

**Asia Research Institute
Working Paper Series No. 182**

**Begging for Babies:
The Sacred Geography of Fertility in Thailand**

Andrea Whittaker

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

andrea.whittaker@monash.edu

April 2012



The **ARI Working Paper Series** is published electronically by the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each Working Paper.

ARI Working Papers cannot be republished, reprinted, or reproduced in any format without the permission of the paper's author or authors.

Note: The views expressed in each paper are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the Asia Research Institute, its Editorial Committee or of the National University of Singapore.

Citations of this electronic publication should be made in the following manner: Author, "Title," ARI Working Paper, No. #, Date, www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm. For instance, Smith, John, "Ethnic Relations in Singapore," ARI Working Paper, No. 1, June 2003, www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm.

Asia Research Institute Editorial Committee

Michelle Miller - Chair

Jeremy Kingsley

Jonathan Benney

Liang Yongjia

Maureen Hickey

Peter Marolt

Tim Bunnell

Valerie Yeo

Asia Research Institute

National University of Singapore

469A Tower Block #10-01,

Bukit Timah Road,

Singapore 259770

Tel: (65) 6516 3810

Fax: (65) 6779 1428

Website: www.ari.nus.edu.sg

Email: arisec@nus.edu.sg

The Asia Research Institute (ARI) was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

Begging for Babies: The Sacred Geography of Fertility in Thailand

We are Buddhist, it is common for us to ask or beg for a baby, Buddhists tend to leave their hopes with something you can't see. (Nut and Mani)

The unpredictable nature of conception sometimes requires intervention by gods and doctors. In Thailand, infertility is viewed as a consequence of one's past deeds in previous lives, karma (*kaam*) and fate (*khro*) as much as a medical issue. As a result, couples experiencing fertility difficulties will implore a fertility pantheon for intervention in their quest to form a family at the same time as they undertake high tech assisted reproductive treatment. Visiting shrines provides the opportunity for patients to be proactive agents in seeking care for their infertility, requesting, begging and bargaining for various forms of spiritual intervention on one's behalf.

As a medical anthropologist, in this paper I consider the ways in which religion continues to play an important role in reproduction in Thailand, even within a select population committed to 'high tech' interventions to cure their infertility. Syncretic medical practices complement pluralistic religious practices as couples pursue a range of treatments as well as a range of spiritual and religious interventions. To my surprise, the literature on health and reproduction in Thailand fails to describe the associations between shrines, pilgrimages and fertility. This paper addresses this gap by describing a range of religious spaces in Thailand as forming part of a 'sacred geography of fertility' appealed to by infertile couples. I argue that these shrines have particular gendered significance for women in their pursuit of children. They represent further examples of the intersection between the sacred and the ordinary, religion and magic in Thai society.

Although here I only discuss a few of the major sacred sites visited by the informants in my study, many such sites exist throughout Thailand. These journeys speak not only of the intense desire of couples for children, but the array of locations reflects the diversity of Thai religious belief and practice. I discuss the interrelationship between religion and fertility and how these shrines offer people (particularly women) a means to intervene in the supernatural world without the mediation of (male) monks.

In many ways, such pilgrimages in the spiritual realm have their own parallels in treatment seeking within the biomedical realm. Both involve syncretic care seeking at multiple sites, both are enveloped by a sense of enchantment and appeal to various sources of authority.

Wilson (2008:632) makes an important observation that magico-religious practices associated with shrines should be considered not as vestiges of 'traditional elements' of non-Western urbanity, but as equally modern expressions of religiosity. In the same way, we can view people's resort to shrines seeking care and cures – their approach to what we might call 'the fertility pantheon' – not as an archaic practice on an axis of tradition to modernity, but coeval spiritual practices coexisting with high technology treatments. These circuits through the 'sacred geography of healing/fertility' in Thailand are layered upon other spiritual quests. And as I later suggest in this paper, there are a number of similarities in the ways both are deployed and experienced by infertile couples.

In doing so this paper contributes to the anthropology of reproduction, but also to the study of religious practice in Thailand. Most studies of religious practices in Thailand have focused upon orthodox Buddhism, however there is growing consideration of other spiritual domains (for eg Jackson 1999a, 1999b Morris 2000, Pattana Kitiarsa 2007, Keyes 2006, Nilsen 2011). Pattana Kitiarsa (2005) for example, provides an overview of the 'hybridization' of Thai popular religion. However,

with the exception of studies of the practices of shamans and spirit mediums (Golomb 1985, Heinze 1988, Morris 2000), the health motivations of visitors to shrines undertaking devotional activities has not been seriously studied. One possible explanation is that requesting health is such a ubiquitous part of peoples' activities at shrines that it seems unremarkable to commentators. The lack of this perspective within religious studies of Thai shrines also possibly reflects the gendered nature of academic writing on Thailand and religion (predominantly by men) in which issues of gender and reproduction have attracted little attention. And yet as I was to discover, a large network of sites is known and visited by couples seeking children, and a fertility economy of statues, offerings and advice revolves around them. Feeding local knowledge is the networking on the internet (Whittaker forthcoming) which describes various people's success at various sites. Taking these sites from the point of view of a woman or man seeking assistance with infertility reveals a 'sacred geography' (Wilson 2008) in which certain locations, statues and sites take precedence over others.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF HEALTH PILGRIMAGE AT SACRED SPACES

A range of studies in other countries document health seeking in temples or shrines. The most famous Christian site of healing is that of Lourdes. Gesler (1996) describes how Lourdes is a 'therapeutic landscape' in which the physical and built environment, social conditions and cultural perceptions combine to produce a place conducive to healing. Similarly, the Buddhist shrine to Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy at Hangzhou in China is viewed as a 'transformative space, a space of becoming healthy and whole' (Walsh 2007). Other ethnographic studies at shrines primarily focus upon the role of religious sites in the treatment and management of mental health and psychiatric disorders (eg. Pirani et al 2008, Pfleiderer 1988, Raguram et al 2002, Padmavati et al 2005) and the power of pilgrimage as a means of expressing personal traumas and loss (Notermans 2007).

There are few studies of care seeking at shrines for infertility. In a study of women migrants and reproductive health in slums of Rajasthan, Unnithan-Kumar (2011) mentions the use of spiritual healers by childless couples as a means of displacing the stigma of childlessness away from themselves. She notes that resort to spiritual healers allows women to negotiate the usual control over their reproductive bodies by patrilineal kin and the state.

Turner and Turner suggest that journeys to expiate disease can be seen as 'rituals of affliction' (1978:11) to propitiate those supernatural forces which create or perpetuate illness or misfortune. They suggest that such journeys are pilgrimages, rites of passage conducive to healing. Such pilgrimages are characterised by a period of separation from everyday social relationships. This is followed by a liminal phase when the pilgrim is 'betwixt and between'. The final phase involves a transition back to customary relationships but in a new state of being following the transformative experience of the pilgrimage (Turner and Turner 1978). Although sites of pilgrimage can be found anywhere, there is a tendency for many sites of pilgrimage to be in peripheral or isolated settings separated from the social political centres of society, in remote wild lands surrounding the 'ordered' social world. Utilising the Turners' work, Cohen (1992) described Thai shrines as either 'concentric' (towards the centre) and 'excentric' (away from the centre) places of pilgrimage. He suggests a hierarchy of Thai shrines exists, describing 'formal politico-religious centres' such as Wat Phra Kaew (the Emerald Buddha) versus 'major' and 'minor peripheral pilgrimage centres'.

