



SELECTED SEMINAR PAPERS

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Animism in the Arts of Southeast Asia



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Introduction



The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO SPAFA) in collaboration with the Thai Khadi Research Institute at Thammasat University is pleased to present this selection of papers from the Seminar on Animism in the Arts of Southeast Asia, which was held on 8 and 9 August 2019 at Thammasat University, Bangkok. This seminar is the fifth and final seminar on our series of arts in the major religions of Southeast Asia which have been organised since 2012 under the Sacred Universe Flagship programme instituted by Dr. M R Rujaya Abhakorn, the former Centre Director of SEAMEO SPAFA.

The main aim of this seminar was to provide a platform for discourse, where academics and professionals from relevant fields including archaeology, anthropology, museology, and even theatre, could share their insights and knowledge relating to Animism in the arts of Southeast Asia. This volume includes the presentations, in essay form, from Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia and Myanmar. Due to some logistical difficulties, we were unable to include all the presentations in this volume, but their abstracts are also included in this volume and their presentations from Cambodia, Laos, Singapore and Brunei may still be accessed on the SEAMEO SPAFA YouTube channel.

Animism encompasses the belief that objects, sacred places, animals and natural phenomena possess a distinct spiritual essence. Animistic beliefs and practices are ingrained in the fabric of Southeast Asian societies and continue to persist in today's spiritual practices, regardless of the dominant religions. Such beliefs continue to be a crucial force in the religious lives of Southeast Asians and provide significant inspiration for various art forms within the region. The papers published here are a testament to the variety of artistic forms, ranging from sacred textiles to ritual healing performances, and globalisation and its effect on changing and shaping the arts and cultures of Southeast Asia - a common theme that runs through each paper.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our speakers, staff and all participants who made this seminar a success. We hope this volume is a valuable introduction into the various spiritual traditions of Southeast Asia.

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Animism in Vietnamese Folk Art

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Abstract

Vietnam's long historical belief in Animism together with ancestor worship, Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism has had a tremendous influence on the country's religious folk art. It has become a kind of syncretic art; an amalgamation of artistic influences from all religions practised in Vietnam today. The distinction between secular and sacred art is not so clearly made in Vietnam as it is in other countries, such as those with predominantly Christian, Buddhist, Hindu or Islamic societies. This paper examines the historical contexts and the influence of animism in Vietnamese folk art. It also explores how Vietnamese folk art has been shaped by animism and how the arts changed during a period of economic development and modernisation, known as "Doi-Moi", in Vietnam after 1986.

Introduction

Animism is one of the earliest faiths in Vietnam. It still exists today, maintaining the concept that all objects and phenomena have souls. E. B. Tylor (1871) viewed animism as the belief in spirits that inhabit or are identified with parts of the natural world, such as rocks, trees, rivers and mountains. In his well-known book, *Primitive Culture*, Tylor asserted that in primitive societies matter contains a soul and spirit that come to inhabit "dead" objects. Tylor's animism "represented an early form of religion, one which preceded theistic religions in the evolution of "primitive thought" (1871: 426). The term is sometimes used loosely to cover the religious beliefs of indigenous groups in, for example, Africa and North America, prior to the introduction of Christianity, and is still widely used to describe the religious practice of so-called tribal or indigenous groups in areas like Southeast Asia (Barnard & Spencer 2002: 891). In the late 19th and early 20th century, Vietnamese scholars understood the term 'animism' through Western learning, meanwhile the Chinese translated the term as fanlinglun/泛靈論 and assumed that "all things possess a spiritual essence" (wan wu yun you ling xing/萬物均有靈性)¹.

¹ Like Vietnam, China was also open to Western science during this period, thus the translation of "animism" into Vietnamese or Chinese from French are the same.

Animism, together with ancestor worship, Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism, forms a complex syncretisation of religions in Vietnamese culture. This religious syncretism² has also had a heavy influence on Vietnam's folk art, especially with artistic forms that relate to religious rituals. Therefore, a study of animism in Vietnam will help us access these "variants" of Taoism and Buddhism, which are quite different from Taoism in China and Buddhism in India. This syncretism is an important feature that makes religious beliefs in Vietnam extremely complicated, so much so that the think tank, PEW Research Center, listed Vietnam as a "folk religious country" in 2010, and a country with "no clear [religious] majority" in 2012 (fig. 1). A prominent characteristic of Vietnamese culture is its amalgamation of various religions and beliefs. The different religions and beliefs, featuring numerous gods from, for example, Buddhism, Taoism, cult ancestry and animism, are all worshipped without discrimination. As a result this religious syncretism has produced a vivid artistic folk culture in Vietnam.

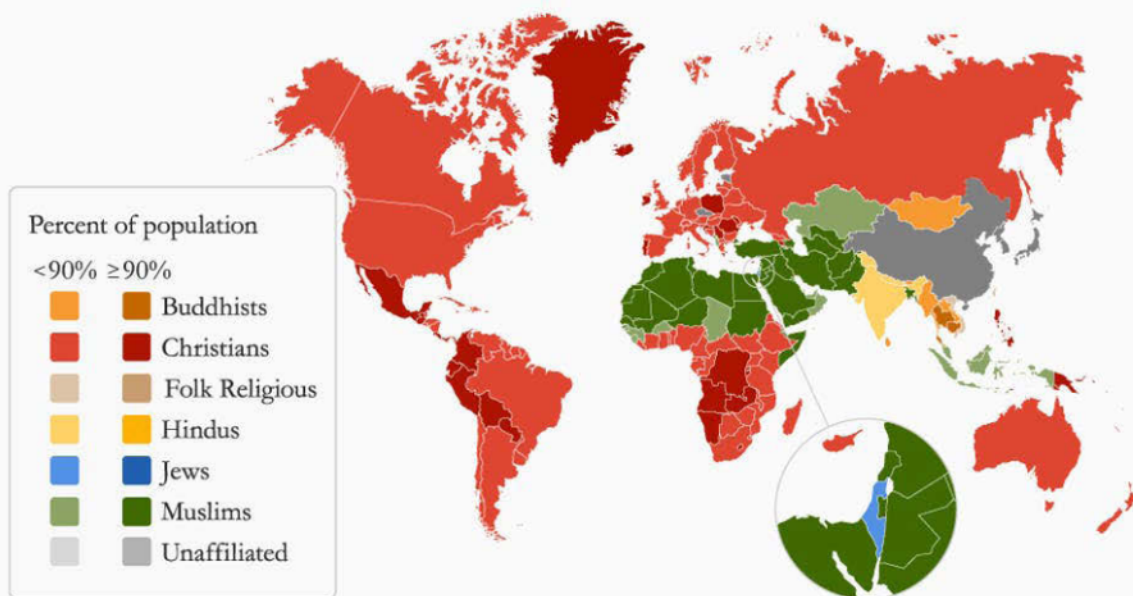
It is important to note that animism is considered an amoral belief system, making it difficult for people to exploit its edifications like in other religions. Therefore, to survey influences of animism in the religious life of Vietnam, folk art is a suitable field of study. Through Vietnamese folk art, it is possible to make a comparative analysis of animism in Southeast Asian culture because Vietnam plays a role in bridging Sino-Indian cross-cultural processes that have occurred throughout the history of Southeast Asia.

Vietnamese folk art today marks a diverse convergence between indigenous Southeast Asian cultures and other cultures in the confluence of globalisation. Modern adaptations of animism have created a number of new cultural elements that are expressed in its folk art. Studying these elements in present-day Vietnam will provide us with another perspective on the role of animism in the 21st century, for example, its reverse impact on orthodox religions as a result of the popularisation and deification of secular phenomena (the secularisation of sacred elements through commodification occurs even in dominant religions like Buddhism or Taoism). This paper examines the historical contexts and the influence of animism in Vietnamese folk art. It also explores how Vietnamese folk art has been shaped by animism and how the arts changed during a period of economic development and modernisation, known as "Đổi Mới", in Vietnam after 1986.

² According to Lamont Lindstrom, syncretism refers to the hybridisation or amalgamation of two or more cultural traditions. However, all cultures comprise of a variety of diffused and borrowed elements (Barnard & Spencer 2002: 812).

The largest religious groups worldwide

Largest religions by country in 2010 (darker colour represents greater prevalence)



@StatistaCharts

Source: Pew Research Center

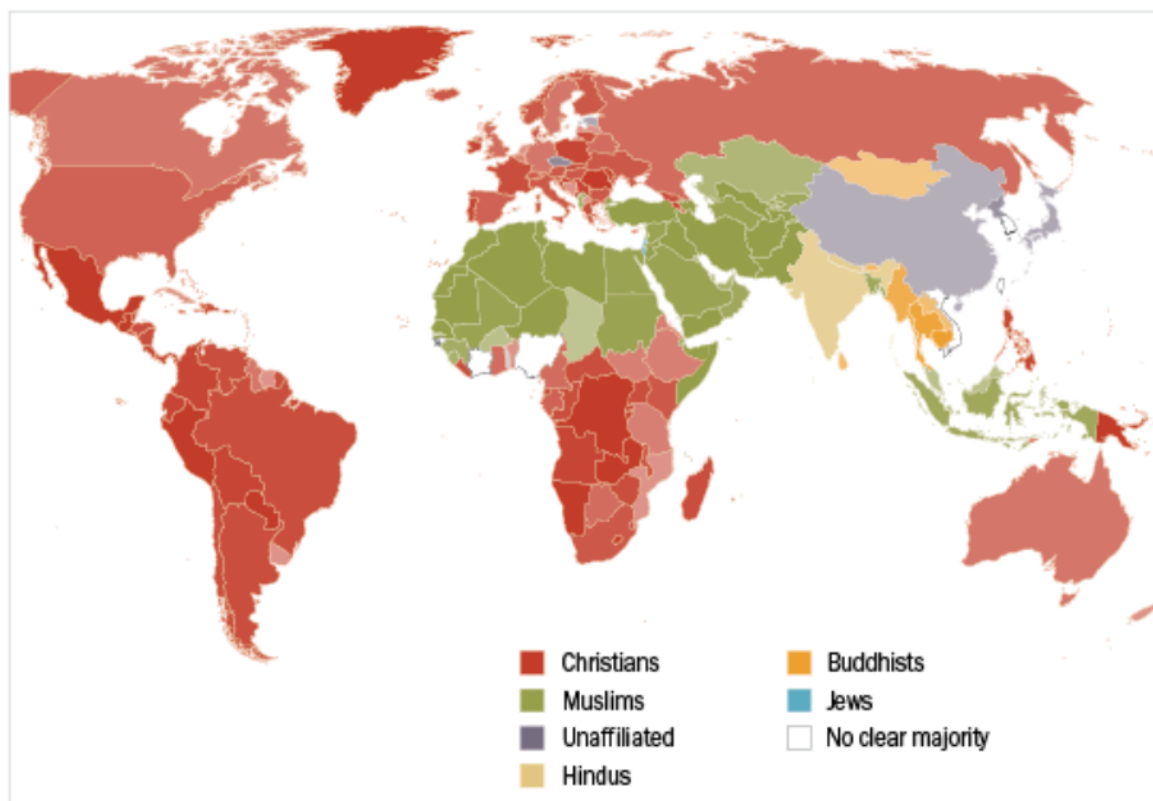


INDEPENDENT

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Majority Religion, by Country

Countries are colored according to the majority religion. Darker shading represents a greater prevalence of the majority religion.



Nine countries have no clear religious majority: Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Macau, Nigeria, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Togo and Vietnam. There are no countries in which adherents of folk religions make up a clear majority. There are also no countries in which followers of other religions (such as Bahai's, Jains, Sikhs, Shintoists, Taoists, followers of Tenrikyo, Wiccans or Zoroastrians) make up a clear majority.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life • Global Religious Landscape, December 2012

Figure 1. Vietnam moves from a largely "folk religious" country in 2010 (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/what-are-the-largest-religious-groups-around-the-world-and-where-are-they-a6982706.html>) to a "no clear majority country" in 2012 (<https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>).

Animism in Western Academia

Though considered a “primitive” faith in history, it was not till the late 19th century when studies on animism became prominent in Western academia. Major studies were carried out by anthropologists Edward B. Tylor (1871), James G. Frazer (1890), Lucient Levy-Bruhl (1938), and Philippe Descola (1996; 2013). The term “animism” was reintroduced as common use by Tylor (1871) in *Primitive Culture*. Though animism attracted great attention within the field of anthropology, it has not been a focus of interest for other disciplines like history, philosophy or theology. These specialities pay attention to fundamental viewpoints rather than folk beliefs found in animism. Moreover, animism was considered a pagan or heretical belief system.

Tylor (1871) asserts that the human soul was the basis for early forms of religion and the common model for all other religions, while Durkheim (1915) in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* assumed that religions originated from totems. Frazer (1890) held a similar point of view to Durkheim in *The Golden Bough*. Another well-known scientist, Levy-Bruhn (1938), presented in *The Mystic Experience and Primitive Symbolism* a “non-primitive” angle to animism by considering “primitive” religions as symbols. From the mid-20th century, these standpoints were gradually tempered by cultural relativism – the idea that a person’s beliefs and practices should be understood based on that person’s own culture and not against that of another. Accordingly, owners of supposedly “primitive cultures” (tribes found in Asia, Africa, America or in the Pacific) were now considered intellectually, scientifically and artistically on counterpoise with Europe. Most studies on animism since the second half of the 20th century followed this direction.

Philippe Descola (1996: 13) defines “animic” variation as a mode of identification. “Animism can be specified by, at least, three dominant modes of relation: predation, reciprocity and protection”. Descola asserts that “of all the modes of identification, naturalism is obviously the more familiar to us, even if some of its expressions result in antinomies and are thus condemned to remain in the domain of utopia” (op.cit. 16-17). He also recognised animism as a combination of *Man and Nature*. Descola’s viewpoint was expressed consistently in many of his studies, especially in *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013). It is possible to conclude from Tylor’s “primitive” concept to Descola’s “animic” variation that there was an evolution of consciousness: human beings live with nature and explore nature in order to understand that their interrelation with nature must be a *combination* of nature and culture and the manifestation of animism is seen through “animic” variations.

From the perspective of Western monotheistic religions, animism is considered a pagan religion. However, from an anthropological viewpoint, animism is related to numerous existing beliefs, such as incantations, taboos, shamanism, cult worship or pantheism that “what has been called ‘animism’ in the West is actually a theological collision of worldviews between Christendom and Indigenous Peoples. A defining feature of what is now referred to as “Indigenous Peoples” and what we have called their ‘religion’ is their understanding that all beings comprising the network of life are sacred-animated by human and nonhuman persons” (Arnold et al, 2018: xii). Thus, the presence of animism and syncretism in Vietnamese culture is clear evidence of animic variation.

Concepts, Classification and some Typical Forms of Animism in Vietnam

Concepts of Animism in Vietnam

Before the French laid the foundations of “Western teaching” in Indochina, Vietnamese bureaucrats and the academic class were not familiar with the term “animism” as coined by Tylor (1871). Instead, the Vietnamese used the terms *linh vật* or *vật thiêng* to refer to material and immaterial cultural and natural phenomena such as animals, tools, weapons and objects. Believing that souls can bring about bad or good luck to the living, believers would try their best to satisfy these souls by performing rituals dutifully so as not to anger them and to avoid any danger. This fact shows the amorality of animism in Vietnamese culture in which diseases and death are associated with souls and therefore, treatments are made to appease souls rather than cure patients.

Animism or folk belief in Vietnam consists of various ritual elements from Taoism and Buddhism. One of the most famous animistic practices is that of “*cúng cô hồn*”, the presentation of votive offerings to wandering souls on the 7th lunar month. At present, offerings for this occasion are not only restricted to votives, food and incense but also iPhones, cars, villas, and appliances. These items reflect the existence of modern day animistic worship with new contemporary forms of art. Animism has strong vitality in Vietnamese culture where folk art is abundant and there are cross influences between Buddhism, Taoism and Animism. The Vietnamese expect peace, contentment and good fortune by worshipping everything that could possibly lead to it; consequently it is no surprise that such beliefs are reflected in their art, underlied by the concepts “worship leads to blessings, anticipation brings about good luck” (có thờ có thiêng, có kiêng có lành) or “banyan trees have deities, cotton trees have ghosts” (thần cây đa, ma cây gạo). To obtain support from souls, believers need guidance from intermediaries (shamans or sorcerers). These intermediaries play an important role and possess power as well

as special influence on the believers' spiritual life and ritual practice. The sacrifice of effigies (*cúng hình nhân thể mạng*), the consecration to relieve bad luck (*dâng sao giải hạn*) or making offerings to souls (*cúng vong*) in funerals are conducted by these intermediaries.

Classification of Animist Objects in Vietnam

Tylor's term "animism" is translated in Vietnamese as "*Thuyết Vật linh/vạn vật hữu linh*" (which literally means: everything has a soul). However, "*vạn vật hữu linh*" is an abstract concept that is difficult for the layman to understand. Therefore, to better appreciate it, we need to classify animist objects. *Table 1* presents a list of animistic objects commonly found in Vietnamese folk art, which have coexisted or have been influenced by popular religions and beliefs in Vietnam. These objects have helped to shape and influence people's spiritual lives and Vietnamese folk art considerably. The objects include: Deities; Humans; Animals; Objects/Forms; Offerings. They are represented abundantly in Vietnamese folk art and will be discussed in detail in the next section in relation to ancestor worship, the sacrifice of effigies, the cult of dead animals and genital worship. Animistic beliefs that have recently appeared in Vietnam will be discussed in the last section of this paper under: Changes to Animism in Vietnamese folk art in the post-"Đổi-Mới" period.

Table 1. Classification of animist objects in Vietnamese folk art.

| | Deity | Human | Animal | Natural Phenomena/ Objects | Offering |
|---------------------------------|--|---|--|--|--|
| Animist objects | Sacred sculptures, tablets | Human remains | Sacred animals | Sacred objects, sacred trees, ritual poles, natural facts, talisman, amulet, etc. | Votive Offerings |
| Vietnamese names | <i>Tượng thờ, bài vị</i> | <i>Nhục thân, xương, xá lị</i> | <i>Các con vật linh/linh vật</i> | <i>Vật thiêng, đồ tế khí, cây thiêng, cột lễ, cây nêu</i> | <i>Vật phẩm dâng cúng</i> |
| Natural/ Human Phenomena | Sculptures, tablets | Mummified body, bone, relic, soul | Dragon, unicorn, turtle, phoenix, lion, elephant, tiger | Stone, water, caves, votive objects, human sacrifices, artifacts, trees, ritual poles, holy mountain, sacred forest, sun, moon, thunder | Meat, boiled chicken, banana, flower, fruits, betel and areca, alcohol, incense sticks |
| Art objects | Temples, shrines, worship and ritual places and activities | Altars, cemeteries, graves, tombs, stupas, coffins, ritual houses | Man-made mascot and sacred animal such as <i>Tứ linh</i> (four holy animals) | Worship objects, natural trees, decorative and worshipping poles, natural objects at the special locations, natural landscapes, holy lands | <i>Ngũ quả</i> (five kinds of worship fruits), <i>xôi-gà</i> (boiled chicken and sticky rice), and many kind of votive offerings |

Specific Forms of Animism in Vietnam

Ancestor Worship. Ancestor worship is particularly common in Vietnam³. The “residence” of the dead is called “chín suối” (long-lasting habitat or its literal meaning, “nine springs”). The ceremonials in commemoration of the dead (*lâm giỗ*) are performed annually on the day of a person’s death. Since 1995, according to surveys conducted by the Institution of Religious Studies on religions in Vietnam, “the Vietnamese people who practice the worship of ancestry account for an annual average of 98%. Filial duty to ancestors is fulfilled through Buddhist requiems; in a funeral, Buddhist monks are invited to read prayers so that the dead person can be free from suffering; on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month (*ngày lễ Vu Lan*), people go to Buddhist pagodas to pray for their dead parents. The Vu Lan festival, in the view of Buddhist followers, is the day of general amnesty, during which people should do good things so that their dead parents are blessed in the other world” (Lê Đức Hạnh 2016: 98).

According to Leopold Cardier (2015: 57), “immortal ancestors that appear in daily life are not a cliché or figure of imagination but a certain fact, because ancestor worship is the most popular worship amongst the Vietnamese”. This is the main reason why they worship at the same place called *nhà thờ họ* (clan worshiping place) for three, five or even ten generations. This form of worship is the most important kind in comparison to other existing religions in Vietnam.

In traditional Vietnamese culture, humans are made up of two parts: the body (*xác*) and the soul (*hồn*). When “the soul leaves the body” (*hồn lìa khỏi xác*), a person is considered dead. After the death, the body is cremated but the soul will exist forever and can move from one body to another. There are good souls and bad ones (ghosts/devils – *ma/quỷ*), so the worship of souls aims to keep good souls and drive bad ones away. This form of belief has existed for a long time in the traditional culture of Vietnam and is related to most of the objects mentioned above (through concepts of gods, soul-body, sacred objects, and votive offerings). It is possible to say that the belief in the soul in ancestor worship is one of the most typical forms of animism in Vietnam. Over time, the cult has been expanded to cover a hierarchy of “general ancestors”, such as forefathers (*tổ tiên*), ancestral kings (*tổ vương*) and holy mothers (*tổ mẫu*)⁴. At present, the belief has been nationalised and internationalised

³ According to Maurice Bloch, the term ‘ancestor’ is used in anthropology to designate those forebears who are remembered, and to denote specific religious practices of ‘ancestor cult’ or ‘ancestor worship’. Ancestor worship is a phrase used to denote religious practices concerned with the belief that dead forebears can in some way influence the living ((Barnard & Spencer 2002: 66-67).)

