

Influences of the Séance Ceremony on Politics in Southeast Asia¹

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ต่อการเมืองในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้

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Abstract

This research aims to discuss how séance ceremonies have influenced politics in Southeast Asia. Four case studies of the séance ceremony from Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar were reviewed. Data from documentary studies from various sources, including AnthroSource, ASSIA, Wilson Web, CSA, Sociological Abstracts, and social media during 2000-2023, were examined. Schema Theory was utilized to explore the impact of ghosts on particular political actions. The researchers posited that schemata should be considered a fundamental framework for understanding the cognitive processes and behaviors of individuals. These cognitive structures shape individuals' interpretations and social interactions within their environment. In the construction of knowledge units, individuals incorporate common elements and characteristics to categorize surrounding objects and phenomena.

Three major findings are: 1) the rationality of alternative modernity is considerably integrated within the séance ceremony, thereby increasing the involvement in political activities; 2) rulers adopted the séance ceremony as a strategy for political benefits; and 3) the schema of rulers-ghosts-deities relates to changes in national policy of the four case studies.

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่ออภิปรายถึงอิทธิพลของพิธีกรรมเข้าทรงที่มีต่อการเมืองในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ ผ่านการวิเคราะห์พิธีกรรมร่างทรงกรณีศึกษาประเทศไทย เวียดนาม อินโดนีเซีย และเมียนมา เก็บข้อมูลเอกสารจากแหล่งข้อมูล ได้แก่ AnthroSource, ASSIA, Wilson Web, CSA, Sociological Abstracts และสื่อสังคมออนไลน์ ระหว่างปี พ.ศ. 2543-2566 และประยุกต์ใช้กรอบอ้างอิงคน-ผี-เทพ เพื่ออธิบายอิทธิพลของพิธีกรรมร่างทรงต่อปฏิบัติการทางการเมืองบางประการ ผู้วิจัยเปิดประเด็นถกเถียงว่ากรอบอ้างอิงดังกล่าว มุ่งทำความเข้าใจถึงกระบวนการทางปัญญา และพฤติกรรมของบุคคล รวมทั้งโครงสร้างของจิตที่มีผลต่อการตีความและปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางสังคมของผู้คนกับโลก ในการพัฒนาหน่วยความรู้ บุคคลมักนำส่วนประกอบและลักษณะที่รู้จักมาจัดหมวดหมู่ให้กับวัตถุและปรากฏการณ์แวดล้อมตนเอง

ผลการวิจัย 3 ประการ ได้แก่ 1) ความเป็นเหตุเป็นผลจากภาวะสมัยใหม่ เปิดโอกาสให้พิธีกรรมร่างทรงเกี่ยวพันกับกิจกรรมทางการเมืองเพิ่มขึ้น 2) ผู้ปกครองใช้พิธีกรรมร่างทรงเป็นกลยุทธ์เพื่อผลประโยชน์ทางการเมือง และ 3) กรอบอ้างอิงคน-ผี-เทพ ของผู้ปกครองเกี่ยวข้องกับการเปลี่ยนแปลงนโยบายในระดับชาติของทั้งสี่กรณีศึกษา

คำสำคัญ: พิธีกรรมร่างทรง กรอบอ้างอิงคน-ผี-เทพ การเมือง

Introduction

Animism is one of the oldest ontologies and has long played a crucial role in Southeast Asia (Arhem & Sprenger, 2015). Rooted in animism and matriarchy, the séance ceremony encompasses the belief that everything possesses a distinct spiritual essence. Maintaining the matrilineal way of life, women hold the primary power positions in the séance ceremony (Guthrie, 2004; Bénédicte, 2002).

The common socio-cultural challenges in contemporary Southeast Asia include poverty, inequality, and a highly unequal gender division of labor (Cook & Pincus, 2014). The increasing prominence of uncertainty and social disruption in the beginning of the 21st century allowed the séance ceremony to become one of the most accessible and affordable psychological self-healing events for the poor as well as an effective political strategy portal for the rulers.