However, the visits to shrines and temples described in this paper do not neatly fit into the classic notion of either a pilgrimage or a definitive hierarchy. Although some sites are located on the peripheries, away from the urban centre of Bangkok, in forest temples and obscure locations, many 'popular' sites are located within the city and most are easily visited despite Bangkok's traffic. Rather than involving a lengthy period of time, most are conducive to a short visit-- compressed liminal

periods away from the office or home. Visits to shrines to ask for children are purposeful but also generally considered *sanuk*. 'fun', combining devotional practice with the touristic pleasure of an outing. Although visiting shrines to ask for babies carries some elements of pilgrimages, it is important to note how such journeys also form part of the everyday religious practice of Thais, in which it is common to stop to acknowledge a tutelary spirit, request assistance to pass exams, or divine lottery numbers conveyed in dreams. As James Taylor reminds us (2008:21) Buddhism in Thailand is best understood as a religious assemblage. Following Foucault, he suggests the question of religion might be viewed through the notion 'of 'heterotopias'—in which there is an eradication of accepted boundaries between the sacred and the ordinary in everyday life. This is beautifully illustrated by the dense and intermingled religious landscape in Bangkok as couples seeking children seek assistance from a range of gods overlapping their beliefs as Buddhists and their treatment as patients. As Nilsen (2011:1610) notes, paying respects and generosity to spirits is a fundamental moral value in Thailand and is seen to constitute a 'good act' which in turn brings karmic merit. Not only is respecting spirits morally appropriate, but has a practical dimension; once asked to intervene to assist spirits can also become dangerous if not appropriately respected, causing misfortune, illness and even death. Visits to sacred places constitute the small quotidian acts of devotion and enchantment common to the management of everyday life, risks and concerns in Thailand and 'erase the line between religion and magic' (Nilsen 2011:1625).

Despite the lack of fit, I retain the use of the term pilgrims and pilgrimage in this paper as it does capture something of the dedication and devotion with which people undertake their visits and the sense of transformation they experience. Not every visit involved asking for a child, some informants said they visited shrines for *kamlangjai*, (confidence) and reassurance during their treatment. Such visits also reinforce the supplicants' status as moral subjects, who have done everything possible to improve their karmic status, propitiate wronged spirits or intervene in their fate. They allow people with fertility difficulties a degree of agency.

Nor is visiting a shrine an act of last resort or a rejection of modern biomedicine (Turner and Turner 1978: 22). Gesler (1996:99) has described visiting Lourdes as 'a popular return to mystery at a time when the elite culture has turned to rational thought'. On the contrary, all the informants who visited shrines described in this paper were patients undertaking high tech modern assisted reproductive technologies to treat their infertility. Visiting shrines was not a last resort in a 'hierarchy of resort', it was simply another form of care and intervention described as a means to complement and enhance other forms of intervention.

METHODS

This research forms part of a broader medical anthropology project seeking to document the social and cultural impact of infertility and assisted reproductive technologies in Thailand and the new opportunities, imaginaries and threats they present to women. Fieldwork took place in 4 IVF clinics in Bangkok in 2007-2008 when 31 women and 13 men as well as 6 medical staff (doctors and scientists) were interviewed about their experiences of infertility and use of assisted reproductive technologies. This paper draws upon a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with patients in a private room while they were waiting for their appointments. Patients were recruited through the clinics. Written permission was obtained to participate in the study and to tape record interviews. Participation was entirely voluntary. The interviews were semi-structured with certain demographic and personal information collected from all participants but then followed by open-ended questions, allowing the interviewee freedom to give their stories and express what they felt was important. Interviews took approximately an hour. In some cases, patients were re-interviewed at later dates in person or followed up by phone to track their treatment.

Interviews usually took place either at the clinic following or before a regular scheduled appointment at a private location within the clinic, or at a place determined by the patient. In addition to the interviews, observations in clinics and at sacred sites were undertaken and are drawn upon in this paper. Informal interviews in these locations took place whenever possible. Thematic analysis has been carried out on the interviews utilizing ATLAS-ti to facilitate the coding and management of the qualitative data.

Participants in this study were all undergoing assisted reproductive cycles in the clinics due to female or male fertility problems or a combination. Due to the expense of these treatments most informants were middle to upper middle class backgrounds. These 'high tech' treatments ranged from IVF (in vitro fertilization), ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection of single sperm for male fertility issues sometimes in combination with testicular extraction, TESE) and associated procedures such as PGD (preimplantation genetic diagnosis). In some cases, couples were using donor ova and surrogacy. These treatments followed long histories attempting to become pregnant which often involved painful surgical procedures and previous attempts at IUI (intrauterine insemination). A typical 'cycle' in IVF involves the suppression of a woman's normal menstrual cycle, the induction of ovulation, through daily injections of hormonal drugs, the 'harvesting' of those eggs, their fertilization and growth 'in vitro', their selection and further testing in the case of PGD, other drugs to encourage the production of endometrial lining, and the insertion of the resulting embryos. Two weeks later, testing reveals the successful implantation of the embryo or not. The average success rates of IVF treatments is low and is dependent on a number of factors such as the age of the woman, the treatment required and whether donated eggs are used. In US clinics, an average of 41 percent of women under 35 years old and only 12.6 per cent of women over forty achieve a 'take home baby' after undergoing assisted reproductive treatment (Society for Reproductive Medicine 2009). Due to the low success rate, couples will often undergo the procedures multiple times, until their hope or money runs out. The uncertainty and stress associated with assisted reproductive treatment is considerable.

SACRED GEOGRAPHY OF FERTILITY

I adapt the term 'sacred geography' from the work of Ara Wilson (2008) who uses the term to describe her mapping of 'market shrines'--the small shrines found in workplaces, shops and market stalls in Thailand, propitiated by people to ensure business and financial success. As I discovered through this research on infertility and IVF, we might also speak of a rich 'sacred geography of health and fertility' that exists across Thailand--sites recognised for their efficacy in curing the ill or granting requests for children. They form integral parts of people's quests both as a supplement to other treatments and as separate interventions.

Participants in this study visited sites associated with the cults of Hindu gods and goddesses (particularly Brahma), Chinese deities popular within the Sino-Thai population, royal spirits such as King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), local guardian and tutelary spirits (see Table 1) . This diversity reflects the cosmopolitanism of the Bangkok population which draws upon groups from all over Thailand. The list of sites named by participants in this study in Table1 is by no means exhaustive. It reflects the geographical origins of the informants of this study dominated with sites in Bangkok with a few sites included from Northern and North-east Thailand (Isan). There are many other such sites dotted across the country. Not all patients could recall all the sites they had visited. For example, Ladda claimed,

My husband took me there. He told me the name but I forgot now. There were so many people paying respects and plenty of garlands. I think all the patients and their relatives went there to pay respect and got better. I just want a baby so I prayed and asked from everywhere. I don't even know who is who [among the deities]!

Not all of the people in this study had visited shrines. Exceptions included one Christian woman, Tuk, and one Muslim couple, Bee and Piak, who did not undertake such pilgrimages but prayed. Thus when asked about whether they had visited sacred places, Tuk replied 'I prayed with God inside my heart, but God hasn't answered my prayer yet'. Only two Buddhist informants were true sceptics about spiritual intervention in their infertility. Mai, a Thai expatriate who normally lives in Britain, stated 'With all my respect, I just don't believe in this kind of thing' and Poy laughed when we asked about seeking assistance from sacred places, stating: 'We haven't been to any sacred places (laughed) because even when we have come to be treated by science it still hasn't been successful!' Apart from these, all other patients had undertaken some form of devotional act to ask for a baby.

Table 1: Sacred Places Visited by Informants in this Study to Ask for Babies.

