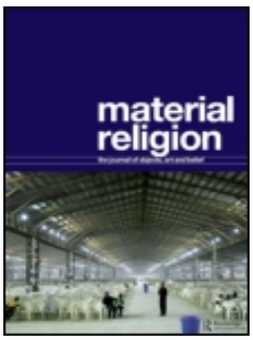

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the agency between images: the relationships among ghosts, corpses, monks, and deities at a buddhist monastery in thailand

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ABSTRACT

The ghost, Mae Nak, is well-known in Thai Buddhism as a protector of soldiers, pregnant mothers, and young lovers. Her shrine at Wat Mahabut (a monastery in Bangkok) is an important center of worship, astrology, and ritual protection. However, her statue is not alone. It is part of the pantheon of famous monks, "Hindu" deities, and Buddhas at Wat Mahabut. They draw power from each other. The relationship between these images, and what they can teach us about the study of Buddhist material and visual culture, is the subject of this study. The sacredness of a Thai Buddhist image often lies not in its origin and style, but in the relationships it creates and allows. Observing the complexity of Buddhist images and the ritual life surrounding them at this monastery helps expand and question Alfred Gell's theory of the agency of images and the "art nexus," as well as Michael Taussig's theory of "distraction."

Keywords: Thai Buddhism, art, image, art nexus, Alfred Gell, Daniel Miller, Bangkok, Mae Nak, agency, protective magic

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In June 2007 I found myself at a re-funeral for a ghost. It was 7:45 on a moonless night in a small monastery situated along a dirty canal, at the end of a small city street. The monastery, Wat Mahabut, was founded as a rural village temple; but over the last 200 years Bangkok has grown by over 12 million people and the forested grounds of the monastery have become fixed firmly in a grid of allies, tenements, and sidewalks. I had never been to a re-funeral before. I did not know what to expect. As a monk thirteen years previously, I had performed several funerals. However, on this occasion, the funeral was for a poor farmer, wife, and mother named Mae Nak who died in 1868. The shrine to Mae Nak is an open air pavilion flanked by three large trees. Her image is surrounded by new dresses, boxes of cosmetics, candles, incense, and thousands of colorful scarves tied to the trees. In the folds of the scarves are hundreds of handwritten letters entreating Mae Nak to protect soldiers, children, and the sick. Behind her are dozens of amateur paintings of the ghost as a beautiful young woman. Her visitors often give her portraits of herself, because ghosts can't see themselves in a mirror. The portraits allow Mae Nak to look at herself. On the altar is a rather garish golden statue of Mae Nak with a long black-haired wig. The image holds two plastic baby dolls also layered in gold leaf and paint. Mae Nak supposedly only had one child. The second doll is simply a replacement for the first doll that was worn out from all the touching and caressing by the steady stream of devotees. The managers of the shrine had not removed the worn doll. Indeed, rarely are things ever removed from shrines in Thailand; abundance is valued. Images accumulate. Piles of stuff show how much a shrine is honored.

Mae Nak's shrine is generally a bustling place. At night, there were only seventeen people besides myself, a relatively even mix of women, men, and several small children sitting on folding chairs in front of the shrine. We were all offered bottles of Pepsi or Orange Fanta. The mood was light with chatting, cell phones ringing, and a couple of guys smoking. To the right of the statue of Mae Nak was a temporary dais with four monks preparing to chant; they were holding ceremonial fans, joking with each other, and drinking lukewarm tea. The monks chanted standard funeral chants. Kneeling, we presented gifts to the monks, smiled, and sat back on our haunches. Then we proceeded to pour water out of small metal vessels (some people just used plastic water bottles) into small bowls while chanting again. Since I had forgotten to bring a bottle, I held the wrist of the man next to me as he poured, in order to share in his merit. We stood

FIG 1
Sign near the entrance of Wat Mahabut reads "Parking Lot for Wat Mahabut, otherwise known as 'Wat Mae Nak Phrakhanong.'" The sign also has advertisements for Pepsi and Mirinda Orange Soda.

up, walked to one of the large Takian trees that had long been blackened by candles and softened by all the hands touching it. We put our collective foreheads against it. As our heads touched the trees in unison we silently entreated Mae Nak for protection. There was some bumping and light laughter. Supposedly Mae Nak's body is buried under the tree. Then we went back to the statue of Mae Nak and offered it gold leaf, incense, and a little bit of cash. We all went home. It was late; everyone had buses to catch, and children had to be put to bed. We were becoming friends. We would all see each other again next month, schedules permitting. This re-funeral is performed once a month, at the same time, at the same shrine.

Mae Nak has become a standard object of worship. She is part of the pantheon of famous monks, "Hindu" deities, and Buddhas who have statues at Wat Mahabut. They draw power from each other. They have become mutually defining.[1] Certainly she has her own qualities. She is feared and respected as a devoted wife and a protective mother, but these are also qualities based on her relationships. Today her statue helps form new relationships. These relationships, and what they can teach us about the study of Buddhist material and visual culture, is the subject of this study. There are not only relationships formed between the image of Mae Nak and her visitors, but also between her and other images on the grounds of Wat Mahabut. Near her image there are also statues dedicated to famous Thai monks, Hindu deities, Chinese bodhisattvas, land spirits, and Buddhas; there is also a shrine for soldiers and even a desiccated corpse of

an infant. These various images alongside Mae Nak create a rich visual and ritual environment in which individuals and families can express a range of emotions and participate in a variety of activities. If we study the relationships between images and between persons closely, we see that images create local histories, promote new developments in practice, and invoke memories and anxieties.