Today, the popularity of the séance ceremony has become part of an economically driven strategy for state governments as well as a religious practice across Southeast Asia. Chan (2014) states that the *tangka* worship (the Nine Emperor Gods Festival) is a popular séance ceremony celebrated annually in Southeast Asia, including in Singapore and Phuket, Thailand.

Bubandt (2009) studies the relationships among spirit possession, politics, and subjectivity in Indonesia. His findings support the idea that spirits could be treated as informants to reveal how possession rituals construct and make relationships among experiences, politics, and emerging democracy intelligible. Kertzer (1988) highlights the importance of ritual ceremonies in politics and re-ordering or dis-ordering society. Sennett (2012) supports the idea that the ceremonies enable expressive cooperation of the four counterparts of religion, workplace, politics, and community life.

Transgender medium emergence and popularity in Southeast Asia during 2000–2023 related to the phenomenon studied display the crucial turning point of interconnection forms of rulers' subjugation policy about séance ceremonies and create political solutions for the rulers concerning sustainable development. By establishing socio-cultural spaces regardless of class and gender discrimination, séance ceremonies become a perfect political strategy for the rulers to display their support of international development values. Along the lines of Judith Butler's suggestion during her interview by Gleeson (2021), gender could become a negotiation, a struggle, and a way of making new realities.

The researchers argue that the following four ceremonies are examples of how séance ceremonies influence politics: the *Nat* ceremonies in Myanmar, the *Bissu* ceremony in Indonesia, the worship ceremony of *Thờ Mẫu* in Vietnam, and the *Faun Phii* ceremony in Thailand. Several studies have identified rulers using the séance ceremonies, sacrifices, and worshiping objects as tools to achieve power (Bénédicte & Jackson, 2022; Jackson & Baumann, 2021; Davies, 2007; Nguyen T. B. V., 2012; Hayashi, 2003; Foxeus, 2013). Understanding the upsurge of spirit possession cults, roles of séance ceremonies in politics, and the emergence of new forms of supernatural rituals of the séance ceremony reveals a diverse socio-cultural stratum, across classes and social systems (Chauvet, 2012; Endres, 2011).

Aim

This article aims to discuss how séance ceremonies have influenced politics in Southeast Asia.

Question

How do séance ceremonies manifest in Southeast Asian political practice?

Séance Ceremony and Schemata Theory

The séance ceremony brings together the material world with the world beyond in a kind of spiritual combination. To understand the dynamic function of the rulers' learning perception based on this interconnection of new narratives, experiences, the self, the theory of schemata, or unconscious mental structures, was applied. This research highlights the power relation between séance ceremonies and politics in Southeast Asia by describing connections between schemas and gender influenced by memories and experiences surrounding socio-cultural environments, and narratives.

The crucial relation between the declarative (“what”) and the procedural (“how”) information reveals characteristics and values of dominant power (Morris, 1994). Understanding schemas provides a distinct explanation of differentiation between the declarative and procedural memory as well as displaying how narratives play the most crucial role in guiding political actions in certain societies (Bartlett, 1932; Anderson, 2000).

Schemata theorists believe that human recollections are not always authentic and involve the replacement of unfamiliar information with the more familiar and inferences that may go beyond the information given in the original situation. Therefore, human recollections may well be represented not only by the generic knowledge about the world, but also new information received from several sources. In everyday living, the dynamic of narratives leads to sequences of changes in individual mindset and action. According to schemata theorists, three factors cause cognitive development: biological development which progresses in stages, interaction with the world of nature and objects, and social interaction with others (Brewer, 2000b; Johnson-Laird, 1983).

