

“I Am Not Your Mother! I Am Phaengsri, the Goddess!”: A Medium’s Failure To Be a Good Daughter and Her Reconstruction of the Self¹

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Abstract

This article explores a medium’s life-narrative which she employs to construct her personhood in a particular social world and specific situations, and discusses how spirit possession brings into play the fluid categories of the self that operate therapeutic procedures and the re-establishment of her social self through personal traumatic experiences in her family. The medium’s life-narrative indicates the conflict with her mother and family. The major issue involves the idiom of gratefulness that children should be good to their parents according to Buddhist orthodox of filial relationships. To negotiate in such a situation, the medium’s self had been reconstituted by directing the relationship from parental ties to spiritual ties. The ethnographic analysis demonstrates the problematic

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issues of kinship ties, local politics, and the meaning of health in a village in northeast Thailand in line with social change and capitalized forces in modern Thai society.

Introduction

On 24 May 2012, I visited Phraya Lae³ Pavilion where the 6th Lunar Month Festival took place. Spirit mediums from Chaiyaphum and nearby provinces came to worship Phraya Lae. They offered food and gifts to the god. The most spectacular activity was the possession performance when the mediums and their network sang and danced to the music of bamboo mouth organs. It was on this occasion that I met Busaba (not her real name). She came with six other people from the same village. They were relatives and friends. When they stopped singing and dancing, I approached them and introduced myself as a student who was interested in spirit mediumship. I asked them who the master in the group was because I had observed that every mediumship network was comprised of a prominent master of their followers who were their ex-patients. Busaba said she had not become a healer yet because her master and mother suppressed her from healing people. Busaba said that a mediumship network was similar to a Thai entertainment circle, full of hatred and jealousy. Busaba mentioned her situation was even more complicated. After the festival, every medium would arrange shrine worship rituals at their houses.⁴ Busaba invited me to visit their rituals in their village.

From May to June 2012, I intensively participated in Busaba's ritualized activities and her everyday life. She was strong, expressive and talkative. Her close relatives and friends looked up to her with great respect. However, she told me that these authoritative characteristics were not her original self. It was Thongdam, the

³ Phraya Lae is a historical figure who appears in Thai national history. For the mediums in Chaiyaphum, he is the most respected and supreme god in their pantheon.

⁴ Most of the mediums have their own shrines at home where their gods and goddesses reside and will come to possess them at the invitation of special occasions.

guardian god of the locality, who had made her like this. She told me that she had died and had been revived three times from accidents and disease since her childhood. “The other half of me is the god,” she said “without him, I can’t live my life like this. Thongdam is inside me, he never leaves me,” she emphasized, “if he leaves me even 5 minutes, I will die.” For Busaba, the main function of Thongdam is to help her to live, to work, and to help other villagers.

According to her personal health history, Busaba might not have been able to work hard in the field and raise her two daughters alone, but she believed Thongdam made it possible. The god appeared both in the ritualized domains and everyday practice. He came to revitalize her strength when she was too weak to work and to motivate her to teach other people when she performed her political role. Busaba’s self can switch back and forth between herself and Thongdam for particular purposes. Interestingly, during the many times Busaba quarreled with her mother, Thongdam came to teach and chase her mother away. Here, the questions of identity and selfhood are intriguing and should be addressed to understand the relationship between the operation of spirit possession in terms of the self and the social world where domestic conflict has taken place.

In this article, I show how spirit mediumship and the medium’s self-construction reflect the local problems of kinship ties, political power, as well as gender relations among capitalized forces. The medium’s life-narratives of struggle to exist as a good daughter of her family highlight the social pathology of the country in contemporary Thai society. In this current article, I did not want to focus so much on the healing processes of mediumship per se, but I have tried to explore the working relationship between the medium’s personhood and her social conflicting world. I would like to demonstrate how she negotiated her existence in domestic encounters, dealt with local political battles, and practiced as an honest wife without her husband’s protection in specific situations by the appropriation of spirit mediumship.