⁴ Further explored in Dinh Hong Hai (2018), *Các vị tổ* [Ancestors].

by some organisations and individuals both in the country and abroad to “invent” a new religion of the Vietnamese, which will be discussed in the last section: Influence of animism on present-day religious life and society in Vietnam.

Sacrifice, Immolation and the Use of Effigy. The sacrifice of animals, and offering their blood and cooked meat as votive offerings is a custom quite popular in Vietnam and Southeast Asia⁵. Together with other votive offerings such as, fruits, flowers, incense sticks, lamps, betel and areca nuts, these are some of the most popular and important offerings given during animist ceremonies in Vietnam. However, the custom now severely conflicts with Buddhist vegetarianism (*ăn chay*). In practicing the worship of ancestry, the choice of animal offerings (*cỗ mặn*) or vegetarian meals (*cỗ chay*) causes disagreement within the family itself. The sacrifice of human beings or human blood is evidenced through archaeological artifacts and historical documents dating as far back to the New Stone Age in many cultures throughout the world. It is believed that the custom is maintained among hunters and herders of central and north Asia, where evidence of remains from specific animals and parts of their bodies are used for sacrifice. In Vietnam, Pichon (2011) asserts in his book, *Les chasseurs de sang* (The Blood Hunters), that

this practice was maintained until the first half of the 20th century. Vestiges of human sacrifice in Vietnam are now found in the sacrifice of effigies (*hình nhân thế mạng*) (Figure 2)⁶. However, this practice has significantly changed, for example during the Mooncake Festival (the 7th lunar month) a number of artifacts and effigies are “burnt” as offerings for souls in the afterworld. The effigies are votive offerings and also substitutes for human sacrifices.



Figure 2. An effigy for a Sán Chay person (Photo by Đinh Hồng Hai, 2019).

⁵ Blood sacrifice is supposed to offer food to souls so that they would protect prosperity and keep the living healthy. This ritual is normally related to such events as birth, marriage, funeral, drought, war, claiming new land, building a new house, new crops, new harvests, etc.

⁶ The sacrifice of effigies is still carried out in line with traditional rituals in some ceremonies among ethnic groups like Nùng and Sán Chay in Vietnam.

Worship of Dead Animals. Some dead animals are also worshipped like higher beings with tomb and ceremonial rituals (figure 3a and 3b). However, they must be very special animals (whales, tigers, snakes), those of special interest (pets) or those that have died in special situations such as if in an accident or during sacred times (New Year Eve, Mid-Autumn Festival etc.). In Vietnamese culture, the worship of whales (*thờ cá Ông*) is a long-standing practice that still exists today. It is a specific cultural activity predominantly practised amongst coastal residents and associated with the well-known *Nghinh Ông* Festival (Whale Welcoming Festival). Whales are marine mammals that are believed to frequently save fishermen in storms at sea. In many legends and stories whales float on the sea's surface as sheet anchors for fishing-boats during hurricanes. Vietnamese fishermen adopt the date when they discovered a whale drifting ashore to celebrate its death (*lâm giỗ*). This primary anniversary is a premise to form and develop such ceremonies as the Whale Welcoming Festival in the 3rd lunar month in *Mân Thái* Village (*Đà Nẵng* City) or in the 6th lunar month in *Bến Tre* province⁷.



Figure 3a. Whale worship at Vạn Thủy Tú Communal House, Bình Thuận province (Photo by Dinh Hong Hai, 2018).



Figure 3b. Pets worship at Tề Đồng Vật Ngã Pagoda (Photo by Dinh Hong Hai, 2019).

Together with the worship of whales there appears to be a trend in pet worship in Vietnam. Thousands of dead pets have been buried, worshipped and commemorated in respect of their souls. The largest cemetery (approximately 2,000 square meters) in Viet Nam is *Tề Đồng Vật Ngã* Pagoda established by *Mr. Nguyễn Bảo Sinh* in Alley 167, *Trương Định* Street, *Hoàng Mai* District, Hanoi. At present, over 5,000 pets (mainly dogs and cats) are buried there. The establishment of *Tề Đồng Vật Ngã* Pagoda is noteworthy because eating dog and cat meat is a widespread phenomenon in Vietnam. Further study of this pagoda will be carried out in the future.

⁷ Traditionally, the man who discovers a ground whale is responsible for burying and going into mourning for it like for his parents. In 2019, fisherman *Trần Sáu* in *Bình An*, *Mũi Né* Ward (*Phan Thiết* City, *Bình Thuận*) found a whale, 14 m in length and 15 tons in weight. He buried it in line with rituals of fishermen in *Mũi Né* on 29 May 2019.

Figure 4a. Đào Thịnh Bronze Jar (Photo by Ngo Vuong Anh).



Figure 4b. Human copulation on Đào Thịnh Bronze Jar (Photo by Dinh Hong Hai, 2012).



Fertility and Genital Worship. Besides famous linga-yoni temples of the Cham in Vietnamese culture, fertility rituals still exist, such as Nỗ Nường, Trò Trám and Ná Nhèm where the objects of worship are genitalia (sinh thực khí; sinh = reproduction, thực = fertility, khí = tool). Fertility cults are intended to maintain and stimulate fertility not just in humans but in crops. In the conception of fertility (phồn thực; phồn = multiple, thực = fertility), this form of belief appears in two main categories in Vietnam: genital worship (thờ bộ phận sinh dục) and the cult of sexual intercourse (thờ hành vi giao phối). We find evidence suggesting a similar concept existed in the prehistoric material culture of northern-central Vietnam. Depicted on the Đào Thịnh Bronze Jar (a national treasure dating circa 2,000 years) are four couples engaged in sexual intercourse (Nguyễn Huy Minh, 2013) (Figure 4a and 4b).

Figure 5a. Ông Hiệu and cô Tướng in Gióng Festival (Photo by Dinh Hong Hai, 2015).



At present, in some national festivals like the Hùng Kings Temple Festival (inscribed into UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2012), there is a dance called "tùng dũ" depicting the sexual intercourse between young boys and girls. In rhythm to the beat of drums, dancers hold replicas of male and female genitalia. Another fertility festival, Gióng Festival, was inscribed into UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2011. It involves parading children who represent male and female gender (figure 5a). Genital worship still exists in Vietnamese folk culture today, but many changes have been made due to the boom in economics

and tourism. Thus we find the male genital form is depicted more explicitly during the Ná Nhèm Festival (figure 5b).

Figure 5b. Realistic male genital form in Trò Trám Festival (Photo by Hoang Anh)



Manifestations of Animism in Vietnamese Folk Art

It is not easy to obtain full statistics on the manifestations of animism in Vietnamese folk art due to their abundance and popularity in the cultural and spiritual lives of the Vietnamese. In Table 1, objects of worship were simply classified into deities, humans, animals, natural phenomena and offerings. This paper will now move on to an in-depth study of animistic objects that come under the five key groups - sacred sculpture, human remains, sacred animals, sacred natural phenomena, and votive offerings - found in Vietnamese folk arts.

Sacred Sculpture

There are many kinds of sacred sculpture in Vietnamese folk art, from simple earthen sculptures to sacred statues in temples of major religions like Buddhism or Taoism. Sacred sculptures play an important role in Vietnamese folk art, together with the existence and development of animism. There are three main categories of sacred sculpture: sculptures for worship (*tượng thờ*); decorative sculptures (*tượng trang trí*); and mixed sculptures (for worship and decoration). Sculptures for worship are sculptures of gods, deities, and saints placed in the sanctuaries of religious buildings that must be ritually sanctified. Decorative sculptures are objects inside and outside religious buildings (of dragon, lion, unicorn, tortoise, or phoenix) and sometimes flowers/plants/trees that are not used for ritual sanctification. Finally, there are sculptures for both decoration and worship, such as *linga-yoni*, lion, blue dragons and white tigers (*Thanh Long – Bạch Hổ*).

The advent of sacred sculptures in Vietnam was first mentioned in *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* (泐 X 扇譚渤 or 柿 X 扇譚渤, Collection of Stories on the Shady and Spiritual World of the Viet Realm) from the Lý Dynasty (1009-1225). Sacred sculptures experienced a prosperous development in *Đại Việt* (old name of Viet Nam). In daily life, sacred sculptures are much simpler, and are normally made of earth or wood like *tượng nhà mồ* (tomb-house figurines) in the Central Highlands. Some wealthy families worship in their private houses statues of deities, saints and Buddhist gods as well as ancestral tablets (*bài vị*). Recently, the trend of taking photos for worship, instead of the use of tablets, has become increasingly popular (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Alter for ancestor worship (Photo by Dinh Hong Hai, 2013)

Human Dead Remains

While some religions, such as Hinduism, do not consider the physical body important after death, the Vietnamese regard human remains as extremely important. They consider funerals a new start for souls. Ethnologist *Từ Chi* (1996) considers funerals an “ultimate solution” in a soul’s journey of return. In Vietnam, almost all beliefs related to dead people’s souls are associated with ceremonies and procedures for the burial of the body. This originates from the Vietnamese world view of a three-layered universe: heaven, the human world and the afterworld. Heaven (*tầng trời*) is the place where the souls of the dead reside eternally or are awaiting rebirth. The human world (*dương thế*) is the land of the living. The afterworld (*“tầng âm”, “thế giới bên kia” or “âm giới”*) is where human remains lie in rest. Because human beings cannot see the afterworld of the dead, folk art plays an important role in depicting it.

To gain support from the souls of the dead so that they bless their living relatives, the Vietnamese choose good land that is in line with feng shui rules and build mausoleums/tombs under the guidance of geomancers to bury their kin. Mausoleums of *Nguyễn* kings in *Huế* are architectural masterpieces that house the remains of kings and their relatives. Similar to tombs or mausoleums, coffins are also an important

component for keeping dead remains, for example tomb-boats (*thuyền táng*) from the *Đông Sơn* Culture or jar coffins (*mộ chum*) of the *Sa Huỳnh* Culture dating back thousands of years ago. At present, wooden coffins are still popular

in Vietnamese culture but they are gradually being replaced by simple coffins used for incineration. Distinguished from the remains of common men, the ashes of Buddhist monks are called *xá lị* (relics or *sarira* figure 7a,b) and their tombs *xá lị* stupas (figure 7c)⁸.



Figure 7a (left), b (right). Mummy statue relics (Photo by Nguyen Lan Cuong)



Figure 7c. Relic stupa in Bồ Đà Pagoda, Bắc Giang province (Photo by Đinh Hồng Hải, 2017)

⁸ Apart from relics (*xá lị*), their physical body (*nhục thân*) is sometimes kept intact as statues, such as those of two Buddhist monks *Nguyễn Khắc Minh* and *Nguyễn Khắc Trường* in *Đậu* Pagoda.

Sacred Animal

Throughout history there are numerous sacred animals found in Vietnamese culture, from the bull head on the rock-art of *Đồng Nội* dating back 20,000 years ago to the national treasure Cowboy (*người cưỡi bò*) of the *Đông Sơn* Age displayed in the Vietnam National Museum of History. Unlike in Hinduism where cobras (Naga) are worshipped as incarnations of Shiva, followers in Vietnam combined India's sacred animal with China's holy dragon and created the Vietnamese Lý dynasty dragon. We see a harmonious artistic combination from China and India reflected in the Vietnamese Lý dynasty dragon by the sinuous form of the body of a Naga with whiskers 'moulded' in a sacred fig leaf pattern from India, and the mane of a dragon from the Song dynasty in China; see Table 2 (Dinh Hong Hai 2018a; 2018b:53).

Table 2. The characteristics of the Vietnamese Dragon (Dinh Hong Hai, 2018b: 53).

| | The Song dynasty dragon | The Lý dynasty dragon | Naga, Makara |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Features</i> | Four legs (as beast) | Conceal legs, curving body | No legs |
| <i>Body</i> | Animal body | Snake body | Snake, fish body |
| <i>Head</i> | Mane and horn | Crest and mane | Crest and no horn |
| <i>Figure</i> | Thorny | Curving, flexible | Flexible |
| <i>Expression</i> | Ferocious | Friendly | Majestic |
| <i>Symbol</i> | Kingship | Kingship, theocratic, sovereignty | Theocratic |
| <i>Purpose</i> | Demonstrating royal family power | Demonstrating sovereignty | Demonstrating power of religion |

Such powerful sacred animals like tigers, elephants and lions have gradually been transformed into guardians (Blue Dragon-White Tiger, Rahu, Yaksha, etc.). Sacred animals of good omens, such as kỳ and lân (male and female lion-unicorns) are Vietnamised to be nghệ in folk sculpture or upgraded to royal symbols as Tứ linh as found on the roof tops of Huế's Imperial Citadel (figure 8). In contrast to royal symbols are more common symbols, for example bats (representing "happiness") or the pairing of a crane standing on a tortoise (hạc-rùa, representing "longevity"). These sacred animals may be real (elephants, tigers, cranes, tortoises) or chimerical creatures (dragons, unicorns) which are all sanctified. The sacred animals in Vietnam "refer to animals used in animal worship, showing respect for the animal through its connection with a special god. The gods are in animal form, but this does not mean that the animal as such is being worshipped. Instead, the divine power of a certain god is manifested in the animal as their incarnation" (Dinh Hong Hai 2018b: 40).

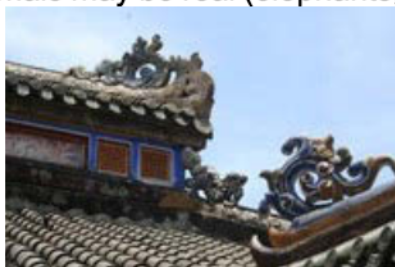


Figure 8. *Tứ linh* in Huế Imperial Citadel (Photo by Dinh Hong Hai 2012)

Sacred Object/Form

Sacred objects, such as trees, ritual poles, natural facts, talisman, amulets and so forth also include natural elements from rocks, water sources, grottos, votive objects, sacrificed effigies to mountains, forests, the sun, the moon, thunder, and clouds. In other words, whatever is sanctified or thought to be sacred can become a sacred thing. Sacred “things” may be natural or man-made. For example, the master-tree in a forest (*cây chủ rừng*, the biggest tree in a forest area), banyan trees, bodhi trees or mumian trees (*cây gạo*) are natural entities considered sacred as a result of the long-standing Vietnamese conception “*thần cây đa, ma cây gạo*” / “*cây gạo có ma, cây đa có thần*” (banyan trees have deities, mumian trees have ghosts). Man-made examples come in the form of ritual poles (*cây cột lễ* or *cây nêu*, similar to totem poles) that are made from trees but are manipulated by man and highly decorated to serve important ceremonies.

Natural entities (mountain, forest, river, sea, thunder) can be divided into two groups: the first include those which humans must depend on (mountains, forests, rivers, the sea). The second are powerful elements which can terrify human beings (such as thunder, lightning, flood, storm). Over thousands of years, these powerful entities are an amalgamation of Taoist and Buddhist factors and symbolises the hierarchy of *Tứ pháp*, the Four Dharma Mother-Goddesses: *Pháp Vân* (Cloud), *Pháp Vũ* (Rain), *Pháp Lôi* (Thunder), and *Pháp Điện* (Lightning) in *Chùa Dâu* or *Tứ Pháp* pagoda (Figure 9). Even a strange-shaped cloud (figure

Figure 9. *Chùa Dâu* or *Tứ pháp* pagoda in *Bắc Ninh* province (Photo by Đinh Hồng Hai, 2015).



Figure 10. Strange-shaped cloud in Hanoi (Photo by Nguyễn Đức Thín, 2015).



10) or a tortoise suddenly appearing in the *Hoàn Kiếm* Lake in Hanoi on the day of the Thanglong-Hanoi Millennial Anniversary (*Đại lễ Nghìn năm Thăng Long-Hà Nội*) are recognised as sacred animistic elements (*Tiến Nguyên*, 2010). Such unbelievable overconfidence makes Vietnam’s present-day religious market a profitable business domain. One of the biggest banks in Vietnam (Bank for Investment and Development of Vietnam) even mobilised money from its employees to purchase a sacred animal sculpture for the sake of good fortune (*Lê Nga*, 2009).

Although not becoming a system like *Tứ pháp*, man-made factors have been able to establish deep roots in the religious culture of Vietnam. From simple artifacts (amulets, philtres) used in daily activities (medicinal treatment, birth) to complicated rituals like burning sacrificial effigies (*đốt hình nhân thế mạng*), sanctifying worship sculptures (*hô thần nhập tượng*) or the consecration to relieve bad luck (*giải hạn*), all of these play sacred roles to help obtain good luck and evade misfortune. Clearly, sacred phenomena in animism, in favorable conditions, can dominate and/or transgress major religions in Vietnam.

Votive Offerings

Votive offerings are less important than those mentioned above but their diverse forms have helped to expand the art that has emerged from animistic worship in Vietnam, animistic votive offerings in Vietnam differ from those in Christianity or Islam, as they consist of daily life items. The offerings include *ngũ quả* (five votive fruits) and *xôi gà* (boiled chicken and sticky rice), which are accompanied by incense-sticks. The Vietnamese have a saying, “as above so below” (*trần sao âm vậy*), which means that any food and drink in the ‘yang world’ (world of the living) could be votive offerings in the ‘yin world’ (world of the dead).

In the economic boom after “*đổi-mới*”, an economic reform initiated in Vietnam in 1986 to create a “socialist-oriented market economy”, votive offerings have become extremely diversified. This is especially so during the Ghost Festival also known as *Rằm tháng 7* (July 15th Lunar year) or *Ngày xá tội vong nhân*. This is a day of great amnesty when all the underworld prisons are opened and imprisoned souls are set free for one day. On this day, many kinds of votive food, for example *ngũ quả* and *xôi gà* are presented to the wandering souls. Recently, replicas such as electronic devices, motorbikes, villas, even Underworld Bank (*Ngân hàng địa phủ*) deposit-books, have been included as gifts. These contemporary offerings also include the following: “bikini, high-heeled shoes, smart phones, iPads, luxurious cars, and effigy-maids sent to the dead” (N. Huyền, 2019). Even a replica of their “wives” or “girlfriends” have been arranged for dead consanguineous family members or kin (figure 11) (Huyền Anh, 2019). These offerings are primarily constructed out of paper. Due to the trend in votive paper objects they have become one of the best-selling commodities in Vietnam. Some traditional craft villages that originally specialised in traditional folk wood-block prints like *Đông Hồ* have changed their production to votive paper objects because it is more economically lucrative.



Figure 11. “Wife” and “girlfriend” for dead consanguineous family members.(Photo by Dinh Hong Hai, 2019)

Votive paper objects burnt annually in Vietnam costs nearly 1 billion US Dollars per year. In his research, *Dr. Nguyễn Việt Cường* calculates that “the total expenditure for ceremonies was about VND 13,000 billion in 2012 and increased to VND 16,000 billion in 2016” (Phan Anh, 2019). The extravagant burning of paper objects has become such a social phenomenon in Vietnam that it annually incurs major costs in damages and contributes to rises in pollution levels. The Department of Grassroot Cultures (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism) issued Document No. 46/VHCS-NSVH in 2019 to manage and organise the festival in order to restrict the burning of votive paper objects. This practice of animism in Vietnamese folk art has both a positive and negative aspect.

Changes to Animism in Vietnamese Folk Art after “Đổi Mới” Period

Animism has had a major impact on the social, spiritual and religious life of Vietnam. It also inspires new works of folk art. Lifelike luxurious cars/ motorbikes, iPhones or smart-TV sets are vivid examples of the creativity in the contemporary religious and spiritual life of Vietnam. As products of folk art, they express the unpredictable changes and innovations that are motivated by materialist aspirations in a post-socialist country. Pious descendants strive to grant their predecessors recompense in the afterlife for the hardships experienced in their former lives. The products used in such compensation both represent “religious commodification” and an “invented tradition” of incorporating new facets of animism that I call “postmodern animism” after “*đổi-mới*.”

Folk art in Vietnam experienced sudden changes during the post-“*đổi mới*” period. One of the most important features influencing Vietnamese folk art in this period is the modification process. Animism has been modified so much that it can be described as “postmodern animism”, with a number of new products, from special votive paper objects representing wives and girlfriends to yachts and luxury cars. It is possible to assert that “postmodern animism” has created a new social phenomenon in 21st-century Vietnam.



Figure 12. Worshipping for a new car, Vietnam (Photo by Dinh Huang Hung).

This social phenomenon has more or less resulted in a religious hodge-podge, upsetting society’s moral domains, for example in the secularization of sacred things (commodifying sacred offerings for economic gain) or the sanctification of secular objects (smartphones, money and cars (figure 12) into sacred objects). Religious art/objects have gradually been sanctified by the religious market rather than through religious ceremony. From an artistic

perspective, however, folk art after the “đổi mới” period aroused new interest in research on animism in Vietnam. Joshua Zukas (2019), a journalist of The Economist, writes “Vietnam’s ghosts are hungry for iPhones. The dead in Vietnam aren’t satisfied with traditional offerings, like money. They want modern tech” (Zukas 2019). With innumerable folk art products invented after the “đổi mới” period, the market for folk art and that of religions in Vietnam seem to merge.

Conclusion

Animistic worship has existed throughout Vietnam’s history. Its effect on the religious and spiritual lives of the Vietnamese is evident and portrayed through the ritual works of art that the country produces. Today, Vietnamese ritual folk art is an amalgamation of religious artistic influences from Animism, Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism. We find examples of this syncretic form of religious art in their statues, votive offerings and architecture. To an extent, Animism has been a significant influence on Vietnamese society. It has an important role in directly shaping religious folk art during and following the “đổi mới” period, a socio-economic transformation that inevitably changed Vietnam’s way of life. The resultant social changes and the part that Animism plays in them reflect the modern considerations of what is perceived and interpreted as sacred. In this context, more research needs to be conducted on the “invention of traditions” in Vietnam. This essay only touched on it briefly.

