as business and political elites are conspicuous in seeking supernatural assistance. In his research in Thailand in the 1970s, Tambiah observed that the cult of magical amulets and related supernatural aspects of Thai Buddhism were central to the lives of the country's ruling elites, although a superficial performance of secular or Buddhist modernity may have obscured a reliance on magic:

> The cult of amulets is no mere 'superstition' or 'idolatry' of the poor or unlettered. If you confronted a prosperous man in the streets of Bangkok—well dressed in suit and tie, or imposing in military uniform—and asked him to open his shirt collar, you would see a number of amulets encased in gold, silver, or bronze hanging on his gold necklace. (Tambiah 1984, p. 197)

While Pattana and some other scholars have been interested in "the question of how marginalised individuals use popular religion to strategically empower themselves" (Pattana 2005b, p. 221), in this study I am primarily concerned with how Thailand's middle classes and elites draw on popular religion to empower and enrich themselves. I study religious change not as a response to threat or loss but rather as the deployment of ritual technologies to take advantage and to make the most of the opportunities provided by the modern social order. Oscar Salemink points out that in contrast to accounts that interpret

spirit mediumship as compensating for the vagaries of the market and the risks of life, in Vietnam the importance of new cults of wealth lies not so much in warding off harm as in their positive role: spirits are actively sought out because they are believed to help in commercial ventures (Salemink 2008a, p. 167). While spirit mediums and magic monks may come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and use their ritual skills as a means of social enhancement, their clients are often members of wealthy elites. As Pattana observes,

> magic monks and mediums are well aware that possessing money is the most crucial factor determining to which social class one belongs. Their desirous will to have rich clients and a large sum of donations is strongly felt in their ritual performances and conversations with clients or disciples. (Pattana 2005b, p. 222)

The often middle-class and elite backgrounds of the followers of the cults of wealth parallels the interest of these same sections of the Thai population in astrology. In her study of Thai astrology, Nerida Cook notes that the professional astrology associations in Bangkok "cater mainly to a middle-class section of the community, the portion of the Thai population which is most interested in astrology and fortune-telling in general" (Cook 1989, p. 36). Thailand's professional astrology associations participate in the annual Red Cross fair in Bangkok, which is under royal sponsorship (p. 38n6). Cook argues that astrology continues to play an important role in Thailand because it is "an intrinsic aspect of a world-view concerned with auspiciousness, power and legitimacy. This is an inheritance from Thai astrology's elite background" (p. x). Historically, astrology was maintained as part of the educated tradition centred on the royal court and ruling elite (p. 40). While in the past astrology was part of the exercise of royal power, since the end of the absolute monarchy in Siam in 1932, this form of divination has been increasingly accessed by the middle classes.[5] Cook contends that astrology has come to be part of the sociopolitical worldview of middle classes that "seek to justify their new aspirations by reference to past precedent, and to ally themselves with the former ideologies of political legitimacy" (p. 318).

In a survey conducted in 1979, Suntaree Komin and Snit Smuckarn found that it was Thais with the highest incomes who were most likely to consult fortune tellers and astrologers, with the incidence of visiting astrologers and fortune tellers also increasing as the level of education rose (Suntaree and Snit 1979, p. 327, cited in Cook 1989, p. 207). Cook observes that the sections of Thai society that draw most upon astrology are those "who are most engaged in the optimization of

different qualities of time", who are "most tied into the capitalist sector of the economy, and most tied into the notion of specific career paths, i.e. involving optimal development or progress over time" (Cook 1989, p. 319). In other words, it is businesspeople and professionals who are the major clients of fortune tellers and astrologers in Thailand.

Kornrawee Panyasuppakun details the continuing importance of astrology and magical cults of fortune telling in the lives of Thailand's business elites today. She reports that in Thailand in 2018, 35 per cent of all Thai babies were born by caesarean section. A key reason for the unusually high rate of surgical births in the country is because large numbers of parents wish to time the birth of their child to take place on an auspicious date, especially "a date that will help their business".[6] One mother interviewed recalled how they "'went to a venerated abbot and had him pick a date'.… Her son was born on December 5, the birthday of the late King Rama IX." A nurse at a Bangkok hospital whom Kornrawee interviewed told her that "[t]he obstetrician himself

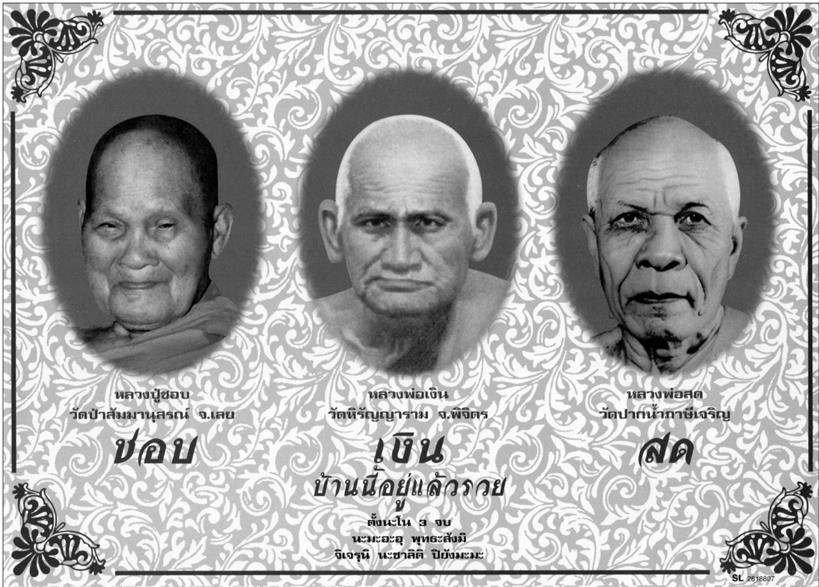

IMAGE 2. "I Like Cash": The Magic Monks Chorp, Ngoen and Sot
A devotional poster of three *keji ajan* magic monks: *Luang Pu* Chorp of Wat Pa Sammanusorn in Loei Province; *Luang Phor* Ngoen of Wat Hiranyaram in Phichit Province; and *Luang Phor* Sot of Wat Pak-nam Phasi Charoen in Thonburi. The names of the three monks printed in large letters spell out the Thai sentence "[I] Like Cash (*chorp ngoen sot*)", followed by the sentence "[With the presence of these monks] this home is rich". (Source: Jattujak Weekend Market, Bangkok, 1997. From the author's collection.)

picked the date for me. It was the 6th day of the 6th month in the year 61. He said number 6 was lucky".[7] Her son was born on 6 June 2018, or BE 2561. Kornrawee notes that

> [t]he belief that a person's birthday determines the course of their life is prevalent in Thai society, especially among well-to-do people and celebrities who can afford to cover the cost of a C-section. Chompoo Araya Hargate, a top Thai celebrity and her billionaire husband, for instance, had renowned *feng shui* master Grienggrai Boontaganon set the delivery date for her.

Famous fortune-teller Arunwich Wongjatupat said nine out of 10 parents look for dates that will yield either prosperity or leadership qualities for their soon-to-be born child.[8]

While previous studies linking Thailand's modernizing elites, both royal and commoner, to institutional Buddhism (see C. Reynolds 1972; Ishii 1986; Somboon 1982; Jackson 1989) are not necessarily inaccurate, they have tended to overlook the participation of these modernizers in forms of ritual outside of institutional Buddhism. Gray notes that while "men of prowess" in Thailand build spiritual potency through acts of world renunciation, "[i]f they perceive these acts at all, Western diplomats and political analysts tend to view them as irrelevant to the 'hard facts' of political and economic life or merely as social irritants" (Gray 1995, p. 225). In contrast, in this study I consider forms of ritual that, to borrow the idiom of Tambiah's observation noted above, have often been hidden behind an apparent façade of rationalist modernity epitomized by Thai businessmen wearing Western-style suits and military officers wearing imposing uniforms.

Reformist Buddhist Critiques of the Cults of Wealth

While the cults of wealth are followed by large numbers of Thais from all social strata, they have at times been the object of trenchant criticism by reformist Buddhists. While reflecting the views of a minority in Thailand, intense critiques of the cults are nonetheless prominent among more doctrinal Buddhists. Some of the most vocal critics of the cults have been journalists and Buddhist intellectuals, who have access to the media and publications to disseminate their views. While reformist Buddhists are vociferous critics of the cults of wealth, they are not politically violent and their criticisms in publications and the media have not been transferred into practical interventions in prosperity-oriented rituals or cultic forms.

Critiques of "ignorant blind faith" (*khwam-ngom-ngai*) in the supernatural are widespread in Thailand's print media. The intensity of

the opposition to spirit cults in some quarters is evident in the hybrid English-Thai title of one recent paperback, "*Fuck Ghost: samakhom tor-tan sing ngom-ngai*", whose Thai subtitle translates as "The society against ignorant blind faith". Written by an author using the English pen name of "Fuck Ghost" (2016), this text lambasted a diverse range of spirit cults for being in conflict with Buddhist teachings, and upon its release it was prominently displayed among new titles at major bookstores across Thailand.