Expanding the Art Nexus with New Distractions

Alfred Gell, Patrick Geary, Martin Holbraad, Kaja McGowan, and Daniel Miller have brought the study of ritual objects to the forefront of art historical and anthropological studies over the last twenty years.[2] However, these trends have been slow to influence Southeast Asian Buddhist studies and art history, which often focus on iconography and the dating of individual images.[3] Art historians in Southeast Asia have also primarily concentrated on the study of images produced by the elite and made before the twentieth century. The field of Southeast Asian Buddhist art is changing with greater attention being paid to art produced outside of elite courts, but these changes are coming slowly. While certain images in Thai Buddhism are lauded for their age or precious materials, most are honored for their connection to certain powerful people (historical or supernatural). Many of these highly revered and powerful images are made out of wax or wood, plastic copper, resin, or clay. An accretion of gifts, incense, flowers, candles, food, and other images takes place on altars around the images. However, these gifts are often overlooked by art historians who remain focused on the original or central image. I emphasize that sifting through the pile of stuff that accumulates around or on major images reveals a history of response and relationships that can tell us more about a piece of art than the name of the artist or the style of the period. Images have relationships with the gifts given to them, as well as with other images on different altars in the monastery. Mae Nak's statue has attracted other statues of seemingly more "sacred" Buddhist figures like monks, bodhisattvas, Indic deities, and Buddhas. While many of these images are older than Mae Nak's, they did not garner much attention until her image was installed. However, the central (either physically in the center of the monastery or on the highest altar or the ritually most important) images are the magnets that attract other images and these "other" images may take on value of their own overtime. The central images in a monastery are not always statues of the Buddha. Wat Mahabut is a good example. Mae Nak is becoming the new magnet for ancillary images. It is becoming hard to tell if Buddha

FIG 2
Collection of images placed on a "san" or altar for a tree spirit at Wat Mahabut. Images include several Nang Kwaek, a Brahmin sage, a Chinese Maitreya Buddha, royal dancing girls, a bottle of strawberry Fanta soda, a small Ganesha, jade lions, and many other images.

images in Wat Mahabut are drawing legitimacy from Mae Nak or vice versa.

Scholars of material culture focus on recipients, rituals, and agents involved in the production of culturally significant objects; they also track the agency of the "things" (see Holbraad 2007; McGowan 2007: 239). They teach us to investigate the ways in which human activities have been constituted by the centripetal and centrifugal forces of things. Gell is often credited as the foundational thinker of the study of agency and art. In an oft-lauded and oft-criticized formula, he emphasized that the agency of an image exists in a nexus formed by the: (1) artist; (2) image (or what he called the "index") which causes a cognitive reaction; (3) "patient" or recipient (of the index); and, (4) "prototype" or the thing from which the artist drew inspiration or on which s/he modeled her/his work (i.e. a

FIG 3
Desiccated corpse of Baby Ae dressed in pajamas and surrounded by stuffed animals, toys, and currency from several different countries.

previous work of art, a person on whom a portrait is based, a god who inspired the statue, etc.). This revolutionary idea sees agency as diachronically and synchronically spread over multiple nodes, all of which "act on" each other.[4]

The field of material religion has much to offer Buddhist studies, and the field of material religion has much to learn from Buddhist monastic ritual and art. This is particularly true for the very idea of images having agency. The complexity of Buddhist images and the ritual life surrounding them in a Thai monastery greatly expands and questions Gell's nexus. First, in Buddhist monastic art, the artist is rarely identified, known, or even acknowledged. The artist's agency is further marginalized because each image is a possession of the *sangha* (community of nuns and monks) in general, even though they are made and presented by the laity. I have never met a person at Wat Mahabut or most other monasteries who can tell me the name of the artist who created a particular statue. Most art historians in Thailand have trouble connecting known artists to known images.

Second, the image or "index" is constantly changing. It does not remain a finished product after the artist created it. Patients or recipients offer gold to images in Thailand by sticking thin leaves of gold onto the image. Often so much gold is affixed to the face, feet and chest of each image that the facial features disappear with all the layers added (in the case of Mae Nak, not only is gold affixed, but lipstick and eyeliner are added and the statue's hair is combed). Candle and incense smoke darken the images, garlands of flowers are hung around their necks, and money is placed in their hands. The patients participate in the constant *re*forming of the index. The portraits given as offerings to Mae Nak can be seen as another way of adding to the index.

Third, images/indexes are often believed to be inhabited by different spirits. Therefore, the "prototype" doesn't merely inspire the creation of an image; it resides within the image, constantly empowering it. If the spirit who resides in the image (a Buddha, a famous monk, a ghost, a child, etc.) is unhappy with offerings or the actions of the "patients," s/he can leave the material confines of the index. As is often the case with images of Hindu deities, Buddha images are often given particular personal names, bathed, and dressed. Other images are supposedly happy only with particular types of gifts. For example, there is a Buddha image in Chonburi Province that is said to like boiled duck eggs, Ganesha (Thai: Phra Kanet) images are said to like bananas and sugar cane, while other Buddha and Brahmanic images in Thailand are

FIG 4
Main statue of Mae Nak holding a plastic baby doll. Both images are covered in gold affixed by visitors to her shrine. The black wig and make-up are also additions to the original image donated over the past seventy years. In her dress are stuffed Thai baht.

fond of flowers of a particular color. Fourth, the "patients" or recipients are constantly changing. There are no official curators, docents, conservators, patrons, trustees, or consulting scholars assigned to monastic objects. Children play around them; teenagers flirt behind them; adults play cards, sell snacks and lottery tickets, make astrological predictions, light candles, and offer flowers in front of them. As we will see, they often have very particular and personal relationships with the images and address them with specific words, at specific times.