My analysis relies on the recordings and transcriptions of Busaba’s life-story narrative. The subjects and idioms that I select to emphasize in this current article are the subjects and idioms that

Busaba frequently mentioned, not only during the recording sessions, but also during many of our subsequent meetings. Anthropologists have long made use of the method of life-story collection in ethnographic research. Life history provides information about the particularities of people’s experiences under their conditions and specific cultural settings. As my ethnographic focus aims to understand female experiences and the constitution of self and identity, life history research offers a way of exploring individual lives among cultural environments. Anthropologists maintain that a life history method should be employed to identity research depending upon the circumstances of the society.⁵ Regarding female agency in ethnographic studies, Geiger considers women’s life histories as the primary sources for the database of women’s lives, and life history research as a feminist method for the broader and deeper understanding of women’s consciousness, historically and in the present.⁶ The life history method can be used to give expression to hidden or silenced female lives and opens pluralist stories and selves of local women.

Anthropological literature has explored the spirit mediums’ selfhood and its meanings and processes in diverse cultures. These comparative studies examine how mediums, especially females, construct their identity and personhood and how the transformations of the self have operated. These operations cannot be mentioned without their intertwinement with gender relations in particular contexts. Spirit mediumship has been regarded as an alternate outlet for women to seek power against male domination. Lewis proposes that Somali women’s spirit possession provides them effective means to construct their selves and protest against male domination.⁷ He calls this sort of possession “peripheral” because the malign spirits that come to possess women, particularly married women, originate outside and play no part in the moral code of the societies. The afflicted women are believed to be possessed by *sar* spirits which demand luxurious clothes, perfume, and exotic dainties from the husband. To recover, the

⁵ Goodson, “The Story of Life History”; Peacock and Holland, “The Narrated Self”.

⁶ Geiger, “Women’s Life Histories: Method and Content”.

⁷ Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*.

spirits' request should be fulfilled and a cathartic dance attended by other women and directed by a female shaman will be organised.

Norton indicates Vietnamese female mediums who claim the importance of their self commitment to serve the spirits are a challenge to their husbands' patriarchal authority.⁸ This claim has the potential to invert traditional power as asymmetries and overturn one of the Confucian "three obediences", for example, woman's subservience to her husband. In a Northern Thai context, McMorran indicates that spirit mediumship can be viewed as "ritual of rebellion" where women can act out male roles or monks' status.⁹ Also, Irvine gives an account of female mediums in urban Chiang Mai who negate the physiological facts of their sex and act like males.¹⁰ However, Nabokov demonstrates that Tamil exorcist rituals in Sri Lanka force women to recommit themselves to the cultural expectations of 'a good wife'.¹¹

One anthropological study indicates female personhood transformations according to the changing age. Balzer argues that, for the Siberian Khanty in the Soviet Union, a "woman has opportunities to grow sacred as she becomes old."¹² Menstruation is considered polluting and bars women from a public, ritualized domain. Menstruating women are dangerous while postmenopausal women, without the unclean stigma, are suitable foci of spiritual respect.

Several anthropological works explore the constructs and the transgression of gender categories, both in ritualized activities and on an everyday basis. *Len dong* or spirit mediumship in Vietnam provides rich accounts showing how the practice enables mediums to construct gender and transgress lines of gender identities. Endres examines how male and female practitioners of Vietnamese spirit mediumship constitute their gender identities through the ritual embodiment of divine entities belonging to the pantheon of the *Tu Phu* religion.¹³

⁸ Norton, " 'Hot-Tempered' Women and 'Effeminate' Men".

⁹ McMorran, "Northern Thai Ancestral Cults".

¹⁰ Irvine, "Decline of Village Spirit Cults and Growth of Urban Spirit Mediumship".

¹¹ Nabokov, "Expel the Lover, Recover the Wife".

¹² Balzer, "Rituals of Gender Identity".

¹³ Endres, "Spirit Performance and the Ritual Construction of Personal Identity in Modern Vietnam".