Followers of the influential twentieth-century Theravada Buddhist philosopher monk Buddhadasa (see Jackson 2003; Ito 2012) are especially vocal critics of popular supernaturalism. They denounce these ritual forms as *phuttha phanit* ("Buddha-commerce"), an expression that describes the commodification of what the followers of Buddhadasa understand as true Buddhist teachings (Jackson 1999b, pp. 309ff.) and which they often regard as reflecting "superstitious" residues from Thailand's premodern past. According to Buddhadasa, arguably the most important reformist Buddhist thinker in twentieth-century Thailand, magical ritual or *saiyasat* is the "science of sleeping people" (*Photjananukrom Khorng Than Phutthathat* [2004?], p. 300). In contrast, Buddhist teachings, which Buddhadasa calls "the Buddhist science" (*phutthasat*), is the science of awakened people, uses reason and teaches self-reliance. These views are frequently expressed by lay journalists and Buddhist monks in the press and media.

In 1997, the renowned scholar monk *Phra* Dhammapitaka (Prayuth Payuttho), one of the intellectual mainstays of doctrinal Buddhism, published a book titled *If We Want to Overcome the Crisis We Must Abandon Our Attachment to Superstition (Saiyasat)*. In this text he isolated the widespread popularity of *saiyasat*—which he glosses variously in English as "animism", "supernaturalism", "superstition", "magic" and "black magic"—as being at the core of the problems that led to the late-1990s economic crisis in Thailand. *Phra* Dhammapitaka noted that Buddhist teachings do not call for the wholesale rejection of *saiyasat*, but he nonetheless makes it clear that he regards *saiyasat* to be a distinctly inferior religious form. He claims that over-reliance on *saiyasat* means that the Thai people have not developed mentally to a sufficient extent to deal with the complexities of the contemporary world, and that Buddhist meditative practice (*patipat tham*, "*dhamma* practice") would help develop the mental acuity, moral stamina and self-reliance that he argued the country needed to overcome its national economic problems at the height of the Asian economic crisis.

In the aftermath of the economic crash, *Phra* Panyananda—a prominent reformist monk and a well-known follower of Buddhadasa—emphasized the need for correct belief as the basis of Thai Buddhism:

> 'What is in crisis is the beliefs of Buddhists, not the religion', the monk [*Phra* Panyananda] told a recent seminar organised by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre. Most Thais have mixed an element of black magic [*saiyasat*] into their Buddhist beliefs, he said, and many famous monks are now known for their 'magical powers' instead of their teaching of *dharma* (Buddhist principles). The media, in addition to monks and politicians, are to blame for promoting these misbeliefs, leading to what he described as 'religious consumerism' [*phuttha phanit*].[9]

The strength of opposition to cults of wealth and magical *saiyasat* rituals in some quarters in Thailand is reflected in the fact that some media, such as *The Nation* daily newspaper, present critiques of these forms of religious enchantment as matters of editorial policy. On 5 February 2015, *The Nation* published an editorial titled "Protecting Thai Buddhism from TWISTED Teachings", in which the word "twisted" was printed in capital letters. In part, this editorial stated:

> Thailand is routinely described as a Buddhist country.… However, in reality, our Buddhist identity often goes little further than what's written on our ID cards and house-registration documents. Many of us stick to animistic beliefs and superstitions.… The ignorance is exacerbated at many Buddhist temples, where monks take advantage of lay people's superstitious nature by selling amulets and services. Exorcisms, protective spells and trinkets are readily available at a price, and have become a lucrative trade for some monks.[10]

In a similar vein, in 2018, prominent progressive journalist Pravit Rojanaphruk published a column in the *Khao Sod English* newspaper titled "Let Thai Buddhism be Reborn", in which he wrote: "Many Thais are Buddhists only in name, attached to the rituals, superstitions and a sense of Buddhist chauvinism.… Superstition, attachment to various supposedly magical amulets … these are but some of the troubling aspects of Thai Buddhism."[11] Despite their vociferous intensity, it is important to emphasize that the critiques of magical cults of wealth have not been matched by practical or legal interventions. Most followers of the cults have ignored the criticisms published in books and newspapers, focusing their attention on ritual practice rather than arguments over doctrine or correct belief.

Key Arguments: The Modernity of Magic and the Primacy of Ritual

Magic is Modern

Tambiah (1990) has deconstructed the history of the opposition of reason and science to magic. He argues that it was during the Enlightenment that a fundamental divide between prayer and spell was established, the former coming to be seen as characteristic of religion and the latter of magic (Tambiah 1990, p. 19). He points out that before the Reformation, Christians believed in the reality and efficacy of magic but condemned it as pagan fetishism. It was during the Reformation that Protestant reformers went a step further and not only declared magic to be false religion but also inefficacious action: "It is essentially in the modern period, since the Enlightenment, that a particular conception of religion that emphasises its cognitive, intellectual, doctrinal and dogmatic aspects, gained prominence" (Tambiah 1990, p. 4). Tambiah points to the imbrication of magical forms of inquiry in the origins of modern science, with luminaries regarded as the founders of modern rational science, such as Newton and Copernicus, having been deeply involved in magical inquiries. He also draws on the anthropological literature to argue that we cannot categorically define modern Western societies as having expelled magic, pointing to Bronislaw Malinowski's (1935) account of the magic of advertising for beauty products and its parallels with love magic among Trobriand Islanders.

Despite claims by some of their followers that contemporary religious movements represent a return to ancient tradition, efflorescing supernaturalism and new reformist and fundamentalist movements both emerge from, and are intimately part of, the modern world of market-based, commodified scientific technologies. The dynamism of the diversifying forms of spirit cults and magical ritual in Thailand and across Southeast Asia, and their emergence from the context of market-based, mediatized "global modernity" (Dirlik 2005), indicates that these religious forms are not residues of premodern tradition but rather represent highly contemporary phenomena.

In light of the efflorescence of magical ritual and spirit cults in Thailand and elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia, we need to take Tambiah's deconstructive project forward. We need to view the sociological forces of modernity as not merely providing spaces for the survival of residues of magic among those excluded and disenfranchised by capitalism but as also actively producing magic anew

among the wealthy and winners from global modernity. In this I follow studies of the modernity of contemporary forms of magical ritual. In his study “The Magic of Modernity”, Bruce Kapferer summarizes studies of magical ritual that “powerfully insist that these practices are thoroughly modern” (Kapferer 2002, p. 16). Kapferer emphasizes that

> [t]he crucial argument regarding modern magical practices concerns their disjunction from pasts (histories and cosmologies prior to modern periods … before the imperial expansions of the West) and the radical reconfiguration of ideas and practices of the past in terms of the circumstances of the present. This position represents a major corrective to those orientations that see magical practices as survivals of tradition and refuse to attend to the import of their current reformulations in the political and social contexts of their use. (Kapferer 2002, p. 19)

Contemporary Thai magic such as the cults of wealth and amulets as well as new forms of professional spirit mediumship cannot be dismissed as premodern residues that have managed to hang on into the era of global capitalism. The forms of magical ritual studied in this book are not ancient. Modernity is making new forms of magic in Thailand, just as it has also engendered new forms of reformist doctrinal Buddhism. While there are continuities with practices, rituals and beliefs from the past, the alternative modernity of economically neoliberal, digitally mediatized, military dominated and monarchist Thailand is reproducing magic anew, with the forms of enchantment that are sociologically and economically significant and politically relevant in Thailand today coming into being out of significant transformations of premodern forms. As detailed in Chapter Two, Thai magical ritual, like monastic Buddhism, has not emerged unchanged from the successive historical vortices of European and American imperialism, Western discourses of civilization and rationality, new scientific technologies and globalizing capitalism.

As Kapferer observes, anthropologists have been especially interested in contemporary forms of magic because of their significance in revealing “the fabulations and transmutations of capital in globalizing circumstances, and the magical character of nationalist discourses of the modern and postcolonial state” (Kapferer 2002, p. 2). Magic, or what Erick White calls the ritual arts of efficacy in Buddhist societies, displays “creativity, innovation and adaptability” (White 2016, p. 17), and he notes that as Asian societies have modernized “the ritual arts of efficacy have sometimes experienced a frequently underappreciated transformation in their social organization, transmission and

consumption" (p. 16). White also contends that the increasing dominance of capitalist modes of production, the expansion of a culture of consumerism, the rise of cultural heritage industries and the spread of ideologies of democratic governance have all "provided new models for how knowledge and practice within the ritual arts of efficacy can be organized, distributed and consumed" (p. 16).

An especially significant development in recent decades has been the professionalization of divination and spirit mediumship. By selling ritual services, diviners and spirit mediums have increasingly become full-time professionals. Edoardo Siani argues that because of the impact of the market and the professionalization of magical ritual, each ritual specialist "needs to differentiate him or herself in order to define the specificity and difference of their services and skills in a highly competitive market for divination services" (Siani 2018, p. 424). Siani contends that the consequent triumph of individuality over a previous standardization of belief and practice constitutes "a rupture from the past, when authenticity and adherence to a supposedly original knowledge was highly prized" (p. 423). In contrast to the previous conformity to tradition in Thai magical and divinatory rituals, "the contemporary Bangkok divination scene takes pride in its diversity" (p. 423).

The Empirical and Theoretical Primacy of Ritual Practice in Modern Enchantment

Another linking theme across the sections and chapters of this study is the priority of ritual and practice over doctrine and belief in the making of modern magic. In Chapter One I summarize Bruno Latour's account of modernity as a fractured condition divided between purifying processes of ideological rationalization and hybridizing practice. This account provides a framing analysis for understanding how religious modernity produces both purificatory doctrinalism and fundamentalist movements at the same time that new modalities of ritual magic also emerge. The Thai cults of wealth inhabit the hybridizing spaces of modern ritual practice, constituting an excluded other of both doctrinal religious and rationalist secular versions of modernity.