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Glossary

Ăn chay: Vegetarianism

Ăm giới: Afterworld

Bài vị: Tablet

Các con vật linh: Sacred animals

Cây gạo có ma, cây đa có thần: Banyan trees have deities, mumian trees have ghosts

Cây thiêng: Sacred tree

Có thờ có thiêng, có kiêng có lành: Worship leads to blessings, anticipation brings about good lucks

Cỗ chay: vegetarian meal offering

Cột lễ, cây nêu: Ritual pole (similar to totem pole)

Cúng cô hồn: Presenting votive offerings to wandering ghosts or souls

Cúng hình nhân thể mạng: The sacrifice of effigies

Cúng vong: Making offerings to souls in funerals are conducted by these masters

Dâng sao giải hạn: Consecration to relieve bad lucks

Địa ngục: Hell

Đổi-mới: Economic reform/renovation in Vietnam after 1986

Đốt hình nhân thể mạng: Burning sacrificial effigies

Giải hạn: Relieve bad lucks

Hình nhân thể mạng: Sacrifice of effigy

Hoa tre: Bamboo flower

Hô thần nhập tượng: Sanctifying worship sculptures

Hồn lìa khỏi xác: The soul leaves the body [body (xác) and the soul (hồn)]

Làm giỗ: Commemoration of a dead person

Lễ bỏ mả: Tomb-abandoning festival

Linh vật or vật thiêng: Refers to sacred animals or objects

Ma/quỷ: Ghosts/devils

Mộ chum: Jar coffin

Ngân hàng địa phủ: Underworld Bank

Nghinh Ông: Whale welcoming festival

Ngũ quả: Five votive fruits

Nhà thờ họ: Clan worshiping place

Nhục thân: Mummy

Ngũ quả: Five kinds of worship fruits

Nỗ Nường, Trò Trám, Ná Nhèm: Some fertility rituals

Nùng and Sán Chay: Some ethnic minorities in Vietnam

Phiếm linh luận: Fanlinglun/ 翫靈論/ an assumed that “all things possess a spiritual essence. (similar to Vạn vật hữu linh /wan wu yun you ling xing/ 瑣捏待稍靈曝)

Phồn thực: Fertility

Rằm tháng 7 or Ngày xá tội vong nhân: July 15th of Lunar year (mooncake)

Sinh thực khí: Objects of worship are genitals (sinh = reproduction, thực = fertility, khí = tool)

Syncretism: Refers to the hybridization or amalgamation of two or more cultural traditions.

Thanh Long – Bạch Hổ: Blue dragons - white tigers

Thần cây đa, ma cây gạo: Banyan trees have deities, cotton trees have ghosts

Thập điện Diêm Vương: Ten Underworld Palaces

Thờ bộ phận sinh dục: Genital worship

Thờ cá Ông: Worship of whale

Thờ hành vi giao phối: The cult of sexual intercourse

Thuyền táng: Tomb-boat

Tổ mẫu: Holy mothers

Tổ tiên: Ancestor, forefathers

Tổ vương: ancestral kings

Trên sao âm vậy: As above so below

Tùng dí: Depicting the sexual intercourse between young boys and girls

Tượng thờ: Sacred sculptures/for worship

Tượng trang trí: Decorative sculpture

Tượng nhà mồ: Tomb-house figurines

Tứ linh: Four holy/ Sacred Animals (Dragon – Lion-unicorns – Tortoise - Phoenix)

Tứ pháp: Four Dharma Mother-Goddesses - Pháp Vân (Cloud), Pháp Vũ (Rain), Pháp Lôi (Thunder), and Pháp Điện (Lightning)

Vật phẩm dâng cúng: Votive Offerings

Vật thiêng: Sacred thing

Xá lị: Relics or sarira

Xôi-gà: Boiled chicken and sticky rice



The Traditional Healing Ritual of the Khmer in the Southern Esaan Region of Thailand

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Abstract

Rapid changes due to globalisation can, in varying degrees, affect the traditional way of life for people around the world. Nonetheless, some indigenous groups still cling tightly to old traditions and cultures. Moreover, they try to promote their cultural heritage in order to keep their identity. This article focuses on a traditional ritual of the Khmer ethnic group in the southern part of Northeast Thailand known as Southern Esaan, which covers the provinces in the area of the Donrak Mountain, bordering Cambodia. Southern Esaan is one of the places where many traditional rituals and ceremonies based on supernatural, superstitious and religious beliefs are still found.

To prove the above claim that old traditions are still practiced by some indigenous groups, this article will discuss the Ma Muod Ritual - the traditional healing ritual of the Khmer, the biggest ethnic minority group settled in three provinces of Thailand: Sisaket, Surin and Buriram. The *Ma-Muod Ritual* is part of the Khmers way of life. It enhances cultural identity and differentiates the Khmer people from other groups in Thailand. Though it aims to heal sick people, the ritual also promotes unity and brings peace and harmony to the community.

Introduction

Thailand is geographically divided into four regions (North, Central, Isan (Eastern-Thailand), and Southern Thailand). Apart from geographical characteristics, each region can be differentiated roughly by the culture and language of its inhabitants. Within each region, there are also many different indigenous groups which have their own distinguished traditions and cultures. Among the four regions, the eastern region is the biggest. It is widely known as Esaan or the land of the high plateau. The eastern region is divided roughly into three geographical zones; northern Esaan refers to the provinces in the northern zone, middle Esaan refers to the provinces in the middle zone and southern Esaan

refers to the provinces in the area of the Donrak Mountain, bordering Cambodia. Many indigenous groups in Esaan have their own unique traditions and cultures. They have their own dialects and way of life. Although change due to globalisation is rapid, the traditional way of life for these indigenous groups remains resilient. Many groups still cling tightly to their culture and old traditions. Moreover, they try to promote their cultural heritage in order to keep their identity.

Southern Esaan is one of the places where many rituals and ceremonies are still practised. Across generations, people in these parts are familiar with practices based on supernatural, superstitious and religious beliefs. This article will focus on the traditional healing ritual practised by ethnic groups in Southern Esaan. There are four main ethnic groups in Southern Esaan: Lao, Gui, Yer and Khmer. Among these, the Khmer ethnic group is the biggest in three Southern Esaan provinces: Sisaket, Surin and Buriram. The local Khmer are familiar with ancient ways of life, traditions and cultures that have been passed on by older generations. Many bizarre and traditional rituals are still unknown to the outside world. However, some rituals are gradually being introduced to the wider community by researchers, scholars and the younger generation who use social media as a means to promote the traditions and cultures of their homeland.

Khmer Ethnic Group in Southern Esaan Region, Thailand

The Khmer settled around the Dong Rak Mountain Range covering the area of Buriram, Surin and Sisaket province in Thailand and throughout Prasart Wat Phu in Champasak province, Laos PDR. The Khmer language is spoken most in these three provinces in Thailand (Sumetharat, 2011: 35). Among the three provinces bordering the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Khmer are dominant in Surin Province. Most of the Khmer in this group are Theravada Buddhists. Their way of life, culture and traditions are, however, based on Buddhism and Animism.

Khmer Traditional Rituals

The Khmer's way of life, traditions and culture are based on supernatural and religious beliefs, with many traditional rituals distinguished on the basis of purpose. These rituals include ancestor worship; those related to supernatural phenomena; blessings granted to people or communities; as well as rituals related to birth and death and the healing of the sick. The San Don Ta Ritual, for example, is a traditional ritual whereby people pay homage to their ancestors by offering food and making merit. "Mongkol Jongdai" refers to the ritual of calling spirits in order to bring good luck to housewarmings, weddings or welcoming guest ceremonies. The Ma Muod Ritual is a healing ritual for the sick and will be the focus of discussion in this paper.

Paying respect to ancestral spirits is a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. According to Khmer beliefs, ancestral spirits are considered sacred spirits that protect their children. When carrying out any important activities, the Khmer ethnic community will ask their ancestors for good fortune. They believe that such actions will ensure that what they do will go smoothly without any obstacles. In addition, a ritual paying homage to their ancestors is held every year. Both the Khmer people in Cambodia and Thailand perform this ritual which is called “San Donta” in Thailand. The San Donta ceremony is strictly practised by the Khmer ethnic group that settled in Surin, Si Sa Ket and Buriram provinces of Thailand. The words “San Donta” mean sacrifice or worship (“San”) Grandmother (“Don”) and Grandfather (“Ta”). This tradition is a way of showing respect to their ancestors. It also shows gratitude towards benefactors and strengthens the love and bond among family members, as well as relatives and people in various communities. San Donta is held annually on the 14th lunar day of the 10th lunar month. When the date of the ritual is announced, descendants of each Cambodian ethnic group who go to work in different locations, whether near or far, will return to be together with their relatives to participate in the San Donta ceremony. The ritual is based on the belief that by the lunar day of the 10th lunar month, the gates of hell will open and ghosts from the underworld are released to visit their relatives. The long journey makes the spirits tired and hungry. They wait at the temple to see whether their relatives will come to make merit (with offerings of food and drink). If relatives visit and make merit, the spirits will be happy and receive the offering. The ancestors will bless their relatives with success, happiness, wealth and prosperity, however, if they do not see their relatives, they will get angry and curse them. Their anger or dissatisfaction will lead to punishment. Therefore, when a family member gets sick, the Khmer usually believe that he or she is being punished by the mysterious power of the ancestral spirits due to his or her wrong doing. In order to recover from this sickness, they need to hold a healing ritual.

The Khmer Healing Ritual

The San Donta Ritual shows how local Khmer people realise the importance of respecting ancestral spirits. This makes them live their lives carefully so as not to offend those spirits. However, mistakes are inevitably made and this, according to traditional beliefs, brings serious illness upon those who offend the ancestral ghosts. In the past, when people became ill, they relied on traditional medicine, using herbs along with superstitious treatment. Local doctors would heal patients by sprinkling holy water (magically empowered water used in important ceremonies) on them and recite an incantation. The local doctor would diagnose the illness, use herbs to cure the sickness and magic to expel

evil spirits from the patient's body (Tonngam, n.d. In: Thongkaew, 2006: 71). Although there are modern treatments in hospitals, the Khmer today still cure sickness using traditional and magical ways of healing. The healing ritual is known as "Ma-Muod".

The Origin of the Ma-Muod Ritual

Aside from ancestral spirits that protect each person, the Khmer believe that everyone has a personal spiritual teacher or a holy spirit that follows them everywhere. The Khmer believe that everyone has their own invisible spirits within them. These spirits follow them like a shadow. Each person must therefore be virtuous and honor others in order not to offend their personal teacher or spirit. Similarly, ancestral ghosts protect family members from evil. They are powerful and omnipresent. Spirits have the power to bring both good and bad luck. On some occasions, however, if certain taboos are broken they can become weak (Buakein Buddha 2018, personal communication, 15 October). The Khmer believe that people get sick because that person wronged his or her spiritual teacher. In response, the teacher punishes that person by inflicting illness.

Taboos passed on from generation to generation must be strictly adhered to in order not to break or offend the ancestral spirits. There are many taboos held by the Khmer; however, men seem to have more rules to keep than women. For example, men cannot go under a clothes line where women hang dresses, skirts, trousers or underwear. They cannot be lower than the feet of women or children, and they must not let women or people who are younger than them touch their head. Breaking any of these taboos is believed to be the likely cause of sickness, bad luck and even insanity. For this reason, most men are quite strict about the rules. Even young children have their own unseen spirits that function as their personal protectors who follow them everywhere. Whenever a violent or frightening event, such as a thunderstorm or a terrifying incident occurs, mothers will console their children by saying "come spirit, come back, be with my child, please don't go away". Furthermore, when they take their children to the woods, they will call the spirits back home by saying "*come back home, my child's spirit, we're going home now*". It is believed that by not calling their children's spirit back home their children will become sick. Without the spirits, other evils may attack them more easily. Sickness amongst the Khmer community is always considered mysterious. When one member is sick, it is always understood that unseen mysterious spirits are the cause of the sickness. For this

reason, they have to hold a ceremony to ask for mercy and help from the spirits. By doing this, people believe that the sick person will recover and become strong and healthy again. A ceremony was created to help people communicate with spirits who can get rid of evil. Consequently, a healing ritual called the “Ma-Muod Ritual” was created.

The solution for curing sickness is that those who are sick must vow to Ma-Muod (a medium) that if they are cured of their sickness they will arrange a ceremonial ritual. The guardian spirit of the sick person is believed to possess the Ma-Muod who may transform into different characters. For example, if the Ma-Muod is a polite and shy woman who does not like to smoke or drink alcohol, they become possessed by a male spirit who drinks and smokes and will smoke tobacco and drink whisky. If the possessive spirit is a child, the Ma-Muod will dance and act like a child. Besides curing sickness, the Ma-Muod Ritual is also used to pay respect to the ancestors and to foretell the symptoms of the sickness. This ritual is widely practised in Thai-Khmer villages in Surin, Sisaket and Buriram provinces.

Preparations for the Ritual

The Place

In arranging the Ma-Muod Ritual, community members work together to build a temporary marquee and prepare offerings and food for its participants. The place in which the ritual takes place is carefully chosen (Pojana Narasarn 2018, personal communication, 20 November). The temporary marquee is erected outside the house facing east. It is rebuilt every time the ritual is conducted. Normally local people will use bamboo poles approximately 2-5 metres long to build its structure. The width is approximately 50 square metres, or the size that suits the number of participants in the ceremony. 9 pillars approximately 2 metres high are erected. Each pillar is tied tightly with strong bamboo purlin, and is decorated with a fine silk fabric, a big bunch of bananas, green coconuts, sugar cane sticks, boiled rice wrapped in banana leaves and garlands of local flowers. Coconut leaves are used for the roof. The marquee ground must be flat and smooth, suitable for laying mats or wooden planks (Tonngam, n.d. In: Thongkaew, 2006: 71) (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Temporary marquee built outside a Khmer family home in Surin province (Photo: Pornnapa Wong-on, 2018)

The Offerings

The Ma-Muad will arrange and present offerings to the ancestral spirits, and ask for their permission to hold the ceremony. There are many items used in the Ma-Muod Ritual which is prepared by elderly members of the village who have years of experience carrying out the ceremony. They will make the Baisi, or offering tray, very attractive (fig. 2). Items that must be prepared for the ceremony are as follows:

1. Local food, sweets, whisky and local fruits like coconuts and bananas.
2. One set of Baisi (an offering tray made from banana leaves decorated with flowers).
3. Mats and pillows.
4. Silk shawls, white cotton robes, clothes for men and women, such as loincloths and sarongs.
5. A sword with a sheath and a long gun (some communities may not have a gun and therefore it is not a requirement).
6. Fragrant spices, perfume, and turmeric powder.
7. Flowers, incense and candles.
8. Betel leaves, betel nut and tobacco.
9. Uncooked rice and eggs.
10. A bowl of water placed in the centre of the marquee for the dancers to drink.
11. Boiled rice with banana wrapped in banana leaves.
12. Glass, comb and face powder.
13. A ladder (for spirits to metaphorically climb) made from banana stems and decorated with flower garlands (Phochana Norasarn 2018, personal communication, November 20)

Among the offerings listed above, the rice bowl is considered a very significant tool that is used in the ceremony. It is called “Patle Angore” in the Khmer language. The bowl, made from silver or brass, is about 8-10 inches wide and is filled with uncooked rice. A candle is lit in the middle of the marquee. Whilst concentrating on the flame the Ma-Muod invites the spirit to possess its body. The Ma-Muod slowly moves the bowl round and round, this action speeds up as the connection between the Ma-Muod and spirit gets stronger. Witnesses to this ritual will know the change their clothes. The clothes selected are based on the personality of the spirit that possesses the Ma-Muod.



Figure 2. A baisy offering tray at a healing ritual ceremony in Sisaket province (Photo: Satapong Sabai, 2018)

The Music

In order to perform a Ma-Muod healing ritual ceremony it is necessary to use music to make the ceremony magical and powerful. Music can lull the participants of the ceremony. It can calm them down and make them feel peaceful and bring them happiness and joy. At the same time, the music can be rhythmic in order to stimulate the patient to feel energetic and encourage them to fight against the illness.

Kuntrum music, which is the traditional music of the Khmer, is played during the ceremony. The musical ensemble consists of a drum or Sagol, the local fiddle and flute, and a pair of big and small cymbals. There is also a singer who sings traditional Khmer songs. Different lyrics and melodies are sung at different stages of the ceremony. This musical ensemble has changed through time and varies between different households and villages, for example, some communities may only use a bamboo reed organ. In the past many instruments were used in the ceremony, such as a xylophone, fiddle, reed organ and a drum. The Ma-Muod selects the type of music to play based on the spirits preference.

The Participants

Participants to the ritual consist of a head Ma-Muod or Kru Ma-Muod, who inherited the role from their parents or older relatives and who has many years of experience. The other participants include the patient, village representatives who have also trained and inherited their roles as Ma-Muod, as well as relatives and community members. There is no limit to the number of participants attending the ceremony, but there must be a senior Ma-Muod teacher who will lead the ceremony and take care of the preparations for the ritual and give advice to other Ma-Muod teachers to perform the ceremony correctly.

Timing

In addition to performing for curing the sick, the Ma-Muod Ritual is also conducted to pay respect to ancestral ghosts. The tradition is held annually on either the third or fifth lunar month (February or April). The head Ma-Muod usually holds the ceremony on a Tuesday or Thursday, these are considered auspicious days amongst Thai Buddhists. The ritual cannot be held on Buddhist holidays however, because the Khmer believe that all the holy spirits have to hibernate during those times. The ritual starts around 7:30 in the morning till approximately 10 in the evening. However, the ceremony has no fixed ending time. It depends entirely on when the spirits leave the medium's body, and only until they do will the ceremony stop. Thus, the ceremony can last all night long. Dancers perform all night until dawn (Phochana Norasarn 2018, personal communication, 20 November). Ritual ceremonies can be arranged at home, where vows are taken privately to cure the sick or carried out publicly among community members in the centre of the village (Thongkeaw, 2006: 71).

The Ritual Process

Once all the arrangements have been made, the attendees will gather at the marquee. The Ma-Muod teacher will ask the host to share the cost of the ritual as would have been previously promised. When the patient and their relatives who have made their vows and the Ma-Muod teachers who will perform the ceremony come together, the ceremony begins. Among these participants, there must be a senior Ma-Muod leader or teacher who leads the ceremony. They overlook the preparations, introducing the teachers and informing the new ones, especially, on how to perform the ritual in the correct sequence. They also hold the sword or the "Capa" in front of the marquee in order to drive away various ghosts and all kinds of evil and sickness from the patient. Music is played throughout the duration of the ceremony. Before the ceremony begins, however, the Ma-Muod teachers must pay respect to the ancestral spirits and music teachers or "Wai Khru" (Aree Thongkaew, 2016: 73).

The Ma-muad Ritual process is divided into many steps:

1.1. Paying homage to the ancestral spirits.

The ceremony starts by paying respect to ancestral spirits. In paying homage to the ancestral spirits, the head Ma-Muod will lead the ceremony. This stage of the ceremony is called “Jol Ma-Muod”, which is followed by paying respect to music teachers and then the curing process itself.

1.2. Paying homage to music teachers.

Besides paying homage to the ancestral spirits, the Ma-Muod also pay respect to music teachers, both their spiritual and physically real teachers. The offerings consist of the following items (fig. 3):

1. One piece of white cloth
2. One bottle of liquor
3. One boiled chicken
4. One pig's head
5. Two dishes of cooked rice
6. Two dishes of curry
7. Five flower cones
8. Five sets of betel nuts and betel leaves
9. Five rolls of tobacco
10. Two cups of uncooked rice
11. Two fresh betel leaves
12. A tray and plate
13. One large mat, or two small mats
14. Two pairs of incense sticks and candles
15. Fragrant powder, perfume and money (21 baht 50 Satang) (Aree Thongkaew, 2006: 74)



Figure 3. An offering tray to music teachers and spirits during a healing ritual ceremony in Sisaket Province (Photo: Jongkit Wongpinit, 2010).

1.3 The sickness curing process.

The key person in the ceremony is the head Ma-Muod, “Kru Ma-Muod” or “Rangsong” in Thai, which means a medium who communicates with spirits. When all Ma-Muod teachers are possessed by spirits, the head Ma-Muod will hold a sword and walk to the offering table. Like the spirit (“Pe” is the word used for wandering spirits), the head teacher wanders clockwise three times around the offering table. The host lights a fire on a piece of dry cloth outside the marquee, the head teacher then uses a sword to cut the offerings and throws the offerings away (fig. 4). This signifies that all evil spirits have been destroyed. This stage of the curing process is called “Bong Bot”. The medium then invites all holy spirits to the ceremony and communicates with them. It is believed that the spirits will advise on what is wrong with the patient and suggest the best way of getting rid of the sickness.



Figure 4. A sword is placed on the offering tray before the offerings are destroyed (Photo: Pornnapa Wong-on, 2018).

1.4 Farewell step.

The ceremony stops when the curing process has finished. The process is completed when the spirits have gone and the Ma-Muod becomes conscious and their normal mannerisms return.