Endres indicates some spirit mediums who project their imbalanced state onto the multitude of spirit identities: a female medium who is hot-tempered and deviant with the male spirits or a male medium who integrates his unresolved homosexuality by tracing his feminised gender identity to the spirit root of the Little Princess.

Endres also examines a spirit medium’s life and hardship through different periods of Vietnam’s restless history, from the last years of French colonisation through the Vietnam/American War to the present market-oriented Renovation era.¹⁴ In the particular context of postcolonial Vietnam, Endres regards the medium’s self as a site entangled in “the multivocality of competing, contested, and contradictory discourses concerned with conceptions of and ideas about personhood, gender, and national identity.” The concept of several “spirit roots” connected to various ranges of spirit personalities give the medium more opportunity to deal with her unconventional character in different terms than just a mainstream Vietnamese social context. With the contradictions between self-perceptions and the perceptions of others, spirit mediumship provides the medium with a stage in which she can perform her unruly self and unconventional identity in a culturally meaningful way.

Building the ground from the existing ethnographic literature, I am interested in exploring my case study of the medium’s construction of personhood in relation to her particular problematic issues of domestic conflict.¹⁵ Busaba is a daughter, a wife, a mother and a sister. I have investigated how the operation of spirit mediumship reconstitutes her positions in her multitasks and negotiates conflicting situations. Moreover, I have expanded my investigation to see how such construction of the social self addresses her role and gender in the public sphere — local politics.

¹⁴ Endres, “Fate, Memory, and the Postcolonial Construction of the Self”.

¹⁵ See Endres, “Fate, Memory” and Harris, “Concepts of Individual”. I agree with Endres in identifying the difference between the terms “self” and “person.” By following Grace Harris, Endres mentions that “self” implies the conceptualization of the human being “as a locus of experience, including experience of that human’s own someoneness” whereas “person” refers to human beings as “agents-in-society,” as “authors of actions affecting human life.”

On the Brink of Death and the Rescue of God

Busaba is 37 years old. She is the fourth child of her parents. There are two elder brothers, one elder sister and a younger brother. Now she lives with her two daughters, 17 and 4. Her husband left the family and has been working in Taiwan for 12 years. He usually visits his family once every three years because of the high cost of travel. Busaba told me that her second daughter is unfamiliar with her father because after she was born until two years later she had not seen her father's face. It should be noted here that in the village and nearby communities there has been a huge amount of labor mobility to Taiwan in the past two decades.¹⁶ These male and female labor migrants leave their children behind with their spouses and families.¹⁷ The money her husband sends to the family and her hardworking has secured their income and has allowed them to live their life without debts.

Busaba recounted her traumatic life stories. Since she was born, she has been on the brink of death three times. First, when she had not reached one year old, she fell into the Chi River and, floating along, she got stuck in the stones. People thought she must have died of drowning. When she was found, Busaba's parents buried her body, leaving only her head above the ground, as the last way to save her life. They believed that doing so would dehydrate the water from her inner body. Luckily, she survived. However, the accident left subsequent health problems.

Busaba married when she was 20 years old. Not long after her marriage, Busaba had a pain in her ear. Doctors at Chaiyaphum examined her and found her right ear with a severe infection. She needed an operation right away. The doctors recorded a video of her ear operation. Later, she learned from the video that some of her flesh was cut off. She went back home and lived with pain for a while before her recovery. Busaba was likely to shout when she spoke as she had lost some degree of hearing capacity. She considers the incident as the second death.

¹⁶ For an account of Thai labor migrants to Taiwan, see Chanthawanit, et al., *Thai Migrant Workers in East and Southeast Asia, 1996-1997*.

¹⁷ See Graham and Jordan, "Migrant Parents".