The emphasis on ritual practice over doctrine is a defining feature of new magical phenomena across mainland Southeast Asia. Summarizing the situation in Burma, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière observes: "The spirit cult exists primarily in practice whereas Buddhism relies mainly on the transmission of a textual corpus for which the religious specialists (monks) are held responsible" (Brac de la Perrière 2009, p. 195). In her account of *len dong* spirit possession in the cult

of the Mother Goddess in Northern Vietnam, Andrea Lauser notes that "there is no codified set of religious texts, and there is to date no overarching institutionalized organization that makes decisions concerning religious practice or doctrine" (Lauser 2018, p. 7). The emphasis on ritual practice in Thai religious life has a deep history. Peter Skilling argues that the complexities of religious life in pre-modern Siam demonstrate the inadequacy of describing the society as "Theravadin" (Skilling 2009, p. 183). He notes that the complex nature of Siamese religion in the middle ages was reflected in the phrase *samana-chi-phram* (Pali: *samaṇa jī brāhmaṇa*), which denoted diverse ritual specialists, including Buddhist mendicants, renunciants and brahmins, whose distinctions were not made in terms of religion, creed or faith "but rather in terms of ritual and function" (p. 184).

In Chapter Three I argue that the limitations of older theories of religion, and their failure to provide adequate frames to appreciate emergent phenomena such as the Thai cults of wealth, stem from their focus on belief and teachings and their neglect of ritual practice. In that chapter I also argue that the emphasis on ritual in Thai vernacular religion is a pragmatic response to the need to build a coherent religious field from multiple, doctrinally incompatible cultic forms. In Chapter Seven I argue that the productive, performative effects of ritual in mediatized neoliberal societies is key to the processes that bring modern enchantment into being. The performative effect of ritual underpins modern magic in Thailand, while at the global level modern enchantment emerges in the field of hybrid practice that Latour describes as the denied and excluded other of rationalizing modernist ideologies.

Interdisciplinary Method

Because Thai magical ritual exists in domains that Latour describes as non-rationalized practice-based hybridity, we will not be able to appreciate its significance in the country's modern history by methodologies that draw solely on analyses of religious texts, discourses and doctrines. The cults of wealth exist in a religious field that is structured more by ritual practice than by doctrine. The methods of this study consequently need to describe what people do as much as what they say or write. It is not legal statutes, administrative orders, doctrines or exegetical texts that we should look to in understanding magic in modern Thailand, but rather the ritual practices of the general public, businesspeople and state officials.

Religious studies approaches often focus on spaces and sites traditionally understood as religious, such as Buddhist monasteries,

spirit medium shrines and religious icons and texts. The spaces of prosperity-oriented Thai ritual studied here, however, have expanded far beyond the conventional bounds of monasteries and shrines. Pattana Kitiarsa observes that the boundaries of Thai popular Buddhism "expand as far as its commercial influence spreads" (Pattana 2012, p. 2). Indeed, to study the cults of wealth we must also look outside monasteries to department stores, shopping malls and marketplaces, for it is in these locations that many contemporary forms of Thai religiosity are now most visibly expressed and where popular Thai religion is commodified, packaged, marketed and consumed. Sacredness and the supernatural have now colonized the commodified spaces of neoliberal capitalism and often take highly developed forms outside traditional religious locales. Because religiosity and magic have colonized the marketplace and media, the approaches of media studies and cultural studies—whose fields of expertise are the new worlds of consumerism and mass media—also provide valuable insights that have escaped some established approaches to the study of religion.

Jean Comaroff proposes that we need to regard Asian forms of capitalism as "signifying systems" and contemporary forms of religion in East and Southeast Asia as "evidence of the symbolic richness of the modern mind ... in response to an explosion of market commodities" (Comaroff 1994, pp. 303–4). It is iconic of the wealth-oriented focus of the prosperity cults that one is just as likely to find their ritual objects in commercial spaces as in traditional sacred localities such as monasteries. For these reasons, in this book I adopt an interdisciplinary approach that draws on anthropology, religious studies and history as well as cultural and media studies to understand how modernity in Thailand has produced new forms of commercially inflected enchantment. This approach takes us beyond an analysis in which religion, economy, media and popular culture are conceived as discrete constructs, enabling us to see these fields as interrelating semiotic domains marked by hierarchy and contestation. A semiotic analysis also helps us rethink the religion-capitalism relationship and leads us beyond an emphasis on the Thai cults of wealth as a commercialization of Buddhism to instead view them from an alternative perspective as a spiritualization of the market.

The modern structure of knowledge assumes that there has been an organizational divide between religion, society, politics, economics, art and culture. Furthermore, it is assumed that because of these sociological divides it is possible to establish epistemologically distinct disciplines of knowledge, which respectively take one of these several

fields as their specialized object of inquiry. But if there is no clear separation of the socio-economic, religio-political and aesthetic-cultural fields, then the intellectual project of separating domains of disciplinary knowledge as being based upon ostensibly discrete objects of inquiry collapses. My method is necessarily cross-disciplinary because the phenomena studied here are not contained within any one field of modern knowledge, or indeed of modern social organization. Lauser makes this point with regard to *len dong* spirit mediumship in modern Vietnam, which, she states, "combines spiritual, social, political, economic, cultural and aesthetic dimensions, and … connects the different contexts it is manifested in, and it is affected by all of these contexts" (Lauser 2018, p. 13). This study is conducted at the multidisciplinary intersection of what Latour describes as "imbroglios of science, politics, economy, law, religion, technology, fiction" (Latour 1993, p. 2).

Disciplinary Boundaries and the Omission of Magic from Modern Thai History

If, as argued here, magical cults of wealth are culturally and, indeed, politically important in modern Thailand, why have they not figured prominently in most histories or political analyses of the country? There are several reasons why magical ritual has often been overlooked. First, the non-institutional dimensions of Thai ritual life are often undervalued, if not devalued, in studies that have drawn on older formulations of religious studies. From its inception, religious studies prioritized study of the texts and doctrines of monotheistic religions that place expressions of faith at the centre of their conception of the religious life. Within this understanding, forms of religious life that centre on ritual practice and which lack a canonical religious text or an institutional clergy have often fallen outside the scope of inquiry. Religious studies still struggles to arrive at a coherent account of Asian polytheisms that are founded more upon ritual practices than upon professions of faith in the revelations recorded in sacred texts.

The modern academy's failure, or rather inability, to view magic as a genuine force in the world of globalizing capitalism also emerges from the blinkering of perspectives and the silo-effects upon knowledge that are produced by the boundaries that separate different disciplines. While anthropology has treated modern magical rituals as phenomena worthy of study, this has not been taken up in mainstream historiography or political studies, or for that matter in cultural or media studies, all of which often remain under misapprehensions engendered by

rationalist secular ideologies. The interdisciplinary approach adopted here aims to break through some of the barriers to conversation and analysis that are set up by structural divides between the disciplines in the modern university.

The "Invisibility" of Thailand's Ritual Economy

While this study focuses on cults that are oriented to the worship of quantitative increases in wealth and prosperity, my analysis of the empirical setting and local discourses of Thai religious practice is limited to qualitative approaches. Observations suggest that large amounts of money are involved in the rituals and cultic objects associated with the prosperity movements. The commodification of religion is a contentious issue in Thailand, however, and there are no reliable studies of the actual size of Thailand's ritual economy or the amounts of money that flow through the cults of wealth. Despite a plethora of statistical studies of the performance of different sectors of the Thai economy, we have no accurate measure of how much money has been spent in temple construction, merit-making donations or speculative investment in amulets and other ritual objects over recent decades.

Gray observes that a practical barrier to studying Thailand's ritual economy is the fact that money directed into monasteries and the purchase of objects such as magical amulets is defined in religious terms as "making merit". As Gray observes, "once wealth is channeled into the Sangha, into merit-making activities, it is no longer spoken of as wealth or money (*ngoen*), it becomes 'merit' (*bun*)" (Gray 1986, p. 52). As an example, Gray notes an expression used by one of her informants: "*Mi sattha 20 baht nai wat nan*". While literally translating as a person "had faith of 20 baht in that monastery" (p. 667n18), this statement in fact means that the person in question donated twenty baht to the monastery. The language of financial transfers to monasteries and spirit medium shrines, and of money used to purchase ritual objects related to the cults of wealth, in which "capitalist ideologies are portrayed as ideologies of merit" (p. 849), obscures the amount of funds involved in these transactions. As Gray laments: "Unfortunately, for the anthropologist as for the Buddhist layman, as soon as 'cash' enters the temple door, it disappears from analytic sight" (p. 77).

The Chapters

Part 1: Why Religious Modernity Trends in Two Opposing Directions

Chapter One: The Contradictions of Religious Modernity

Viewed at the global level, and in particular from the perspective of modern Thailand, not only is religion becoming more important, religious change is also taking place in two directions that earlier theories of modernity defined as being opposed, if not mutually exclusive. In contemporary Southeast Asia we find a parallel efflorescence of ritual-based magic and spirit mediumship in some localities, while anti-supernatural doctrinal accounts of Buddhism and Islam are influential in other settings. In Thailand we find movements to rationalize religious life on the basis of a purified text-based and doctrine-centred view of "true" original Buddhism at the same time that we also find other movements—which are now sociologically more numerous and more pervasive across the Thai religious field—that are based on ritual practices that invoke magical and enchanted imaginaries. Both of these contrasting trends—rationalizing doctrine-based and magical ritual-focused religiosities—have developed from the same matrix of mediatized techno-scientific capitalism. Yet, theories of modernity based on Enlightenment ideas that opposed magic to both rational science and "true" religion contend that we should be seeing a decline of magic in both secular and religious life. The fact that reformist Buddhism now exists alongside novel forms of enchantment suggests that, at least in the fields of religion and ritual, the very notion of modernity has been misconceived. It is not possible to imagine modernity as being equally productive of both rationalized doctrinal Buddhism and new forms of magical ritual without radically reassessing what modernity itself may be.