However, during this time a kind of cognitive dissonance can result as new narratives are experienced and the traditional values of the viewer are challenged and questioned. The dynamic of schemas allows human recollections to alter or to accommodate new information. Although some studies reveal the limitations of the schema concept when used in a broader aspect for all complex forms of knowledge (Rumelhart, 1980; Alexander et al., 1991), several studies disagree. Anderson (1977; 1978; 1984) and Anderson & Pearson (1984), for instance, state that schemas help in understanding the relation between initial information and human recollections of it and so too in the construction of a meaningful representation of the content. For example, gender studies scholars apply schemas in searching for the relation between past experiences and the gender attributes of their culture. Bern (1983) states that while learning about the contents of their society’s gender schema, individuals choose the linkage between attributes and their own sex. Therefore, individuals’ self-schema is not a standalone situation but integrated with other schemas such as a culturally determined schema that can lead to the creation of a new aspect of gender about the world. As mentioned by Renstch et al. (2009), the usage of a schema for cultural understanding could expand to a wider perspective because of its complexity and flexibility.

Considering the above discussion, the researchers of the present study expected that a greater understanding of the schema of rulers-ghosts-deities and the schema foundations of embodied knowledge related to the emergence of transgender mediums could help in better policy designation concerning gender equality rooted in the complex connections of socio-cultural perspectives, political strategies, and actions.

Research Methodology

This documentary research utilized a netnography approach as a methodology to investigate influences of the séance ceremonies in Southeast Asian politics. Digital academic source references included AnthroSource, ASSIA, Wilson Web, CSA, Sociological Abstracts,

academic literature, research reports, songs, folk dramas, and video clips published during 2000–2023.

Netnography data collection and analysis was based on a non-linear and holistic approach. First, archival data was collected from the selected sites. Second, elicited data including both synchronous (online interview, video clips, songs, etc.) and asynchronous (online forums and microblogging sites) were investigated to develop a co-created communicative environment between researchers and digital participants (Kozinets, 2010). The data collection ended when theoretical saturation was reached.

The researchers adopted a grounded theory for ritual analytical processes. By sampling a selected set of digital texts from the population of texts for ritual analysis, three coding techniques including open, axial, and selective were adopted (Strauss & Cobin, 1998). First, open coding was applied to identify key ideas, incidents, social interaction, and political involvement that were related to the séance ceremonies. Categorization was done by combining concepts into subcategories and higher order categories, respectively. Second, axial coding was assembled into casual relationships. Last, select coding was systematically identified until theoretical saturation. These sources were examined for the following: 1) vivid evidence of the séance ceremonies' influences in politics during the last two decades, 2) rulers' schemas on gender and the use of the séance ceremonies as political strategies, and 3) political involvement in the relations between the rulers or the state government that uses séance ceremonies as political strategies.

By using keywords in search engines including authors, researchers, the séance ceremonies, queer or transgender mediums, gender identity, and politics in Southeast Asia, four case studies of séance ceremonies were selected as being pertinent. These included the *Mod Meng* ghost dancing ceremony, Thailand; the worship of the mother goddesses, Vietnam; the *Bissu* rituals, Indonesia; and *Nats*, the spiritual worship, Myanmar.

Findings

The research indicated several notable findings. These included the presence of rhetorical appeals to socio-cultural politics, transformative cultural knowledge to the gender political movement, and the extensive use of narratives as the mechanical drive of political forces revealed in the interpretations of the séances. The existence of an afterlife and manifestations of the agents as a universal schema among rulers in Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar was evident and displayed in the close interconnections of animism, modernity, and social practices. The power of the “agents” went beyond the physical and socio-cultural boundaries and varied by an origin of death which was commonly demonstrated in the forms of an interplay of place, space, gender, objects, and temporality within the modernity. Evidence was found in every case study of social interaction and ritual practices of transgender mediums in both public and private places and digital spaces. For example, mother goddess worship in Vietnam was organized in a joss house (a small altar for worship located inside the house), through a live exhibition in the Women’s Museum, and in a digital narrative story called *Spirit of Asia* (Thai PBS, 2023; Tengakson, 2021).