Theravadhan Temples/ Shrines	Locations
Luang Phor Sathorn	Chachoengsao
Phra Tat Phanom	Nakhon Phanom
Phra Puttha Chinarat	Ayutthaya
Wat Phra Kaew	Bangkok
Nine temples in Suphanburi	Suphanburi
Local temples	Uthai Thani, Saraburi, Ayutthaya
Wat Paa lae lai	Kanchanaburi
Doi Suthep	Chiang Mai
Guardian spirits	
Saan Taa Yai	Bangkok, Nakhon Ratchasima
Village spirit post	Home village, Mahasarakham
Jao Phor Lak Muang	Kamphaengphet
Jao Paa Khao Kaew	Chiang Mai
Maternal house spirits	Chiang Mai
Mae Thup Thim	Bangkok
Yaa Mo	Nakhon Ratchasima
Chinese deities	
Jao Phor Seu	
Jao Mae Kwan Im	Yaowarat, China
Jao Mae Soi Dok Maak	Ayutthaya
Brahman statues	
Phra Prom	Bangkok
Phra Pickanet	Nakhon Prathom
Royal spirits	
Rama V	Dusit, Bangkok
Statue of Prince Mahidol in front of hospital	Bangkok
Somdet Phra Naresuan Maharaj	Kanchanaburi

Ut, 32 and Khiat, 31 are typical of my informants in that they have visited many shrines. They have prayed for babies at the *San Taa Yai* (Grandpa-Grandma shrine), the *San Phra Phrom* in Bangkok (Brahma Shrine, also known as the Erawan shrine), the Phra Pikanet (Ganesh shrine) shrine in Nakhon Prathom and the Rama V statue in Bangkok. They also bought a small statue of Phra Pikanet for their home and Khiat also wears an amulet of Kwan Im (Guanyin, Mahayana Goddess of Mercy) and has undertaken a vow to not eat meat on every Buddhist holy day. Ut suggested that their trips to the various shrines strengthened them mentally and spiritually. Buying the small statue of Phra Pikanet for their home was particularly efficacious-- they attributed their successful pregnancy to his intervention shortly after purchasing the statue on their third attempt using TESE ICSI. Now, Khiat added, they would have to redeem the various vows they had made. Apart from these pilgrimages, Ut and Khiat had also donated money to orphanages to make merit, make daily food offerings to Buddhist monks and transferred merit to ancestors by pouring water at the temple on Buddhist holy days, 'We did so many things because we were very depressed [about our infertility] and we would try anything that would help us'.

In addition to visits to sacred sites, as mentioned by Ut and Khiat, many women and men prayed for children at personal shrines at home furnished with devotional objects and statues purchased from the many shops specializing in sacred items. Devotional practices such as meditation, periods of renunciation symbolized by wearing white and fasting would also be undertaken as offerings. In addition, amulets of particular deities, such as Kwan Im were carried or worn by women and men. Lingam (*palad khik*), representing the phallus of Shiva can also be worn usually by men to enhance potency and fertility as well as for protection. Some versions considered appropriate for women to wear to enhance fertility are also available for purchase in markets and on the internet. Ying also spoke of her visits to spirit mediums in the first years of her treatment in her quest to ask for a child. All such practices allow individuals access to sources of magico-religious power outside of formal Buddhist practice.

Individual pursuits of interventions by various spirits and deities at shrines might also be read as a resort to alternate powers outside of authorised Buddhism. Peter Jackson (2000:245) suggests contemporary 'postmodern' Buddhism in Thailand displays an increased emphasis on the supernatural as distinct from rationalist/doctrinal Buddhism which was associated with attempts to reform and institutionalize the Sangha as part of the project of Thai modernity. Likewise, O'Connor (1993:336) has suggested that magical forms of devotional practice are a response to the centralisation of the governance of the Buddhist order which insisted on orthodoxy and removed 'curing and magical arts, denying the benevolent protective powers that brought people to the wat' (O'Connor 1993:336).

Pilgrimages to sacred places must also be read within the context of the commodification of urban religiosity in Thailand (Jackson 1999, Wilson 2008). Overlapping these sites is a thriving commercial economy of tourist oriented fairs, amulets, religious artefacts and markets. This is not unique to Thailand, for example, the famous shrine to Mary of Lourdes has distinct sacred and commercial zones, contrasting the silence of religious practices with the profane spaces of shops selling religious tourist souvenirs, hotels and restaurants (Gesler 1996:102). Likewise at nearly all the sites described here, a thriving market exists nearby, conveniently selling the items required for devotional acts, flowers, incense, 'sets' of items for particular requests, souvenirs, pictures, amulets and lottery tickets. Tourist companies offer special daytrips and package tours to famous sites, combining merit making with sight-seeing and local delicacies. Similarly, a number of informants applied the logic of capitalism to their promises made to the gods and spirits, with emphasis being placed on the size and expense of their vows: one hundred boiled eggs, annual dance troupe performances, eight pigs' heads. While by no means as costly as IVF treatment, large expenditures were seen to improve one's chances of success.

To illustrate the complexity of these practices, in the following sections I explore some of the major sites noted by my informants. The ‘fertility pantheon’ of Thailand draws upon sacred figures and places related to Thai histories of flows of religions and peoples. These include examples from all the different types of sites—from temples to Chinese shrines, nature spirits and tutelary spirits, Hindu gods and Royal spirits. In this paper I consider seven such sites: the temple of Luang Phor Sathorn, San Jao Phor Sua, Tao Mahaphrom or Erawan shrine, the Shrine to Mae Thup Thim in Nai Lert Park, Wat Mangorn Kamalawat, the statue of Yaa Mo and the King Rama V statue.

THERAVADHAN TEMPLES

Phra Buddha Jao and Boiled Eggs

The site that was most commonly described as efficacious by informants for asking for babies lies seventy-five kilometres away from Bangkok in the nearby industrial town of Chachoengsao---the temple of Luang Phor Sathorn. It is the shrine most often mentioned by my informants in this study. The temple is named after a Buddha image which is said to have floated into town on the river on which the temple is now located (Hong 1987:27, Cohen 1992). It is a popular pilgrimage centre with a steady flow of visitors, especially on weekends and festival days and has an extensive market across the road selling local delicacies, flowers and ritual objects, parking spaces, food and drinks, as well as tortoises and fish to be released in merit-making by worshippers.

The site is dominated by an impressive white ‘new’ Sothornvararamvoraviaharn temple (see Photograph 1). Within its main hall, or *ubosot*, sits a group of Buddha statues, the most important of which is that of Luang Phor Sathorn, dressed in robes, the original statue now encased within a larger gold statue and not directly accessible to worshippers. Votive offerings of candles, lotus flowers and incense are made and there are numerous collection boxes into which worshippers place money. The atmosphere is one of restrained formality



Photograph 1: The 'new' ubosot of Luang Phor Sathorn.
(Photograph by A. Whittaker)



Photograph 2: Praying to Luang Phor Sathorn at the 'new' site.
Photograph by A. Whittaker

The vast main hall has a multi-level roof rising like a chedi, the eighth level contains a relic of Buddha and has four statues of Buddha facing four directions to important sites of the Buddhist world in China, Indonesia, Cambodia and India thereby linking this site with other places of pilgrimage. The floor of the temple is beautifully inlaid with images of fish, turtles and river life, harking back to/recalling the story of the discovery of the Luang Phor image floating in the river, brought ashore to this spot. The officiate told us that if people wanted a baby they could either simply offer up their pilgrimage as homage to Luang Phor and ask for a baby, or pray in front of the image for a baby and in return either ordain as a monk if you were a man or follow the eight precepts for 15 days if you were a woman. A flower seller at the site also suggested that offerings of eggs or bananas were appropriate for a baby and that you should eat a banana in front of the statue, however all such offerings seems to only take place at the 'old' site.