In Chapter One I argue that Bruno Latour's (1993) account of the modern world as one divided between a public discursive and ideological level of purificatory rationalization, on the one hand, and a practical level of hybrid non-rationalized practice, on the other, provides insights into how modernity is producing both doctrinalist reform movements and magical cults. In Thailand, some aspects of Buddhism have been reconstructed in accordance with notions of rational scientific modernity, while magical ritual has also flourished in what Latour describes as the non-rationalized field of hybrid practice. Drawing on Latour, we can also see that the divide between reformist

Buddhism and modern magic in Thailand is far from unique. Rather, it is one manifestation of the structural divide between rationalized discourse and non-rationalized practice that, drawing on his ethnography of scientific practice in the West, Latour contends is the character of social life in all parts of the world that now call themselves modern. I extend Latour's model to religion to argue that the modern Thai religious field is structured by discourses of rational secularization and disenchantment that overlay lived domains of enchanted ritual practice, which are exemplified by the cults of wealth. Drawing on Latour, I argue that magic is not only given new life by modernity; magic is produced *de nouveau* by one of the contradictory moments of modernity, which we need to understand as the coexistence of both rationalizing and enchanting processes.

Chapter Two: Semicolonial Modernity and Transformations of the Thai Religious Field

Even though the ideology of modernity as disenchanted is an inaccurate account of contemporary social conditions, it has nonetheless had real impacts on Thai intellectual and political cultures. In Chapter One I argue that the view of modernity as a world historical process of rationalization and disenchantment is an ideological project. In Chapter Two I detail how this ideology was linked with imperialism and discourses of European civilizational superiority and subsequently has had dramatic impacts across the world. In Thailand, as in some other Buddhist societies in Asia, it has resulted in a categorical distinction between "religion" (as disenchanted) and "belief" (as enchanted), as well as a regime of representation that positions religion or Buddhism (*sasana*) as dominant while often obscuring magical ritual and practice. In Chapter Two I describe how the impact of Western power has seen the creation of what I call the Thai regime of images, and which Christine Gray (1986) describes as Janus rituals, which at times has obscured the full range of Thai ritual activity from Western observers.

In response to Western influences, the self-modernizing semicolonial Siamese state brought the institution of Buddhism under increasing bureaucratic and administrative regulation while relegating non-institutional ritual practices to a more private domain largely beyond the gaze of critical Western observers. Practised outside contexts that came to be defined as modern and public, magical ritual was permitted relatively free reign, continuing to be elaborated in innovative ways within popular culture in parallel with the modernizing transformations of institutional Buddhism effected by the state.

In this chapter I also present an alternative narrative of modern Thai history through the lens of magic, which has never been dispelled but rather was repositioned within the Thai polity and refashioned in its forms and character in response to Western influences and the local instituting of the regime of images.

Part Two: Thailand's Cults of Wealth

Chapter Three: Theorizing the Total Thai Religious Field

Western religious studies has at times taken the colonial-era construct of Buddhism as being equivalent to Thai religion as a sociological fact rather than a discursive construct, and as a result has not been able to integrate magic and ritual into a total picture of Thai religiosity. An expanded conceptual frame is needed to appreciate the distinctiveness and significance of the Thai cults of wealth. The form of complexity that characterizes Thai popular Buddhism—which is an open, expanding and dynamically evolving complex of cults—lies in the way that multiple ritual forms exist in parallel and share some common features but do not merge into a single hybridized unity. White captures the complexity and multiplicity of Thai popular Buddhism, and alludes to the analytical challenges this complex presents, when he writes that this religious field

> is too foundationally inchoate as an empirical reality to conform to any single, homogeneous, coherent or totalising model or representation. As an historical, social and cultural reality, Thai Buddhism is protean in its axiomatic diversity, ambiguity and contradictions. (White 2014, p. 134)

White summarizes the difficulties scholars face in accounting for the broader picture of the Thai religious field when he observes that

> [the] highly differentiated and pluralistic landscape of Thai Buddhist religiosity reveals a sociocultural environment in which multiple forms of Buddhism and multiple forms of spirit possession and mediumship are in conversation with multiple forms of Buddhist-inspired devotion and esoteric popular religiosity. (White 2014, p. 436)

As White also observes, "during the efflorescence of popular religiosity in the 1980s and 1990s, an already existing diversity increased even further" (White 2014, p. 257). Justin McDaniel describes the diversity of spiritual figures in modern Thai belief and practice as forming a "pantheon of famous monks, 'Hindu' deities, and Buddhas" (McDaniel

2011, p. 4), while Nidhi Eeoseewong argues that the Thai belief system "is able to increase the number of spirits and gods indefinitely" (Nidhi 1994, p. 90). Hans-Dieter Evers and Sharon Siddique (1993, p. 9) have remarked upon the fragmentation of the study of religion in Southeast Asia, which they see as a consequence of the "sheer religious diversity" between and within countries in the region. It is in part because of this empirical diversity and the analytical fragmentation of research that the interdisciplinary field of religion, society and politics in Southeast Asia is poorly conceptualized.

We need a range of new concepts to analyse forms of religious expression that have developed in polytheistic societies that were already culturally diverse and which have been further transformed by globalizing capitalism and new communications media. In Chapter Three I propose contributions to the conversation on developing an analytical vocabulary that appreciates the diversity and scope of the Thai religious field as a whole and the complex of cults of wealth in particular. I outline:

- Polyontologism as a non-blended mixing of religious forms;
- The *kala-thesa* "time and space" contextualized separation of culturally diverse ritual forms and a general tolerance of ambiguity, incommensurability and contradiction;
- The hierarchical dominance of Buddhism in structural and symbolic terms; and
- An emphasis on ritual practice over doctrinal harmonization.

Chapter Four: Royal Spirits, Magic Monks, Chinese and Indian Deities

This study does not consider a single religious movement or one deity or focus of devotional sentiment and ritual. It deals with a complex of multiple, intersecting movements, each of which has its own distinct object of devotion, its own rituals and often its own holy sites and places of worship and pilgrimage. What unites the Thai cults of wealth is not any common deity but rather their collective focus on wealth and prosperity, their recent development and historical novelty, as well as their symbolic contiguity and co-location in a range of domains and spaces from the shrines of professional spirit mediums to commercially produced ritual objects such as magically empowered amulets. In Chapter Four I summarize the most important cults of wealth that have become prominent over the past four decades. These include worship of the divine spirit of King Chulalongkorn; the Chinese Mahayana

bodhisattva Kuan Im; Hindu deities such as Brahma, Ganesh and Rahu; and Buddhist monks regarded to possess supernatural powers to bless and magically empower amulets.

Chapter Five: Empowered Amulets and Spirit Possession

Thailand's cults of wealth lie at the intersection of two other major phenomena that are also distinctive emergent features of the Thai religious field and which reflect novel modalities of ritual enchantment; namely, the cult of amulets sacralized by magic monks and professional spirit mediumship. One of the most widespread and popular ways of demonstrating attachment to a deity, or to request a spirit's helping presence, is to own or wear an amulet bearing an image of the god. The faithful can also seek to communicate directly with a deity associated with a cult of wealth in a spirit possession ritual mediated by a professional spirit medium who channels that god. The cults of wealth, the cult of amulets and professional spirit mediumship are three distinct but also intersecting phenomena that have all emerged as novel expressions of Thai popular Buddhism since the middle of the twentieth century and which represent autonomous expressions of ritual and material religious practice. In Chapter Five I describe the material dimensions of the cults of wealth in the closely allied cult of amulets and the central place of spirit possession in the rituals associated with the cults. This chapter details how followers of the cults of wealth express their faith in the deities and spirits of prosperity and seek to communicate with these beings to request their help and support.

Chapter Six: The Symbolic Complex of Thai Cults of Wealth

In Chapter Six I present a synoptic perspective and argue that the Thai cults of wealth form a symbolic complex that draws upon religious, economic, political and other sources to create systems of meaning. Some of the cults considered in this book have been the focus of detailed study by specialist researchers, and I rely on the work of these scholars in summarizing the key features of each movement. My goal in Chapter Six is to weave the growing number of focused studies of Thai popular religion into a synoptic picture of a broader phenomenon that only becomes visible, and whose significance only becomes fully apparent, when the detailed accounts are brought together in conversation.

Part Three: How Modernity Makes Magic

Chapter Seven: Capitalism, Media and Ritual in Modern Enchantment

While critiques of Weberian accounts of modernity are well developed, positive accounts of the production of enchantment in modern societies are fragmented and partial. Jean and John Comaroff argue that new forms of magical ritual parallel the cultural logic of neoliberalism, while Rosalind Morris contends that mediatization produces forms of auraticization and a spectralization of social life in which the supernatural finds new spaces in which to flourish. Stanley Tambiah has described the performative character of ritual as constituting the enchanted fields of religious life. These separate accounts of processes of modern enchantment, however, do not yet speak to each other. In Chapter Seven I outline how the several partial accounts of modern enchantment can be woven together as the basis for a general model of the making of new modes of magic. I argue that the performative force of ritual explains why neoliberal capitalism and new media have been exceptionally active sources of enchantment in religious cultures that value ritual practice above doctrine and teaching.