What is not included in Gell's theory of agency is the relationship images have with each other when they occupy the same physical space. How does the patient or recipient view, interpret, or value an image differently when it is placed in relation to another image? How does the agency of an image change as other images accumulate around it? How does the relationship between images and between patients change when they can touch and act on each other? In a Thai monastery, agency is created by the very fact that the images are near each other. An image must be studied in relationship with other objects within the room or the monastic campus.[5] Moreover, any individual image is made more ritually powerful when situated among other images from which it draws concomitant associative power.

A person might not be able to see a single image well when it shares space with many other images, incense sticks, candles, and the like, but Daniel Miller notes that some images are important for the simple fact is that they are not isolated and seen individually. They are important because we "do not 'see' them. The less we are aware

of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so" (Miller 2005: 5). Similarly, Michael Taussig asserted that when art becomes expected and ordinary, it creates a space for non-contemplative practical memory (Taussig 1991). It becomes "distraction." Distraction is a type of "apperceptive mode." The ordinary is no longer studied, it is only noticed when it is absent.

The insights of Taussig and Miller are applicable to Thai monastic art in many ways. Miller and Taussig concentrate on common images, not technically/aesthetically complex and mysterious objects, which Gell believes are the only types of images that "captivated" patients (Gell 1998: 66–8). Thai images are easily accessible and can be viewed by any lay or ordained person who simply strolls into a Thai monastery. Ubiquity makes them ordinary. They are often made of simple materials and are not technically advanced. They are so common that they often don't invite study or intense reflection. However, while their beauty and meaning might not be the subject of detached repose, I argue that they actually fall into a category between an artwork that has what Walter Benjamin called an "aura," and an ordinary object. Benjamin believes that "aura" emerges because of the multiple reproductions that are created of an "original" image. These reproductions make it seem that the image itself is wholly unique.[6] The original develops the appearance of something timeless through the multiplicity that it generates. In Thai monasteries, the importance of many images is not that they are seen individually or necessarily reproduced, but because they are in good company. These images exist in mutually empowering relationships with other images. The greater the number of images there are, the greater the ritual and votive attention. Visitors (patients) are taught their importance though their sheer number. Crowds are signs of value. Taussig, drawing on Walter Benjamin, actually acknowledges this in his famous essay on everyday art by showing that this apperceptive mode is essential for understanding the ways in which common images, especially those that are able to be touched and moved, create a "tactile appropriation" that is different from purely optical and contemplative art. Taussig and Benjamin were reflecting on everyday art such as advertisements, modern urban architecture, and the like. Thai religious art can also be common and tactile art; however, its sacredness lies not in its origin and style, but in the relationships it creates and allows. Therefore, Thai monastic art is not simply part of what Sallie Han might call an "ocularcentric" religion,

FIG 5
Gifts donated to the ghost of Mae Nak's infant child. Gifts include toy cars, games, and comic books. The television and fan point towards the statues of Mae Nak and her son and the television is regularly tuned into children's programming to entertain him.

where seeing a deity is as important as learning doctrine (see especially Han 2009). These images are part of what might be called a tactile-centric religion. Objects are not just meant for display. They drive performance, invoke emotions, and demand touch and interaction.

Wat Mahabut and the Forest of Images

Wat Mahabut, founded in 1793, is a good example of a busy urban monastery which has, like many others, dozens of seemingly unconnected image altars scattered over its grounds. There are eight major shrines at the relatively small monastery. If you add the number of astrologers and fortune tellers' tables, the number rises to three dozen places where a devotee can visit either for merit, consultation, protection, or the secrets to picking winning lottery numbers. There are also open air classrooms, monastic cells, an ordination hall, and a functional and unornamented sermon hall.

"Proper" images of the Buddha and monks, of which there are many at Wat Mahabut, share space with images to ghosts, hermits, bodhisattvas, and local and Brahmanic

deities. Theories about sacred and profane space do not work well here or at any Thai Buddhist monastery. The space is relatively open and images of the Buddha sit comfortably among images of other powerful beings. In fact, one path at Wat Mahabut is a veritable forest of images. On this path, there is a small building with metal gates which houses several Buddha images, as well as an image of Kuan Im (this is the Thai pronunciation of Kuan Yin, a female Bodhisattva popular with Sino-Thais, originally known as the male bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara) the Indian arahant Kaccāyana (Thai: Phra Sankacchai), among others. The room also contains two images of monks, one of which is from Laos and the other from Central Thailand. There are also dozens of smaller images of the Buddha and a couple of Ganesha (the Indian elephant-headed god). Among these images are two machines. The first is a Buddha image about eighteen inches high sitting on top of an electric machine which spins and lights up when a person puts a five baht coin in the slot near the feet of the Buddha and follows the instructions on the sign to "athithan" (contemplate/focus your good intentions). The other is a similar machine, but instead of a Buddha image, there is a Brahma image. After the coin is inserted the lights spin around and a number appears, as if on an electronic roulette machine, which tells the viewer their lucky number. This number can be applied when choosing lottery tickets.