Conclusion: The importance of the Ma-Muod Ritual

Traditions and cultures are part of human society. Giddens (2000: 18) states that without culture we would not be human, we would have no language to express ourselves and no sense of self-consciousness. The Ma-Muod Ritual is part of Khmer culture. It distinguishes the Khmer from other groups and defines their cultural identity. Moreover, the ritual brings them together and unifies them as a community. Culture and society cannot be separated. No cultures could exist without society and no society could exist without cultures (Giddens, 2000: 18). Though the Ma-Muod Ritual is held for the treatment of illness, the ritual also helps strengthen the Khmer ethnic community. Despite no clear scientific evidence that the ritual improves patients' health, the Khmer firmly believe that it makes them more energetic and stronger. The ritual enables them to feel more secure and protected.

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Babaylan in Philippine Communities: liminality, myth and inspiration

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Abstract

Contemporary concepts of the *Babaylan* have conflated meanings, especially to those who subscribe to special figures that embody supernatural powers found in Philippine communities. They may be ordinarily a neighbour performing everyday tasks but transform on certain conditions or in settings that may call for such mysterious actions. In more urban settings, *Babaylan* are now construed as a female or a transgender being that has mystical powers to heal, prescribe amulets, divine, teach and perform rituals. Several communities, however, may also involve a male *Babaylan* that possesses the same abilities – in all, the *Babaylan* are known to believers as wise and benevolent beings, with extraordinary abilities.

It is said that to be a *Babaylan*, one must be willing to give up a mundane existence and go through a difficult process of apprenticeship. They are known to transcend this world and communicate with the other through trance, prayers and kinship reckoning. While valorised in their communities, they are also seen as dangerous since they are misunderstood, believed to harbor malevolent spirits or have the ability to perform sorcery akin to witches in the West. This may be the reason for their popularity despite historically being marginalised by colonial powers, that dismissed their powers as myth.

This paper focuses on the *Babaylan* in Philippine communities that have parallels with similarly imbued characters believed to have supernatural powers found across Southeast Asia. It will look at data that I collected on healers and village priests in Northern Luzon, some of whom might have been secretly recruited by religious missionaries during the Spanish colonial period in their vocation to convert “natives”, as well as used as examples of dissident figures in contrast to the goodness that the Christian God represents. This precarious and liminal position of the *Babaylan* – of being betwixt and between – makes these characters powerful central figures that loom large in our myths and from which we draw inspiration in times of crises.

Introduction

In the *Progress of Medicine*, the first of four panels painted by National Artist Carlos V. Francisco depicts a looming female figure on the left standing with her hands up in the air, eyes closed as if in a trance, wearing a rather peculiar costume serving to orientalise Asians who were characterised in popular culture in the 1950s (fig. 1). To the artist, this is how he imagined healing practitioners, such as the *Babaylan*, to look like during the pre-Spanish colonial period. In the centre of this panel is a fire that seems to have been prepared before the ritual sacrifice of the bound pig in the foreground. Lying supine below her is an emaciated figure with a seated chief next to him, resplendent in his costume and ornaments but who appears somber. Several figures in the background include a man who is using a conch shell as a horn to summon all to participate in this rite, while a local liquor being poured from a bamboo container is about to be offered to the spirits from a pot. Amid the traditional healing practices shown in this painting, the story is one of desperation, repeated on the faces of the figures.

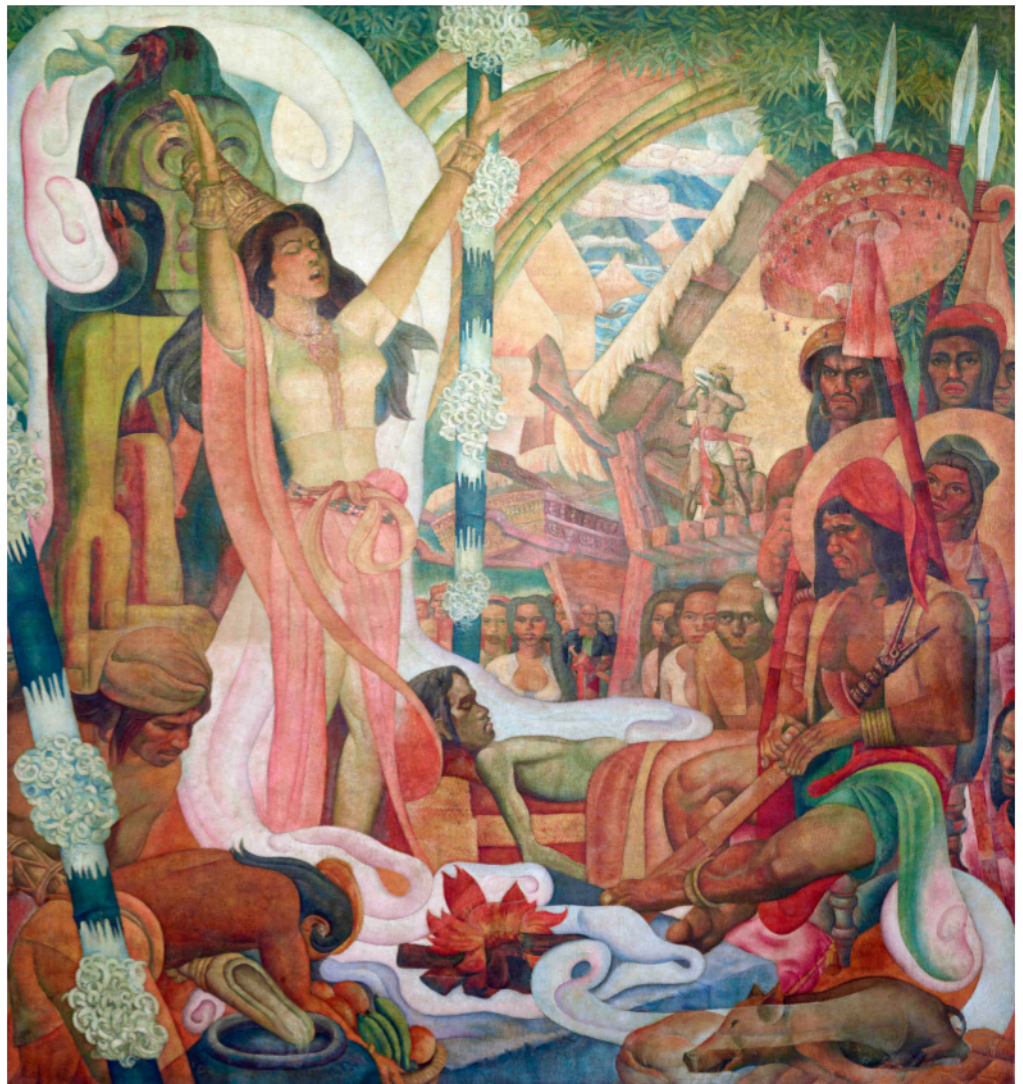


Figure 1. Carlos Francisco, *Progress of Medicine 1*, 1953, Oil on canvas, 500 x 400 cm (Photo by Bengy Toda).

This first panel features a composite of Francisco's fantastic depiction of ancestral Filipinos, elicited perhaps from his work as a film production designer (Tiongson, 2008). Although a dated notion of that era, the female figure with upraised arms performing an invocation is considered by many viewers of the painting as a *Babaylan*, or a traditional healer. It is interesting to note that the rest of the panels showing the development of medicine in the Philippines from the pre-Spanish period to the Spanish colonial period, and then from the American colonial period until liberation after the War, would portray men as the central healers in these paintings commissioned by the Philippine General Hospital in 1953.

Traditional healers are not often *Babaylan* but they inhabit the same space in popular imagination, especially those who would resort to what is considered primordial medicine when Western or modern medicine fails. They are believed to mediate with the spirit world to bring about treatment to the sick. Physical or psychological illness is believed to be caused by malevolent spirits or ancestors as punishment for not being remembered or appeased.

Such is the power of artworks as that made by Francisco in the *Progress of Medicine*, especially his first panel, lending itself to various interpretations of what would constitute as pre-Hispanic healers that many would argue still exist today. While the paintings themselves have been given attention by the state when they were declared as National Cultural Treasures in 2012 and their relocation from the hospital lobby to a dedicated gallery at the National Museum of Fine Arts (Barns and Labrador, 2016), its continued relevance has to do with the appeal exuded by the primeval world and its central figure, a shaman, locally known as the *Babaylan* or the *Catalonan* (Kroupa, 2019; Sola-Boza, 2006; McCoy, 1982).

According to Santiago (1995: 156), Antonio Pigafetta who chronicled Ferdinand Magellan's expedition to the East Indies, provided the earliest eyewitness account in 1521 of *Babaylan* rituals. He further claimed that by the 1870s, these rituals continued to be practised in the Visayas and became a movement called *babaylanes* with its leadership shifting mostly to men due to its evolving militancy as a means of survival (1995: 161). There are indications that although they are not as prominent today, the *Babaylan* "as religious practitioner" continues, as found in the ideological systems of Sugbu or Cebuano (Sola-Boza, 2006: 268). I will elaborate on and connect images, such as the Francisco painting that may have less to do with the romanticism of Filipinos' past but more to do with our indigenous belief system that is just as compelling and relevant.

The enduring faith in the *Babaylan* is in its performative power, imbued by the animistic disposition of its believers, which according to Pierse (1991) is “a great consciousness of spirits being in things” and that indigenous or popular religion considers everything to be connected. In this sense, even if the *Babaylan* does not promote material culture in rituals, performing them in sacred places and other sites, as well as in the faith that natural beings have a distinct spiritual essence, stimulates creativity and artistry in the Philippines and Southeast Asia, as I will demonstrate in this paper.

Conceptions of *Babaylan*

The *Babaylan* is considered, among the divinities identified by Jocano (1968: 179), to belong to and be at the same level as the *Catalonan*, which are both “lesser divinities assisting Bathala or the highest ranking deity”. This is supported by Barretto-Tesoro (2008: 79) who describes the *catalonan* as a “healer, priestess, seer, guardian of folk knowledge, and performer of rituals”. A number of social scientists have documented supernatural beings as mediators between this world and the spirit world or the mundane and the magical world (Aguilar, 2013; McCoy, 1982; Jocano, 1968; Berdon, et al., 2016; Trosdal, 1975). In this paper I will use the term *Babaylan* to mean spirit mediums that are widespread among animist religions, which are also indigenous religions.

Figures such as the *Babaylan* in the Visayas and *Catalonan* in Luzon (Tagalog and Kapampangan areas) are not unique to the Philippines. In Southeast Asia, McCoy (1982: 144) noted that:

In insular Southeast Asia the most common term for spirit mediums is derived from the classical Malay word *belian* - *balian* or *waylan* in Java, Bali, Borneo, and Halmahera; *bailan*, *mabalian*, or *baylan* among the interior populations of Mindanao; and *baylan* or *babaylan* in the Visayan region of the central Philippines...not only is the same root word used in many parts of insular Southeast Asia but the specifics of the animistic priesthood's recruitment, social role, and ritual practice are markedly similar in several significant respects.

This is further supported by recent studies in the region that certain community members practicing indigenous or animist religions are imbued with supernatural abilities. Weavers of textiles, baskets and mats, who are mostly female, may be regarded as such (Niessen, 2009; Howard, 2004; Barnes and Khahlenberg, 2010; Hall, 1996; Inocian, et al., 2019; Nocheseda, 2004; Malabong, 2010). Among the

Batak of Indonesia, as Niessen (2009) points out, the tripartite system of organisation is manifested in the structure of Batak textiles in which the middle field is flanked by symmetrical panels. Weavers express Batak worldviews and their “understanding of the universe, as divided into an upper, under and middle world, with a triumvirate of gods in the upper world” (Niessen, 2009: 36). This worldview is further elaborated in Angerler’s (2016) study of Toba Batak storytelling, furthering the notion that animist art could help us detect latent supernatural beings that might have been concealed as a result of colonial censure or presumed threat of an imposed religion.

On its 2019 website, the City of Bago, Negros Occidental (part of the group of islands in the centre of the Philippines), featured a dramatic photograph of a woman in local costume with sheaves of long dry grasses in each hand, appearing to be dancing and in a trance (fig. 2). These sheaves of grass are actually a type of sedge (*Fimbristylis utilis*) commonly called Tikug (Bureau of Education, 1913). While it is native to parts of Southeast Asia, in the Philippines it grows “in profusion in many parts of Mindanao, Bohol, Leyte and Samar...to a less degree, it is found and utilized in Negros and Panay” (Bureau of Education, 1913: 182). I have noticed in a number of ritual performances throughout the Philippines, that grasses and sedges similar to those captured by the image in figure two are included as extensions of the arms or in its flailing, as a way to invoke the spirits in trance.



Figure 2. Babaylan Festival in Bago City, 2015 (Hptina24, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Babaylan_Festival_in_Bago_City.jpg, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>).

The reason I cited this image, and perhaps even the aim of the City of Bago for featuring it on their website, is to not only illustrate the idea of the *Babaylan* in the contemporary sense, but to also imply its traditional roots. Although the festival itself is new and established by the city only in 1997 (Vito, 2018), it follows the same format as many newly developed festivals in rural cities and towns in the Philippines. Besides drawing tourists to their annual festivities (in the case of Bago City, every February) it also functions as a trade and agricultural fair.

Locals in the area, named Negros Occidental by Spanish colonial authorities, had a longstanding conflict with religious missionaries (McCoy, 1982; Santiago, 1995; Geremia-Lachica, 1996). One of the most famous feuds led to the rebellion in the 19th century of Dionisio Mabuelas who was more popularly known as Papa Isio, and who organised the *Babaylanes* group to revolt against Spanish colonial rule in 1896 in Western Visayas. While this was downplayed in the award-winning blog site, Happy Trip.com, the history of the *Babaylan* festival was attributed in particular to the City of Bago and belonging to the culture of the Negros Occidental in general, as it cited Mount Kanlaon as “one of its major inspirations...the mystical mountain is considered by the *Babaylans* and other faith healers as a source of power” (Vito, 2018).

Spirits are said to reside in mountains (McCoy, 1982) and in the Philippines where the landscape is studded with rugged terrain, many animist religions may be found. The country’s unique geological formation consists of unusual highlands that are mostly made up of volcanoes, which lend to beliefs that they are mystical. I came to understand this whilst carrying out long-term fieldwork in the Cordilleras where I asked local informants where their ancestors who have become *anitos* (spirits) reside, and they would point to the nearest peak or escarpment. Even if they farm and live in the mountain themselves, they would choose not to stay at the highest parts as those areas are reserved for their ancestral spirits. In different parts of the country there are mythical beings that are stuff of legends, which I will elaborate on in another section. The rivers too, are magical, as they are sacred spaces on which local stories begin such as the *Hinilawod* (or tales from the mouth of Hilawod river) as I will explain later.

One group identified by Jocano (1968a) who reside in the highlands of Central Panay are the Sulod or Suludnon. Muyco (2008) documented the Sulod in the following areas: Tapaz and Jamindan of Capiz; Janiuay, Lambunao, and Calinog of Iloilo and some parts of Antique and Aklan. They are similarly known as the Tumandok, Panay-Bukidnon, or Panayanon Sulud and when Jocano first encountered them he found them and their practices remarkable. For the purpose of this paper,

I will refer to them as Sulod. Jocano (1968a) was one of the first to have recorded the Sulod's 30-hour epic *Hinilawod*, their unique dance called Binanog which mimics the flight of an eagle (Muyco, 2016), their evocative music (Muyco, 2008) and distinctive language known as Igbok or Sulod. The Sulod's also stand out for their incomparable female attire with their ensemble made out of readymade garments called *Panubok* that have been embellished with embroidery, appliqué, beads and coins (Madrid, 2017).

At the core of Sulod practices is a hierarchy of spirits or *diwata* (similar to the *anito*), of which the *Babaylan* propitiates to ensure success in farming, hunting, fishing and family life. The Sulod's social organisation is based on kinship (Jocano, 1968a). As with most Filipino families the Sulod reckon their kin from both sides of their mother and father, enabling extended relations. In his ethnographic research of the Sulod, Jocano gives a detailed account of life cycle rituals from birth, to marriage, to death, with their indigenous religion interwoven around them, "making it difficult to distinguish which is social and what is religious in their daily affairs" (1958: 421).

Hinilawod began to receive serious attention following Jacano's exceptional documentation of the epic in 1957 and 1958. Although the *Hinilawod* was popular among the Sulod, it had not been studied before his research. However, it was well known among early Spanish chroniclers who possibly dismissed it as a folk tale. Taken seriously, the epic is not just a literary piece but reveals the Sulod's world view and framework for how the Sulod should best live, putting family honour, courage and dignity at its core.

Babaylan are tasked with performing the *Hinilawod*, however, not all *Babaylan* can perform it. Only the chief among them becomes qualified to recite the *Hinilawod*, which is usually passed on from one chief *Babaylan* generation to the next. The epic has 29,000 verses and takes about three days to chant in its original form, making it one of the longest epics known. This is performed during important life cycle rituals, especially during a marriage, involving kinship reckoning. It aids in rites of passage (Turner, 1979) that enable transitions in a public platform. Being able to chant the epic involves not just extraordinary memory but entails the *Babaylan* to be in a trancelike state. Ernesto Caballero, a Manlilikha ng Bayan (National Living Treasure) is an example of an exceptional epic performer who is able to complete the three-day chant from his hammock (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Manlilikha ng Bayan (Living Treasure) Federico Caballero on his hammock from where he performs the Panay Bukidnon epic poetry (courtesy of the National Commission on Culture and the Arts).



Liminality and Straddling Many Worlds

Accounts of those who have seen Caballero perform epic chants – such as that observed by Magos (n.d.) – indicate that he is able to transpose this form of ritual while also considered as community entertainment. Children are particularly entranced by his chants that seem to suspend time and create another space through what is essentially forms of storytelling. His performances are representations of traditions that are contemporised each time he performs them. Like a true *Babaylan*, he is able to transcend from this world to the spirit world, which the Sulod believes ensures the successful outcome of this public liminality – both performer and audience are betwixt and between. This is how Turner (1979) critiqued the communal staging of the epic.

More complex than were documented by Jocano, the Sulod possess more than one epic. Although *Hinilawod* is the most well-known, it is just one of ten epics recorded in 1993 and 1994 by Magos. Perhaps some aspects of their chants are purposely revealed to outsiders, while some epics are reserved only for the community. It is believed that the *Babaylan* inhabit a different world as they eventually become spirits that intercede on behalf of mortals to communicate with the gods. To mediate between the mortal and immortal worlds, community members offer the *Babaylan* sacrifices whenever they petition for something. Performing a long epic may be considered a sacrifice for the *Babaylan* as a high level of endurance is required to enable transitions involved in life cycle rites (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. F. Landa Jocano recording Huga-an (courtesy of Felipe Jocano, Jr).

It is this liminal position of the *Babaylan*, connected to the magical and the transformative that a number of scholars have questioned the gender of this spirit medium (Geremia-Lachica, 1996; Santiago, 1995; McCoy, 1982). Quintos (2012) made a recent and more compelling argument that Spanish missionaries like Alcina, who first documented them were biased in focusing on the binary distinctions between genders rather than account for the in-between such as the androgynous, hermaphrodite or those that shapeshift. In his paper, he accounted for “the transformation of the ancient magnificent asog, bayoguin and binabayi” (Quintos, 2012: 156) that were in precolonial records and how these *Babaylan* were pejoratively considered what is today called a *bacla/bakla* or someone who is weak or unable to assert his masculinity. The missionaries characterisation of the *Babaylan* may be due to fear, as they did not accept the power of the *Babaylan*, and in their desire to convert the locals to Christianity, missionaries developed different ways to marginalise even women *Babaylan* who soon found themselves operating outside the accepted definitions of female society by defining their own spaces (Santiago, 1995; Demetrio 1988; Kroupa, 2019; Geremia-Lachica, 1996). Deities identified as female are: Enkanto or Inkganto, Diwata, and the Lakapati (Scott, 1994; Demetrio, 1988; Jocano, 1968b). Eventually, *Babaylan* that mediated between the spirit world and the mortal world became part of a range of malevolent spirits such as the *manananggal*, *asuang* or the *buruha*, who were marginalised by mainstream society for their supernatural powers and popularity, serving to further disparage them in their community (Lieban, 1967; Pertierra, 1983).

Myth, Authenticity and Experience

It is said that in order to survive under the pressure of a power greater than we have encountered, strategies and adaptation must be developed. In the case of the *Babaylan*, I suspect that this happened, which is part of the reason that their practice continues and is still relevant. Even if obscured by colonisation, modernity, and urbanisation, their roles in their communities seem to have endured. Despite the limitations of her feminist framework, Brewer (2004), favouring gender binary, acknowledged the power of “the ambivalent and ambiguous in conceptualising an Animist world view” (p. 103).

Using the analysis of Scott (1985) regarding everyday peasant resistance, those who have little or no power understand power and power relations. It is valuable to understand that these relationships are dynamic and shifting, accounting for defiance as a means to challenge authority. As Scott (1985: 321) noted:

Religion is perhaps an exception, but here we have only to look at the way both the early working class and the peasantry create their own sects and religious understandings outside official orthodoxy, including revolutionary millennial beliefs.

This supports Santiago’s account of the gender shift among the *Babaylan* in Visayas, a movement that saw by the 1870s mostly males take spiritual leadership due to the region’s “evolving militancy as a means of survival” (1995:161). While it may be argued that the documentation of *Babaylan* male names were mainly done by male chroniclers, such as Spanish missionaries like Diego Francisco Aduarte, OP, Juan Fernandez, OSA, and Francisco Ignacio Alcina, SJ (in Geremia-Lachica, 1996), it is also possible that eventually public performances became strategically male and private ones female, in order to protect and maintain the potency of the more spiritual rituals. This can be supported by studies such as that of Magos (1992) of the *Ma-aram* in Antique province, as well as her documentation of the *Binukot* among the Sulod (although Magos preferred to refer to them as Panay Bukidnon) that was first mentioned by Jocano (1968a) and developed in a comparative research based on epics and other intangible heritage records of veiled and secluded women by Abrera (2009), such as Rosita Silva Caballero known as the last *Binukot* (fig. 5).