Key Terms

Before beginning my accounts and analyses in the chapters that follow, in the next section I outline how I understand some of the key descriptive and conceptual terms used in this study. These terms are the focus of considerable discussion and debate and often take definitions that reflect the different theoretical frames of analysis within which they are deployed. I outline the background to some of these debates and how I position this study in relation to the at times divergent and contrasting settings within which the terms are used.

Notes

1. For example, see Brac de la Perrière 2011; Brac de la Perrière et al. 2014; Brac de la Perrière and Gaillard 2019; Endres and Lauser 2011; Irvine 1984; Johnson 2014; Keyes et al. 1994; Klima 2002; Lauser 2018; McDaniel 2011; Maud 2007; Morris 2000a; Mulder 1979, 1985; Nidhi 1993, 1994; Pattana 2012; Salemink 2007, 2008a; Siani 2017, 2018; Sorrentino, forthcoming; Stengs 2009; Tambiah 1984; Taylor 2004; Visisya 2018; and White 2014, 2017.
2. For example, see Comaroff 1994; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2000; Gottowik 2014; Gray 1986; Hefner 2010, 2017; Jenkins 2000; Kapferer

2002; Lee 2020; Lee and Ackerman 2018; Lyon 2000; Saler 2006; and Tambiah 1985, 1990.

3. Wat Phra Dhammakaya was at the centre of a series of controversies about improper proselytizing methods, financial irregularities and heterodox teachings from the late 1980s. See Edwin Zehner 1990 and Rory Mackenzie 2007.
4. Lyon here cites Peter and Sue Kaldor (*Where the River Flows* [Homebush West: Anzea, 1988]), who in turn are quoted in Alister McGrath (*The Renewal of Anglicanism* [Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1993], pp. 7–8).
5. The country was named Siam until 1939, after which the official name was changed to Thailand.
6. Kornrawee Panyasuppakun, "An 'Auspicious' Beginning?", *The Nation Weekend*, 29–30 September 2018, p. 1.
7. Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9. Mukdawan Sakboon, "Top Monk Sees Crisis in Beliefs Not Buddhism", *The Nation* (online), 14 January 1998 (accessed 20 January 1998).
10. Editorial, *The Nation*, 5 February 2015, p. 9A.
11. Pravit Rojanaphruk, "Let Thai Buddhism be Reborn", *Khao Sod English*, 24 February 2018, http://www.khaosodenglish.com/opinion/2018/02/24 (accessed 25 February 2018).

Key Terms: Debates, Theories and Contexts

Modernity

Understanding the full diversity of contemporary Thai religious life requires several paradigm shifts in our thinking, most importantly in what we understand by "modernity", as well as the assumptions underpinning academic disciplines such as sociology and political science, which have often taken this notion as their self-defining object of study. Indeed, the parallel development of both rationalizing religious fundamentalisms and magical cults—which respectively challenge accounts of modernity as a process of both secularization and disenchantment—have led some to question the value of the term modernity. Yet, the need to acknowledge, describe and account for the character and scale of the dramatic transformations of recent centuries continually forces us back to some notion of modernity as both a sociological and an epistemological condition that has developed within interweaving processes of economic, social, cultural, intellectual, political and religious change. Notions of modernity are repeatedly critiqued and challenged, yet they nonetheless refuse to die and continually reappear, often in new guises, after each new assault on their value and validity. Bruno Latour observes,

> Modernity comes in as many versions as there are thinkers or journalists, yet all its definitions point, in one way or another, to the passage of time. The adjective 'modern' designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word 'modern', 'modernisation', or 'modernity' appears, we are defining by contrast, an archaic and stable past. Furthermore, the word is

> always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns. (Latour 1993, p. 10)

Given the multiplicity of forms of modern life, Michael Saler's extended descriptive definition, which sets the scene for his critique of accounts of the modern world as disenchanted detailed in Chapter One, provides an apt frame for the analyses in this book:

> In broad outline, modernity has come to signify a mixture of political, social, intellectual, economic, technological and psychological factors, several of which can be traced to earlier centuries and other cultures, which merged synergistically in the West between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. These factors include (but are not exhausted by) the emergence of the autonomous and rational subject; the differentiation of cultural spheres; the rise of liberal and democratic states; the turn to psychologism and self-reflexivity; the dominance of secularism, nationalism, capitalism, industrialism, urbanism, consumerism, and scientism. Different accounts of modernity may stress diverse combinations or accentuate some factors more than others. There is one characteristic of modernity, however, that has been emphasised fairly consistently by intellectuals since the eighteenth century: that modernity is 'disenchanted'. (Saler 2006, p. 694)

I address accounts of the multiplicity of modernities and detail Bruno Latour's account of modernity as a fractured condition of rationalization with hybrid practice in Chapter One.

Disenchantment and Enchantment

While many accounts of modernity represent it as a disenchanted condition, the notion of disenchantment itself is in fact poorly theorized. Indeed, the literature on modernity has focused much more pointedly on processes of rationalization and secularization, with accounts of disenchantment operating almost as an afterthought. Michael Saler and Richard Jenkins number among the few scholars to have addressed this gap. Saler sets the context of his account of modern enchantment, which I detail in Chapter One, by observing that by the disenchantment of the world Max Weber meant

> the loss of the overarching meanings, animistic connections, magical expectations, and spiritual explanations that had characterised the traditional world, as results of ongoing 'modern' processes of rationalisation, secularisation, and bureaucratisation. (Saler 2006, p. 695)

Jenkins describes Weber's notion of disenchantment as

> [t]he historical process by which the natural world and all areas of human experience become experienced and understood as less mysterious; defined, at least in principle, as knowable, predictable and manipulable by humans; conquered and incorporated into the interpretative schema of science and rational government. (Jenkins 2000, p. 12)

Jenkins makes the important point that secularization and disenchantment are not the same, although they are often confused and conflated (Jenkins 2000, p. 19). David Lyons observes that secularization originally described the transfer to the state of properties once owned by organized religion. In modernization theory, this historical loss of religious influence in Western Europe "was generalised into a theory that viewed societies as increasingly marked by a mutual exclusion of religion and modernity" (Lyon 2000, p. 22). Anthony Giddens reflects this view of secularization when he argues that "most of the situations of modern social life are manifestly incompatible with religion as a pervasive influence on day-to-day life" (Giddens 1990, p. 109, cited in Lyon 2000, p. 22). The categorical difference between secularization and disenchantment is highlighted by the fact that the two poles of the modern, ostensibly secularized world—namely, organized religion and non-religious secularism—are both equally critical of magical forms of enchantment. While secularist critics represent supernatural ritual as a superstitious residue of premodernity that holds society back from attaining rational scientific modernity, religious doctrinalists often see it as a form of heresy that needs to be expunged to attain pure and true religious insight.

Raymond Lee and Susan Ackerman propose that re-enchantment, which they relate to notions of charisma, emerges from an exhaustion of the project of rationalizing modernity in combination with romanticist challenges to processes of disenchantment: "[W]e conceptualise religious change in the new millennium as the reversibility of disenchantment" (Lee and Ackerman 2018, p. vii). However, Lee and Ackerman conflate the rise of magical cults, New Age shamanism and fundamentalist movements as all representing forms of re-enchantment. In this, they confuse two significantly different trends in modern religious change. It is important to differentiate the rise of anti-secularist, anti-magical forms of doctrinalism that emphasize scriptural sources of faith and aim to "purify" religion, on the one hand, from cults centred on magical ritual, on the other. In this study I restrict the notion of enchantment to the latter trend. Doctrinalism

is anti-secularist, but in its emphasis on the primacy of correct belief and uprooting both heresy and ritualism it cannot be characterized as reflecting a form of enchantment or re-enchantment. In contrast to Lee and Ackerman, I also argue that enchantment is produced out of the conditions of late modernity and is not an anti-modernist reaction.

I should also emphasize that this book is not a study of "re-enchantment" in Thailand. Modern Thai ritual life has never been secularized or disenchanted. Enchantment has never been purged or eliminated even from official practices. Rather, as detailed in Chapter Two, in the process of modernization following the influences of the imperial and neo-imperial West, magical rituals were often relegated to an informal or inferior sector of social life where they were overlooked or ignored by much past academic research. This study is of the further effervescence of magical enchantments in Thailand as a consequence of late-modern economic, media and other influences.

Jenkins astutely points out that while the claim that the modern world is increasingly disenchanted is a central tenet of Weberian sociology of religion, what enchantment in fact denotes as a category of sociological analysis is rarely if ever defined. This is perhaps because most sociologists have assumed that modernity has expunged enchantment from the contemporary world and hence it is not in need of being considered in detail. In this gap, Jenkins provides the following definition:

> Enchantment conjures up, and is rooted in, understandings and experiences of the world in which there is more to life than the material, the visible or the explainable; in which the philosophies and principles of Reason or rationality cannot by definition dream of the totality of life; in which the quotidian norms and routines of linear time and space are only part of the story; and in which the collective sum of sociability and belonging is elusively greater than its individual parts. (Jenkins 2000, p. 29)

Saler's definition of the disenchantment of modernity, cited above, also provides a basis for a counterpoint definition of modern enchantment as "the production of overarching meanings, animistic connections, magical expectations, and spiritual explanations" out of the sociological conditions and processes of modernity. Erick White (2014) argues that in Thailand the expansion of the market and urbanization have fostered novel religious movements based on new forms of charismatic authority. He offers what can be regarded as a practical definition of the production of modern enchantment in Thailand when he states that these new movements reflect "an efflorescence of diverse

and innovative models of religious personhood, devotional expression, esoteric mastery, and sacralising technique" (White 2014, p. 433).