Photograph 3: Making offerings at the 'old' site of Luang Phor Sathorn.
The Buddha statues are in the background surrounded by pilgrims.
 (Photograph by A. Whittaker)

In stark contrast to this pristine 'new' temple, adjacent is what is called the 'old' temple, which more resembles an old shed or large *sala*, hot with the crowd and smoky from incense. The 'new' temple took ten years to build. A temple officiate explained that because it took so long to build, some people are confused as to which is the original site and mistakenly believe the 'old' temple to be positioned on the original site.

Although it resembles a temporary structure, it continues to be visited by pilgrims. Unlike the 'new' temple, it is noisy and crammed with worshippers, many of whom are offering huge piles of boiled eggs to a set of Buddha images which locals advised us include the 'real' image of Luang Phor Sathorn (see Photograph 3). Again in contrast to the 'new' temple, in the 'old' temple, the statues are directly accessible to worshippers who crowd inside to apply gold leaves to the image and make offerings of flowers. Towards the front of the 'old' hall, Thai classical dance troupes are available for supplicants to hire to make a votive offering, the number of dancers depending on the amount paid. Such dances are often offered in thanks for the granting of the supplicants' requests. The temple also offers other merit-making activities such as drinking lustral water. People also cast red *chensi* divination sticks to ask about their future or to request assistance from the *saksit* (magical power) of

the principal Buddha statue. Some of those we spoke to said they were there seeking good luck (there are lottery ticket sellers plying their trade throughout the area) for children's examinations and to ask for a child. We were informed by one woman that 'If successful you offer 100 boiled eggs... if your wish is granted your child will tend to be a dark-skinned boy and you may not hit the child or the boy may return [to Luang Phor]'.

One of the women undertaking IVF, Mot, described how she had offered boiled eggs and a performance by the resident dance troupe at Wat Luang Phor Sathorn before both of her pregnancies. She and her husband had previously visited Wat Phra Kaew (The Emerald Buddha, considered one of the most sacred, meritorious and powerful sites in the Thai state), Phra Prom (the Erawan Bhrama shrine described below), shrines at the hospitals where they sought care and a shrine at Kasetsart University. But they were only successful after visiting Luang Phor Sathorn. She explained:

We have been to both (the new and old temple) but we redeemed the vows at the old temple. I offered boiled eggs as well but we were told to offer the performances. We did and we got the babies! We still need to go to redeem the vow every year because people believe that the babies are His [Luang Phor's] babies.

The Luang Phor Sathorn temple materially represents the tensions between institutionalised Buddhism and popular religion in Thailand. Erik Cohen (1992) suggests Thai pilgrimage sites fall into two categories, 'formal' or 'popular' sites. He describes the dominant motivation for the former category as the acquisition of Buddhist *bun* or merit, whilst pilgrimages to the latter sites are dominated by appeals for assistance from the concrete magical powers - *saksit* - of the image or person at the centre. Writing before the construction of the 'new' temple, he described Luang Phor Sathorn as a 'popular' site-- 'a minor peripheral pilgrimage site' dominated by requests for *saksit* assistance. With the construction of the new temple, such a clear categorisation between the formal and popular is no longer so easily made. Between the two sites, at Luang Phor Sathorn, the spatial representations and practices of an institutionalised formal Buddhist site now competes with the more magical 'old' site. The question of authenticity of the image hangs over the two sites as people move between the 'new' and 'old' sites and seek advice as to how they should behave. On one hand the 'new' site is associated with centralised orthodox Buddhist practice, charged with formal authority and stripped of its magical associations. People are advised by officiates to resort to orthodox means of making merit through donations and ordinations. On the other 'old' site, people make their appeals directly to the highly accessible images, and are encouraged by their peers to bargain directly and make vows to fulfil their appeals. And yet the appeals are made to the same source of power, Luang Phor Sathorn. While religious practices may be labeled as 'other-worldly' or 'this-worldly' in orientation (Cohen 1992), the reality is far more complex and often fuse relationships with the divine with self-improvement, health and prosperity.

Such tension between 'merit making' and '*saksit* seeking' is also evident in other Theravadhan Buddhist temples. Although not as famous as Luang Phor Sathorn, many of my informants also visited a range of Theravadhan Buddhist temples to both make merit and seek direct magical intervention. Most informants went to temples to accumulate merit to improve their karmic status, assuming that this was contributing to their childlessness. The sites visited break down Cohen's (1992) classification of some sites as 'formal political' sites versus 'popular'. For example, some this included visits to Wat Phra Kaew, (the Emerald Buddha) within the Grand Palace, an especially auspicious and *saksit* image of the Buddha usually associated with the Thai nation. These visits also

constitute tourist trips to ‘*pay thiaw*’. For example, Ladda had undertaken a merit-making tour featuring the ‘Nine Temples in Suphanburi’¹.

Apart from standard offerings such as incense, candles and flowers, offerings that symbolize fertility such as eggs and bananas (easy and prolific producers of fruit) or oranges (a Chinese symbol of prosperity) are common. Although as Ladda explained, in some cases the offerings take on strangely postmodern dimensions:

I was told that I should offer eggs because I could not produce eggs and the eggs would symbolize eggs that are used in the procedures. The egg is a must. It might sound like I was mad but I went to Suphanburi to pay respect to 9 temples. I was thinking that perhaps it was my sin that I had done something bad with someone without knowing it. That’s why I could not have kids. I freed birds, fish and so on...whatever I was told to do. At one of the 9 temples I visited, I was told that the temple was effective to ask for a baby; anyone who came here, asking for a baby would succeed. There is a catch though... they told me that the venerable monk there loves strange things. Someone came to ask for a baby and offered KFC chicken. The monk had no idea what KFC was but that person got a baby as wished. I went and did a similar thing by offering French fries. When I got the baby, I took French fries to redeem my vow.

As Ladda describes, appeals for babies are often transactional exchanges in which offerings are promised in exchange for success. Such activity is not described as merit making (*tham bun*) but rather described as *kae bon* (แก้บุญ) redeeming a vow. As will be described below, within Chinese temples, such exchanges also involve symbolic ‘stealing’ from the Gods-- offerings given by other pilgrims are ‘taken’ and then returned twofold when a child is born.

BRAHMAN DEITIES

Appealing to Brahma

Everyday the famous Tao Mahaphrom or Erawan shrine (ศาลพระพรหม) at the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel at the Ratprasong intersection is crowded with devotees seeking wealth, success and power through their offerings and acts of devotion to the image of *Phra Phrom* (Brahma), a Hindu deity associated with acts of creation. While much has been written about this shrine and its association with the prosperity religion of Thailand (Keyes 2006), it is also a prominent site for asking for children. The shrine was established in 1956 after a series of misfortunes and deaths of construction workers plagued the construction of the Union Thai Hotel. An astrologer who was consulted, Rear Admiral Luang Suvicharnpaad, had a vision that the construction needed to continue under the protection of Brahma (Majupuria 1987). The hotel was named the Erawan (after the three headed elephant *Airavata* (Pali) upon whom Indra rides). The success of the hotel became linked to this statue. In 2006, a man said to be mentally ill destroyed the original statue of Brahma and was killed in retaliation by two bystanders. A replacement statue now graces the shrine. So significant is this

¹ Nine is a particularly auspicious number and a similar pilgrimage to nine temples in Bangkok around the Thai New year is a popular activity. The tour she described to Suphanburi is advertised by a number of companies as a day trip and involves cruising along the river to Wat Chalermprakiet Wora Vihan, Wat Kae Nok, Wat Choeng Ta, Wat Choeng Lane, Wat Saeng Siri Dham (for the famous statue of Luang Phor Yim), Wat Yai Sawang Arom, Wat Poramai Yikawas, Wat Sao Tong Thong, Ma Fueng Pagoda (Cambodia Pagoda containing the Ta-Klen Goddess and 2 statues of topknot child (Kumarn Phom Juk) and the final temple Wat Phai Lorm to see Phra That Raman Pagoda.

shrine in the national imaginary that Charles Keyes (2006) has written of the ways in which the destruction of the image became linked to national concerns about the Muslim insurgency in Southern Thailand and the legitimacy of the embattled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatr.