Like humans, roles and the status of ghosts varied by their social class. Ghosts with the lowest class were known as “bad ghosts” or demons who once lived badly due to questionable

ethical failures, performing bad deeds, and suffered negative death experiences like suicide, violent death away from home, or brutal killings. These low-class ghosts often harassed, harmed, or possessed the people they haunted. None of them were invited into the séance ceremony because of being unable to eat and drink or having mutilated and distorted appearances. Having lost the character of humanity, they were not able to receive objects of worship nor to give blessing wishes to appellants. These bad ghosts were considered troubled ghosts who must be excluded from the séance ceremony (Ongsakul, 2005; Bénédicte, 2002).

The séance ceremony reflected the rulers' symbolic self-healing based on a common belief in the power of the "agents" or in this research referred to as ghosts and deities. Although there were various forms of using the "agents" in politics, the most effective way was through the séance ceremony. The ceremony process consisted of worshiping, transcendence, séance, performing arts, and blessing. The powerful narration of the superpower agents was enhanced with the delicately designed procedures, exquisite material objects characteristic of mediums, and active appellants (Lewis, 1989). There were five key actors involved in every séance ceremony, but the medium was the most important change agent, followed by the medium-assistant, musicians, announcers, and appellants (Endres, 2011).

During the transcendence, mediums were appointed to communicate with the agents through their bodies. To convey messages to the appellants, the medium's modes of communication included incantation, dancing, performing arts, automatic writing or speaking ancient languages. Symbolic forms of communication such as colors of cloth, body shaking, mysterious chanting, and musical performances were the linkages between agents and mediums. The medium assistants who were standing by helped the medium with clothing, make up, preparing objects for worship, sending signs of transcendence and withdrawal of the agents. During the séance, a group of musicians played nonstop traditional music based on the medium's demand and local culture. The announcer greeted and informed all participants about the séance process. Successful mediumship involved a symbolic bodily communication of the mediums, gorgeous worshiping objects, and the satisfaction of the appellants. Common blessings included timely rainfall, abundant produce, success against enemies, longevity, good health and composure, wealth, fortune, love of virtue, and talent (Nguyen, T. B. V., 2012).

1. Ghost-deities in Politics

Four case studies demonstrated rhetorical appeals of ghosts and deities in politics. Changes of ghost-deities schema and the use of narratives as the mechanical drive through political strategies revealed the interconnections of the rulers' pattern of thinking, linked perceptions, and political actions. The organized unit of the rulers' schemas displayed their sense of the world and long-term memories based on narratives and the creation of continual ideas about the power relation. By storing both declarative (what) and procedural (how) constructed narratives, the ghost-deities schema displayed several adaptations of ghosts and deities as the mechanical drive of power.

The schema of rulers-ghosts-deities revealed the social relation between the rulers' cognitive thinking and the use of ghosts and deities. The dynamic change of schemas occurred continuously throughout the rulers' life span. This complexity of the schemas resulted from

internal factors such as perception of self and mindset as well as external factors such as new information, modernity, and engagement in the ceremony, and social interactions with surrounding environment and objects. The term *ruler's modernity* in this research refers to changes in the relations of power, especially in terms of the weakening of beliefs and practices associated with traditional culture as well as the acceptance of “modern” values and practices from external drives or the rulers’ schema. Evidence was found in the case of the reformatory belief policy of King Anawrahta Minsaw in 1587 C.E. (Bénédicte, 2002) and King Tilokkarat’s import of Buddhism in 1443 to establish “*Lan Na’s modern Buddhism*,” which led to socio-structural changes in peasant communities (Sakamoto, 2009).

Five common external mechanical drives of power included special characteristics of mediums, rituals, horrifying narratives, worshiping, and symbolic performances. The distinctive spiritual practices commonly found in the séance ceremony were related to the ruler's belief in animism and the need to maintain power. By introducing modernity, new forms of power relations were created based on a character of flexibility in times, spaces, and contexts. The flexibility of the séance ceremony allowed it to be organized in both personal space and in the public sphere, or in an open arena such as a national festival, museum, or on public television. This helped to make sure the exchange messages with ghosts and deities could be settled anywhere, anytime (Bénédicte & Jackson, 2022; Brewer, 2000a).