The worst health situation happened when Busaba had a headache and went to the hospital for a checking up. The doctors found an abscess in her brain. She needed a brain operation soon. These two operations took place within one year of her marriage. At a hospital in Chaiyaphum, she had her brain x-rayed and the result devastated her. Most of her brain had been destroyed. The doctor recommended the family move her to Srinakharin Hospital in Khon Kaen for an operation and told her that after the recovery, she might lose her memory and the capacity to help herself. After the operation, she moved back to Chaiyaphum. She then needed subsequent checkups and treatments at a hospital near her village. Busaba's recounting of her modern medical experience exposes problematic issues of state services that fail to respond to the basic needs of people with limited earnings. “Doctors hate the poor,” she said, “they don't want to accept the welfare card for the poor issued by the government.”

I lost my gut. My heart became numb since then when I heard what the doctor said. He said we were poor. The hospital would be poor because of us. He sent me back to Srinakharin Hospital in Khon Kaen. When I returned to Chaiyaphum, the hospital in Chaiyaphum didn't want to accept me. I made my decision to quit the hospital. My mother asked the doctor what would happen if I stopped being injected and taking pills. Doctor told us to prepare for a cremation. I cried so hard. My mother gave moral support and she tried to find a clinic that could give me the injection. My mother went to borrow my husband's mother's money. She said she had no money. I felt sad and cried so hard because of my sufferings, physically and mentally. My husband failed and was hopeless too. He followed me everywhere. I slept and cried everyday almost half a year before I could get back to myself.

Her health problems led to psychological trauma. After Busaba came back to stay at home, her eyes turned blurry. She could not see things clearly. She told me that in the bathroom, she looked at one block at the wall, but she saw it spreading into five blurred block images. She was frightened. Her friends came to visit and cried for her. Busaba's husband later did not want to go with her because he

was ashamed. When he saw his ex-girlfriend around, he left his wife. Busaba realized and had the scar in her mind. “There is no real love in this world,” she said. “We just keep patient and stay together until we are old. He hurt so much in the past.” Busaba added, “I always told my husband that if he treats me well, I treat him back well. If not, we end up. Without my husband, I can live my life because I have Thongdam. He helps me to be a good person and to do good deeds. Without him, I must have gone mad.”

Thongdam came to possess Busaba when her first daughter was two years old, right after her husband left for Taiwan. When Busaba had a leg ache, she went to see Sri, a medium who later became her master. Sri told Busaba’s mother that the spirit would come to Busaba. She went to her mother to accept the god and raise her own shrine. Her mother also was a medium. Her god’s name was “Phaengsri,” a female spirit. It should be noted here that for local villagers, especially women, having gods in the shrine guarantees healthiness. I asked some Chaiyaphum mediums about the preponderance of females among the possessed. They said a woman’s mind was weaker than a man’s. Gods could come and go to them easily. A man’s mind was strong and often resists the visit of the gods. Spirit possession was considered a feminine susceptibility. A woman’s vital essence and weakness makes her less able to resist incursions of opportunistic spirits.¹⁸ The gods of females protect them from such attacks.

After her husband went to Taiwan, her bond with Thongdam grew significantly. Not only did Busaba believe that the god protected her from afflictions, this is a notion that most local women regularly share, but she also considered that the god rescued her from physical deterioration and empowered her mental strength. She insisted that she could live her life because of the god. According to her perception of the medical explanation of her physical problems, she thought her brain had been mostly destroyed. What revitalized her strength to work hard in the farming domain and motivated her to live is the god. “I’m different from other human. I’m human, but not human. I’m a half human. The other half of me is Thongdam. Nowadays, he never leaves

¹⁸ Boddy, “Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan”.

me for 5 minutes. If he leaves me, I will chase my sister away from my house. I will be mad and cannot control myself.”