There are not only dozens of small images in the public places of the monastery. There are also many in the private monastic cells. These images communicate close relationships. For example, the present abbot of Wat Mahabut, does not live next to the other monks. He occupies a *kuṭi* (cell) next to two shrines: the first one with the large image of the Buddha image, Luang Pho Yim, and the other is a small air-conditioned room which houses a large image of a former abbot of Wat Mahabut, Phra Khru Phithak Thawonkhun. The particular placement of this shrine enforces the connection between this highly revered abbot of the monastery with all subsequent abbots. He partakes in the prestige of his predecessors. His own *kuṭi* is a mess of magazines, images, unopened mail, books, gifts, ritual implements, and toiletries. But among this mess another relationship is formed. The abbot, who is particularly dedicated to the famous Thai monk, Somdet Phutthachan Phromarangsri To (*c*.1782–1876), has a large image of this famous monk in his room and receives visitors who wish to take the five precepts in front of it. This is a common practice in which visitors chant short verses vowing not to kill, steal, lie, consume intoxicants, or engage in sexual misconduct that day. If

FIG 6
A resident monk at Wat Mahabut holds a container with "corpse oil" (*nam man phrai*) used to protect pregnant women, as well as serve as a love potion.

the abbot is not available, one of his assistants conducts the ceremony, which ends with the pouring of holy water (*nam mon*) and the tying of a string bracelet (*sai sincana*) around the devotee's wrist. The abbot and his assistants sit in front or next to the statues of more famous monks. This communicates to each visitor that the living monk in front of them has a direct connection to a well-known predecessor. The placement of statues in monasteries and the positioning of monks' bodies in front of them establishes spatially, as well as temporally, a prestigious lineage. Monks don't only establish lineages with former monks or the Buddha. Images of powerful women are also included. For example, near the abbot's monastic cell is a statue of Nang Torani. In Southeast Asia, Nang Torani is the earth goddess who protected Prince Siddhartha Gotama while he was meditating and trying to achieve Buddhahood. The goddess had absorbed an ocean full of water into her hair. To protect the Buddha, she wrung out her hair in order to create a flood to wash away the daughters of the evil Mara and an army of demons who tried to distract the meditating prince. Next to Nang Torani is a shrine to Kuan Im. It is surrounded by trees and flowers with a man-made pond and fountain. In front of her shrine is a large wooden sign on which is painted the verses to chant while prostrating to her. Most Thai shrines offer helpful liturgical guides to visitors who have not memorized each and every chant. I have interviewed a number of people in front of these various shrines and most say that they silently entreat the image after annunciating the prescribed formula. The formulas are often specific to each image. Although the prescribed

liturgy has nothing to do with examinations or schooling, at this particular shrine, I interviewed a number of students on different occasions who were entreating Kuan Im in order to perform well on upcoming examinations. Kuan Im is not known across Southeast Asia for helping students, but this particular image, I have gathered, has developed a special relationship with local students. Many have stated that they passed examinations after they entreated this image of Kuan Im. This shows us that we must be careful when assigning blanket qualities to particular images. Each image has its own particular following and history. So, stating that Kuan Im is a "symbol of compassion," Ganesha helps artists, or Luang Pho Yim helps the sick may actually tell us little or nothing. Each image of Kuan Im or a particular Buddha is known for different powers in different situations. Therefore, at Wat Mahabut students can visit the abbot or another living Buddhist teacher to receive advice or to be protected with holy water. They can also walk right past the living and entreat Kuan Im or an image of a long deceased monk. Both options are perfectly proper religious actions. It is those options that make monasteries like Wat Mahabut popular. More visitors lead to the offering of more images and more gifts to images. The more images attract more visitors.

The shrines are not permanent monuments; they are stages vibrating with a subtly shifting, yet ever growing number of characters. They allow a measure of individual and community participation. This can be seen particularly at Wat Mahabut's central *san phra phum* (about sixty meters away from Kuan Im's shrine). This is a slightly run-down version of the "spirit houses" that are common in Thailand. They are placed in front of nearly every high-rise, hotel, shopping mall, and home (even Christians and Muslims occasionally have spirit houses). The spirit house at Wat Mahabut is at the base of a large Takian tree and is populated by a wide array of items including four Nang Kwaek (the goddess that "calls wealth" into a home) images, an image of a Brahmanic *ṛṣi* (sage or seer), a plastic Chinese Buddha image, two faux jade lions, plastic *kae bon* dancers, red incense, flower garlands, and a bottle of red Fanta soda. This particular array of images and offerings will surely be different the next time I go, as it was slightly different on each of my past visits. The images rarely move (although occasionally more are added), but the offerings are refreshed. Even children are involved in monastic life by offering new images to the altar. One sees a toy robot or doll on these shrines now and then. I have even seen plastic images of the Virgin Mary on a spirit house. There is no one central authority at the monastery dictating who can and cannot place images

FIG 7
Entrance to the shrine of Mae Nak Phrakhanong surrounded by garlands of donated plastic flowers.

on various shrines. The abbot does not inspect individual shrines and pick and choose which offerings or images are worthy. These shrines are often participatory sites, not efficiently orchestrated business plans. If each shrine or statue is studied in isolation then they could be described as cheap trinkets or poorly executed pieces of vernacular art. However, when studied in relation to each other, their associative value is clear. Each images value is raised because they are in good company.