The rulers’ complicated mindsets and statuses provided a unified collective system based on charismatic authority and the Janus-faced ritual with the cult of power worship displayed in the forms of the continuous action in the narrative construction of the sacred in the séance ceremony. The intrusive power of modernity is displayed in the complexity of the rulers’ worldview and their fear of changes in the power relationship. The use of agents in politics provided the greatest changes at the structural level as evidenced in all four cases. These included changes in the power relationship between rulers and external forces and in the establishment of new perspectives for the rulers.

The common start of using ruler-deities schema in politics was the claim of necessity in modernity. The use of belief reform policy, oppressive political strategy, and implementations in forms of belief management were common political strategies. By adopting ideological reformatory policy or goodwill to current beliefs based on modernity, rulers reestablished a new belief system. An examination of the following ceremonies provided evidence to support the researchers’ main objective to show how the séance ceremony had been used in politics.

2. Nat Ceremony

The *Nat* ceremony is one of the most crucial séance ceremonies since the time of the first Burmese empire. To gather power after enthronement, King Anawrahta Minsaw imported the idea of modernity to launch a reformatory belief policy in 1587 C.E. By overthrowing the most popular belief systems of animism and matriarchy, the king replaced them with imported Buddhism (Bénédicte, 2002; Guthrie, 2004; Foxeus, 2013). To achieve his goal, mediums were targeted and forced to resettle on Mount Popa, the sacred pilgrimage space. King Anawrahta

Minsaw then symbolically authorized the royal *Nats* to govern all the *Nats* who had later been degraded to be merely the stupas' guardians. Resistance to this royal command meant one's life would be threatened with brutally oppressive punishment. As a result, a complex and overlapping territorial claims area developed where the king was settled at the top of the symbiotic relationship in both physical and ideological arenas (Temple, 1906; Spiro, 1996).

Historically, only female mediums operated the *Nat* ceremony. The introduction of Buddhism led to the establishment of a new social hierarchy based on patriarchy. After the 1980s, most mediums became males who dressed up and were made up to look like females. However, the emergence of a variety of social media in Myanmar spread international information about the schema of alternative gender. Today, transgender mediums are increasingly performers in *Nat* ceremonies. The popularity of *Nat Kadaws* both at the national and international level is based on their talent in symbolic communication, ceremonial dance, blessing, and ritual shower. However, it should be noted that the ceremonies also create the place and opportunities for the people who seek fun to socialize, drink, and gamble. This situation led to the government's change of the schema of state-ghosts-deities relationship.

As a result, the *Nat* ceremony is accepted by the state government as a national festival attracting local and international tourists. The ceremony has become one of the six main state tourism attractions to preserve traditional heritage and customs of the local people in 2021 (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2021). Due to public unrest, the Myanmar government allows only the shrine at Taung Byone village near Mandalay to present this ceremony where the most powerful members of Myanmar's pantheon of 37 *Nats* are located without applying a nightly curfew. This village held the largest *Nat* festival in mid-August since 2016 (Khaing, 2016).

Acting as key spiritual actors, *Nat Kadaws* used the ceremony to develop a new social space based on a cohesive rational social network regardless of class, gender, or social position. The state government used the ceremony as a tool to manipulate socio-economic resources for tourism and the concentrated focus of the public. Tens of thousands of elites, high ranking government officers, residents, and international tourists attend the *Nat* ceremony (Bénédicte, 2002; Guthrie, 2004; Foxeus, 2013).