Devotees offer flowers, garlands, incense and small wooden elephants and food offerings. A Thai dance troupe perform the *ram ke bon* (dance to fulfil one's vows) virtually non-stop at the shrine paid for by the devotees whose wishes have been granted. The dense clouds of incense smoke rise to the Bangkok Skytrain station walkway at Chitlom where passing pedestrians show reverence to the shrine by a discrete *wai* (placing their hands together and raising it to their heads). Lottery ticket sellers and large numbers of tourists add to the constant buzz of activity at the shrine.



Photograph 7: The Erawan Shrine.
(Photograph by A. Whittaker).

Another Hindu God, the figure of Phra Pikanet (Ganesh, the 'remover of obstacles') was also mentioned by some informants. Appeals were made to this figures to assist in the success of treatments. It was an appeal to Phra Pikanet that assisted Ut and Khiat in their successful pregnancies.

CHINESE DEITIES

Lord Tiger and Sugar Chedi

Given that many of the couples who attended the infertility clinics I studied were members of Bangkok's wealthy middle class and of Sino-Thai ancestry, it is no coincidence that Chinese temples were a common place visited. This reflects the diverse religious influences across Thai history, and the more recent history of the acknowledgement and incorporation of ethnic Chinese and Indian populations into the Thai state. But it is important to note that resort to these sites did not necessarily follow ethnic lines, people who did not identify as Sino-Thai also visited Chinese temples.

San Jao Phor Sua (Lord Tiger Deity shrine) is a revered Taoist shrine built by the Teochew Chinese community in Bangkok and noted as a site for requesting babies by a number of my informants. When we visited in the middle of the afternoon, the shrine was noisy with a Chinese opera being performed in honour of the deity and crowded with people. The deity is tiger shaped and is believed

to be the spirit of a tiger associated with the western cardinal direction who offers protections from evil.



Photograph 4: The entrance to *Jao Phor Sua* temple.
(Photograph by A. Whittaker)

Colourful stalls and shops surround this busy temple, filled with various materials required for offerings at the shrine. At the stalls surrounding the perimeter of the temple, shopkeepers advertise 'sets' of items for various requests, including the 'set for asking for a child' (see photographs 4 and 6 below). Generally offerings are made of oranges, candles and incense and in some cases gold and silver paper is burnt. Offerings to the various gods resident at the shrine vary as some are vegetarian, others such as the Tiger Lord prefer pork, eggs and sticky rice. A stall keeper explained that to ask for a child, a man should promise a sugar lion. These are beautiful and elaborate moulded sugar figurines and are sold in a range of sizes (see photograph 5). You steal another person's lion and take it home. Another stallholder explained that once you take the lion home you can eat the sugar or cook with it or else release the rest into running water and then ask for the baby. After you have a baby you are obliged to return two lions so another person can 'steal' one. People requesting sons will steal a male lion, and if they want a daughter they will steal a female sugar lion. Once they have received their baby, they will return two sugar lions to the gods. An officiate informed us that the most auspicious day for asking for children is the 15th day of the first month (of the Chinese calendar). Apart from making offerings to the Lord Tiger Deity, this shrine also contains an image of *Kwan Im* and an image of Thai nature goddess, *Mae Thup Thim*, both associated with fertility.



Photograph 5: A 'set' of sugar lions for purchase to be presented to redeem vows at Jao Phor Sua Shrine.
(Photograph by A Whittaker)



Photograph 6 Items for purchase at a market stall near Jao Phor Sua shrine, including a sign advertising 'Sets for asking for a child'.
(Photograph by A. Whittaker).

Stealing Oranges in Yaowarat

A further Chinese site associated with fertility is off the busy gold selling strip of Yaowarat Road in Bangkok. Opposite the *Talat Kao* (Old Market) stands the Chinese temple *Wat Mangorn Kamalawat*, (Dragon Lotus temple) but more commonly known by locals as *Wat Leng Noei Yee*. It was built in the reign of King Rama V in 1871 by Phraya Chotikaratsetthi and was one of the largest Mahayana temples of that time.



Photograph 11: The entrance to Wat Mangorn Kamalawat, Yaowarat.
(Photograph by A Whittaker).



Photograph 12: One of the many shops near the shrine selling religious paraphernalia for offerings.
Note the bags of oranges for sale.
(Photograph by A Whittaker)

This shrine highlights the religious hybridity of Thailand and the Chinese heritage of Bangkok. On either side, shops festooned in red and yellow paper lanterns, funeral paper goods, bags of oranges and a range of reliquary items line the street, the material culture and economy of rituals. We interviewed two of the shop owners who are happy to advise their customers about appropriate offerings, rituals and auspicious times for offerings. Thinking my research assistant Som had come to ask for a child, the first woman asked how old Som was and advised us that 'unless you are desperate, don't come here to ask for a child as the children who you ask for from the Gods are difficult to raise, *'liang yak'*. You can't hit them or punish them or else they may return to the Gods'. The most appropriate day to come to ask for a child is the 7th day of the 7th month according to the Chinese calendar. She suggested that infertility had its origins in past incarnations: 'if you didn't have dependents (*borawaan*) in your past life then you may have difficulties in having children in this life'. She told us the story of a customer who came to the shrine and asked for a child from *Kwan Im* and the child ended up looking like one of her subordinates at work (the implication being there was a karmic link between them from a former life).

You enter the temples, overseen by four huge brass and polychrome protective guard demons. Once inside a range of shrines crowd the temple, for 58 deities, each with its own area for placing incense and candles. Shoes are not removed, save for the immediate area in front of statues. No photos are allowed inside the shrine. Around twenty people were at the shrine when we were there as well as a gaggle of tourists. A constant stream of people moved in and out the temple. Many people light a large handful on incense and then place three sticks at the various statues according to their prayers. The shrine is famous as a place to remove bad luck, *'sador krroh'* and to make offerings for one's children's success in education and exams. But it is also known as a place to ask for children, and in this two images are of special importance. The first is an image of the bodhisattva Tao Mae Kwan Im, กวนอิม (the Thai name for Guanyin, the feminine form of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara) the Goddess of Mercy. There is a small brass statue approximately one foot high demonstrating her role in fertility depicting her holding a baby. She is set in a glass case with nine other images of her in various poses. To ask for a child, we were informed that one should offer paper offerings (a paper lotus or gold paper, later burnt at a small oven outside) incense, candles and oranges to the image. Oranges are a symbol of fertility for Chinese. You should then steal two oranges that have been offered by another person to take home with you. If your wish is granted and you have a child, you should bring ducks or fruit in return or whatever else you promised.

The other image sought by people asking for children is that of *Mae Seu* (the Thai name for *Gong Phua* or *Mazu*), another female deity depicted in a statue holding a child. The polychrome image of *Mae Seu* is about three foot high. Associated with the sea, she is understood by many lay people to be one of the many manifestations of *Kwan Im* and so also appealed to for granting children.