The Ghost Mae Nak

Among the various images at Wat Mahabut, I will now focus on two that have particular importance for the relationships they create: the wooden image of Mae Nak, mentioned above, and the mummy of Baby Ae. Although scholars in the past have often dismissed ghosts as non-Buddhist or as macabre and menacing cultural oddities, they are an important part of monastic aesthetic and ritual programs. Indeed, it could be argued that more than any Buddha or monk image, the statue of Mae Nak is the central image at Wat Mahabut. The common nickname for the monastery is actually Wat Mae Nak. Each ghost has its own history. They are not merely beings to be avoided. The story of the ghost “Mae Nak Phrakhanong” or “Mother Nak of Phrakhanong District” (a small section of what is nowadays the southern edge of Bangkok) is old and very well known. It has been told and retold by Siamese of all classes since the late nineteenth century. There are many versions with different characters and name changes. Most Thai children and adults have heard this story. Indeed it has been a novelette, a play, a poem, an opera, a popular comic book, a graphic novel, as well as the subject of the most popular genre of ghost films

(over twenty-two films) in Thailand leading up to the 1997 blockbuster hit *Nang Nak*, the 1999 live opera *Mae Nak*, the 2003 *The Ghost of Mae Nak*, and the 2005 *Ghost of Mae Nak*. In 2008, a very popular animated version was released with much fanfare in which the beautiful ghost defends Thailand against foreign ghosts. Most versions of the story tell of a young woman who dies in childbirth while her husband is fighting as a soldier against the Burmese in the 1860s. Her ghost is so attached to her love for her mortal husband that she doesn't move on to the next life. She disguises herself as a human and attempts to live with him. She kills anyone who tries to tell Mak that his wife is actually a ghost. She ends up killing several people and is finally subdued by the previously mentioned powerful monk Somdet Phutthachan Phromarangsri To. For decades she has been feared as a menacing undead specter, but she is also admired for her love and dedication. More recently she has become a protector of soldiers fighting Islamic insurgents and a caretaker of pregnant women as she is seen as loving her warrior husband, hating those who attack Thailand, and longing for the child she lost in childbirth. The shrine to Mae Nak is much larger and more popular than any other shrine and towers over the tiny one to her husband, Mak, who was both a war hero and a monk in local legend (upending the usual hierarchy in Thai Buddhism in which monks are considered more worthy of offerings).[7] Mae Nak commands a funeral every month, while Mak does not. However, he receives gifts and respect for being placed near the image of his wife. They depended on each other in life and as statues. Often both shrines are visited by married couples hoping to have a child or to seek protection against divorce or military service (which would pull them apart). Nak and Mak's relationship is a model for those couples who touch their images.

Baby Ae

About 200 yards from the shrine to the ghost Mae Nak is another important model of undying love. In 1977 an infant named Sirirot Phibunsin (affectionately known as "Ae" or "Dek Chai Sirirot") died. He was only thirty-nine days old. Since he died an unnatural death, like Mae Nak, he was buried instead of cremated according to Thai custom. Not long after he was buried, there was a terrible flood in Phrakhanong district and the dirt around his coffin was washed away and the coffin resurfaced. His distressed parents, Pramot (a local police officer) and Sirilak (a nurse), brought his skeletal remains, which still had dried leathery flesh clinging to them, to the abbot of Wat Mahabut. The abbot agreed to take care of the infant (*du lae luk*) in order

to avoid upsetting his ghost. He ordered a glass coffin to be made, placed the coffin in a small wooden house built specifically for the coffin, and opened the doors to the public. Although he is not given a re-funeral every month like Mae Nak, Baby Ae gets a lot of visitors.

Many Thai Buddhists do not give gifts blindly to random images simply out of custom. Gifts and incantations are often catered to particular images with which they have developed a relationship. For example, Baby Ae's coffin is filled with toy airplanes, spacecraft, trucks, boats, several teddy bears, a giant stuffed "Hello Kitty" doll, a cell phone (supposedly if he wakes up and wants to make a call), and lots of cash. In fact, Baby Ae's corpse is dressed in children's pajamas. Only Baby Ae's eyeless head, covered with a thin layer of grayish leathery skin with blondish/white hair, is clearly visible through the glass. He is tiny even for a 39-day-old infant. Next to the coffin is a place to give more offerings. One of the more popular gifts, besides toys, is excessively sugary children's fruit punch. A 76-year-old woman named Khun Somwong, who keeps the shrine clean, sat with me for a long time on several occasions talking with me about visitors and activities at Baby Ae's house. Khun Somwong clearly was very attached to Baby Ae and I suspected it was not just for the cash he generated for the shrine and her family. She spoke of him as her own child. She spoke of Baby Ae's parents who would come once a year to the shrine, about the troop of about twelve to sixteen *Kae Bon* (a traditional type of dancer) who would dance in front of Baby Ae upon request, and the school children and mothers who would visit the coffin. Baby Ae was said to give people who visited him dreams, and in those dreams winning lottery numbers would be revealed. Most

FIG 8
Shrine to both Mae Nak and Mak (her husband) who was a soldier who ordained as a monk after her death. The shrine is packed with Nang Kwaek, Kuman (princes), toy soldiers, images of elderly ancestors, and donations of cigarettes, soda, and rice.

FIG 9
Lottery ticket salesperson outside of the shrine to Mae Nak. Many lottery salespeople surround the shrine as many believe that Mae Nak and other images at Wat Mahabut can give winning lottery numbers to visitors.

of Baby Ae's visitors were sports teams though. Local high school teams would visit Baby Ae to give offerings before or after big soccer, *takraw*, or volleyball matches. They either asked Baby Ae to help them win the game, thanked him when they won, or apologized when they lost. I only observed this twice, but Khun Somwong and the assistant abbot assured me that this was the most common activity. I asked several people, including most of the monks in residence at Wat Mahabut why an infant corpse could help sports teams. I was told by people like Achan Sirisak, Achan Yai, Khun Patthana, Khun Somchai, and many others that Baby Ae had "won" by not being destroyed by the flood. The assistant abbot (*phu chuai chao awat*), Phra Khru Withankitchathon, who is officially the monk in charge of the Mae Nak shrine and most day-to-day activities at the monastery, said that there was also some "proof." The small school connected to the monastery had one of the best *takraw* (a type of volleyball played with the feet and a rattan ball) teams in the city even though they were a tiny school in a poor neighborhood. Moreover, the local technical college had won the city-wide soccer championship after offering gifts to Baby Ae. However, he was skeptical. Even though the sports teams had won, he thought that the belief in the power of Baby Ae was not based in reality. Regardless, he thought the presence of the child was good for the parents who were comforted that their child had inspired so many people. He admitted that the 300,000 baht (about US$10,000) that the shrine brought in annually was also helpful to the monastery as it was helping build a new dormitory for monastic students. What others might see as commercialism, he sees as therapy for one family. What he saw as therapy, a local teenage soccer player sees as victory. The reasons an