Figure 5. The Last Binukot_
Rosita Silva Caballero
(Panay Bukidnon) (Photo by
Jacob Maentz).

Sometimes beliefs survive through folktales, folklore, or myths, such as the tale of *Maka-andog* from Samar as recounted by Hart and Hart (1966), which speaks of female shamans as holders of knowledge. Their interpretation of such beliefs were at times concealed by metaphors and metonymies of this world and the spirit world. Female shamans were unusual figures in folk history retold and performed as mythical iconic characters that are both male and female, depending on place and time.

I have heard of the exploits of the Lumawig (male) among the Bontok of Mountain province in the highlands of Northern Luzon who they believe descended from the sky and founded their culture. The many versions of his story are recounted by the *papattay* (the village shaman who is male) during life cycle rituals (Labrador, 1995). On the other hand, the many legends of Kanlaon – one of which has been mentioned above and also refers to the largest mountain in Negros Occidental – have protagonists that are either male or female (Aguilar, 1997; McCoy 1982; Mojares, 1974). The native Negrense, who reside around the mountain (that is also a volcano), sometimes referred to the billowing smoke from the volcano as that of a serpent smoking and sending them a message (Miller, 1904). The meaning of these smoke signals were interpreted by their local *Babaylan*.

For the Bagobo in Mindanao, the *Mebuyan* is represented as a goddess of the underworld with many breasts who nourish dead children. Once satisfied, these children are believed to move on to their final destination, *Gimokudan*, where they join family members who have moved on (Benedict, 1913). In this connection, the *mabalian* (or *balian*) or the shamans are known to take a “trip to the sky”, a recurring theme in Bagobo myths, according to Raats (1970).

As mentioned above, the unique geological formation of the Philippines makes it a rich ground from which myths develop to protect the landscape, resources and knowledge of places. Besides hills, mountains and volcanoes, rivers, caves and rock shelters are invoked in their stories, revalidating each time their animist or indigenous religion. There are also 200 ethnolinguistic groups as the ethnolinguistic map of the National Museum of the Philippines indicate, each possessing their own animist or indigenous religion that create an interesting process of developing diacritical marks with both their intangible and tangible heritage (fig. 6). In the processes of religious conversion, the asymmetrical power relations between the converted and the missionaries created an acceptance of the former to practice, even if superficially, a syncretic form of worship that accommodated the coloniser's religion with their animistic beliefs.

ETHNOLINGUISTIC GROUPS OF THE PHILIPPINES

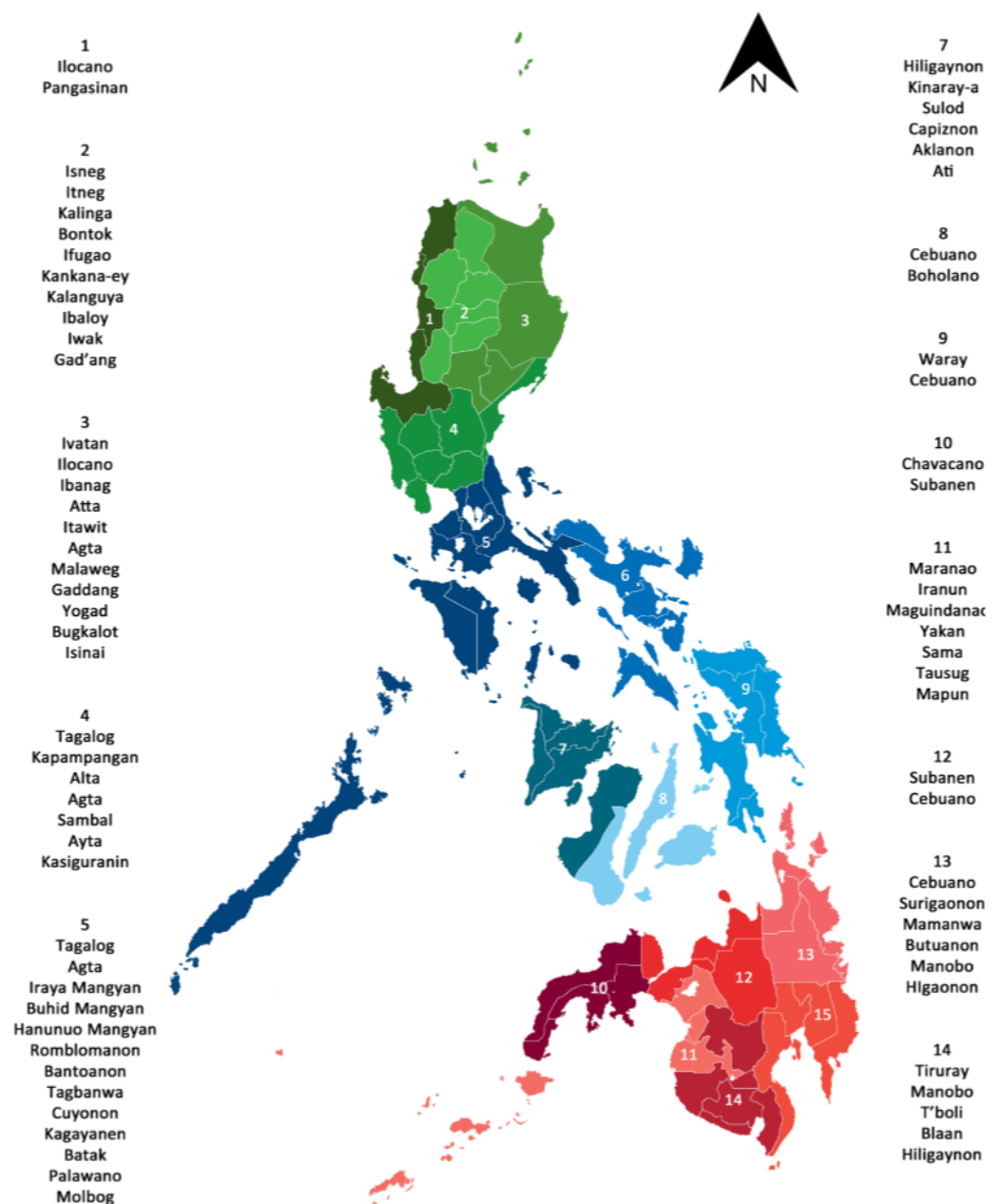


Figure 6. The Ethnolinguistic Map of the Philippines, Ethnology Division (National Museum of the Philippines).

This religious syncretism manifests in how primordial spaces for ancestor spirits and rituals, especially mountains, are subsequently named after the *Virgin Mary*, such as *Mariang Makiling* in Laguna (Mojares, 2002), *Maria Cacao* in Cebu and *Mariang Sinukuan* in Pampanga (Seki, 2001). Yet these sites have been and continue to be part of lore, identity and history for not just its local residents but the nation too. Even if these deities that reside in mountains have been denigrated in stories from missionaries, counter stories from the local *Babaylan* and religious sects recover and retrieve what is fundamental in their beliefs. Archaeology has helped in this regard. Some indications that they deem these sites sacred include finding Late Neolithic biconical and sub-conical spindle whorl used in spinning mulberry paper (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) or abaca (*Musa textilis*) in the islands of Batanes (Cameron, 2013).

Having researched on the spaces within which women weave (Labrador, 2016), I noticed interesting patterns in the spaces where traditional textiles and basketry (including *banig* or mats) are made. It emerged that areas like underneath houses on stilts for backstrap loom weaving, and rock shelters and caves for basketry are favoured over other parts of built environments or natural sites. Besides being cooler and comfortable, these areas give a sense that they are sacred places where women congregate, perform rites or keep to themselves while finding solutions to quotidian challenges. Caves are particularly sacred sites for the *Babaylan* and believed to hold magical forces or are sources of healing powers (McCoy, 1982; Demetrio, 1988; Hart, 1966; Inocian, et al., 2019). These grottos were implicated in myths in which protagonists emerged transformed, such as in the Sulod's epic *Hinilawod* mentioned above (Jocano 1968a; Santiago 1995; Quintos, 2012).

There is potential for future research on the social and ritual uses of caves in the Philippines as their cultural aspects have been mainly seen from archaeological activities (cf. Domenici 2001; Moyes 2012). While some caves and rock shelters are also mortuary sites in which associated material culture has been found, ethnographic studies need to be done in more detail, such as in the mummy caves of Benguet in Northern Luzon.

In the Philippines, most ethnic groups practice ancestor worship and their burial practice is generally entombment. This enables the body to be exhumed, with the aid of the *Babaylan*, to be washed and cleaned as an act of propitiation towards the ancestor spirits. On Banton Island in Central Philippines cloth fragments were discovered in 1966 in a disturbed mortuary cave, alongside a range of blue and white ceramic plates, bowls and ornaments. These objects were likely trade items dating from the 13th to early 14th century (Labrador, 2016). Grave goods

found in the Arku Cave in Peñablanca, Cagayan, also included clay spindle whorls and other materials for weaving that date to the Late Neolithic (Thiel, 1987).

Another area worth investigating is the role of caves in belief systems. Despite evidence of animist rituals surrounding caves, it is difficult for those outside the culture to appreciate that those sites were probably chosen by local artisans as spaces to congregate and make craft, especially when it comes to preparing to weave cloth or basketry. Moreover, there is a functional preference for most women weavers to work in caves and rock shelters. “They do the weaves in their homes but a few work inside mountain caves, which are a lot cooler and more comfortable”, is the explanation of a tourism officer of Calatrava, Negros Occidental, on why mat and basket weavers of pandan leaves (*Pandanus amaryllifolius*) prefer to work in Mahilum Cave (The Good Life blog site, June 27, 2017). While this may be true even when the weavers themselves offer similar explanations, there is reason to be skeptical after visiting the site. “We prefer weaving inside this cave because the cool temperature is conducive to keeping the *tikog* grass [the *banig*’s main raw material] soft

and bendable” (Go, 2020), replied a female member of the Basiao Native Weavers Association who are known for embroidering designs on their mats in Saob cave, eastern Visayasa, which is actually a rock shelter (fig. 7).



Figure 7. Basey (Samar) mat weavers in Saob rockshelter, eastern Visayasa (Photo by AP Labrador, 2019).

As I mentioned above *tikog* (or *tikug*) is a sedge (*Fimbristylis*

utilis) used also for rituals. I found it cooler in Saob Cave than in their houses, but a more detailed study may further our knowledge about choices made on sites and activities, especially in the complexity of weaving as the templates of their design are committed to memories or appear in their dreams (Paterno and Oshima, 2001). As Moyes (2012: 21) points out “gaining a better understanding of caves as symbols and understanding their uses in ritual contexts promotes sensitivity in cave researchers that will be crucial in dealing with issues of heritage management involving indigenous people”.

Inspirations from the *Babaylan*

On occasions of civic and public rituals, such as the Quincentennial celebration or the 500th year of the Philippines' first European contact that will take place next year, a self-conscious reckoning is happening, which is similar to what had occurred in 1998 – the country's commemoration of the centenary of its independence from Spain. Rather than be critical of our former coloniser, most Filipinos responded in a sentimental manner and preferred to view the past with romantic lenses. There are no signs of this perspective changing. There are already indications of imagined histories and reinventing the past, especially the pre-colonial Spanish period in which our view comes from the revival of idealised images of early "Filipinos" from the Boxer Codex (Donoso, 2016) or the Edenic landscapes such as those done in the 18th century by Fernando Brambila from the Malaspina expedition in 1792. In addition vignettes found on the two sides of the 1734 Carta Hydrographica de Las Islas Filipinas also adopts a similar sentiment (Santiago, 2010) (fig. 8. National Library of Spain copy).



Figure 8. 1155px
Carta Hydrographica y
Chorographica de la Yslas
Filipinas, Manila, 1734,
(Wikimedia Commons:
[https://commons.
wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:Carta_Hydrographica_y_
Chorographica_de_la_Yslas_
Filipinas_MANILA,_1734.
jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carta_Hydrographica_y_Chorographica_de_la_Yslas_Filipinas_MANILA,_1734.jpg)).

This self-conscious reckoning becomes more defined in the performances of religious folk commemorations that have been Christianised. These include popular celebrations, such as the Nazareno procession (Pilario, 2017), the *Sinulog*, Santo Niño festivals (Ness, 1992) and *Moriones* street performances (Chan, 2017). There has been increasing popular demand for authentic performances rather than reenactments that have been promoted for tourists, such as, *Mogpog Marinduque* ‘Centurions’ (fig. 9). This same demand existed during the Smithsonian’s Folklife Festival in 1998 (Trimillos, 2008).



Figure 9. Mogpog Centurions (Marinduque) (Photo by AP Labrador, 2014).

These present-day celebrations are rooted in pre-Spanish rites where the main protagonists have been *Babaylan*. Macdonald (2004: 88) posits a plausible explanation for their continued popularity and community involvement that bring together millions of participants annually:

As a result, customs of Hispanic Catholicism – thus, acceptable to Catholic priests, such as the cult of the saints or funerary rituals – could prosper with the blessing of the clergy, while retaining their polytheistic structure and fulfilling pre-Christian religious needs, which were quite simple and basically concerned with prosperity and health.

This is the case for civic rites such as the Quincentennial commemorations that started on December 14 for the 500 days to the 500th year of the first circumnavigation of the world by Ferdinand Magellan and Sebastian Elcano on Spanish fleets. Led by the National Quincentennial Committee and the National Historical Commission of the Philippines, the event carried the theme, “World of Our Ancestors”, to signify a Filipino-centric

tribute to a world event. One of the programmes for that day involved a fleet of reconstructed balangay boats, reenacting the arrival of the chiefs Raya Kolambu (King of Butuan) and Raya Siyagu (King of Mazaua) to meet the Europeans in Lapu-Lapu near the spot where Magellan and his men landed (and were eventually killed) in Cebu, Central Visayas.

This reinvention of pre-colonial history could be seen as the civic counterpart of more religious ritual performances. Each time a ritual is performed they become more powerful in the minds of devotees or believers. Contexts are recontextualised through events, timing and space. These recontextualised rituals reconcile devotees/believers' imagined pasts and present representations in their minds – such effects are produced in the rituals performed by the *Babaylan*. There are dangers in homogenising it when state-sponsored celebrations come into play, such as in exhibitions. Price (2013: 458-459) warns as she observed the tendency of some museums, such as the Musee du Quai Branly, in showcasing the “other”:

It then conceptually merges this latter set of unrelated cultures and societies into a single homogeneous whole and assigns them a set of common characteristics, imagining, for example, that they are all centered on animistic and polytheistic cosmologies, that they are all “in harmony with nature,” or that they all live outside of history.

In another context, with the uncertainty of contemporary life, especially when health and well-being are threatened by diseases, there has been a revival in the powers of traditional healers and mediators such as the *Babaylan*. Revivals of long discarded practices such as that of Pana-et in Tubungan, Iloilo, seeks to continue the *Babaylan* tradition (Alejo, 2019). This ritual is performed for the community's well being and held every 7 years next to a sacred well, considered one of the four pillars of the world. This supports Cornelio's (2014) notion of popular religion and the everyday revalidation of its authenticity, online subscriptions to these sites might be a way of making real their experience even in the consumerist approach of tourism festivals. He succinctly expresses the following: “religious feasts are in themselves avenues to express personal religiosity. At the same time, such events as the Ati-Atihan and Moriones festival can be manipulated easily for tourism purposes” (Cornelio, 2014: 494). This could, however, be recast and challenge perceived orthodoxy, such as the video art of *sinulog* that Filipino-Dutch artist Martha Atienza has produced with community members of Bantayan Island, her father's homeland that is currently on view at the National Museum of Natural History in Manila (fig. 10).

Figure 10. Installation View
of Sinulog procession
underwater by Martha
Atienza, *Our Islands*
11°16'58.4_N 123°45'07.0_E
(Photo by AP Labrador,
2020).



Interestingly, when searching online for *Babaylan*, a number of sites promote the interest or even belief in spirit mediums and their sacred powers. Some used the image of Francisco's first panel which I mentioned at the start of this paper. These include both local websites and sites generated from abroad particularly North America: isiswomen.org; babaylanfiles.blogspot.com; philippineculturaleducation.com.ph; centerforbabaylanstudies.org; aswangproject.com; ovrag.com; nightskylie.blogspot.com; and filipinaswomensnetwork.org. It would be interesting to conduct research in the future on overseas Filipinos and their belief in the mystical, ancient practices in the Philippines, especially those who have been away as long-term residents abroad.

As a recent example, the Fourth International *Babaylan* Conference took place on 20 to 22 September 2019 at the YMCA Camp Pine Crest in Torrance, Ontario, Canada near Wahta Kanien'Keha:Ka Territory. According to its press release, it "will provide a space for the exploration of what it means to re-root ourselves in our indigenous heritage as Filipinos living in the diaspora and on lands not our own" (Center for *Babaylan* Studies, 2019). This was co-organised with local Filipino-Canadian organisations by the Center for *Babaylan* Studies. According to its website, it is a non profit organisation based in Sunnyvale, California, "whose mission is to spearhead reconnection with the heritage and creativity of Filipino indigenous wisdom and spirituality in an age of globalization" (Center for *Babaylan* Studies, 2019). I have yet to find out its outcome and the reason for the lack of announcement of the fifth conference this year.

An independent film entitled *Babaylan* by Optimum Minds Media Productions, Inc. was released in 2016, in which four young Filipino characters experienced visions and went on a journey to the *Babaylan*

apprentice's hometown in a quest to find answers and possible solutions to their visions. Their journey enabled them to learn and be immersed in an age-old culture that encompasses that of their own, opening new ways of understanding themselves, their new roles in society, the world around them and beyond. Although limited in audience as an independent film, it marked the idea of the *Babaylan* in mainstream media.

Conclusion

For whatever reason, the *Babaylan* continues to be relevant to many Filipinos both locally and internationally. This paper aimed to show that *Babaylan* is still as compelling and dynamic as when it was first recorded. Although it is difficult to define what the *Babaylan* is in many communities, whether or not they are referred to by other names such as *Catalonan*, *Mumbaki*, *Baylan*, *Mabailan*, or *Papattay*, they continue to be recognised as having sacred potent powers to heal, bring about blessings and good harvests and other aspirations for families and communities. It is because of their continued practices and performances that makes the *Babaylan* a uniting force. The key may have been in the active choices made by those who believe in them, such as in the resilience of the Sinulog in Cebu, which Ness (1992: 233) observed, and to which I will end this paper, as a way of thinking about the enduring belief in the *Babaylan*:

What was preserved, what was erased, what was put in, what was left out, what was modified, qualified, distorted, or developed – these were choices evident in the sinulog choreographic practices that gained meaning as they were set against the location where they were created and employed. They were decisions that revealed, what, in the face of a changing and uncertain cultural environment, was worth being included in the visible record of the city's identity.

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Iban Pua Kumbu: A Canvas of Animistic Documentation, and Social and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

In the past, the action of weaving pua kumbu was guided by animistic spiritual beliefs, both in the process of making the textile and when designing its motifs. The Iban's community livelihood and presence was heavily influenced by their supernatural beliefs that consisted of various taboos and rituals. At the centre of their animistic beliefs are supernatural beings believed to be the core of existence of Iban traditional religion which is based on concepts of a pantheon, souls and dreams, ritual obligation, and festivals and cults that led to various practices such as headhunting and weaving of pua kumbu cloths. At present, with Christianity as the pillar of their beliefs, the Iban community creatively adapted their animistic spiritual beliefs to Christian values. This is evident by a handful of Christian Iban weavers who have syncretised their religious beliefs. Their devotion to animism and its practice is deeply rooted in the process of weaving pua kumbu. Although, in a modern cultural setting pua kumbu is woven mostly for economic gain and no longer holds its animistic spiritual significance, the master weaver still performs the rituals in accordance to the belief that they are being guided by supernatural beings. This convergence of beliefs and practices can be very confusing, but it seems to be relevant for the survival of the pua kumbu weaving tradition.

Introduction

The pua kumbu, an animistic Iban textile of the Dayak people of Sarawak, Malaysia, is a warp-patterned textile produced using a tie-dye resist technique and woven on a back-strap loom. Its production involves a complicated process of preparing the threads, warping, counting, selecting, folding, tying warp threads and dyeing them before the weaving even begins. Each process is accompanied by various taboos and beliefs. The pua kumbu possesses a unique identity as each design carries a name, a rhyme or a story. Different tones of colour signifies a distinctive piece. Internationally, and as expressed in Malay-

Indonesian terminology, the tie and dye technique has been referred to by many scholars as “ikat”. However, amongst the Iban the technique is simply known as “kebat”. The pua kumbu amongst the Iban community functioned as a protective blanket during ritual practices in which many of the designs were considered sacred and only passed down within the family. For decades the designs of pua kumbu have been protected by traditional intellectual property rights, with a strict taboo to observe. Many of these woven designs were accompanied by poems that contained hidden animistic meanings now lost with the passing of their proprietors. Although many textiles have ended up in museums and with collectors, their animistic beliefs, the meaning and significance behind each design is lost.