GUARDIAN SPIRITS

Mae Thup Thim in a Sacred Grove of Lingams

Behind the white luxury of the Nai Lert hotel, near the rubbish and service entrance, is a quiet glen mentioned in guidebooks as one of Bangkok's bizarre sights for tourists. It is an unlikely place of pilgrimage -- a forty metre square site surrounded on one side by the service carpark and on the other by a construction zone and neglected work area. The area around the shrine offers a sanctuary of shade and quiet. It is dark and atmospheric shaded by a large Banyan tree in the top left corner and other large trees, all sacred tress, as evidenced by the cloths tied around their trunks and the offerings at their bases- small models of *thewadaa* (angels) and attendants, candles, incense, and flowers. In one corner of this space an old rusting filing cabinet sits ludicrously. I wonder how it

came to be dumped there and what the pilgrims who come to this spot must think of the awkward juxtaposition of a sanctuary amidst the daily disorder and detritus of the service entrance. As you enter the site, you follow a path fenced on both side by a row of small, multicoloured lingams. Some are carved from stone and many are red. I am struck by a beautiful red one which incorporates a woman's torso carved into the phallus trunk, at another's base is a small statue of a baby riding a rocking horse, the head now broken from the body but laid alongside (see photograph 10). In the centre of the shrine is a small wooden spirit house, adorned with gold leaf on the right side, in front of which daily offerings of incense, candles, fruit and flower offerings of yellow marigolds and yellow chrysanthemums are placed by the hotel.

While we were there a woman from the hotel staff came to give the daily offering. Kneeling in front of the spirit house she paid homage for a short time and then arranges the offerings. She said many people still come to the shrine. Even his Royal Highness the Crown Prince had graced the shrine with a visit to pay respect she declared. Thinking we had also come for that reason, she advised us that *Mae jao* likes chrysanthemums and that offerings of fruit, incense and candles and a phallus are appropriate. 'If you asked you would be granted a boy child' she said. She said the hotel doesn't know how many people come as no one counts. There was no particularly auspicious time or day to come. People simply came and asked and would return when they conceived a child to thank *Mae Jao*. We paid our respects and then I took some photographs. I was disturbed when the initial photographs didn't work as though something was causing my digital camera to malfunction. Som suggested I should ask permission of *Mae Jao* before I took my pictures and explain my research to her. After doing so, my camera functioned perfectly (fieldnotes, 2008).



Photograph 8: San Jao Mae Thap Thim in Nai Lert Park within a sacred grove, with offerings of flowers, candles and incense and lingams in the background.
(Photograph by A. Whittaker)



Photograph 9: View of the shrine showing the many lingam offerings at the site.
(Photograph by A. Whittaker)

This shrine to the female deity known as *San Jao Mae Thap Thim* in Nai Lert Park is one of the more spectacular sites visited by Thais with fertility difficulties. While all the other sites described in this paper are visited for various reasons, this site is solely associated with fertility. Couples seeking a child are recommended to bring a carved lingam, at least the length of an arm to offer along with food, a rice dish and dessert and a standard set of offerings known as *khan haa*, incense, flowers and candles. Ideally the husband of the woman seeking to fall pregnant should whittle the lingam offering himself, as it is the partner of the one who makes the phallus who will fall pregnant. A magic verse, *khataa* is intoned during the offering. The shrine is said to have been originally built by the millionaire businessman Nai Lert, after whom the hotel and park is named, to honour the female deity said to inhabit the old ficus tree on the site. Shortly after the shrine was built couples fell pregnant after visiting the site and a steady stream of pilgrims has come ever since. The deity *Mae Thup Thim* is a Thai female nature spirit associated with Banyan trees (which carries spiritual associations both with Buddha and the Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva). Her name, *thup thim* in Thai translates both as ‘pomegranate,’ a fruit symbolising fertility, and ‘ruby’. Phallic offerings are called *dokmai cao* (the flower of the spirit). It is clear when visiting the site that it continues to attract pilgrims, there are new lingams as well as countless older ones at the site. A small wooden plaque depicting *Mae Thup Thim* stands in the spirit house. This shrine thus merges together the representations of Shiva and beliefs in spirits of nature/ protectors of places. She epitomises the hybridity of Thai religious beliefs as a statue to her can also be found in some Chinese temples.



Photograph 10: Detailed view of some of the lingum offerings at the site.
(Photograph by A. Whittaker)

The Brave Lady

A bronze statue of Thao Suranari (ท้าวสุรนารี) most commonly known as Yaa Mo (ย่าโม Paternal Grandma Mo) stands in the centre of Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) city next to the Chumphon gate of the old city walls. The monument was erected on January 15, 1934. The statue enshrines this Northeastern guardian spirit who protects the people of the city. The story of this Khorat heroine is that in 1827 she fought against the rebellion of Jao Anuwong of Vientiane who rebelled against the King of Siam. The people of Khorat were ordered to leave the city, but as the captives reached Phi Mai district, Ya Mo inspired the women and men of Khorat to fight against their captors and defeated them. Jao Anuwong had to withdraw and a Thai army was mobilized which eventually suppressed the rebellion, and captured Jao Anuwong (Nilsen 2011:1599). The title of Thao Suranarai (Brave Lady) was awarded to her by King Ram III for her bravery. She is regarded as the grandmother/ protective spirit of all the people of Khorat and stories associate her with cleverness, leadership, bravery, female charm and love of the Northeast. The Ya Mo monument is considered very sacred *saksit* to local people and her popularity is evident in the many people who come particularly early in the morning and at dusk offering flowers, incense, coconuts and fruits, foods, pigs heads, eggs and other offerings. Despite her warrior strength she is a benevolent spirit may be asked for anything but it is customary to give her a promise in return. For example, a common promise is to hire dancers to perform local

singing and dancing *plaeng Khorat* in return for fulfilled wishes. A range of miracles are attributed to her intervention. Each March a festival is also held in her honour.

Despite evidence that the story of Thao Suranari was a fabrication associated with the Thai nationalist movement in the 1930s under Field Marshal Phibul Songkham (Keyes 2002), this has not dampened enthusiasm and belief in this figure, especially among the people of Khorat.

For her first pregnancy, Ladda had visited a number of sacred places, including *Luang Phor Sathorn* and the King Rama V monument, as well as the Kwan Im goddess in Yaowarat and the *Chao Phor Sua* (Lord Tiger Shrine):

We had been to so many places. We don't even know where to go back to redeem the vows. The last place we went was *Yaa Mo* (Grandma Mo). I had asked for so many things from her and got them as I wished. I believe that she is real. At the time, I asked for one of her disciples to be born as my baby. Her disciples are soldiers so I was so sure that I would get a boy.

At the time of our interview she had just returned from the *Yaa Mo* monument where she had redeemed her vows by donating a dance troupe to perform and 100 eggs: 'We went to redeem the vow at *Yah Mo* because we are very confident that she gave the baby to us'. She was pregnant with her second child for whom she had again sought assistance from *Yaa Mo*.

We offered her a dance show, betel nuts, betel leaves, coconuts and 100 eggs before I came to implant the embryos. I have been to ask from so many other places but failed every time. I prayed to *Ya Mo* to let whoever else [among the deities] that also helped us, know that all the offerings were for them, too.

FEMALE DEITIES AND SPIRITS

Female spirits/ deities such as those described above are important in people's quests for children. Although not mentioned by my informants, the Hindu Goddess *Mariamam* (Uma Devi or Shakti, Shiva's consort) is also associated with fertility. She and her sons, (Phra Khantakuman or Subramaniam and Phra Phikanet or Ganesh) are worshipped at the important Tamil Sri Maha Mariammam temple (the Maha Uma Devi temple (วัดพระศรีมหาอุมาเทวี) or colloquially known less respectfully as *wat khaek* (วัดแขก) among Thais) in Silom. The images of femininity displayed by such figures ranges from the demure nurturing grace of *Kwan Im* through to the warrior strength of *Yaa Moh* and the sexualised fecundity of nature spirits such as *Mae Thup Thim*. All represent sources of feminine *saksit* power unmediated by men.