FIG 10
Married couple hoping to become pregnant offer gifts to Mae Nak. Behind them are several donated dresses, boxes of cosmetics, and amateur paintings of Mae Nak.

image becomes popular are over-determined and highly local.

Soldiers and Expectant Mothers

Images draw power from each other. They must be studied in relation to other images and the community that supports them. Moreover, regardless of standard Buddhist injunctions against "attachment" and "selfishness," visitors laud the love between wives and husbands as well as parents and children. The Buddha and monks might be the symbols of mendicancy and lone asceticism, but at Wat Mahabut these values are trumped by those of loyalty and love. Despite dying in childbirth, being attacked by villagers and monks, and finally being spiritually pacified, Mae Nak's *winyan* (Pali: viññāna; English: "consciousness" or even "life-force") remained active at the monastery. Phra Khru Withankitchathon believes that Mae Nak's *winyan* is caught at Wat Mahabut because people keep her there by giving her gifts and asking her for help. She was bound to the world because of the relationships she had formed.

Over the past three years I have interviewed many visitors to Mae Nak's image. Many are open about their anxiety over losing a husband to violence or a child *in utero*. This palpable fear drives them to do "something," even ask for the impossible. To many, Mae Nak, despite her vengeful and murderous ways, is a sympathetic figure. Her husband was drafted. She went through her pregnancy and delivery alone. She died holding the cold corpse of her infant. However, even if she was ready to move on to the next life, her followers would not let her go. I asked the abbot if abbot he saw this as uncompassionate or a sign of attachment. Shouldn't Mae Nak's followers want her to be peaceful and move on to

her next life? To this question, Phra Khru Withankitchathon had no direct answer, but he argued that Mae Nak was compassionate (*mi khwam metta*) because Mae Nak helped people "win," not only the lottery, but in other ways. Since Mae Nak hated the military, many people who visit Mae Nak's shrine ask her to protect them and their family members from being drafted into active military combat service, especially in Southern Thailand or along the Burmese border. This was compassion. Moreover, he argued there are two types of winning numbers they want from Mae Nak. They want a lottery number, but also a "winning" conscription number. A good conscription number means that they will not be picked to serve on active duty. He noted that since these numbers are handed out in April, each year the shrine is busiest then. Moreover, besides protecting the living, for many Mae Nak helps produce new life. Either pregnant women or women hoping to get pregnant (or simply meet a good man in order to have the chance to get pregnant in the future) visit Mae Nak and plead with her for help. Many people I talked to also admitted that Mae Nak's relationship might have ended in death and ghostly revenge, but at least she inspired love and attachment from her husband.

Two visitors I interviewed one evening are good examples of the diverse reasons why a murderous nineteenth-century ghost stays relevant in modern Thailand. Kai and her husband Montri went to visit Mae Nak on a quiet Sunday evening on February 24, 2008. As I was chatting with an astrologer named Tittiporn, Montri, wearing a black jacket emblazoned with the English word "Army" and a camouflaged hat, approached me and asked me straightaway "Are you American?" in the rough urban vernacular of a man who did not care to whom he spoke. I said "chai krup" (sure) and then he said, "What do you think of Taksin?" (the former prime minister who was removed in a *coup d'état* in September, 2006). It was late, I needed to get home, but I knew I was in for a long conversation. However, once we agreed to disagree and laughed about Montri's theory about how George Bush's problems were all caused by his choice of a black dog as a pet, I decided it was my turn. He had done his ethnography for the day, now I would do mine. I asked him why he was visiting Mae Nak. This time, his wife Kai finally spoke up. She told me that they were thanking Mae Nak for protecting her husband who had served in the South over the past few years as an Army Ranger. She had asked Mae Nak to protect him from the violence. She had. Montri would retire in April. He would be stationed close to Bangkok now. It was about time to thank his protector. I noticed Kai was wearing a crucifix around her neck.

FIG 11
Notes stuffed in the folds of donated scarves tied around a tree at Mae Nak's shrine. The notes ask Mae Nak to grant the writers healthy children, success in finding mates, protection from military draft, and success in becoming pregnant.

She said that she was Catholic. Montri was Buddhist. Visiting Mae Nak had nothing to do with being Christian or Buddhist, they said. She helped them particularly. In fact, as I later learned from the abbot and the keepers of the shrine, many of the visitors to Mae Nak were Muslim. They all needed protection in their own way—to avoid being drafted, to have a child or a mate, or to pick a winning lottery number.