In the much celebrated literature on pua kumbu by Jabu (1991), it is explained that the weaving of pua is not just a process that must be learnt, but is central to each weavers’ relationship with the spirits. Passed down the matrilineal line, knowledge of the weaving process follows a “naturally sequenced order sanctioned by the spirit world” (Jabu 1991: 80). The present “master weaver” who has been awarded the status, “World Living Legend of the Pua Kumbu”, and who is considered the “Malaysian Master Weaver (Adiguru) of Pua Kumbu”, is a Christian who has never practised any complicated ritual to produce her fine pua. Many Iban weavers today have embraced Christianity which has affected many aspects of Iban culture, especially the weaving of pua kumbu. It has become increasingly difficult to continue this practice due to the complexity of their animistic beliefs, which follow strict taboos that contradict Christian practices. However, a handful of Christian Iban weavers have syncretised their religion. Their devotion to the weaving process is still deeply rooted in animistic beliefs and practices, which have existed for centuries and still remains in some small Iban communities in Sarawak today. Most recently, the state government of Sarawak emphasised that pua kumbu should be commercialised as haute couture. This paper attempts to discuss the significance of pua kumbu as a canvas for documenting animistic beliefs and practices of the Iban, and discusses how it has changed and contributed to the cultural heritage of today’s Ibanic community and Malaysia in general.

Animism and the Pua Kumbu amongst the Iban

As indicated by Halbmayer (2012: 12), “In current theories animism is understood as relational ontology including other-than-human persons. The central focus is thereby mostly on relationships with specific animals, seldom on those with plants and (their master) spirits and hardly ever with “things” like stars, the sun and the moon, the wind, rain or rainbows”. Animist theories generally assume that animals are considered to be humans or that animals consider themselves to be humans. Humans and animals form part of a shared relational frame of interaction. Thus in animistic ontologies relations and interactions with these persons are maintained through communication, mutual understanding and the possibility of transforming into and becoming the “Other”. Halbmayer (2012) noted that certain scholars argued that animism inverts the Western nature/culture dichotomy, whereby culture (soul or interiority) is common to potentially all beings who differ only in terms of nature (body or physicality). From this perspective, animism is therefore characterised by a mono-culture and multi-naturalism (Halbmayer, 2012: 12). This fundamental understanding of animism befits Ibanic animistic religious beliefs.

The traditional religion of the Iban is based on concepts of a pantheon, souls and dreams, ritual obligation and festivals, cults relating to paddy cultivation and healing, and the practice of augury. The realm of the gods (*petara* in Iban culture), incorporates many benevolent beings that have power over natural phenomena. They are the gods of the tree-tops (*Petara Puchok Kayu*) and gods of the earth (*Petara Tengah Tanah*), who are invoked during rituals (*gawai*), in prayers (*sampi*) and incantation (*pengap* or *timbang*). These gods are highly anthropomorphic and are perceived as having specialised functions and powers (Freeman, 1953; 1961). While the Iban pantheon is complex, three main gods signify salient features of Iban cultural values: *Singalang Burong* as the god of war; *Simpulang Gana*, the principal god of the earth; and *Selampandai*, the creator of humans.

In Iban culture, the augural God is related to the Iban by marriage of *Singalang Burong*'s seventh daughter. It is the son-in-law of *Singalang Burong* who revealed divination to the mortal Iban. Humans communicate with supernatural powers through dreams and its meaning is understood by performing the miring ritual. The dream is a place of meeting between people and their *petara* (Jensen, 1966). The Iban are also guided by omen birds when carrying out their daily activities. In terms of seniority and authority, these bird omens are *Ketupong*, *Beragai*, *Embuas*, *Papau*, *Pangkas*, *Bejampung* and *Kunding*. *Ketupong* is married to *Endu Dara Tinchin Temaga*; *Beragai* to *Puchung Pengabas*; *Embuas* to *Endu Letan Berpulas*; *Papau* to *Endu Ketunsong Ngembai*; *Pangkas* to *Kechapong*

Pulas; *Bejampong* to *Endu Kechapah Dulang Midong*; and *Kunding* to *Dara Patri Langit*. Except for *Kunding*, all are day birds, with bird calls usually heard in the early morning. *Kunding* is a night bird that is heard only at night. These bird calls are signs to the Iban cautioning them to be more vigilant and careful. Another bird omen is *Nendak*, who is believed to live in the same longhouse as *Singalang Burong*.

The most feared of all the bird omens is *Ketupong* - the husband of *Dara Tinchin Temaga*. According to Roth (1980), *Ketupong*'s main task is to warn against any impending danger. For example, if *Ketupong* flies inside the house, they must leave the house. The bird omen has a huge significance in the practice of headhunting amongst the Iban. Headhunting parties are never organised without observing bird omens. Before a man leaves for his travels, known as *bejalai*, a miring ritual would be conducted for three consecutive nights. The ritual follows the Iban's usual ceremony of using seven sets of sacrificial food items. A set of plates are placed above their sleeping area and covered with a ritual blanket known as the pua kumbu (Kedit, 1993).

The significance of pua kumbu in Iban rituals is undeniable. Pua kumbu serves as a canvas of Iban cosmology, religion and animistic beliefs. It is constructed by skillful, knowledgeable women weavers guided by supernatural beings who communicate with them through visions or in their dreams. In Iban cosmology, gods live in the upper cosmos, below them are the deities, humans live on earth and the spirit realm is everywhere. Pua kumbu is believed to have power that comes from supernatural entities that are captured and pictured in the cloth. This supernatural realm consists of two kinds of spirits: good and bad spirits (*antu*) (Sutlive, 1978: 101).

Pua kumbu is rich with motifs that form abstract designs. These motifs are also inspired by nature, as well as living and non-living things of this world. The designs are accompanied by poems and folklores that depict the stories of Iban pantheon, related supernatural beings of all kinds, great warriors, and also forest animals that are tied to a rich complex spirit world inhabited by both benevolent and malevolent spirits. The Iban would traditionally use designs on the pua kumbu to interpret messages from the spirit world (Linggi, 1998: 2).

The Symbolic Designs

The design of each pua kumbu is accompanied by a very long name or a short poem known as *julok*. This accompaniment of poem and abstract name for each design reflects the animistic events and situations that are explained in folklores and legends. There are many interpretations of Ibanic folklore and legends, and while the narrative is open to interpretation by others, weavers themselves share and understand their real meaning. For example, the “Kelekuh” design is accompanied by a poem containing the hidden message of “asking for more head trophies or the impossible” where *buah engkeramuh* (fruit in general) and *terung bulu* (brinjal) are symbolic meanings for *antu pala* (head trophies) in this context.

Kelekuh embun belabuh, nyawa rauh-rauh,
minta tutuh ka Raja Nyaduh,
buah engkeramuh mansau se-dan
Kelekit gajai langit,
nyabak seremidak se-sengit minta tumbit ka menyadi'iya
Ranggau Tindit Bukit bebal' nyadi emperan
Keleku gajai antu, nyabak seremidak rerengu minta tunu ka
Raja Nyadu, terung bulu mansau redam

It is important to consider factors such as the purpose for which the pua kumbu has been woven, its date and historical context, the life story of the weaver herself, as well as the rich repertoire of references to Iban legends, religions and oral history (Jabu, 1991: 81). Fitzgerald (2005: 50) suggests: “the role that pua cloth has traditionally played within their society is evident in the myths that form the basis of their social and religious life”. Hitchcock (1991: 79) suggests that the role of weaving in Iban society is reflected in the veneration of the female deity, *Kumang*, who taught humans the art of dyeing and weaving. Gittinger (1979: 218) notes that textiles come from the same mythic source as the Iban's most sacred traditions, and it is this joint origin that qualifies them for use in the ceremonial context.

While individual motifs are shared among weavers, overall designs generally are not. Designs are usually revealed through dreams and as this brings the weaver into contact with the spirit world it is considered risky as it can bring bad luck. If the designs are copied, however, they are considered less risky (Taylor & Aragon, 1991: 166). A weaver with broad knowledge of all the motifs and patterns, their associated taboos, and an ability to navigate her way through the dangers involved is truly making a contribution to her community, because textiles play a very important social and cultural role.

Although the patterns on pua kumbu are limitless, overall there is a common aesthetic appearance to the cloth, which is evident in its layout (fig. 1). Traditionally, all pua have a central panel (the most powerful section on the cloth) that is bordered by plain striped longitudinal borders, as well as a horizontal border of triangles. Only narrow widths of cloth can be made on a body-tension or backstrap loom, therefore two identical pieces are woven in a continuous warp. A pua kumbu is finished by sewing these two pieces down the middle, resulting in a much wider finished piece (Hitchcock 1991: 78). A *kain kebat*, or ceremonial skirt, consists of only one width of cloth that is sewn end to end to create a tube. For pua, the central panel is traditionally asymmetrical, consisting of a “progression of interlocking motifs from top to bottom,” while others are symmetrical with the upper and lower half as mirror images (Fahrni 1994: 30).



Figure 1. Examples of the range of patterns on pua kumbu textiles (Photo: Jehom, 2020).

Most motifs found on pua are anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or representative of various flora or geometric patterns (fig. 1). Van Hout (1999: 11) notes that traditional images are seldom realistic, unless anthropomorphic or reptilian, and it is uncertain whether depictions are actual representations of objects or animals, since “some patterns only resemble, but do not represent the objects they are named after”. Zoomorphic motifs include birds, deers, lizards, crocodiles, and snakes. Authors report a wide variety of additional representations, including leeches (Saunders, 1997: 44), spiders and centipedes (Hitchcock, 1991: 174). Some of the common floral motifs include creepers, the tree of life, rice and areas of rice cultivation, rattan, fruits and flowers. In terms of geometric patterns, abstract hooks, scrolls, lozenges, and hooked diamonds are common. Although rare, motifs of human heads or references to headhunting were occasionally depicted on pua, and are becoming more common (Kahlenberg, 19976: 42).

According to Robert von Heine-Geldern (n.d.), the origins of some motifs can be traced back as far as the initial Neolithic phase of immigration to the Indonesian archipelago from ancient Central and East Asia in the third and second millennium B.C. (von Heine-Geldern (n.d.) In: Kahlenberg 1977: 41). Kahlenberg (1977: 41) points out that motifs were “related to the sacral concerns of nature-and-spirit worship and include ornate

humans, animals, and plant forms of universal significance such as the tree of life". Von Heine-Geldern believes that these motifs, now primarily found in Indonesia, may have been widespread in East Asia. Fitzgerald (2005: 46) suggests that a later influence came during the Bronze Age in the 1st millennium B.C. from the Dongson culture of Annam in central Vietnam. Kartiwa (1989: 59) suggests that "Abstract and geometric forms such as the spiral, double spiral, hook and meander are evident of patterns in early Iban textiles". Gittinger (1979: 45) also notes that the hooked diamond called the rhomboid and key, which is a major motif among the Iban, is also shared with the Batak of Sumatra, the Sumbanese and the Timorese, suggesting a common source.

Weaving Pua Kumbu

Traditionally, the process of weaving ikat of pua kumbu begins with the removal of all seeds from the cotton plant by using a cotton gin. Cotton is then handspun into thread, placed on a warp, and the weaver begins to tie the pattern into the warp by sectioning off groups of warp threads (longitudinally). After this comes the dyeing process. Sections are tied using a dried fiber leaf called lemba, which is coated in beeswax to prevent any seepage of dye (Jabu, 1991: 78). The smaller the groups of threads are tied, the more intricate the overall design is (Fahrni, 1994: 47). After preparing the dyes, yarn that has been handspun is removed from the loom and dyed with different colours (Saunders, 1997: 3). When the dyeing process is completed, the yarn is placed back on the warp, and the weaver can then begin to weave the dyed threads using a plain weft thread (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Iban women weaving the pua kumbu on back strap looms (Photo: Jehom, 2020).

The designs are created by tying groups of yarn using a resist material (fig. 3) followed by dyeing the warp using a red-brown colour from natural dye plants. The next step is to cover parts of the dyed areas accordingly, leaving the rest untied to take in the next colour which is blue from the leaves of the indigo plant (*marsdenia tinctoria*) (fig. 4). This produces a black colour from the over-dyed red-brown colour (*morinda citrifolia*). The blue colour that appears on the pua kumbu is achieved by taking off the strings from the first tie on the desired parts, thus exposing those parts which will absorb the blue colour. The dyed yarns are washed to remove excess dye and left to dry. Once the yarn is dry, the ties are cut and taken off before the warp can be unfolded revealing the symmetrical designs that have been created. The final process is the weaving of the upper and lower warp or web using weft threads producing two pieces, which once completed, are cut at each end and joined together using a herringbone stitch to make a single piece of pua kumbu.



Figure 3. “Ikat” technique – Designing directly on the thread by tying a bunch of threads before the completed designed thread is dyed (Photo: Jehom, 2020).



Figure 4. Preparing *marsdenia tinctoria* for blue-indigo dye (Photo: Jehom, 2020).

The Use of Pua Kumbu

A number of scholars have recorded the use and importance of pua kumbu, with each observing the functionality of pua kumbu based on their interpretations at the time. Consequently, very often foreign scholars published work on pua kumbu based on their understanding from key Iban informants who at the time of study did not share similar views with Ibans from other regions. In addition, local scholars who published work on the pua kumbu tend to be biased towards other Iban weavers from other regions in Sarawak in terms of the illustration of rituals, and the dyes and techniques used. The uses of pua kumbu, as put forward by a number of scholars, will now be discussed.

Pua kumbu is usually hung against the wall and put on display during major ceremonies and festivals. Before the introduction of Christianity pua kumbu designs transmitted important meanings when selected for display in ceremonies. Taylor and Aragon (1991: 166) suggest that “In funerals, pua are said to symbolize the roof of the boat that carries the deceased downriver to the afterworld”. Kahlenberg (1977: 41) suggests that “pua serve many ritual functions and are used to consecrate sacrifices and figure in the transfer of wealth”. Van Hout (1999: 12) points out that the pua kumbu were also used to wrap newborns in when carried to their first ritual bath. More specific ceremonies involving pua kumbu are gawai ceremonies, or religious festivals, in which there is a magnificent display of textiles (Fitzgerald, 2005: 51). Gittinger (1979: 213-214) suggests that “some gawai ceremonies are geared to individual concerns, but others are part of the great cycle of ceremonies that ensures the continued well-being of the society, connected with agriculture, warfare, and the Festival of the Dead”. For example, the ceremony of gawai batu precedes the cleaning of the paddy fields in parts of Borneo. Gittinger (1979: 127) explains that pua cloths are wrapped around whetstones and used as awning over an elder who makes sacrifices to stones.

Fitzgerald (2005: 52) highlights another important ceremony known as gawai burong. This is a celebration in honour of *Singalang Burong* - leader of the omen lord and god of war. He suggests that “as with other ceremonies, gawai burong brings about good relations with the gods” (2005: 52). Gittinger (1979: 213) points out that “in this ceremony, pua are used as indicators of the festival occasion, and a pua might be draped over the body of a participant in a procession”. Aside from the large festivals, the Iban also use pua as a blanket in the “dream room” at the top of the longhouse as they await a “spirit helper” (Fitzgerald, 2005: 52). As such, Gittinger (1979: 217) suggests that in the past they were used by headhunters seeking physical protection and spiritual guidance, but might now be used by a weaver in the hope of achieving spiritual guidance from the Kumang deity in the form of a new pua design.

The evident power of pua kumbu is seen in its use to delineate sacred areas by way of hanging numerous pua for display (Hitchcock (1991: 139) or by using pua as a focal point for ceremonies, for example, to enclose the dead at funerals or to designate space for a new mother and child (Fitzgerald, 2005: 52). Pua played a significant role in headhunting, a past practice central to ensuring the prosperity of the community and which also linked it to fertility (Fitzgerald, 2005: 53). Upon the return of a headhunting party, heads would be presented at the top of the steps of the longhouse to senior women of the community, who would wrap them in pua for protective measures (Taylor and Aragon, 1991:166). It was noted much earlier by Gittinger (1979:32) that the rituals surrounding headhunting and rice harvesting were similar because both ensured fertility.

In terms of ceremonial functions, LaDuke (1981) suggests that pua kumbu are used during rites of passage: to receive a newborn infant, to decorate both the longhouse for wedding ceremonies and the room of newlyweds, to cure the sick, to shelter the body of a relative during funerary ceremonies, and to serve as a protective cover for priests during ceremonial rituals. She goes on to suggest that pua kumbu were also used for seasonal rice festivals, payment of services rendered by the priest, and in gift giving and barter. Empiang Jabu (1991) suggests that the pua kumbu is essentially a sacred cloth, and each piece woven differs according to its ritual use and the significance of its designs. They are employed in every facet of Iban ritual life, for example, to define ritual space or to create and bridge boundaries between the human and supernatural worlds. Jabu (1991: 80) also suggests that pua kumbu designs, in addition to their specific ritual use, are identified by the skill, seniority and expertise of the particular woman who weaves them.

The Feminine Power behind Weaving Pua Kumbu

Mastery of the pua kumbu weaving process is a way of determining a woman's status as a weaver and within the community. The following categories describe the status of weavers from least experienced to most experienced. The first category, *indu paku indu tebu*, is for women who do not weave, perhaps because they do not come from a weaving family. The second is *indu temuai indu lawai*, which is for women who are able to accomplish a basic pattern, but with the help of another woman. *Indu sikat indu kebat* is for a proficient weaver who can weave basic patterns, but is unable to create her own, and thus only copies designs of her mother or grandmother. *Indu engkebang indu muntang*, describes a weaver who can invent her own designs, is extremely proficient, and has the power to attempt potentially dangerous patterns.

As master weavers they are highly knowledgeable on the production of pua and as historians they are able to (1) weave a graphic design representing the animistic beliefs of the Iban, the spiritual realm and world views of life around them; (2) have knowledge that the designs are vested with meanings and energy; (3) understand that the more powerful the design, the closer it brings the Iban to the spiritual world; and (4) be aware that the more powerful the design, the greater the danger for the weaver.

The highest attainable status achieved in weaving is that of *Indu tau nakar Indu Ngar* (or *tau' nakar, tau' ngar*). Essentially, the phrase means “women who know how to measure the mordant and perform the rites [with] divine assistance” (Gavin, 1991: 4). These women are recognised as the most proficient of all weavers and are able to complete the dyeing process of mixing mordant solutions, in a procedure called *ngar* (fig. 5). Successfully completing such a process is an extremely difficult undertaking that is referred to as *kayau indu* (the warpath of women). This warpath has been compared to and considered equally significant and just as important as the dangerous warfare journeys of Iban men who headhunt (Gavin, 1991: 5). For this reason, Taylor and Aragon (1991: 166) note that women gained status within the community through weaving just as men gained prestige through warfare success. Gittinger (1979: 218) notes that for both men and women, these achievements were vital considerations before getting married. He writes that “no man’s prowess was confirmed until he had taken the head of an enemy, and no woman was fully recognized until she had woven a pua”.



Figure 5. The master weaver, Bangie anak Embol, mixing all ingredients in a “Ngar” ritual, prior to mordanting cotton threads (Photo: Jehom, 2020).

Fitzgerald (2005: 39) points out that Sarawak was “traditionally a classless society lacking hereditary leadership, Iban culture encourages competition, individualism, and status and prestige through achievement”. Men reach these goals through acts of bravery, successful rice farming and prestige. For women, this prestige is acquired through mastering the art of dyeing and weaving (Fitzgerald, 2005: 40). Regarding the position of women in Iban society, Mashman (1991: 246) suggests that women are not subordinated because “their gender identity is located outside the system in their knowledge of weaving”. In this sense, Mashman (1991) claims that neither male nor female is dominant, rather they are both dependent on each other through the control of separate resources.

The establishment of a social structure within the weavers’ community can be explained by the social theory of Giddens (1984) which states that such structure is not outside social action, but exists only because of social action, and it is the repeated patterns of social action that constitute the structural reality. With this social structure, the master weaver is able to enforce moral rules that dictate social action and interaction, by which weavers are encouraged to learn the weaving tradition before taking up more skilful tasks of weaving pua kumbu. Gradually, the master weaver takes up the role as an educator for novice weavers. The social structure also provides her the capacity to act, make decisions and change the course of action (Adams & Sydie, 2002: 50).

Pua Kumbu Weaving Tradition: Cultural Survival in a Modern Setting

Many of the patterns and functions of pua have changed over the past century (Fitzgerald, 2005: 54). These changes have been well documented by a number of scholars, some with opposing views (see Gavin 1991, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999; Gavin & Barnes 1999; Kedit 1994; and Palmieri and Ferentinos 1979). Fitzgerald (2005: 55) points out that the design, function and spiritual value of pua has significantly changed because of trade and modernisation following World War II. By the end of the nineteenth century pre-spun thread and pre-dyed yarn was widely available, however, the use of pre-dyed yarn was slow to catch on because of the spiritual importance the Iban placed on the dyeing process. Jabu (1991: 80) claims that pua kumbu is still valued because of the important ritual and technical processes that determine the way it has been woven”. However, as pua became popular and manufacturing became easier, designs were copied and mass produced. Heppell (1994: 133-134) remarks that this change was spurred on by “changes in value systems, loss of free time due to longer cultivation work for cash, natural sources of red dye becoming scarce, and the opportunity to experiment with different colors or motifs”. He also notes that traditional designs were

often copied, with weavers trying to match dye colors with new pre-dyed thread or time-saving chemical dyes. Fitzgerald (2005: 56) suggests that because of the use of chemical dyes, traditional dye colours were difficult to match and the traditional red background of pua gave way to a chemical dye that produced a pinkish-red color. Gavin (1996) also attributes the loss of weaving knowledge to the scarcity of thread during World War II. Instead of returning to growing and spinning their own thread, many weavers abandoned the tradition altogether, even though thread was available again after the war.