Studies of Thai religious practice tend to consider gender only in association with debates within the Sangha about the ordination of women. In most studies of visits to shrines and urban religion (for example Jackson 1999, Wilson 2008) little attention is paid to the gender of visitors and whether this affects their motivations and relationship with religious practice. However, in a study of European Marian pilgrimages by Christians and Muslims to three sites in Germany, Portugal and Turkey (Jansen and Kuhl 2008: 296), the authors note is mostly women who partake in popular forms of religious expression such as visiting shrines. At these Marian sites, women visit shrines seeking assistance from the female figure of Mary for intercession because she is a woman with the power to help them with violent marriages, custody disputes, and family health matters. In her role as a maternal figure she is viewed as able to mediate between sacred male relatives and common believers. Jansen and Kuhl (2008) suggest that as a feminine role model, the figure of Mary is more

complex than often presented. The figure of Mary not only provides a gender script for women (her piety, purity and obedience as a believer and compassion) but is also imbued with courage and power. Devotion to Mary allows women to partake in forms and themes of expression often classified as feminine and enables women to circumvent religious authority represented by the male dominated experience of attending mass—a route to religious authority and direct paths to the supernatural without resort to mediation by men.

One might compare the figure of *Ya Mo*, *Kwan Im*, and *Mae Thup Thim*, with the Marian figures described by Jansen and Kuhl (2008). These are all strong and powerful yet accessible female figures who may act as intermediaries between the supernatural world and the mundane concerns of women. They are believed to have special compassion and affinity with women and understand their concerns. All are powerful, either through their association with fecund nature, spiritual achievement or strength in the face of adversity. Writing of *Ya Mo*, Nilsen (2011:1623) suggests that such female figures 'each in their own way represent the love, goodness, virtue, compassion and selflessness of the Mother image' yet also female strength and endurance—qualities appealing to women undergoing the rigors of IVF treatment.

ROYAL SPIRITS

The pantheon of spirits appealed to by people wanting a baby include a number of Royal spirits. Devotion to the spirit of King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn r. 1868-1910) became very popular during the 1990s, particularly among the Thai urban middle class. King Rama V is revered by the Thai nation as the king who is said to have created the modern nation-state of Thailand and protected Thailand from European colonisation. It is common to see photographs and images of the King in offices and homes and amulets bearing his images are very popular. Reverence for King Rama V thus links expressions of Thai nationalism with desires for personal prosperity, but his image is also mentioned as *saksit* for people seeking success in their fertility treatment. Devotional acts of piety are displayed at the large bronze equestrian statue of the King in front of the parliament building in the centre of the Royal Plaza in Bangkok. Devotees offer flowers, candles, incense and bottles of Thai whiskey each Tuesday evening (the day of his birth). It is not entirely clear why the spirit of King Rama V is asked for children, other than the belief in the sacred *saksit* power he manifests to overcome all forms of difficulties, a general parallel between prosperity (the multiplication of wealth) and fecundity, or possibly due to the fact that in his lifetime he fathered 77 children to his four wives and many concubines.

Homage is also paid to statue of another royal spirit, that of Prince Mahidol Adulyadej, Prince of Songkla and father of the present King of Thailand. Prince Mahidol trained in public health from Harvard University and supported the training and dissemination of modern medicine in Thailand. The Royal Medical school later became the present Faculty of Medicine at Siriraj hospital. It is common practice for patients and staff at this hospital to pay homage to his spirit during their care there².

² This was most notable during the 2007 crisis with King Bhumibol's health (Rama IX) when he was admitted to Siriraj Hospital. Tens of thousands of well wishers crowded Siriraj hospital, many camping in the hospital during his stay, wearing yellow shirts in honor of the King. The statue of Prince Mahidol was a focus of devotional acts during this time.

THE DANGERS OF ASKING FROM THE GODS

Requesting babies at shrines has its dangers. For example, the old shrine built on the remains of a Khmer temple site *San Phra Kaan* in Lopburi, is inhabited by hundreds of monkeys. When I visited with friends a few years earlier, I was warned not to ask for a child from the temple as it is believed that children requested from this site will have the active and mischievous characteristics of a monkey. Children requested from other shrines such as *Jao Phor Sua* or *Luang Phor Sathorn* are said to be difficult to raise as you cannot scold them, for they remain children of the deities, and may return to them if the deities are offended in some way. For this reason some informants like Naa were too scared to ask:

... On one hand I wanted to go, on the other hand I thought, 'Oh people say if you go to ask the Gods for a baby they will be hard to raise. If I raise the child then the Gods might want to take it back. So I thought about that as well. If you believe in asking for a child then you also have to believe what people say about it... I had a lot of people tell me, go here! Go there! But after the miscarried I went and only asked if I would have another baby...[but] to ask for a baby from the Gods, I wasn't brave enough, I was scared. I was afraid that I wouldn't look after the baby in the right way. It isn't that I don't believe in it. I'm scared so I'd better not. Because I mightn't do it properly.

Likewise, Porn and Aruth had visited shrines to make merit but had not asked specifically for a child: 'People around us say go and ask! But my mum said "Don't!" She is scared that if we go and ask and receive it [the baby] will be difficult to raise and so I am not brave enough and never ask.' Instead of asking in person, Porn's Mother-in-law asks on their behalf.

CONCLUSIONS: ENCHANTMENT AND THE MANAGEMENT OF UNPREDICTABILITY

Throughout the world, people employ a variety of culturally specific strategies to ensure their health, manage uncertainty and risk. The sites and pilgrimages described by the participants in this study highlight the continuation of religious influences in the fashioning of everyday life and health in Thailand and the desire of patients to be proactive amidst the uncertainties of their treatment. It allows them a means of intervening in the unpredictable vagaries of conception.

The diversity of sites visited by infertile couples demonstrates the small spiritual acts and enchantment of everyday life common to the management of health, risks and concerns in Thailand (Nilsen 2011:1625). It highlights the intermingling of religion and magic and the pluralistic resources commonly utilised by Thais. The circuits through this sacred geography by individuals may differ depending upon the particular request, ethic or regional allegiances or personal history or preferences. Regarding infertility, these circuits are also gendered. Undertaken predominantly by women they often involve female deities and figures with no male intermediaries; a source of female agency among women who are disempowered through their infertility. Direct appeals deities at shrines may also be read as a resort to alternate powers outside of authorized Buddhism, in particular for women in that it does not require male intermediaries such as monks.

The pilgrimages described in this paper carry a set of common elements. Whether Buddha images, guardian spirits, Chinese deities or Royal spirits, they all involve complementary processes of accessing potent *saksit* powers. Worshipful respect (*bucha*) is demonstrated to all these sources of sacred power through obeisance (*wai phra*) and reverence for objects and personages. As therapeutic places these shrines are assigned sanctity through association with history, miracles and

legends. Some carry particular ethno-regional significance, such as *Ya Mo*, or *Phra That Phanom* for Northerners, or *Doi Suthep* for Northerners, but all are accessible regardless of ethnicity or region. Importantly, most do not require intervention through orthodox institutions but are directly accessible to individuals.