3. *Mod Meng* Ghost-Dancing Ceremony

The *Faun Phii* or *Mod Meng* ghost-dancing ceremony is rooted in fear of an unknown, unexplainable natural phenomenon, and imbalance in life of the *Lan Na* people. Historically, the *Lan Na* people developed self-help in the form of psychological healing called *Faun Phii*. *Lan Na* ghosts included *Phii Mod*, *Phii Meng* and *Phii Jao Nai*. *Phii Mod* is a house ghost that protects the house and keeps happiness and peace for the owner. *Phii Meng* represents the ancient ancestral ghosts of the nation and members of the royal class. *Phii Jao Nai* are spirits of heroes, kings, and famous leaders. All of them are considered "good ghosts" (Sakamoto, 2009; Wyatt & Wichienkeo, 1998).

Faun Phii was displayed through sound, dance, and ritual. The ceremony consisted of three days of activities. The first day was non-stop ghost dancing, with the dance style

mimicking the hand movements like in the *Karanas* Indian dance. On the second day, the medium acted as an intermediary and performed the séance. The rituals for worshiping took place on the last day. In the early times, *Lan Na* was a matriarchal society. Female mediums were the key actors who performed a healing ritual. To lead the ritual, the female mediums took on several stereotypical male behaviors including consuming alcohol, smoking tobacco, and lewd conversation during their trance state, acting as the ritual's leader. The introduction of modernity in the form of culture and religious practices and the import of Buddhism introduced a pre-modern political strategy in the construction of discourses in Lan Na since the reign of King Tilokkarat in 1443 (Sakamoto, 2009).

Lan Na's modern Buddhism provided structural changes in peasant communities in many ways. These included changes in the belief system, gender ideology, and spiritual practices within *Faun Phii*. This, followed by the emergence of a Western-dominated world economic system and of a socio-cultural system based on capitalism, modernity, rationality models of development, and cultural hegemony provided the transformation of the rulers' schema in the relations of power, mode of production, experiences of personhood, body, gender, space, and time (Hayashi, 2003; Wyatt & Wichienkeo, 1998).

The practical roles of *Phii Meng* and *Phii Jao Nai* were not merely the royal ghosts who acted for social protection but often served as the change agents driving the political strategy for the prevention of external forces. For instance, Cao Ubonwanna, the upper-class woman in the Cao Cet Ton Dynasty, used *Faun Phii* to criticize the Siam monopoly tax policy in 1881 (Saksung, 1996; Ongsakul, 2005).

Several studies revealed that *Phii Jao Nai* was a royal ghost used to reflect the *Lan Na* political system of decentralization. Because Siam reigned over the region for more than a century, *Lan Na's* belief system of animism has represented its ideological independence. The evidence of this was in the form of the establishment of ghost shrines in *Lan Na* community and the classification of *Lan Na's* ghosts by making *Phii Jao Nai* the highest class of the pyramid (Ramitanon, 2002; Kamchan, 2001; Tengakson, 2021).

Faun Phii was used as a political challenge to rally against Siam's commercial monopoly policy resulting in many mediums being killed and the recalling of the aggressive Siamese representative in 1884. In 1888, during the period of Siamese suzerainty (1778–1893), King Rama V of Siam wanted to reorganize the political structure of *Lan Na* to allow Siam to gain more advantages from the new tax policy. Unhappy with this external force, *Inthawichayanon*, the 7th Ruler of *Lan Na*, again announced that the new Siamese tax policy exasperated *Phii Meng*, the ancient ancestral ghosts of *Lan Na* and those deities who protect *Lan Na* Kingdom. Although *Lan Na* was later occupied and became an administrative division of Siam, *Faun Phii* was recognized as the main way of communicating through the séance ceremony of *Lan Na's* rulers to create a strong sense of localism to act against centralization policy based on nationalism in Siam (Strate, 2016).

4. Bissu Ceremony

The power of the *Bissus* came from their in-between gender status and their superpowers in communicating with ghosts and deities. During the 16th and 20th centuries, the *Bissus* were the key actors in various national activities with spiritual leaders in the *Bugis* army, the rulers' counselors, state commercial negotiators serving as the royal's medium, and spiritual patriarchs (Andaya, 2000).