In Gittinger's (1979: 223) discussions of changes in traditional pua motifs, designs and patterns, he points out that "although the subject matter may now include vivid colors and modern, often quite amusing forms, the style remains distinctive. It seems inevitable, however, that in a few years weaving will have become an art of the past". Nearly fifteen years later, the same sentiments were still being expressed, with Heppell (1994: 133) noting that it was doubtful weaving traditions would survive, unless there was economic gain from its continuation. Kartiwa (1989: 67) also remarks that although pua cloth may now be copied, their function is purely decorative.

Much of the existing literature on cultural identity that is based on artistic traditions propose that the move towards artistic innovation actually reflects cultural survival, as opposed to having negative effects on the tradition (Milgram, 1999). These authors claim that by preserving tradition, indigenous people are placed in a static past, when they are actually dynamic cultures (Milgram, 1999). In addition, reviving cultural traditions does not remove all forms of innovation. According to Graburn (1976: 20), "revival refers to the attempted re-creation of an art form that has fallen into disuse; it may involve slight modification of the form and probably does not re-create the context of the original manufacture". This counters the claim that indigenous people are stuck in a static past and stresses how the revival of an art form can be a method of cultural continuity. To continue Heppell's (1994: 133) debate on the survival of weaving traditions unless there is an economic gain from its continuation, the economic gain from a continued weaving tradition does in fact relate closely to cultural survival. Cultural survival very much depends on the economic gain of weaving which diminishes the importance of spiritual beliefs in cloths. Furthermore, since weavers are Christian, the process of weaving pua has been treated as "productions" rather than "spiritual endeavours".

Development, or planned social and economic change has often been linked to modernisation, or "the transformation of traditional societies into modern ones, characterised by advanced technology, material prosperity

and political stability” (Zobart 1993: 5). Up until the 1990s, indigenous knowledge, such as that related to traditional arts, was not recognised as an important part of development theory and practice. Zobart (1993) takes a critical look at this previous dismissal of indigenous knowledge. He argues that both development and modernisation theories often perceived indigenous people and traditional culture as an obstacle to change (Zobart, 1993: 6). As a result, past development efforts have often resulted in the loss of cultural traditions and often failed to improve economic conditions for local people. Nevertheless, the ability to create new linkages between elements of different knowledge systems may be an advantage in conserving indigenous systems that instead of disappearing when material realities change, a generalisable, adaptable concept can be achieved if indigenous knowledge is used in conjunction with new technologies.

Conclusion

Pua kumbu is a very important and sacred textile that has a significant role and purpose in Ibanic animistic ritual practices. Its construction was guided by animistic spiritual beliefs, both in the process of weaving the cloth and designing its motifs. With this belief, pua kumbu has been treated as sacred ritual cloths that are used to serve many purposes and important practices, such as headhunting. Beyond that importance, the pua kumbu has a very significant role as a form of animistic art that presents itself as a canvas documenting Ibanic cosmology, ethnic identity and feminine power in respect of women weavers as agents of cultural continuation and conservation in their community. Nevertheless, with the decline of skillful weavers and the disappearance of traditional designs, the pua kumbu has undoubtedly undergone change in its purpose and existence. At present, pua kumbu is seen solely as an art form for economic gain. With the use of chemical dyes, the quality of pua kumbu is compromised. Traditional designs are replaced by commercialised and less meaningful designs that lack the innovation achieved through direct connection with and guidance from the spirit world.

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The Wedding Ceremony of U Min Kyaw: The interaction between Supernatural Powers and Human Needs

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Abstract

Animism plays a significant historical and contemporary role in Myanmar. There are many types of spirit figures known as *nats* or lords, ranging from nature spirits (such as tree, plant, water spirits) to the national pantheon of the 'thirty-seven *nats*' who are said to have been banished by an 11th century king with the institutionalisation of Buddhism. The wedding ceremony of one of the thirty-seven *nats*, U Min Kyaw, illustrates the continuing practise of animistic worship in Myanmar involving a shaman or *nat kadaw*. In the wedding ceremony of U Min Kyaw and many other *nats* today, the *nat kadaw* is often a transsexual, and the celebration is very often accompanied by gambling, drinking and merriment to bring wealth to all participants. Why do animists accept the nat, U Min Kyaw, as a supernatural power and how do animists and spirit mediums marry themselves to him? These and other issues are discussed when presenting the process of the wedding ceremony. An important and often overlooked aspect of the celebrations is its continuity of the traditional arts (music, songs, dress, dance and meals). The research undertaken demonstrates the central concept of a wedding that takes place between a spirit and a human being, and how this tradition fulfills the participants' desires. Using participant observation and key informant interviews during the ceremony, the research suggests why this type of animism is still practised in Myanmar today.

Keywords: supernatural power, *nats*, *nat kadaw*, shaman, human needs, satisfaction, traditional arts, U Min Kyaw, spirit wedding

Introduction

Animism has a long history in Myanmar and its significance is apparent across the country. There are a variety of spirits known as *nats*, which include traditional *nats*¹, regional *nats*² and the thirty-seven *nats*³. Among them, traditional *nats* such as Kayin traditional *nats*⁴ and Mon traditional *nats*⁵ exist in the belief systems of most ethnic groups in Myanmar, whilst regional *nats* are believed to be present in some cities and villages. King Anawrahtar, founder of the Pagan (Bagan) Dynasty (11 August 1044 ~ 11 April 1077), substituted Buddhism in place of Animism. He, however, introduced 37 *nats* to the city of Bagan in a political effort to protect his own authority and governance by merging Buddhism and Animism. A shrine is erected in the eastern corner of the Shwezigon Pagoda compound in his honour (Survey, 2015) and after almost 1000 years Animism is still practised among the people of Myanmar, with most believing and communicating with the 37 *nats* (Kyar, 1999; Nyunt, 1981).

This paper focuses on U Min Kyaw, one of the 37 *nats*. The wedding ceremony of U Min Kyaw illustrates the continued belief in animism and the supernatural, and the interaction between spirits, *nat kadaws*, and its believers in Myanmar. It focuses on a wedding ceremony celebrated near the Tayarshittaung Pagoda, Tharkayta Township, Yangon Region. The *natkanar pwe* (ritual) in this ceremony was conducted over three days in 2015. This paper will address the following questions: why do animists accept the nat, U Min Kyaw, and his supernatural power?; and how do animists, spirit mediums and people marry him? These and other issues are discussed by presenting the process of the wedding ceremony of U Min Kyaw which showcases important traditional forms of art (music, songs, dance and meals) that are often an overlooked aspect of the celebrations.

Animism and Shamans in Myanmar

Religion is the collective reflection of nature, man, and society. It is a product of the collective mind. Tylor (1958:1) states that religion began from people's belief in the spirits of godlike beings. His definition of

1 Their parental spirit or nat.

2 Guardian spirit of city or village.

3 37 spirits who are recognised by kings and the people of Myanmar.

4 *Nats* belong exclusively to an ethnic group and are not included in the list of 37 spirits.

5 The Kayin's traditional nat.

culture includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. There are followers of Buddhism (87.9%), Christianity (6.2%), Islam (4.3%), Hinduism (0.5%), Animism (0.8%) and other religions (0.2%) in Myanmar (Myanmar Population, 2019). When a comparative study between *nat* and Buddhist worship was conducted in 2013, most Buddhists in Myanmar harmonised their belief in *nats* with the teachings of Buddha (Khin, 2013). While many believers turn to *nats* for help in fulfilling their wishes, some continue to accept Buddha's instructions as moral teachings about the reduction of greed, anger and ignorance.

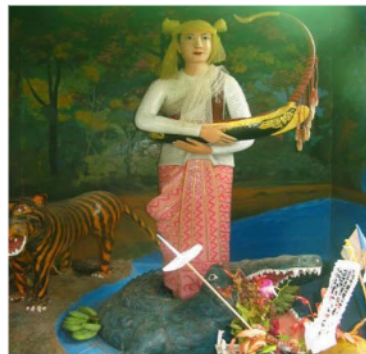
Shamanism is a worldwide religious practice. Yim (2013: 155) writes that "The essence of shamanism is people's nature to overcome their limited abilities by creating and leaning upon supernatural beings. Koreans recognized numerous gods, including the mountain of god, the dragon king of the sea, home site gods, and house site gods. This is a trait not only found in shamanism but also in most religions as well. However, shamanism is usually considered as a mere folk belief rather than a nationally recognized religion". Jambalsuren (2013: 171) describes how "some Mongolians believe the world is alive and full of spirits. The plants, animals, rocks, mountains and water, all have a soul. These spirits must be respected to be in the balance with all of them. Balance is an important thing to keep harmony within you, the community, and the environment". Shamans in Korea use several different tools such as a hand-held drum, foil and mirrors as aids for their spiritual endeavors. They have a costume for their spirit and they dance and play musical instruments. Elsewhere, shamans from tribes in Mongolia, for example, use masks for the ominan ritual (Yin, 2013). Traditional shamans in Mongolia are usually doctors, teachers, or public figures in their community. They are never mysterious or secret people (Jambalsuren, 2013). In Myanmar, the main regional focus of this paper, the shaman or spirit medium is called *nat kadaw* or *natwinthe*. *Nat kadaw* means a person who has knowledge and awareness of *nats* and their associated rituals. *Natwinthe* means a person who can communicate and invite the *nats* to possess his or her own body and soul. *Nat kadaw* can be male, female or more commonly, transsexual. There are two kinds of *nat kadaw*: a person who inherits the role of a *nat kadaw* or one who has had a relationship with *nats* in his or her former life, called *Pahtanzet*. *Nat kadaws* adorn different costumes for different *nats*. Moreover, they have to learn how to prepare specific meals, sing and play specific songs and music for the respective *nat* of worship (Khin, 2013).

In Myanmar, *nat kadaws* are Buddhists. They follow Buddha's teachings and practices in their daily life. By following the five Buddhist precepts

Figure 1. U Shin Gyi's Shrine, Yangon Ananadar Pagoda, Thingankyun Township (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2019).



Figure 2. Statue of U Shin Gyi, Taikgyi, Yangon Region (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2015).



and practising meditation they believe they are better able to communicate with *nats* and that the predictions they make are more successfully realised. *Nat kadaws*, as leaders, should be honorable and admirable people. *Nat* worshippers in Myanmar create statues with different costumes for each of the 37 *nats* (Pho Kyar, 1999: 98; Singer, 1992). For example, the statue of U Shin Gyi wears a white shirt with long sleeves, this is a traditional garment of Myanmar known as a *taungshae*⁶. This is teamed up with a red headdress and shawl tied around the chest. U Shin Gyi is sculpted riding a crocodile with a tiger by its right side (figs 1 & 2). These symbols point to U shin Gyi's power to control creatures as fierce as crocodiles and tigers.

Most Buddhists in Myanmar believe that a person's soul can be possessed by *nats*, also known as *natpudes* or *natwindes*. When the human soul is possessed by a *nat*, he or she can be expected to behave as a normal human being⁷, but are able to predict people's fortune. Followers can

Figure 3. Shan Maung Hna Ma and their believers (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2016).



ask the *nat* directly for help (fig. 3). It is common that the help of *nats*, via a *nat kadaw*, is sought by those who seek to fulfill their physical and mental needs. In a way *nat kadaws*, who have the power to invite and communicate with *nats*, become avatars of the *nats* to worshippers. When they invite and communicate with the *nat*, they will wear the same costume as is worn on the *nats* statue. During the ritual *nat kadaws* dance and sing for the respective *nat* with the help of a *Saiwai*, a traditional Burmese musical instrument. How *nat kadaw* creates a relationship with *nats* in order to benefit from them is described below by the case of U Min Kyaw's wedding.

⁶ Long garment which is 10 metres long and 1.25 metres wide.

⁷ People cannot see and communicate with *Nats* directly because they believe that *nats* can only be seen by *Natkadaw* who holds the power to communicate with them.

U Min Kyaw and Supernatural Power

First, a brief biography of the person behind the spirit of U Min Kyaw is presented. Upon the death of Prince Kyaw Swa, his soul transformed into the spirit, U Min Kyaw, to become one of the 37 *nats*. His parents, King Theinko (Theinzo) (731~ 737 CE) and Queen Shwekaing (Shwegaing Medaw⁸) had two sons, Prince Sithu and Prince Kyaw Swa. The king also had one other son named Prince Shwehlaung with another queen. King Theinko wanted to give his throne to Shwehlaung and so Sithu and Kyaw Swa were sent to fight in the region of Kayin (Taungyu). After defeating its enemies, the princes were given Pakhan City (Kukhan Myot) (circa 738 CE) by their father and despite Prince Kyaw Swa penchant for gambling and drinking, he and his brother built the city up by constructing religious buildings such as, pagodas⁹, monasteries, nine irrigation channels¹⁰ for farming, a water supply system and provided military training (Ko, 2018; Nyunt, 1981; MOC¹¹, 2015; KII, 2019).

As a leader of his troops and victorious in battles, Prince Kyaw Swa became a famous hero among the people of Myanmar. His passing, however, came at the hands of his elder brother Sithu because he failed to manage and control the water flow coming from the Irrawaddy River into the irrigation system. King Anawyahtar (11 August 1044 ~ 11 April 1077) honoured his son with a shrine on Shweguni, a large island in the Chindwin River just east of Pakhangyi, Pakhan Nge, Pakokku Township, Mandalay Region. An annual ritual lasting from the 1st waxing day of the Tabaung (March 3 2019) to the full moon of Tabaung (March 20 2019) is held annually in Prince Kyaw Swa's honour (fig. 4). This ritual is named *Pakhan Pwe* or *U Min Kyaw Pwe*, and is the second biggest ritual in Myanmar today.



Figure 4. U Min Kyaw's Shrine in Shweguni, Pakhan Nge, Pakokku Township, Mandalay Region (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2017).

An 80 year old informant who is the current guardian of U Min Kyaw's shrine in Yayzakyo city recalls his great grandparents having also been the guardians of the same shrine he and his wife now take care of (fig. 5 & 6):

8 Mother.

9 Kuphyu pagoda and Kuni pagoda.

10 *Sintatar, Thaphanpin, Chaungpalet, Meinmathay, Aung Swa, Kyaw Swa, Sithu, Nga Pyae, Pyanmakyai* channels.

11 Ministry of Culture.

Figure 5. U Min Kyaw's Shrine in Yayzakyo (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2019).



Figure 6. U Min Kyaw's Statue and his cockerel in U Min Kyaw's Shrine, Yayzakyo (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2019).



'I do not know the date of this shrine. But my great-grandfather and mother told me that Prince Kyaw Swa passed away and went to Myitkyina as a human being to buy teak for his shrine. He ordered the teak to be sent to the home of the village head, Yayzakyo. The daughter of the village head was possessed by U Min Kyaw who told him to give his gold cup to the teak traders so he could build a shrine for him. The head of the village also gave some of his own money to the traders and built the shrine. His daughter became a guardian of the shrine. It was named *Thet Yauk Nan*, which means his soul arrived at the shrine'.

Prince Kyaw Swa was known as a gentle, free spirited, and skillful military leader who built up the city of Pakhan. Most people regard him as the King of Pakhan City. He has many names such as *Phay Phay* (father) *Kyaw*, *Kogyi* (elder brother) *Kyaw*, *Pakhan*¹² *Kogyi Kyaw*, *U Min Kyaw*¹³, and *Phakhan Min* (King). *Kogyi Kyaw* is the favoured name among youths and believers today. Prince Kyaw Swa's death brought desolation and sorrow upon his people. Many people believe that he is still alive. Even today, most youths prefer to honour him and dance in his honor by wearing royal costumes during the water festival (during April) - Myanmar's New Years Festival. On the day of the festival, most believers visit his shrine in Shweguni and bathe in the Chindwin River.

12 Phakhan is the name of the city. He was a mayor of Phakhan City.

13 U is placed in front of the real name to be polite (U= Mr.).

Crowds of people can be found queuing along the road from his shrine to the river. In addition, it is mandatory for those living in the Pakhan region to offer him alcohol, fried chicken, *Mont Phyu*¹⁴ and *Montni*¹⁵ in their homes. Visitors frequently present alcohol and fried chicken at his shrine, and as a consequence there are many shops selling alcohol and fried chicken nearby.

Why Animists Marry Spirits

Khin (2013: 254-255) answers the following questions in her paper “Safeguarding Strategies for Myanmar Shaman Heritage”: Who can be a *nat kadaw* in Myanmar? What qualifications are necessary for *nat kadaw*? And why do people want to marry spirits holding supernatural powers? Most male *nat kadaw* marry the spirit *Ma Ngwetaung* or *Amay Gyan* (*Phwa Chanthar*) as a wife, whilst other male *nat kadaw* choose *Amay Yey Yin* as their aunty or *Ma Hne Lay* as their sister. Most female *nat kadaw* prefer to marry U Min Kyaw or Shwe Phyin Lay (Tyaungpyone’s younger brother), whilst others prefer a brotherly relationship with them. This freedom to determine the relationship a *nat kadaw* has with a spirit is key to the strength of their bond and the *nat kadaw*’s professional success. We also see some people (both male and female) who are not *nat kadaws* marry a spirit to get help and support from *nats* (Daw Mya, 2018), which this paper will now describe.

Wedding Ceremony Proceedings, the “*San Nan Khwe*”

“*San Nan Khwe*” is the term used to describe the wedding ceremony. The marriage between U Min Kyaw (spirit) and Daw Khin San Nwe (a believer) is presented here as a case study. Daw Khin San Nwe sought help from a *nat kadaw* as her health was failing. The *nat kadaw* told her that she must marry U Min Kyaw to become a *nat kadaw*. Daw Khin San Nwe is a married woman who is over 50 years old, however, she received her husband’s blessing to marry U Min Kyaw. Her wedding took place at *Myottawshin*¹⁶, *Neltawshin*¹⁷, *Ywartawshin*¹⁸ *Natnan*¹⁹ near *Tayarshittaung* Pagoda, Tharkayta (Thakayta) Township, Yangon Region. The ceremony was held over three days and is presented here, step by step.

First, a white cloth and a red cloth are placed between the *nat* shrine and the musical ensemble. The bride faces the shrine and sits near where the white and red cloths meet. The wedding announcer (who conducts the consecration) invites the spirits according to their seniority. First he

¹⁴ White fried sticky rice in flat form.

¹⁵ Red colored fried sticky rice in flat form.

¹⁶ Guardian spirit of town or city.

¹⁷ Guardian spirit of region.

¹⁸ Guardian spirit of Village.

¹⁹ Shrine.

invites *Min-mahar-giri*, the most senior spirit, then his younger sister and five other spirits. He then invites the spirits, *Koe-myot-shin*, *Misai*²⁰, *Phasai*²¹, *Boesai*²² and *Bwasai*²³ to pay obeisance before their wedding. After inviting these spirits, he then asks the bride three times, “Do you agree to this wedding?”. After asking the bride, he asks her husband three times, “Do you agree to their wedding? After getting agreement is made the wedding ceremony begins.

Before the opening ceremony a number of offerings are placed on the white and red cloth, these include: a tray with a meal; a tray for holy water; two trays for two fried chickens; two separate pillows and blankets for the bride and groom; two sets of steel pots, plates and bowls; four bottles of alcohol; the traditional costume of the spirit²⁴ and ceremonial swords. A further seven offerings made up of a hand of bananas and coconuts are decoratively arranged around the white and red cloth.

Figure 7. Preparing for the wedding (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2015)



Figure 8. Witnesses to the ceremony (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2015).



Three of the offerings are placed at the head of the cloth and two offerings are placed along both their sides (fig. 7). After placing all seven offerings, a white thread is wound around them, fencing off a separated area (fig. 8). Three statues of *Thosaung Miphayar*²⁵, one of *Nat-ohat-min*²⁶ and three of *Boungdawsaung*²⁷ are located in front of their respective offerings. The bride sits in front of the musical ensemble outside the fenced off space. The wedding announcer and her teacher (*nat kadaw*) stand to invite the senior spirits to come and dance. In other words, the spirits are invited as witnesses to the wedding. Thus their wedding is celebrated in front of both human and spirit witnesses²⁸(fig. 8).

20 Traditional spirit from his or her mother's side.

21 Traditional spirit from his or her father's side.

22 Traditional spirit from their grandfather's side.

23 Traditional spirit from their grandmother's side.

24 Royal dress called *Htaimathein* (blouse) and *Taungshae pasoe* for male. *Htaimathein* is look like blouse. *Taungshae pasoe* (10 meter long and 1.6 meter wide garment).

25 Queens of Min Ye Kyaw Swa or U Min Kyaw. Their wedding ceremonies were conducted in the shrine of Min Ye Kyaw Swa, Twentay, Yangon Region or Shweguni shrine, Phakhanng, Pakoku, Mandalay Region.

26 Head of the spirit of the shrine (Min Ye Kyaw Swa's shrine) and trustee of nat nan.

27 Mayor of the shrine (Min Ye Kyaw Swa).

28 *Lu Thetthay* and *nat thetthay* (*Lu* is human being, *nat* is spirit, and *thetthay* is witness in Myanmar language).

After inviting the senior spirits, the wedding announcer asks the bride if she agrees to this wedding. If she answers “yes”, then he raises the white thread, allowing her to enter the fenced area. He places two mirrors on her breast and touches them with the branches of the *eugenia* plant. The bride then removes the hair pin from her hair. *Belsalwe*²⁹ and *Nyarsalwe*³⁰ are placed on the bride’s body by her teacher, *Thosaung Miphayar*³¹. A *Leikpyarkyo*³² is then placed around the bride’s neck and is now dressed like U Min Kyaw. Thereafter, U Min Kyaw possesses the teacher’s body. The teacher then wraps the bride’s hands and legs with *Leikpyarkyo*, which is followed by the bride paying obeisance to her teacher.