Protocols, Emotions, and Fun

It was the complex relationships between people and shrines that was made most clear to me when I became an object of attention at Mae Nak's shrine. Many who visit Mae Nak's shrine, after prostrating to her image and offering her flowers and cosmetics, also apply camphor

FIG 12
Visitors to Mae Nak's shrine surround the tree that Mae Nak was supposedly buried under. They apply oil to the tree and rub it in the belief that lottery numbers will appear in the bark.

oil to the Takian tree under which Mae Nak's corpse is supposedly buried. Each person rubs the bark of the tree with the oil. Oiling the bark causes certain grooves of the bark to be exposed. The lines in the bark, many believe, can be counted to give a person winning lottery (*huai*) numbers. Unbeknownst to me at first, on my many visits to the shrine, I actually came to be seen as a person particularly good at seeing the numbers in the tree bark (although, I explicitly admitted to those in attendance that I had no special ability). One woman, Supatra, explained that since I had a job, two children, and a wife, I must have good qualities and good karmic merit (*mi bun*). My relationships made me more trustworthy. Many people I spoke with admitted that they were not sure if they really could get winning lottery numbers from Mae Nak or Baby Ae. Many just joked around with me. Most often it was emotional expression that characterized the experience for many visitors rather than tempered analysis or ethical reflection. Moreover, I noticed that many of those people who participated in the search for *huai* numbers on the tree decided not to purchase a lottery ticket from the lottery vendors nearby. Many of these same people offered donations to the lottery vendors, but declined to take a lottery ticket. Overall, it seemed to be more of a jovial and social group who visited the shrine regularly than a financially desperate one.

Even though there was no guaranteed monetary reward and the "belief" in the power of the images was not vigorously defended, people did have specific emotional and practical reasons for being there. For example, one day at the shrine of Mae Nak, I met, Phra Sirisak, a 37-year-old monk who has resided at Wat Mahabut. Phra Sirisak runs a shop out of his *kuṭi* (monastic cell), which is located on the southeast area of Wat Mahabut near the Mae Nak shrine. He, like many of the monks at Wat Mahabut, was involved in the shrine; they helped perform the monthly re-funeral and blessed visitors with holy water and protective string (*sai siñcana*). Most days seemed pretty quiet for Phra Sirisak though. He reads an unusually large number of daily newspapers and occasionally he "rents" (monks cannot actually "sell" [*kai*] anything only "rent" [*chao*]) amulets, statues, protective potions and oils, candles, and the like. He rents statues like Nang Kwaek and Kuman-kumari. These small resin and plastic statues are designed to be placed on home "spirit houses" (*san phra phum*) and altars. They ensure good health or a profitable business. Many accumulate around the statues of Mae Nak, Kuan Im, and others. Phra Sirisak considers himself particularly skilled at blessing and renting statues and potions that protect pregnant women and soldiers. In

FIG 13
Resident monk at Wat Mahabut sits in the abbot's monastic cell as a representative offering to perform the "rap sin ha" ritual in which visitors agree to follow the five precepts (abstaining from lying, stealing, killing, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants) for the day. Behind him are a large collection of images including Buddhas, the famous ghost-tamer Somdet To, and former kings of Thailand.

this way, his small "business" complements the shrine to Mae Nak. It also complements the dozens of astrologers and spirit mediums who work around the monastery. Many of the tables and small shrines advertise the skills of a particular astrologer, like a middle-aged woman named Mali or a young man named Liang Chaloensuk. They are covered with statues of Laksmi, Ganesha, and Kuan Im. One boasts a sign that reads "Mo Du Yipsy" (Gypsy Astrologer) and has a blown-up color rendition of a French-style tarot card. Another catch-all clinic of sorts advertises not only expertise in gypsy palm reading (*lai meu yipsy*), but also Thai astrology (*horasat thai*), Burmese astrology (*horasat phama*), and numerology (*lekasat*) all in an "air-conditioned room" (*hong air*)! Mae Nak has become a magnet for a whole group of astrologers hoping both to be inspired and protected by Mae Nak, but also to cash in on some of the residual foot traffic generated by the popularity of her image. Therefore, many people go to shrine go to "rent" specific objects for themselves or to bring home as gifts for others. The astrologers and shop owners themselves also patronize the shops of their friends. The site feeds off itself.

These images are not individual objects of exchange. The objects gain value by being close to each other. For example, a Nang Kwaek rented at Mae Nak's shrine is more valuable and powerful than one rented in a curio shop of a shopping mall. These images attract locals in various provinces, students, monks, as well as pilgrims and invited honorary guests. These people need places to eat, sleep, and shop. Therefore, there are hundreds of people who profit socially and financially in the neighborhood (including Christians and Muslims); food vendors, carnival ride operators, astrologers, the renters of

sound equipment (microphones, speakers, stages, cables, etc.), local shop keepers, souvenir makers, candle and incense companies and vendors, florists, motel owners, taxi drivers, dance and entertainment troupes, and the like. This is a truly viable "local" industry formed by the multiple images present and growing at the monastery.

These multiple images form what David Morgan calls the "protocols" that develop between devotee and object.[8] These protocols are not orthodox prescriptions, but certain expectations that the devotee understands regarding the proper body posture, the appropriate range of gifts, and the murmured and deferential voicing of both formal incantations and informal intentions. If a particular image develops a protocol with an image, the abbot of the monastery or the caretaker of a shrine can insert other images near that one. These ancillary images received similar forms of devotions and share in similar protocols. In this way images spawn their own material lineages. The corpse of Baby Ae is near the statue of Mae Nak, Luang Pho Yim, Kuan Im, and several other images. Mae Nak's statue can be seen as the mother of the other images because they certainly would not be as popular and have developed their own following if the image of Mae Nak had not drawn crowds to this very hard to find little monastery. In general, a single altar or a single monastery can become a repository of images of Hindu deities, Thai monarchs, local spirits, monks, and Buddha images. By sharing the same altars (or neighboring altars), they take part in similar protocols and, overtime, can share in the same prestige. One popular image may draw devotees to the monastery or shrine, but while they are there, they can develop relationships and protocols with other images.