From Busaba’s personal life stories, Thongdam has been intensively involved in her therapeutic procedures for more than 15 years. The god not only appeared in a healing dimension, but was also constituted into Busaba’s narrative of the self in her daily life. He had been constructed, substituting for her husband’s position in terms of family protection and security. When I spent time with Busaba and her family, I always heard them talk about Thongdam and other gods as if they were around all the time. Before going to bed, they mentioned Thongdam’s missions as if he existed as a human with flesh and blood, participating in all their everyday activities and helping them get through hard work on the farm and arrange rituals. Busaba acted out her personality like a male on an everyday basis. Her sense of self, in some part, derived from the constructed personalities of Thongdam who had the position as a warrior and guardian of the locality. Busaba interpreted the god’s maleness and power and developed her sense of self through life hardship and traumatic experiences. As a seem-to-be single mother with two children, she struggled with her situation by incorporating the male qualities of the god into her self.

In her paper, Boddy argues that *zar*, spirit possession in Sudan, is concerned with fundamental questions of identity and selfhood. She suggests that a main issue addressed by *zar* is a problem of socialization: the cultural overdetermination of women’s selves.¹⁹ In Busaba’s case, the array of her everyday experiences, the bodily and psychological trauma from afflictions, and the transformative role as family protector could be possibly considered as the motivator to cultivate her ‘stretchy’ self through the associations with spirit mediumship.

Family Conflict

“Hatred and jealousy” were the terms Busaba used to describe her relationship with her mother. Even though Busaba’s mother was the one who had taken care of her when she was sick until she recovered,

¹⁹ Boddy, “Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan”.

family tensions began a few years ago. The conflict between Busaba and her mother resulted from two major stories. First, Busaba lent her younger brother an amount of money for his re-marriage last year. She asked for a piece of his land as a guarantee. Busaba's mother loved her youngest son and wanted to take the land back for him. The mother cheated and tried to reduce the amount of the debt by claiming she had given some to Busaba's elder sister. They quarrelled about the issue and Busaba threatened to sell the land to land pursuers who would give a lot of money for the land. Moreover, she announced that she would keep the land until 1 January 2015 and then she would return it to her brother after he returned the money without interest. Busaba told me that she knew her brother's nature. He was a spendthrift and often got drunk. She wanted to teach him how to spend and save money because she was sure that all the land would be gone if she gave it to him without conditions.

Busaba's mother spread the news that Busaba cheated her brother and was going to sell the land away. The gossip circulated over the farms and fields. The villagers started to alienate Busaba from their communities and activities. This caused Busaba a lot of trouble and mental disturbance. Busaba said she was grateful for her mother's assistance when she was sick and she already returned all the money her mother spent to heal her because her mother condemned Busaba as ungrateful. Busaba suffered from the gossip. She told me she was very tired of laborious work in the fields and was very hurt from what the people said about her. She often came back home and cried.

The second cause of the conflict related to the power of the spirit. Both Busaba and her mother were mediums of gods in the local pantheon. Cosmologically speaking, Thongdam, Busaba's god, was believed to be superior to Phaengsri, her mother's god. However, it should be stressed here that the power of the god is related to the medium's self. Even though Busaba's elder sister's god had a higher ranking than Busaba's, her sister acknowledged and admired Thongdam as the chief saviour of the villagers. For Busaba, spirit possession enabled her to evolve and to recontextualize her personal

experiences from a broadened perspective.²⁰ She elevated Thongdam from a local guardian to an instructive god, and this transcended the position of the god and Busaba’s personhood in the public community. The category of the constructed self both empowered Thongdam and transcended Busaba from her constrained conditions.

Busaba recounted one particular occasion how her mother was discontented when Busaba was possessed by Thongdam and gave the mother a didactic lesson. Last year before the conflict regarding the loan and land had taken place, Busaba wondered why her mother left a ritual after Busaba had changed her clothes in preparation for Thongdam’s descent to her body. This might have represented a change of Busaba’s self and identity that threatened her mother. Her mother left the ritual and never appeared in activities that Busaba would join. I asked Busaba if she knew the reason. She told me that her mother might not be able to accept the didactic messages from her daughter in front of other mediums and audience. Busaba insisted that it was the nature of Thongdam to teach all people who joined the activities.