Religion and Cults

As will be discussed in Chapter Two, as a result of Western influence in the region, Southeast Asian proponents of both secular and religious forms of modernity now maintain categorical distinctions between "magic", "supernaturalism" and "belief", on the one hand, and state-sanctioned and state-sponsored forms of "religion", on the other. In Thailand there is now a distinct set of discursive categories—*sasana*, *saiyasat*, *khwam-cheua*, *sattha*, *latthi*, *latthi-phithi*—that provide focuses for different sets of ideas and attitudes, and which also carry political and bureaucratic valence. Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière observes that many aspects of the ritual landscapes of mainland Southeast Asian societies remain under-examined because of a Buddhist-studies bias in the academy that emerged from the "contrast between religion and ritual that was historically produced in early modern Europe by the progressive differentiation of a properly religious field.… According to this view, actions that are not truly 'religious' in a given society are termed 'ritual'" (Brac de le Perrière 2017, p. 65).

Official and academic discourses in Thailand now distinguish between "magic" or the "supernatural", *saiyasat*, and "religion", *sasana*. *Saiyasat* involves the ritualistic invocation of supernatural power and includes magical rituals and practices. This broad term covers everything from protective amulets and tattoos to spirit mediumship, love potions and the worship of spirits inhabiting trees, mountains, termite mounds and freaks of nature, often believed able to predict lucky lottery numbers. Tambiah describes *saiyasat* as a "technology" (Tambiah 1977, p. 119), in the sense that it is a collective name for the instrumental knowledge of ritual. *Saiyasat* is often glossed as "animism" or "supernaturalism" by Western authors and is typically disparaged as "superstition", "mysticism" or "black magic" by both secular and religious critics in Thailand. Thai secularists critique *saiyasat* as being the opposite of scientific rational modernity, describing it as a "premodern residue" of "superstition" that they maintain holds Thailand back from becoming a fully modern society and polity. For their part, reformist Buddhists see *saiyasat* forms of supernaturalism as a perversion of orthodox religion, labelling it as a heretical or a superstitious "accretion" to true Buddhism. In summary, *saiyasat* is now the maligned other of both secular and religious expressions of modernity in Thailand.[1] Nonetheless, Craig Reynolds (2019, p. 152)

makes the important point that the technologies of *saiyasat* are not only available to subaltern groups and marginalized classes but also to state institutions. Despite being an object of critique, *saiyasat* is widely accessed by all social strata and is a central component of vernacular Buddhism accessed by elites as well as the general public.

A distinction between formally recognized institutional "religion" (*sasana*), on the one hand, and popular or "cultic ritual" (*latthi-phithi*), expressions of "belief" (*khwam-cheua*) and "faith" (*sattha*), on the other, is now also established in the discourses of the Thai academy and national bureaucracy. Buddhist monasteries and the Buddhist monkhood, as well as Islamic mosques and other places of worship, which collectively fall under the umbrella of the term *sasana* or "religion", are administered within the civilian bureaucracy by the Department of Religious Affairs (*krom kan-sasana*), which is located within the Ministry of Culture. In contrast, the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for the oversight of Chinese Taoist temples, Brahmanical shrines, and sites of ritual practice that are described as expressions of "belief" (*khwam-cheua*) and "faith" (*sattha*) rather than as forms of "religion" or *sasana*. That is, the discursive divide between religion and ritual is institutionalized within the bureaucratic structures of the modern Thai state.

Eugénie Mérieau (2018) notes that the term *latthi*, which she translates as "cult", appeared in a contradistinctive relation with *sasana* ("religion") in the first Thai constitution promulgated in the aftermath of the June 1932 revolution that overthrew the absolute monarchy and instituted a constitutional monarchy form of government. Article 13 of this constitution stated that "a person shall enjoy full liberty to profess a religion (*sasana*) or cult (*latthi*), and shall enjoy liberty to perform rites (*phithi*) according to his own belief, provided that it is not against the duty of Thai citizens or contrary to public order or good morals of the people" (Mérieau 2018, p. 12).[2] In his studies of the cults of wealth of King Chulalongkorn and Kuan Im, which I detail in Chapter Four, Nidhi Eeoseewong (1993, 1994) describes these movements with the neologism *latthi-phithi* ("doctrine-ritual"), which he glosses in English as "cult". Nidhi defines *latthi-phithi* as "a ritually rich religious doctrine which is not a part of the 'principles' (*lak-kan*) or orthodoxy of the dominant religion (*sasana*) adhered to by the majority of people" (Nidhi 1993, p. 11n). While "cult" at times has negative connotations in English, I use this term to describe the prosperity movements because it is the now preferred translation of *latthi-phithi* in Thai academic discourse. In contrast to Nidhi's characterization of

latthi-phithi as minority phenomena, however, I detail how the cults of wealth have moved from being unorthodox marginal ritual forms to become part of Thailand's cultural and religious mainstream. It should be noted, nonetheless, that *latthi-phithi* is used with negative connotations by some reformist Buddhists such as the clerical author *Phra* Phaisan Visalo, a well-known follower of the teachings of the philosopher monk Buddhadasa. In a book detailing what he sees as a series of crises confronting Thai Buddhism, *Phra* Phaisan laments that "cults" (*latthi-phithi*) are spreading like wildfire while "mainstream Buddhism is contracting and in decline" ([*Phra*] Phaisan 2003, p. 185). In his critique of the cults of wealth, *Phra* Phaisan observes,

> What is noteworthy about these cults (which tend to have laypersons as leaders) is that if they are not explicitly spirit medium cults then they have developed from such cults.… These cults have become widely popular because they are able to respond to the diverse desires of the middle class, which in general are desires for worldly success. ([*Phra*] Phaisan 2003, p. 185)

The Religious Field

In this study I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the religious field in characterizing the complexity of Buddhist and non-Buddhist teachings, ritual observances and material objects that constitute the totality of Thai religiosity. As White observes, Bourdieu conceptualized social and religious fields as "hierarchically structured arenas defined by social struggle over symbolic capital within a pluralistic field of associated competitors" (White 2014, p. 18). In his account of the religious field, however, Bourdieu argued that "most authors tend to accord to magic the characteristics of systems of practices and representations belonging to the least economically developed social formations or to the most disadvantaged social classes of class-divided societies" (Bourdieu 1991, p. 13). Bourdieu also continued to describe magic as a "survival" from the past (p. 13). The cults of wealth studied here present two significant contrasts to Bourdieu's account. First, I study modern magic among Thailand's elites and, second, I argue that magic is not a mere survival but rather is actively produced out of the conditions of modernity. I concur with White in distancing myself from a number of Bourdieu's assumptions, in particular "that religion is of declining importance in modernity,… that religion's principle social function is to naturalise inequality and differential power, and … that religion's main appeal to elites is to legitimate dominance and

its pleasures [while] its main appeal to non-elites is to compensate for domination and its suffering" (White 2014, p. 17n6).

Vernacular, Popular and Reformist Buddhism

This study focuses on aspects of the Thai religious amalgam that are often described as "popular Buddhism". This expression was coined by Anuman Rajadhon to denote religious forms in which animism and Buddhism together with elements of Brahmanism and Hinduism "have become intermingled in an inextricable degree" (Anuman 1968, p. 33, cited in Terwiel 2012, p. 2). Benjamin Baumann rephrases Stanley Tambiah's operative definition of Buddhism as "religious action in which monks officiate and participate" (Tambiah 1968, p. 43) to define Thai popular Buddhism as "religious practices in which monks are not the main incumbents—although they may be present" (Baumann 2017, p. 19). White regards Thai popular Buddhism as "a plural and contested relational milieu of competing religious authorities, actors, practices, ideologies and experiences" (White 2014, p. 357). He also observes that the modern efflorescence of religious phenomena outside the boundaries of the sangha or Buddhist monkhood "is diverse and far exceeds any simple designation of Thai popular Buddhism as centred on the magical, the supernatural, the apotropaic or the cultic" (White 2014, p. 294).

While earlier generations of scholars used terms such as "folk Buddhism" and "folk religion" to describe the Thai religious complex, it is now more common to use notions of "popular Buddhism" and "popular religion" because they link religion with popular culture as a form of everyday practice integrally related to the market and media. Pattana Kitiarsa (2012) notes that there is no Thai term equivalent to "popular Buddhism", although the expression *phuttha phanit* ("commodified Buddhism" or "commerce in Buddhism") is used, typically in a derogatory sense, to refer to the commercialization of Buddhism. The cults of wealth studied here fall within the scope of both the English expression "popular Buddhism" and the Thai notion of *phuttha phanit*, and in this study I use "popular" to also refer to non-state culture in marketized, mediatized settings. This contrasts with the term "folk", which tends to imply cultural forms in rural settings, and "official", which denotes cultural expressions that are promoted or supported by state actors and agencies.