Bissu rituals are a complexity of schema memory among the Bugis rulers (Davies, 2002). This ritual has played a significant role in *Bissu*'s history safeguarding and enhancing the sanctity of the rulers in séance ceremonies by providing nationalist and modernist political discourses. By emphasizing cultural rationalization, social differentiation, and gender pluralism, the *Bissu* displayed the nation's open mind about gender pluralism (Peletz, 2006). Although *Bissu* maintained their roles as transgender mediums in the 21st century, they have been stripped from the positive and central role in several political activities such as those in the royal court, state cults, and local politics.

Peletz (2002) argued that the *Bissu*'s presence of transgender mediums may not have resulted in politically neutral cultural formations nor served as an example of gender equilibrium. Today, *Bissu* may only be a scattered memory or a reference which is commonly found in social media. Nonetheless, Peletz agreed that there were no laws in the Indonesian archipelago that aim to institutionalize policies of heterosexism nor criminalized sexual activity of same sex lovers as in other Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. Although the Jihad Paramilitary Force and the Laskar Pembela of Islam took steps against LGBTQ organizations in 1999 and the future development direction of national policy about this issue remains unclear, there is no state criminal policy nor public discrimination against transgender persons in contemporary Indonesia (Boellstorff, 2004).

5. Worship Ceremony of *Thờ Mẫu*

The *Thờ Mẫu*, or the mother goddesses, has long been an important Vietnamese séance ceremony since the 16th century. The ceremony is rooted in the appreciation of the power of women and belief in animism. There was a strong belief that the mother goddesses were deities who were brave warriors, heroines, philosophers, or spiritual leaders who did good deeds. After the incarnation, they became the female deities who protected skies, rivers, forests, and mountains. With their superpowers, the mother goddesses gave blessings to the appellants. The influence of the schema of Confucius, especially the respect of ancestors, good deeds, the belief in Karma, and the respect of deities were symbolically closely related with the belief structure of the worship of *Thờ Mẫu* (Vũ, 2015).

The ritual persisted through opposition during the first years of the Communist government, when the state saw the worship of *Thờ Mẫu* as a threat against the modernization policy. The ritual was prohibited and considered illegal (Nguyen, T. H., 2006). Although its practices were against religious practices of both Buddhism and Tao, the global concern about the role of women in development influenced the government's schema of gender. To show the state's concern about women's equity, the Women's Museum was chosen as a public space to display the story of mother goddesses, rituals, and the process of the séance ceremony. In

2016, the Vietnamese government proposed to UNESCO in the eleventh conference of the Inter-governmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the request to register the worship of *Thờ Mẫu* as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

As a result, the Vietnamese government considers the worship ceremony of *Thờ Mẫu* as a symbol of national pride (Nguyen, T. B. V., 2012). Since 2017, there have been several significant changes in Vietnam's national politics related to transgender rights (IJsendijk, 2023). These included the right to serve in the Armed Forces regardless of sex or sexual orientation, the right to have gender-reassignment surgery, homosexuality declassified as an illness, transgender identity declassified as an illness, access to IVF (*in vitro* fertilization) provided to lesbians, MSM (males who have sex with males) allowed to donate blood (Knox, 2007).

Conclusion and Discussion

From a socio-political perspective, these four case studies of séance ceremonies provide examples of the dynamic influences of the schemas of ghosts, deities, and the agents of political actions.

First, the relationship between the schemas and the agents of the four ceremonies had a powerful influence in terms of the increasing the alternative genders presented. The study revealed the rulers' development of generic knowledge about the connectivity between the new world and the old one through the séance ceremony. The example is found in the case of Cao Ubonwanna's use of *Faun Phii* to criticize the Siam monopoly tax policy in 1881 (Saksung, 1996; Ongsakul, 2005).