Requests to gods and spirits are enmeshed in the expanding flows of pilgrim-tourists, money, images and merit seeking in Thailand and across the region (Askew 2008, Cohen 1992). They form part of what Pattana Kittisarsa has termed the 'occult economy' of Thailand. As he describes (2007:133) 'money becomes a form of ritual investment and a means of exchange for religious consumption', whether the small purchases of flowers and incense, donations to orphanages, larger investments of dance performances, the costs of tours to specific sites, or to purchase food at nearby markets. Such exchanges are not viewed as mere consumption and commodification however, but are inherent to the systems of gift exchange and negotiations with the gods. As infertile people, my informants in this study enter into this economy with specific purpose, hence the circuit of sacred sites, 'the sacred geography of fertility' they describe is one among many other itineraries. Multiple circuits overlap each other depending upon the quest of supplicants: for profit or success in business, for protection from accidents, to cure a disease.

In many ways the pilgrimages to shrines by infertile couples find their parallels in the ways in which supplicants also approach the technologies of assisted reproduction. Economic investments in assisted reproductive technologies are significant, but expressed in a language that transmutes cost and commodification into care and investment. Both require faith and trust in a higher authority, as patients follow their faith in the technology and doctors' abilities and reputation. The analogy runs further, the outcome of technological process of assisted reproduction are doubtful and by no means assured and often seem to hinge upon factors other than mere hormone protocols or the age of the patient. In short, as the doctors themselves wryly note, it is not an exact science (see also Roberts description of Ecuadorian IVF clinics 2006). As they undergo IVF treatment the chances of failure outweigh the chances of success and hence many talk about the role of luck and destiny in their treatment. As I will describe elsewhere (forthcoming), patients undergo a range of ritual behaviours in their IVF treatment, especially special diets and bodily disciplines following embryo transfer and themselves carry a number of beliefs about what one should do to ensure success. Patients use similar language to describe undergoing IVF treatment as a parallel pilgrimage, the self-sacrifice involved in IVF treatment, the purity of their motive and the hope placed upon these interventions. The outcomes of processes like IVF appear magical, there is good reason that the babies that result are described as 'miracle' babies.

In an essay on the production and aesthetics of art, Gell (1992) suggests that 'The enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form...the enchantment which is immanent in all kinds of technical activity,' (Gell 1992: 44.) The high-tech production of embryos and babies is full of enchantment, not fully comprehensible to patients participating in it and surprising even the doctors applying it. The enchantment follows from the labyrinthine technical processes, special language and multiple attempts to cater for the individual patients' biologies. This casts a magical element over the treatments, whereby seemingly endless faith in the technology and hope is encouraged in even the most difficult cases. The manipulations of the supernatural through visits to shrines or visits to the clinic are not antithetical to the high-tech undertakings of IVF treatment, but follow a continuum of action to produce a 'miracle' child.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dr Rounsil Chaovarata, Head of Infertility Clinic, Siriraj Hospital for his support of this project and the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, especially Dr Amara Soonthornthada for support as a Visiting Scholar during this research and the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore for a Senior Visiting Fellowship to allow me time to write it up. I particularly wish to thank Dr Parisa Rungruang who worked as a research assistant throughout this project and Khun Jarucha Chotemanee for the translation of some of the interviews. My thanks to the anonymous doctors, staff and most particularly the patients of the two public clinics and three private clinics who facilitated and participated in this study. Ethical clearance to conduct the project was received from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee, (HREC 060504X.2), The Faculty of Medicine Mahidol University (016/2550) and clearances obtained through all participating hospitals and clinics and the National Research Council of Thailand (No. 0002.3/2069). All names of informants and participating clinics remain anonymous and pseudonyms are used throughout this report and all publications. The research was funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council Discovery Project ‘Infertility, IVF and reproductive tourism in Thailand and the region’.

REFERENCES

- Askew, M. (2008). Materializing merit: the symbolic economy of religious monuments and tourist-pilgrimage in contemporary Thailand In P. Kitiarsa (Ed.), *Religious Commodifications in Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Cohen, E. (1992). Pilgrimage centers: concentric and excentric. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19, 33-50.
- Gell, A. (1993). *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press.
- Gesler, W. M. (1996). Lourdes: healing in a place of pilgrimage. *Health & Place*, 2(2), 95-105.
- Golomb, L. (1985). *An Anthropology of Curing in Multiethnic Thailand*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Heinze, R.-I. (1988). *Trance and Healing in Southeast Asia Today*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- Jackson, P. A. (1999a). The enchanting spirit of Thai capitalism: the cult of Luang Phor Khooon and the post-modernization of Thai Buddhism *South East Asia Research*, 7(1), 5-60.
- Jackson, P. A. (1999b). Royal spirits, Chinese gods and magic monks: Thailand's boom time religions of prosperity. *South East Asia Research*, 7(3), 245-320.
- Jansen, W., & Kuhl, M. (2008). Shared symbols: Muslims, marian pilgrimages and gender. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 15, 295 -.
- Keyes, C. (2006). *The destruction of a shrine to Brahma in Bangkok and fall of Thaksin Shinawatra: the occult and the Thai coup in Thailand of September 2006*. Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series (Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series No. 80). Singapore.
- Kitiarsa, P. (2005). Beyond syncretism: hybridization of popular religion in contemporary Thailand. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 36, 461-487.
- Kitiarsa, P. (Ed.). (2007). *Religious commodifications in Asia: marketing gods*. New York: Routledge.
- Majupuria, T. C. (1987). *Erawan Shrine and Brahma Worship in Thailand with reference to Nepal and India* Bangkok: Craftsman Press.
- Morris, R. C. (2000). *In the place of origins: modernity and its mediums in northern Thailand*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Nilsen, M. (2011). The spirit of a heroine: Ya Mo - spirit reverence, patriotism and Thai Buddhism. *Modern Asian Studies*, 45(6), 1599-1625.
- Nortemans, C. (2007) Loss and Healing: A Marian Pilgrimage in Secular Dutch Society. *Ethnology* 46,3:217-233.
- O'Connor, R. A. (1993). Temples, Sangha reform and social change. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 24(2), 330-339.

- Padmavati, R., Thara, R., & Ellen, C. (2005). A qualitative study of religious practices by chronic mentally ill and their caregivers in south India. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 51, 139-149.
- Pfleiderer, B. (1988). The semiotics of ritual healing in a North Indian Musim shrine. *Soc Sci Med*, 27(5), 417-424.
- Pirani, F., Papadopoulo, R., Foster, J., & Leavey, G. (2008). 'I will accept whatever is meant for us. I will wait for that - day and night': the search for healing at a Muslim shrine in Pakistan. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 11(4), 375- 386.
- Raguram, R., Venkatewaran, A., Ramakrishna, J., & Weiss, M. G. (2002). Traditional community resources for mental health: A report of temple healing from India. *British Medical Journal*, 325, 38-40.
- Scott, R. M. (2009). *Nirvana for sale? Buddhism, Wealth and the Dhammakaya Temple in Contemporary Thailand*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Society for Reproductive Medicine [2009 Clinic Summary Report. https://www.sartcorsonline.com/rptCSR_PublicMultYear.aspx?ClinicPKID=0](https://www.sartcorsonline.com/rptCSR_PublicMultYear.aspx?ClinicPKID=0). Retrieved 16 January 2012.
- Taylor, J. (2008). *Buddhism and postmodern imaginings in Thailand: the religiosity of urban space*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Turner, V., & Turner, E. (1978). *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Unnithan-Kumar, M. (2003). Spirits of the womb: migration, reproductive choice and healing in Rajasthan. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 37, 163 -
- Wilson, A. (2008). The sacred geography of Bangkok's markets. *Int J Urban and Regional Research*, 32(3), 631-642.
- Walsh M (2007) Efficacious surroundings: temple space and Buddhist well-being *Journal of religion and health* 46, 471-479.
- Whittaker , A (forthcoming) *Mothers, merit and miracle babies: Assisted reproduction in Thailand*. Berghahn Books, London.