Nonetheless, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière (2009, p. 192) warns that the term "popular religion" in the context of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia may at times be misleading because some rituals

overlap with royal and elite religious practice and are not restricted to those from lower socio-economic strata. Indeed, as detailed in the following chapters, the participation of Thai elites, as well as ordinary people from all walks of life, is a notable feature of the cross-class appeal of the cults of wealth. Furthermore, many of the structural features of the cults of wealth are also characteristic of royal religious practice in Thailand. Given this, I use "popular" to denote the mass religion of the marketplace, while I use "vernacular" to refer to the totality of the Thai religious field, including folk (rural), popular (urban) and official (royal) forms of religious observance that include magical rituals conducted by monks as well as those that are practised outside Buddhist monasteries and conducted by non-monastic religious specialists. This use of "vernacular" draws from and engages White's (2022) use of the expression "vernacular religiosity" in Southeast Asia.

Popular and vernacular Buddhism are here also contrasted with "reform Buddhism" or "reformist Buddhism". Heinz Bechert (1994) also calls reformist Buddhism "Buddhist Modernism", which involves a demythologization of Buddhist teachings, the view that Buddhism is a philosophy that makes it compatible with modern science, and an expanding role of the laity in Buddhist affairs (cited in Preedee 2018, p. 224). Bechert defines the demythologization of Buddhism as the use of early scriptural sources "combined with a modernisation of concepts of cosmology and a symbolic interpretation of traditional myths which were customarily associated with Buddhism" (Bechert 1994, pp. 254–56, cited in Preedee 2018, p. 249n66). Clifford Geertz described the modern rationalization of religion as involving the systematization of doctrine, the intensification of religious concern and the expansion of formal religious organizations (Geertz 1973, p. 187, cited in Gottowik 2014, p. 17). In contrast to reformist and rationalized forms of Buddhism, this study considers the modern enchantment of Thai religiosity in the absence of a systematic doctrine and without formal religious organizations.

Magic

There is no general agreement on what "religion" and "magic" respectively constitute as either sociological phenomena or analytical categories. Indeed, some anthropologists and religious studies scholars have debated whether the Western distinctions between "religion", the "supernatural" and "magic" are valid in understanding the complex forms of religious expression and ritual found in Southeast Asia. White observes that the notion of "magic" is often a negative remainder

category for phenomena that fall outside of religion or science, being used to describe "an intellectual wastebasket filled with logically unrelated leftovers sharing little collective substantive or definitional similarity" (White 2016, p. 3). What comes to be labelled as magic is "heterogeneous, diverse, and unstable", made evident by the "repeated inability to conceptually distinguish between religion and magic in a clear, convincing, or consistent manner" (p. 3). Furthermore, the term magic often operates as "a polemical weapon of rhetorical disparagement in the service of context-specific claims to power, control, authority, and legitimacy" (p. 3). Bourdieu similarly argues that magic came to be used as a derogatory term to describe older religious forms in settings of hierarchy and contestation:

> [A] system of practices and beliefs is made to appear as *magic* or *sorcery*, an inferior religion, whenever it occupies a dominated position in the structure of relations of symbolic power.... Thus, the appearance of a religious ideology relegates ancient myths to the state of magic or sorcery. As Weber notes, it is the suppression of one religion, under the influence of a political or ecclesiastical power, to the advantage of another religion, reducing the ancient gods to the rank of demons, that usually gave birth to the opposition between religion and magic. (Bourdieu 1991, p. 12; emphases in original)

White observes that in Buddhist studies both scholars and practitioners commonly use the term magic to refer to "spells and charms, amulets and talismans, potions and fumigants, numerology and divination, astrology and alchemy, the conjuring and expelling of evil spirits, necromancy and communication with deities, and sorcery and witchcraft" (White 2016, p. 4). As detailed above, in Thailand these diverse ritual forms are collectively called *saiyasat*, which I translate as "magic" in this study. What magical ritual arts share is forms of stylized action "designed to produce desired extraordinary consequences" (p. 5) in the world. Indeed, magical ritual action is designed "to access, channel, control, and manipulate otherwise hidden extraordinary potencies and powers" in the service of often pragmatic and mundane goals (p. 5). Stanley Tambiah describes magic as ritual action that is held to be automatically effective: "Magical acts in their ideal forms are thought to have an intrinsic and automatic efficacy" (Tambiah 1990, p. 7). Raymond Lee similarly defines magic as "the ritualistic means of world mastery" (Lee 2010, p. 182).

White urges us to avoid the term magic because of its use as a marker of otherness in modernist discourses, contending that it is more appropriate to call these diverse phenomena "ritual arts of efficacy centered

on mundane, worldly concerns" (White 2016, p. 4). Nonetheless, White also observes that in an increasing number of studies magic has been relocated from the ambiguous margins of Buddhism to the substantive heart of the religion and that the conceptual vocabulary drawn upon in studying magic has "shifted to discussions of enchantment, the miraculous, ritual potency and other less pejorative interpretive frames" (pp. 12–13). While recognizing the pejorative connotations of magic in many modernist theoretical settings, I nevertheless use this term in this study precisely because of its capacity to challenge and unsettle views of modernity as a disenchanted condition. I use magic as a central term in the critiques developed here to argue that in many contemporary settings modernity is actively producing new magical imaginaries and rituals. As Bruce Kapferer (2002) observes, in the context of critiques of modernization theory, there has been a rehabilitation of magic in some fields of anthropology and religious studies. In summarizing the growing number of studies of modern magic, he notes that magic is increasingly viewed as a "hybrid form par excellence" that works in liminal spaces "at the boundaries and margins" (Kapferer 2002, p. 22). The rituals of modern magic "are frequently an amalgam of different forms" and are based on processes "of fusing or crossing different registers of meaning and reasoning. Such observations are problematic to a rationalizing approach" (p. 22). I draw extensively on this critical framing of modern magic in this study as well as Kapferer's contention that magic is a form of reason that appears in the modern world "in those spaces where other modes of reasoning have failed" (p. 8).

Ritual

While ritual, or ritualism, is disparaged as an inadequate or illegitimate form of observance in doctrine-centred views of religious modernity, I view ritual practice in positive terms in this book. Oscar Salemink observes,

> Ritual does not necessarily refer to religion in the narrow sense of the word, but to a formalization of behavior according to a particular script in a special time-space outside of the ordinary and everyday. In his classic work on ritual, Victor Turner focuses attention on this ritual time-space as liminal, that is, out of the ordinary, performative [*communitas*], governed by other rules of behavior than in everyday life (anti-structure), often mocking the everyday experience (inversion), and creating a sense of belonging for members of a particular group. In a context where ritual events

> are no longer clearly linked with traditional rites of passage or religious events, Catherine Bell (1992), Felicia Hughes-Freeland and Mary Crain (1998) prefer to speak of the ritualization of behavior, practices, or processes. Ritual always refers to boundaries, categories, and groups and therefore is a social phenomenon that concerns questions of identity and identification—giving a partial answer to the question 'who are we?' (Salemink 2008, p. 267)

For practitioners, the central criterion in assessing ritual practice is not epistemological. It is not a matter of demonstrating, instantiating or validating doctrine or belief. Rather, the key criterion in ritual cultures is performative; that is, whether a practice is regarded as therapeutically effective in healing or ensuring prosperity and whether it is dramatically and performatively convincing in its aesthetic presentation. As Salemink notes, the compelling and central aspects of ritual are "efficacy and aesthetic pleasure" (Salemink 2007, p. 570). For ritual to be viewed as being convincing, it must conform to cultural expectations and norms of drama and performance as well as being viewed as therapeutically efficacious. Salemink further observes that "[c]ompleting the ritual engenders enhanced well-being and confidence in the future on the part of participants. In the eyes of the followers, then, the efficacy of the ritual lies in the effects in response to the wishes—whether they be well-being, health or wealth" (Salemink 2010, p. 275). This view of the performative efficacy of ritual practice is an important element of the account of the making of modern enchantment that I develop in Chapter Seven.

Spirit Possession and Spirit Mediumship

Kirsten Endres notes that some anthropologists distinguish between spirit mediumship as the expected possession of a ritual specialist by a spirit or deity in contrast to spirit possession as "an unexpected, unwanted intrusion of the supernatural in the lives of humans" (Endres 2011, p. 76). This distinction is sometimes made because in some Southeast Asian settings, as Andrea Lauser reports from Vietnam, "only a controlled medium is possessed by the spirits, whereas uncontrolled possession is the sign of a ghost obsession" (Lauser 2018, p. 21). Following Erick White (personal communication) and Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière (personal communication), however, in this study I use "spirit possession" to refer to all phenomena in which a nonhuman agency temporarily occupies and takes control of the body and agency of a human being. This may include both positive adorcistic forms of possession as well as negative forms of possession that the affected

person, or those around them, seek to end through exorcism. Luc de Heusch (1962) coined the term "adorcism" to refer to ritual practices in which a possessed person placates, accommodates or invokes spiritual entities. It has a positive connotation and is contrasted with exorcism, which denotes the attempt to expel unwanted spirits from a possessed person. Jean-Michel Oughourlian (1991, p. 97) defines adorcism as "voluntary, desired, and curative possessions".