There are not only protocols that develop between images and individuals, but between monasteries and families. Often overlooked in the study of Buddhism—but which we can comparatively see in studies by Turner (1975), Orsi (1985), and Christian Smith (2005)—is that visiting and performing in front of these images is simply fun. Any parent knows that finding inexpensive and entertaining activities for children can be difficult. These images are not the most refined artistically or important historically; but, these image shrines are popular with children and families who picnic near them.[9] Children often run around the monastery, play soccer, and listen to music. There is also another draw for those who don't live or work around Wat Mahabut. There is a large Carrefour megastore nearby and families who visit the monastery often are either on their way to or from this discount store. In the courtyard in front of the image, local comedy troops perform on weekends and there are several vendors selling

refreshments. There is dancing and ample parking (as well as several bus routes, water taxis, and a skytrain route that pass within walking distance of it). This is quite common at monasteries throughout Thailand. These images are a destination for families who may not be able to afford the large amusement parks on the edges of Bangkok.

In Thai Buddhist monasteries in general, patrons do not merely look at or prostrate to images, but also affix gold, insert relics, draw holy water, request audiences, as well as comfort images with robes, pillows, food, and flowers. There are not simply things to see, but things to do. Images exist in a social and ritual atmosphere. Monasteries are places where one sees the way ritual and leisure often go hand-in-hand. Buddhist monasteries are places where there is little effort made to control visitors or control the flow of information. There are usually no entrance fees, no guides, multiple entry and exit ways. One can leave as little as twenty baht or spend hundreds at shrines. However, nothing is required, there is no designated collection plate being passed around. Shrines and objects are scattered throughout the monastic grounds, there are places to sit and eat, play cards, buy lottery tickets, and sundry. Like most monasteries, a number of homeless people sleep at Wat Mahabut.

Most monasteries are not somber places in which monks are strictly enforcing particular ways of performing rituals. Even during sermons and liturgical chanting, people can be seen chatting in the corner, wandering around the grounds, talking on cell phones, eating, and flirting. Children are rarely corralled. Some certainly go to meditate (if they can find the space and silence), offer gifts, listen to sermons, or get advice from monks; however, there is so much more "going on" and people are largely free to ignore rituals and images, or see them and prostrate to them on their own schedule and according to the relationships that are most important to them. These are often not places of forced spirituality, ethical directives, or detached repose. They are filled with particular types of powerful and empowering "distractions."

FIG 14
Fortune telling machine at Wat Mahabut.

Conclusion

Buddhist images in Thailand are only properly understood as constant works in progress. There are multiple nodes of agency not only between artist, index, prototype, and patient, but between the images themselves. In turn these relationships create new ones between visitors (patients), and visitors often visit images to attempt to protect certain relationships in their own lives (children, spouses, parents, and the like). Monasteries are often lively and stimulating and this atmosphere is created by placing a number of

different images in relationship with each other so that instead of having a single altar with a central focus, there are multiple poles forming a network of visual cues. Studies of individual images in museums or monasteries will more often than not miss these protocols, lineages, networks, emotions, and relationships, and therefore miss an entire part, if not the biggest part, of the way a person's religious repertoire is formed and evolves.

notes and references

[1] Robert Brown has pointed out that narrative mural art in many monasteries is actually is not designed to be "read" by the visitor to the monastery, but is a type of offering to the Buddha image. The murals and the image must be seen as having a particular relationship. See Brown (1997).

[2] See Appadurai (1986), especially Patrick Geary's contribution, and Miller (2005), which provides a broad theoretical overview of recent work on anthropological approaches to art and material culture. See below for Gell.

[3] The two great examples of scholars who have moved beyond this type of analysis are Donald Swearer and Peter Skilling. Although neither has studied the relationships between images in Thailand, they have studied the ritualization of and merit-making connected to Buddha images. See particularly, Swearer (2004) and Skilling (2007).

[4] See Gell (1998), especially chapters 2–5 which discuss the importance of context, religious or other, recipients and what he calls the "art nexus." See also Layton (2003) and Osbourne and Tanner (2007), which is a collection of articles reviewing the impact of Gell's work on the field of art history and visual anthropology.

[5] Here I am inspired by the monumental *De la maison à la ville en pays tamoul ou la Diagonale interdite* by Jacques Gaucher (2006) which is a study of images and temples not just in the context of their religious surroundings, but in their total "neighborhood" environment (in this case, urban settings in South India).

[6] I thank the anonymous reviewers and editors at *Material Religion* for pointing out the subtly of Benjamin's approach here.

[7] I discuss the gender implications of Mae Nak's story in a forthcoming study. Arnika Fuhrman's (2008) dissertation on the Mae Nak film genre is an in-depth gender analysis of her place in modern Thai society.

[8] See Morgan (2005): 25–34. This relationship formed between image and viewer in ritual settings has been discussed by Diana Eck (1998) and David Freedberg (1991).

[9] The sitting Buddha at Wat Kutithong in Ayutthaya is a wonderful example of an image that is entertaining. Not only do people want to pay respect to this very large image, but they also want to bring their children to "play" with the Buddha. This colossal image, named Phra Phuttha Mahamuni Srimaharat, has

a large machine in front of it which operates two water cannons. These cannons are operated by inserting a ten baht coin into a slot. The water shoots about forty feet in the air hitting the Buddha image's chest and thus washing and cooling him (indeed, the image sits in the sun in a very hot valley of Ayutthaya). Children crowd around the machine to take turns washing the Buddha.

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