Their conflict intensified and expanded from the domestic domain to the public domain when Busaba intended to enter the election of village head. Busaba always said that Thongdam did not let her leave the villagers. Busaba insisted that he wanted her to be the village head since the current one was bad and would lead the community to downfall. She narrated that drugs and corruption had been increasing in her village. There would be a new election soon. But Busaba’s master’s son also wanted to enter the election. So, the medium who was the master was unhappy and excluded Busaba from her mediumship network. This master was a close friend of Busaba’s mother. Both of them helped spread news in order to ruin Busaba’s reputation.

It should be noted here that I do not want to push Busaba’s antagonists to the dark side. Busaba related all these stories. I only listened to the stories from her side. She emphasized that it was her mother who told the villagers that she was mad. However, what I witnessed when Busaba’s mother showed up at a shrine worship ceremony confirmed the intense conflict between them.

²⁰ Kegan, *The Evolving Self*.

Dramatic Scene of the Asking for Forgiveness

On June 13, 2012, I went to participate in the annual shrine worship at the house of Busaba's friend. The host invited other mediums to join, including Busaba's mother and some senior mediums. The house was not far from Busaba's place. The host built a small room especially for the shrine. Around 8 am, they started the ritual. They sang and danced to show their respect to the god of the shrine. I noticed that Busaba always performed alongside the musician. She dominated the central space of the ritual while other mediums, especially her mother, danced outside the shrine room. They started drinking white liquor and smoking which signified the beginning of their entrancement. It should be emphasized here that, on a trance occasion, these mediums could switch between their selves and the alternate ego of a variety of spirits.

A substantial amount of literature from psychological and medical anthropology has examined the medium's state of mind during a ritual trance. Many accounts have tried to define the state when the healing ritual is being performed. Koss offers that "possession state occurs when the medium is in a truly altered state of consciousness."²¹ Even though his statement is short and unclear, the key term "altered state of consciousness (ASC)" was brought to light. Later works on spirit mediumship have developed the term to study the practice in their particular contexts. In his paper "Shamanic Healing, Human Evolution, and the Origin of Religion," McClenon proposes that mimetic ritual, such as chanting, singing, drumming, dancing, and other repetitive behaviours, produce ASC.²² The most comprehensive definition of ASC in spirit mediumship comes from Avruskin's work. ASC is characterised by desertion of a person's original personality. It is the temporary substitution of other 'selves' in the ritual trance. It "serves to open new realms of knowledge and experience, to enhance social status, and to free the individual from responsibility for ordinary actions."²³

²¹ Koss, "Social Process".

²² McClenon, "Shamanic Healing".

²³ AvRuskin, "Neurophysiology and the Curative Possession Trance".

In the entrancement, the working relations and tensions are exposed in the mode of performative interaction. This was the first time Busaba and her mother had met in a ritualized activity since last year. Busaba said that her mother never joined any rituals when she invited her. It is conventional that the hosts must invite their masters and senior mediums when they organized any ritualized activities. Busaba and one of her cousin sang to bless the host and show respect to the god of the shrine. The spectacle and climatic scene took place when the senior mediums advised Busaba to ask for a pardon from her mother among the participating witnesses. They told Thongdam to leave Busaba's body and Phaensri to leave her mother's body and let the daughter pay respect to her own mother. All this time, music from the bamboo mouth organ was played with a strenuous rhythm.

When Thongdam left Busaba, she stepped towards her mother and fell to her knees. She put her hands together in respect and threw herself at her mother's feet three times. Suddenly, her mother spoke out loud “I'm not your mother. I'm Phaengsri, the goddess.” She shook her hands off and left the group while saying to other mediums, “I don't give her pardon. She must go to her mother's house and bow to her there.” I saw that Busaba was very sad and hopeless. Later, she told me that all the stories were not about conflict of the gods, but of the mediums. She said she was considerate of the host who was her friend. If this situation took place at Busaba's shrine, Thongdam would not let her be calm and still, but would teach and chase her mother away. Busaba's mother sat for a while before she left the house. The singing and dancing scene proceeded onward until 1 pm.