Second, the wedding announcer and her teacher then feeds the bride *Mingalar Htamin*³³ and *Mingalar Hinn*³⁴ (fig. 9). He then touches the bride and teacher’s tongue with a needle. This symbolises that the bride will enjoy a successful *nat kadaw* life. In particular it means that people will follow her guidance and will obey her instructions. The wedding announcer then touches her ears with a needle to grant hearing ability like a spirit. He uses the needle to touch her eyes so that she can see everything like a spirit. Finally, he touches her lips with the needle to bequeath full power in attaining success in every speech or fortune told. After these rituals, her teacher and the wedding announcer wrap the left-over meal and place it in a red handkerchief with the remaining offerings.



Figure 9. Feeding the bride *Mingalar Htamin* and *Mingalar Hinn* (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2015)

Third, the wedding announcer asks the bride to maintain a relationship with her teacher. While the bride promises to keep their relationship, she has to drink a cup of holy water, which is called *Yayzin* or *Mingalar Yaykyitaw*, seven times. After drinking seven cups of holy water, the bride will become a *nat kadaw*. The announcer invites U Min Kyaw to possess the bride’s soul and body. When U Min Kyaw enters her soul and body, the wedding announcer offers him alcohol and asks the following questions, which U Min Kyaw also answers:

Q: Will you be in her heart and soul, favour her and stay with her?

A: Yes. I will.

Q: Will you look after her as your wife or sister? (Will you feed or give prosperity to her?)

29 Ring of thread which is tied with a rose is worn from left shoulder to right waist.

30 Ring of thread which is tied with a rose is worn from right shoulder to left waist.

31 Her teacher is a queen of Min Ye Kyaw Swa. She is called Thosaung Miphayar.

32 Ring made of of thread which is tied with leaves of *Eugenia*.

33 Cooked rice for the wedding ceremony.

34 Curry for the wedding ceremony.

A: Yes. I will look after her.

Q: Will you fulfill her wishes and needs?

A: Yes.

Q: Will you regard her as your life partner for your whole life?

A: Yes.

After asking these questions the wedding announcer calls for music to play, which the bride then dances to. Whilst she dances, the wedding announcer offers her alcohol. After approximately five minutes of dancing, the spirit of U Min Kyaw leaves her soul and body. The ritual process



Figure 10. Ritual process of Kyetpaungcho Kyetyoehto (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2015).

of *Kyetpaungcho Kyetyoehto* is then conducted whereby the bride sits inside the fenced area and her teacher covers her head with a red cloth and places a banana leaf on top (fig. 10). Her teacher then takes a fried chicken and puts it on her head, dividing the

fried chicken in two. One part of the fried chicken is returned to the tray and the other part is wrapped and stored. *Kyetpaungcho Kyetyoehto* is a symbolic expression to show that she regards her teacher as her *Gaungkai Pankai sayarma*. In other words, she recognises Daw Khin Maw Oo as a *nat kadaw* and a member of the *Thosaung Miphayar, Shwetaik Sayinwin*³⁵. As her teacher she vows to keep their relationship for her whole life. After this acknowledgement is completed, the bride pays obeisance to witnesses of the ceremony that include her seniors, the wedding announcer and her teacher (who also receives an envelope of money for her services).

Fourth, the wedding announcer then gives a sermon and blesses the bride as she receives assistance from the 37 *nats*. He states that if the new bride invites the *nats*, they should go to her and fulfill her needs and wishes. He requests that the 37 *nats* look after her economic well-being, health, and social affairs. He then advises the bride to follow the following steps in the coming days: (1) sleep for seven days in a separate room; (2) eat only vegetables and not meat or fish for one week; (3) do not forget *Annanda Ngarbar*³⁶; (4) and after one week, the bride must go to her teacher with an offering to take off the *Leikpyarkyo* from her body. Her teacher has to accept this responsibility.

The final step of the wedding ceremony or *Sannankhwe Mingalar* is for the bride and her teacher to step out of the fenced area by raising the white thread which is tied around the seven offertories. The seven offertories and the white and red cloths are taken away as a sign the wedding ceremony has ended. After the wedding ceremony, nat kadaws

³⁵ Member of Taungpyone Golden Palace (Shrine).

³⁶ Buddha, Dhama, Sangha, parents and teacher.

continue to invite other spirits such as *Keomyot Shin Maunghnyitma* and *Pyayleipyin Maunghnyima* to possess their bodies and take part in making offerings and dancing. These two spirits are believed to be siblings who grant permission onto others to hold the knife/sword during the *Dharap Pwe*, a ritual giving authority for the bride to use a knife/sword when she leads her *Natkannar Pwe* (ritual for the spirits).

Dharap Pwe

After the Sannakhwe ceremony, they continue to invite many *nats* including *Maung Pho Tu*, *Koemyotshin*, *Pyayleipyin*, *Minmahagiri*, *Taunggyishinma*, *Shwe Nabay*, *Ma Myat Hla*, *Mama Hne*, *Shin Phyu*, *Shin Nyo*, *Taungpyone Min Hnapar*, *Kayin Maunghnama*, *Thidar Maung hnama*, *Poppa Medaw*, *Nakarine Medaw*, *Anauk Medaw*, *Taung Medaw*, *Ashae Medaw*, *Myaut Medaw*, and *Amay Gyan (Phwa Chanthar)* to dance with worshippers. Worshippers who invite and dance with a particular nat will wear that particular nat's dress and dance, sing, play music in a specific style and offer particular foods associated with that *nat*.

Example 1. If *Kayin Maung Hnama* are invited, *nat kadaws* will wear the traditional dress of the *Kayin* ethnic group living in Myanmar and offer cucumbers, *Kaungyay* or alcohol, cooked rice, fried chicken and fish. A musician sings traditional *Kayin* songs and performs traditional dances (fig. 11).



Figure 11. Ritual inviting the spirit, Kayin Maung Hna Ma (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2016).

Example 2. If *Kyoemyot Maung Hnyitma* is invited, participants will wear traditional Shan clothes, and hold two long knives and offer pickled tea leaf, *Mont Phyu*, *Mont Ni*³⁷, plain tea (*Yaynwejan*) and fried fish (*Ngagyaw*). When they dance, musicians play traditional Shan songs, music and dance (fig. 12).



Figure 12. Ritual for Kyoemyot Maung Hnyitma (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2015).

The ritual of *Dharap Pwe* is then followed by *Asaungtai Tetpwe*³⁸ or the conference with four male spirits dressed like royal princes. When *Asaungtai Tetpwe* performs, they place a table in the middle of the *Natkana pwe* with eight red bottles of alcohol, a tray of fried chicken, a tray of fried fish, two plates of fried noodles, two packets of cigarettes, one figure of a rooster and a silver cup. While the contents on the table

³⁷ White and red fried cakes.

³⁸ It is an essential part of the ritual for the spirits (*Natkanna Pwe*). In other words *nat kadaw* makes money by performing *Natkanna Pwe* like a conference.

Figure 13. Performing Asaungtai Tetpwe or conference (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2016).



are being prepared, the four *nat kadaws* arrange for their costumes to look like royal princes. They each sit at the four corners of the table, holding a long fan in their right hand and a long knife and small branches of the *eugenia* plant in their left (fig. 13). When the music starts, they pay respect to the Buddha image and the spirit statues. They stand and wave their long fans back and forth. They go around the table from left to right, then right to left three times. Thereafter, they move forwards and backwards three times. After that, they pass their long fans, swords and small branches of *eugenia* to other members of the congregation and dance happily together.

The ceremony then moves on with three *nats* sitting, waiting their turn on the floor or sat in chairs while one *nat kadaw* dances in a manner that emulates cock fighting. It is a performance that displays the skills of the *nat kadaw*. The dance is repeated three times. The audience will put money into a cup/bowl in appreciation. After each cockfight dance,

Figure 14. The Dharap pwe (ritual giving the right to hold the sword) (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2016).



the performer will offer the money in the cup to the elder of the team; the last cup of money is offered to the musicians. After, the bridegroom's teacher invites the *Taungpyone Min Hnyitpar nat* to celebrate *Darap Pwe* (fig. 14). The bride's teacher skillfully dances with two long swords while the bride sits on the floor. The wedding announcer requests *Taungpyone Min Hnyitpar*, their father *Boe Boe Gyi* and uncle *Boe Boe Lay* to perform *Dhar Kaing Kwint* — permission to play and dance with knives (long or short) - with the bride. After she invites and dances with the spirits who have knives, the bride's teacher passes the two long knives to the bride. Then, after receiving the two swords, she stands to dance with them. At the end of the *Dhar appwe*, they continue with the *Kyat*³⁹ *Phalar*⁴⁰ *Appwe*⁴¹ ritual.

39 Cockerel.

40 Bowl or cup.

41 Ritual for authority of holding the cock and cup which represent Ko Gyi Kyaw's possessions.

Kyet Phalar Appwe

Kyet Phalar Appwe is the final part of the wedding ceremony. It is a necessary ritual to perform in order for the bride to become a perfect and successful *nat kadaw*. The bride and her teacher wear costumes of a royal prince and invite and briefly dance with the senior spirits⁴², *Taungpyone nats*. The bride's teacher invites U Min Kyaw to give his new bride authority to hold his rooster and cup. The seated bride opens her palms to signify that she is ready to accept the statue of the rooster and the cup/bowl. U Min Kyaw possesses her teacher's body and mind and then dances, drinks and skillfully plays with a small gold or silver cup/bowl in one hand while holding the figure of a rooster in the other (fig. 15). They call this performance cock fighting; it invites donations towards the *nat kadaw* and the musicians performing the ritual. On the third time she passes the statue of the rooster and the cup to the bride. After receiving the rooster and cup, the bride skillfully performs the cockfight dance three times. After the third time, the bride hands the rooster and cup back to her teacher. Her teacher offers the cup which is full of money to the musicians and passes the rooster to another *nat kadaw* to return to its place. After that, the bride continues to dance and shares the money with the audience as a symbol of their wedding ceremony successfully concluding.



Figure 15. Nat Kawdaw performing Kyat Phalar Appwe, with the seated bride in royal dress (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion

Anthony F. C. Wallace (1966: 5) writes that religion is the belief in and involves the rituals concerned with supernatural powers, forces and beings. The supernatural is a nonmaterial realm beyond the observable world that may be accepted on faith. In many societies, people believe they can benefit from, become imbued with or manipulate supernatural forces (Kottak, 2013). In Myanmar, most people believe in supernatural powers and approach supernatural beings, such as deities, ghosts, demons, souls and spirits to gain some sort of benefit. Besides, they also believe and rely on celebrated monks or other people who have success in a particular branch of knowledge or specialised supernatural power called *weiza* in Myanmar.

Some people search for and approach these supernatural beings to fulfill their physical and psychological needs. As an example, the wedding ceremony of U Min Kyaw was presented to highlight the interaction between a spirit and a human being. Nat kadaw's have a wide professional

⁴² Minmahagiri nats, Mandalay Boe Boe Gyi nats, and Taungpyone nats (two brothers) are regarded as the senior *nats* or *natgyi* (older nats than other). The invitation for these nats is called *Natgyi kautde* among the *nat kadaws* (spirit mediums).

reach because Myanmar has many ethnic groups and resident foreign groups from India and China that worship *nats*. Followers of Animism in Myanmar, especially *nat kadaws*, respect not only the 37 *nats*, but also



Figure 16. Offering to the Hindu God, Karleman Medaw (Photo: Mya Mya Khin, 2016).

gods/spirits from other religions such as spirits from Buddhism, *Thurathati Medaw* and *Karlmén Medaw* from Hinduism⁴³, and *Ankong Bo Daw* and *Quaryin Medaw* from Taoism. In figure 16, for example, the Hindu God, *Karleman Medaw*, is playing and dancing during an animistic ceremony.

Religion is a human creation, invented for the benefit of human beings. Most *nat kadaw* are flexible and accommodating with their powers and skills. This is a deliberate effort made to attract an audience by showing off their ability to communicate intimately with *nats*. They create *nat* statues, wear costumes which are very colorful with attractive designs, and prepare meals which are also evocative. Their dance, song and music are also excellent forms of entertainment, although some artists do not accept the *nat kadaw*'s dancing as an art but rather a rough and wild act (Ye, 2017). Furthermore, *natpude* or *natwinde* is a very attractive part of *nat kadaw*. When they invite the respective *nat* to possess his or her own body, they feel something like an electric current passing through their body. The *nat* can stay only a few minutes in his or her body. In ritual, they dance in front of the *nats* by wearing their respective *nat*'s costume and musicians also play their preferred music and sing their songs. These actions are called *natchawtde* which means that a *nat kadaw* has invited *nats* and shown his or her performance to the *nat*. Sometimes, a *nat* does not possess a *nat kadaw*'s body, soul or mind, but he or she dances and eats meals in place of the respective *nat*, and shares meals with the believers or audiences to mimic a *nat*. These customs significantly contribute to the belief of supernatural powers, especially in the eyes of people who desire spiritual wisdom.

Another key factor of these customs is the creation of kinship between *nats* and human beings by holding rituals. Every *nat kadaw* has family relationships with *nats*, called *gaungzwe nat*. This is very important in requesting the help of the *nat*, especially in terms of predicting socio-economic affairs or in times of sickness. When a bride weds a *nat* her human husband also attends the wedding ceremony. Husbands often agree and encourage their wives to marry an immortal male because they know she will become a successful *nat kadaw* with the help of U Min Kyaw, and their earthly life will be richer. The ceremony does not just benefit the individual alone, it brings together and unifies the community.

43 Pho Kyar, U (1999: 35, 98).

In summary, this paper has focused on the interaction between supernatural power and human need. The main informant, Daw Khin San Nwe, sought divine help to cure her of her sickness by marrying U Min Kyaw and becoming a *nat kadaw*. By discussing the process of the wedding ceremony to U Min Kyaw, this paper highlighted the ritual artistic components that are constantly at play during the ceremony. From its songs and dance to the traditional costumes and offerings, these artistic expressions illustrate the influence animism has made not only on the artistic culture of Myanmar, but its religious culture in general.

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Cremation of Luang Pho Khun

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For Thai people in the upper north (Lanna culture) and some in the northeast (Lan Xang culture), there exists a unique funeral tradition for monks (only for important ones) in which the coffin is built in the shape of a prasat (palace) on a Husadilingu. The Husadilingu is a mythical bird in ancient Hinduism with great power, a mix between a swan, an elephant and a lion. During a funeral of this tradition, a throng of people in black, led by monks, will trail the majestic Husadilingu prasat coffin along the streets, from a temple to a royal cemetery. Then, the Husadilingu will be shot and the palace coffin will be burnt in flames. This ritual is a proclamation of the greatness of the deceased monk who performed outstanding deeds while alive and a send-off for him to return to heaven. In this context, the Husadilingu functions as an angel accompanying the spirit of the deceased to an afterlife.

Monkey and Chicken: Motif in Brunei Folklore

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Brunei Darussalam is part of the Malay world. Before it became an Islamic state, Brunei experienced cultural periods of animism and Hinduism-Buddhism. Islamic thought in Brunei tampered the belief of animism as well as Hinduism-Buddhism. However, through Brunei folklore and its traditional literature we can find the remains of elements of animism. Therefore, this paper will discuss and examine elements of animism embodied in Brunei folklore. The material of Brunei folklore in reference will focus on folk tales and proverbs in relating to the taboo of two animals namely 'ambok' (monkeys) and 'ayam' (chickens). By looking at the structural elements of the folklore it will assist our understanding of why the people of Brunei consider these two types of animals as a taboo that brings bad fortune to them. However, due to the teachings of Islam, beliefs about the two animals, monkeys and chickens, are no longer maintained. In fact, they have been incorporated as a part of the Brunei cultural heritage.

Keywords: Brunei folklore, Monkey and Chicken, Taboo, Islam, cultural heritage

Dayak Basap Ornaments: Engaging the Supernatural

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Most of the Dayak Basap tribe live in Sangkulirang-Mangkalihat Karst Area in East Kalimantan Province, Borneo, Indonesia. One of the more well-known sub-Basap tribes is the Muara Bulan Basap living in the karstic-forest of Tutunambo. The extreme landscape of the karstic-forest features impressive cliff faces and magnificent caves. Despite palm oil farmers encroaching onto their land since 2010, the Muara Bulan Basap still hold strong Animistic beliefs, especially in the ornaments of tropical forest flowers, leaves and liana (aerial roots). There are four basic types of ornaments, each with their own supernatural function: Wakaroros, Akar Mompong, Rungga-rungga and Beringin Duduk. They are thought to have healing properties, possess the spirits of ancestors and guardians of the forest, or are connected to a holy animal or supernatural power. These ornaments are consulted for a range of reasons, such as when entering a sacred cave or for luck when hunting. The Basap people only make these ornaments for special events and despite their beautiful aesthetics and use of bright colours, they are not considered decorative pieces of art. As such, once they have completed their function, as spiritual containers, they are abandoned on the ground or in the forest. Consequently, these ornaments are difficult to document. This paper explores the Basap's Animistic worship of spiritual beings through ornamental objects.

Ta Reach, the Grand Vishnu at Angkor Vat: from Brahmanism to Animism

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Ta Reach, literally translated as the Royal Ancestor, is an impressive eight-armed statue of Vishnu – the Hindu Preserver of the World. It was the most important deity worshipped at Angkor Vat and its statue was made and consecrated inside Angkor's central tower in the 12th Century.

From approximately the 16th Century, Angkor Vat has been a Buddhist temple. During this period the statue of the Grand Vishnu was transferred to the main gate of the 3rd enclosure at the western entrance of Angkor Vat: a marginal position within the temple when the central sanctuary was closed off as a stupa for Buddhism.

Since then, the statue has gradually become a local deity and a spiritual guardian of the Angkor community. Today, not only locals but worshippers living in all parts of the world still travel to Angkor Vat to pay homage to Ta Reach, not as a brahmanic god, but Neak Ta, an animistic deity of the local community. Worshippers will visit for a variety of reasons, such as for protection, to chase away bad luck, ask for good business, to bear children or to acknowledge marriages.

An annual festival is held at Angkor Vat in homage to Ta Reach at the end of the harvesting season. Either a man or woman acts as a messenger, medium or incarnate of Ta Reach by receiving individual requests from worshippers. As a spiritual representative of Ta Reach, the medium performs the rite of responding to all supplications. This paper will explore how meaning and audience response in connection with the statue of Ta Reach have changed. It will discuss the ritual practices performed and the spiritual value of the statue of Ta Reach to worshippers today.

Keyword: Angkor Vat, Vishnu, Ta Reach, Neak Ta, Community Spiritual protector, medium, performing art, agrarian rite, animistic believe

The Baci Ritual: A Centrepiece of Lao traditions

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The Baci Ceremony is a specific ceremony in Lao, which has been practised for hundreds of years and has its origins in the ancient customs of past generations. Lao people believe that a human being is a union of 32 organs, each having a spirit or Khuan (Lao word for spirit) to protect them. The Baci or Sou khuan is a well-known traditional ritual and an important part of Lao culture. It has a profound significance for Lao people, and is popular with visitors to the country. It represents a mixture of Animism, Brahmanism, Buddhism and spirit worship. The tradition follows the belief that a human being's main body parts are inhabited by 32, or even more, spirits. In some circumstances, these spirits may leave the body to wander around and may lose their way in the universe, thus causing a person to become weak and vulnerable to dangers. It is therefore important to call the missing spirits back; this ceremony is performed on important occasions such as births, weddings, farewells, visits, Lao New Year, etc.

This paper will describe what the Baci ceremony is, and why and how it is performed.

Animism in Art: The Spirit in Puppets

Dr Margaret Chan

It is only the human intellect that can conceive of a metaphysical existence where life is extended beyond mortal death. This argument hinges upon the presence of an immortal soul, an animating supernatural essence. Since the idea of eternal life is a human vision, the shape or form of the deity would arguably be anthropomorphic: as man is made in the likeness of God, so gods are imagined to be in the likeness of man. The concept of theophany where the deity takes on a form that is meaningful for the human audience began with the Greeks and is particularly well-developed in Christian religious discourse. Notions of theomorphism or anthropomorphism have for thousands of years been central to many Eastern and Middle Eastern religion, but theories regarding these concepts are less well-developed in Western scholarship. This essay fills in the gaps in the world knowledge of Asian theophany with particular reference to Chinese and SE Asian spiritual practices, and proposes that the puppet, as animated anthropomorphic form, is the very emblem of animism in art and religious icon par excellence.



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Dr Boonsri Phutavong obtained his PhD in Buddhist Studies at Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi, India. Before his current position as Head of the Division of Beliefs and Religions at the Institute for Sociological Research, Lao Academy of Social Sciences, he lectured at the Comcenter

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PROF. DR MARGARET CHAN

Prof. Dr Margaret Chan is a retired Associate Professor of Theatre/ Performance Studies at the School of Social Sciences at the Singapore Management University. She earned her MA and PhD degrees in Performance Studies from Royal Holloway, University of London, and the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, respectively. Margaret was awarded the Overseas Research Students Award in the UK in 1999; the Thomas Holloway (Royal Holloway, Founder's Scholarship) in 1998, and the Fulbright Research Scholarship in 2016. With interest in tangki spirit medium worship, a signifying cultural practice of the Hokkien, the major community of the Chinese diaspora in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, her research is a seminal investigation into a contemporary religious practice with roots that can be traced back to pre-Chinese animism more than 5,000 years ago. Margaret is the author of *Ritual is Theatre – Theatre is Ritual: Spirit Medium Worship*, Wee Kim Wee Centre – SNP Reference (2006). She is also a pioneer of English language theatre in Singapore, and in 1985 became the first Singaporean actor to represent her country at the prestigious Edinburgh International Festival.



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