This finding is supported by the work of Brewer (2000b) and Johnson-Laird (1983). The social interactions between animism and modernity provided opportunities for restructuring political strategy which the rulers took advantage of as a means to strengthen their political power. To establish a new power relationship over other humans, systems of belief, and other objects and things, the rulers created interconnections among understandings of self, roles, and a sense of the world using the mediums as key actors. This finding is supported by evidence from the four case studies examined and the work of Jackson and Bauman (2021) and Chonpairot (2016).

Significantly, the rulers' schema of a static, unified collective system based on charismatic authority, Janus-faced ritual, and cult of power worship influenced their actions. This finding is supported by the work of Piaget (1977) and Berger (2011). Evidence was found in the form of the integration of the modernization concept with an oppressive ideological strategy. The examples are found in the case of *Nat* ceremony in Myanmar (Guthrie, 2004; Foxeus, 2013) and worship of *Thờ Mẫu*, Vietnam (Nguyen, T. B. V., 2012).

Second, the role of the medium is another main source for influencing political change. Unintentionally, the achievement of modernization policy introduced new forms of schema power relations directly into the people's mindsets. *Bugis*'s open mind about gender, for

instance, established the public acceptance of five gender differences. This opened opportunities for alternative genders to become mediums and thus receive higher socio-cultural status in *Bugis* society (Thamrin, 2015).

For example, the case of *Faun Phii Lan Na* reflects a change in the political ideological system of decentralization by making *Phii Jao Nai* the highest class of the *Lan Na*'s pyramid of power instead of the Siamese's power (Ramitanon, 2002; Tengakson, 2021). By acting as a medium, Cao Ubonwanna, the *Lan Na*'s princess, used the *Faun Phii* ceremony to integrate the ruler's power as a political negotiation based on the fundamental belief system of *Lan Na*. Although this political strategy failed to achieve its goal, it has established a strong sense of independence among *Lan Na* people. This conclusive finding was supported by Aksrondit (2009)

Lastly, changes in the social position of transgender mediums can be seen. The rising of transgender mediums in séance ceremonies provided socio-political connections of neoliberal capitalism demonstrating the power of visual media making future impacts possible with online networks, the politics of cultural heritage, and changes in schema of gender identity (Foxeus, 2013; Buijs, 2006; Jackson, 2003). The influences of social media platforms, which Gramsci (1971) might have called a new conception of the world, created interrelated core mechanisms that necessitated changes in gender identity. The neo-liberalization processes based on the predominant capitalist market economy in policy making, for instance, has used the séance ceremonies as merely an exploitation strategy to gain benefit from local belief and culture. For example, the use of *Nat* festival in Myanmar's national tourist policy provided a mystification of capitalism and neoliberalism to promote the séance ceremonies instead of highlighting inequality and gender unfairness. This conclusion is supported by several experimental studies (Choonara & Robinson, 2008; Maisuria, 2014).

The dynamic of schemas and gender flexibility so present in the séance presentations provided changes at both the micro and structural levels. At the micro level, changes in social position of transgender mediums led to the establishment of a new schema of genders. The change of three principles of becoming mediums included the overlooking of seniority, social class, and gender discrimination, and changing the successor culture from the mother clanship to the acceptance of transgender mediums. This change in abilities and skills in communication with the agents contributed to the presentation of outstanding aesthetic characters in dance performances, delicate arts like needlework, as well as in other crafts.

At the structural level, it was found that the relation between the rulers' schema of power and how they used the séance ceremony for political purposes can be studied. By introducing a new and modern concept into the ceremonies, the rulers had direct political influence in providing for the establishment of a new belief system. The rulers' static and oppressive system limited the development of new belief systems but also included opportunities for the audiences to accept different personas.

Policy Recommendations

The four case studies researched displayed rulers' use of the séance ceremonies through the reformative ideology of modernity. The performance of mediums in blessings and the new

linkage of power in both symbolic and strategic forms should be studied as a socio-psychological self-healing strategy. The interrelated core mechanisms that necessitated changes in gender identity revealed inequality and gender unfairness which can be considered useful for future policy development.

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