After we had lunch, Busaba mentioned that she had a presage of her mother's unmerciful message. Last week she dreamed of her mother. In her dream, Busaba was meditating in a white dress. When she opened her eyes, she saw her mother coming. Busaba asked for forgiveness from her mother. But her mother did not accept the request. She said she would only forgive her if Busaba died in front of her. When Busaba heard what her mother said, she bowed at her mother's feet three times and died there. Then, Yomara, a goddess in pink who came to possess Busaba three years ago, appeared and called her from death. Yomara touched Busaba's head and said she would never let Busaba die.

Hatred and jealousy are not about gods. They are about human beings. Mother couldn't accept her own daughter. The medium of Phraya Meu Lek didn't love us equally. When she listened to my mother, she complied with her and left me. And the medium of Khun In also left me today. Thongdam in me wants to teach them what is right or wrong no matter who they are, even my mother.

Busaba went on that after waking up from the dream, she cut her hair. She told me she was born as a new person. She changed her name to "Boon" or merit. She asked me to call her "Boon." She was not afraid of death because she had encountered it many times since she was born. One point I should add here is that since her husband left for Taiwan, Busaba has turned to the monastic domain. Every morning, she gives food offerings to the monks and dresses in white to meditate in the temple every Buddhist holy day. Busaba even declared that if she gave up being the medium of Thongdam, she would denounce secular life and live in a temple. I observe that Busaba's multifaceted selves operate the negotiation in her conflicting social world through the interpretation of spirit mediumship for specific cultural meanings.

Busaba told me some villagers considered her mad to be obsessed with spirit power. They did know that Busaba had conflict with her mother, taught, and even chased her away sometimes. But Busaba insisted that it was not herself, but Thongdam. Recently, more people have learned the information from Busaba's side and have begun to understand what happened in her family, as well as accepting Thongdam's didactic instructions. Busaba's elder sister, cousin, and some villagers became financially secure by following Thongdam's suggestions on managing farming and debts. Busaba employed the enactment of spirit possession as the reconstruction and reengagement of her new social self. Her subjective world was reified to not only her kin, but also the community. Kapferer emphasizes the third party in the mediumship ritual, the audience. Other people in community are able to enter the subjective world of the possessed. They reorganize their interaction with the possessed in accordance with a world as it is understood to be held by the possessed.²⁴

²⁴ Kapferer, "Mind, Self, and Other in Demonic Illness".

Concluding Remark

This article addresses how spirit mediumship operates to negotiate procedures in the specifics of family and marital tensions. Thongdam was objectified as the projection of the protean self that came to help Busaba when she encountered family and marital conflicts. As related in her personal life stories, Busaba had confronted accident and diseases that she considered put her on the brink of death. By deriving and interpreting the local belief system of gods, guardians, and mediumship, Busaba accepted Thongdam into her own selfhood and operated the cultural meanings of mediumship into her own social world to deal with specific situations. The contradiction of being a good daughter according to the orthodoxy of filial kinship and the ethical critic of her mother's unjust social behaviours was operated by the fluctuating categories of the selves. To maintain marital stability while her husband was abroad, Busaba performed the patriarchal role through Thongdam as the conjugal protector.

Trance is a domain where ritualized actions explicitly expose the mediums' kinship ties and conflicts in a form of culturally meaningful performance. When possessed, the dialogues of these mediums seem to enable them to talk indirectly about their own personal distress and problems.²⁵ The formulaic conversation gives them the opportunity to articulate a sense of self, which is consistent with what is culturally known as the representation of mediumship. Trance, in Busaba's case, became the stage where she performed, asking for pardon from her mother. Unluckily, her mission failed because of the 'slippery' category of the mediums' selves. However, Busaba reconstituted her social self to go on by operating the power and altered selves of the spirits.

²⁵ Nabokov, “Expel the Lover, Recover the Wife”.

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