I use "spirit mediumship" to refer to forms of possession that are more frequent and regular, in which the identity of the possessing spirit is usually made clear and when communication with the spirit is more robust and multifaceted. Spirit mediumship also denotes situations in which the possessed person takes on and identifies with the social role of being a medium for a possessing entity and is an experience of possession that is valued positively. In this usage I follow White, who defines spirit mediumship as a clearly ascribed and recurring role of ritual specialists who act as intermediaries of an identified possessing deity and who identify with the possessing spirit (White 2014, p. 40n11). Spirit mediumship thus usually entails an emically recognized social and cultural role in addition to the phenomenological experience of possession. Spirit mediumship is more about the *ability to channel* spirits, while spirit possession refers to the broader *phenomenon* of being entered by spirits, whether in a positive or negative way.

Spirited Enchantment and Ghostly Haunting

Invited Spirits of Prosperity versus Unbidden Ghosts

Some film studies and cultural studies accounts of the persistence of belief in and representations of ghosts and the supernatural in contemporary global cultures have drawn on the notion of modernity as being haunted. These accounts employ psychoanalytic metaphors in which modernity is imagined as entailing a series of exclusions of premodern discourses and practices, which, on the model of Freud's theory of the return of the repressed, return to haunt ostensibly secular modernity in the form of persistent accounts and cinematic representations of ghosts and demons (for example, see Johnson 2014; Fuhrmann 2016). In his account of the revival of the genre of Thai horror films in the early 2000s, Adam Knee describes ghost films as "dealing with the return of the past in supernatural form" (Knee 2005, p. 141). In analysing contemporary Thai horror films, Pattana Kitiarsa argues that "ghosts need to be taken seriously as an analytic category of modernity" (Pattana 2011, p. 202), contending that

> [g]hosts and their ghostly presence are the products of modern social marginalisation, made in and through the modernisation process. Ghosts appear and make their presence felt at the various margins of both real and imagined modern social worlds. Thai horror films of late show emotional and intimate sides of modernity, suggesting that modernity has produced a marginalising dark side. (Pattana 2011, p. 202)

These film studies analyses of ghost and horror movies also draw on the notion of the uncanny. The uncanny is mysterious, at once strange and familiar, being a situation of both familiarity and threat manifesting through the same person, object or event. Freud argued that the things we find the most terrifying appear so because they once seemed familiar: "[F]or this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something that is familiar and old fashioned in the mind and which has become alienated from it through the process of repression" (Freud 1955, p. 364, cited in Israeli 2005, p. 381). Ghostly and uncanny hauntings are indeed one dimension of the field of Thai popular and vernacular religion. But the cults of wealth studied here do not conform to this view of modernity as being haunted by unwanted spirits of its premodern past. The notion of the uncanny—the unsettling return of that which one thought had been overcome—does not fully capture the empirical setting of a modernity in which magic has emerged more strongly than ever in affirmative and adorcistic rather than unsettling ways. In contrast to ghosts, which are typically seen as unwanted and potentially harmful visitations that need to be exorcised, the spirits that are invoked in the magical cults of wealth and associated spirit possession rituals are invited to speak and are actively sought out for their other-worldly wisdom to guide and assist human beings. The spirit mediumship that is a central ritual form associated with the cults of wealth is not an engagement with demons or the monstrous but, on the contrary, aims to bring the supernatural into the human realm so that its special powers can be used to benefit the living. The inhabitants of the spirit world are invoked because it is believed they know more about our world than we do ourselves, and it is their wisdom and supernatural insight that human followers seek to benefit from.

The efflorescence of Thai magical cults of wealth does not reflect the return of a repressed premodernity. As White argues, it is mistaken to "interpret the efflorescence of popular Buddhism as primarily the resurgence of a previously repressed syncretic heritage or polytropic sensibility" (White 2014, p. 194). Rather, we are seeing completely novel formulations of enchanted religiosity. The cults of wealth have emerged from a further working out of the cultural logic of modernity,

of the productive capacity of market-based techno-capitalist rationality that, when taken to its logical conclusion, produces seemingly non-rational results. This is not an irruption of repressed unreason. To understand Thai magical cults of wealth we do not need a negative notion of modernity as being haunted. Rather, we need a positive theory of enchantment that imagines magic in a productive relationship with modernity. I develop an account of the production of enchantment in modernity in Chapter Seven.

In the Thai context, Pattana describes ghosts as "angry, vengeful or malevolent spirits of a dead person" (Pattana 2011, p. 203) and he notes that Thailand has a diverse range of ghosts and terms for them, including "demon (*pisat*), ever-hungry ghoul (*pret*), malevolent, internal-organ-consuming spirit (*phi pop*), and monster/zombie (*phi dip*)" (p. 203). In the past, the generic term *phi* was used, often in combination with a variety of qualifying expressions, to denote both spirits whose presence is sought out in adorcistic rituals as well as ghosts whose haunting presence was regarded as needing to be exorcized. In recent decades, however, spirits whose presence is actively sought out in the cults of wealth have largely come to be known by the Sanskrit/Pali-derived term *thep* (from the Sanskrit *deva*) and the royal term *jao* ("lord"), with *phi* now largely implying "vernacular perceptions of ghostly presence and uncanny haunting" (p. 203). White (2014) regards this discursive shift and relabelling of spirits as *thep* and *jao* in adorcistic rituals as part of a process of "upgrading" spirit beliefs and rituals in contemporary urban Thailand.

There is one sense, however, in which accounts of the haunting of modernity do capture the epistemological and theoretical imperative to develop positive accounts of the enchantment of the modern world. As Saler argues, enchantment is part of our normal condition, "and far from having fled with the rise of science, it continues to exist (though often unrecognised) wherever our capacity to explain the world's behaviour is slim, that is, where neither science nor practical knowledge seem of much utility" (Saler 2006, p. 716). He concludes that the discourse of modernity as being disenchanted is "a haunting presence that will not cease to disturb our thoughts until it is reunited with its antinomial partner, 'modern enchantment'" (p. 716).

Fundamentalism

Some accounts of fundamentalism describe it as an anti-modern form of religious expression. For example, Lee and Ackerman describe fundamentalisms as exhibiting "a deep-seated antagonism against

the symbols of modernity" (2018, p. 54). In contrast, however, I view the fundamentalist emphasis upon doctrinal purity and rebuilding society from scriptural first principles as betraying distinctly modern preoccupations with purifying belief and a rationalizing reconstruction of knowledge and social life. In this I follow Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, who regard fundamentalism as reflecting the strategies

> by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a people or group. Feeling this identity to be at risk in the contemporary era, they fortify it by a selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs, and practices from a sacred past… [R]eligious identity thus renewed becomes the exclusive and absolute basis for a recreated political and social order that is oriented to the future rather than the past. By selecting elements of tradition and modernity, fundamentalists seek to remake the world… (Marty and Appleby 1991, p. 835)

As Charles Keyes et al. point out, fundamentalism is radically opposed to the complexity and hybridity of the enchanted imaginaries that underpin magical ritual: "Fundamentalists point to an authority found in scriptures in order to undermine religious pluralism" (Keyes et al. 1994, p. 12). This trenchant opposition to the pluralism of magical ritual reflects the emphasis on purity that Latour (1993) identifies as a key tenet of purifying ideologies of modernity.

Neoliberalism

Capitalism has developed through several historical phases. This study focuses on capitalism in its neoliberal form, which came to dominate transnational economic and political life in the decades after the end of the Cold War. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as

> a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can be best advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (Harvey 2005, p. 2)

Sherry Ortner observes that while much work has represented neoliberalism as a new and more brutal form of capitalism that has expanded rapidly across the world, anthropologists have also documented "creative adaptations to neoliberalism, as well as resistance movements against it" (Ortner 2016, p. 48). The cults of wealth studied in this book are indeed notable creative adaptations to the neoliberal order in post–Cold War Thailand.

Notes

1. Despite its centrality in Thai discourses of religion, ritual and magic, the term *saiyasat* has a somewhat obscure history. Peter Skilling describes an inscription from Kamphaeng Phet in north central Thailand dated to 1510 CE (BE 2053) that records the meritorious deeds of the ruler of that state, *Chao Phraya* Dharmās'okarāja, and includes one of the earliest references to the term *saiyasat*, which in the inscription has a Sanskritized spelling as *saiyasāṣaṇā* (Skilling 2009, p. 187, citing Prasert and Griswold 1992, pp. 625–40). Skilling notes that George Coedès regarded the term *saiyasāṣaṇā* to derive from the Pali *seyyasāsana*, literally "the excellent religion" (Coedès 1924, p. 159n1, cited in Skilling 2009, p. 187), which in turn derived from the Sanskrit *s'reyas*, "excellent", "superior". Skilling observes that the term *s'reya-s'āsanā* does not exist in Indian Sanskrit literature and its Pali form *seyya-sāsanā* is not known in the Theravada Buddhist literature that derives from Sri Lanka. He adds that while *sāsanā* is the final element of the compound term in this inscription, it would have been pronounced in Thai as *sāt*—that is, *saiya-sat*—and thus would have been a homophone of a compound formed from the Sanskrit term *s'āstra* meaning "text" or "teaching". Later, and indeed modern, Thai spellings of *saiyasat* are based on the Sanskrit term *s'āstra*, with *saiy* subsequently coming to mean magic and sorcery in the later Ayutthaya and Bangkok periods. Skilling observes that significantly more work needs to be undertaken on the origins and development of indigenous Sanskrit- and Pali-derived terms for Buddhism and Brahmanism in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.
2. Mérieau notes that this section of the 1932 Siamese constitution closely follows the form of religious freedom enshrined in the 1889 Japanese constitution (Mérieau 2018, p. 12n78).