

## THE GENDERED ALLURE OF NANG KWAK: FROM STATUETTES TO NFTS IN THAILAND

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**ABSTRACT**—Nang Kwak, the “Beckoning Lady”, encapsulates the convergence of commercial ambition and spiritual devotion in Thailand. This article explores her role as a popular deity of prosperity and amid the country’s rich genderscape, how her allure is shaped by traditional female tropes of beauty, family devotion, and reassurance. By analyzing her depictions in lore, sacred objects, and contemporary media like NFTs, alongside insights from shopkeepers and amulet collectors, this study examines how her mythical representations as a daughter and worshipped mother intersect with Thai Buddhism. Nang Kwak’s potency works through her charm or *sane* (เสน่ห์), nuancing conventional notions of power and reflecting complex dynamics of gender, religion, and cultural reproduction.

**KEYWORDS:** Digital Art and Media; Gender Tropes; Nang Kwak; Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs); Thai Amulets

### Introduction

“Nang Kwak will never go out of fashion [นางกวักจะไม่หมดยุคหกรอก]”, insisted one of the vendors at Tha Prachan amulet market. Nang Kwak’s name translates as “The Beckoning Lady” and holds a significant place in the Thai pantheon of spirit worship. She is widely venerated and renowned for her ability to attract customers towards commercial establishments, usually perched on an altar (ที่งบูชา, *hing bucha*) at the back of shops. She is depicted as a seated female figure with her right hand raised and left hand resting on a pot of gold. Typically, she wears an adorned headdress (ชฎา, *chada*) and Thai attire (ชุดไทย,

*chut thai*) comprising a sash (สไบ, *sabai*) and a dress (ผ้าซิ่น, *pha sin*) [FIGURE 1]. Despite the profound socioeconomic transformations that have swept through modern Thailand, she has weathered these changes—and is deeply intertwined with seismic societal shifts. Alongside the emergence of prosperity cults in Thailand (Jackson 2022), she continues to play a vital role as a bestower of wealth.

Amid Thailand’s dynamic genderscape, this article argues that representations of Nang Kwak reinforce essentialized female gender tropes of beauty and family devotion, reproducing her potency as a carrier and bestower of charm, *sane* (เสน่ห์). Given the wide variety of gender expressions in Thailand, encompassing categories such as *kathoe* (กะเทย), *thom* (ทอม), gay, woman,

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**FIGURE 1: Nang Kwak figure dressed in traditional Thai clothing, Bangkok, September 2024 © Piyamon Tanya Boonrawd**

and man, this claim may come as a surprise.<sup>2</sup> To substantiate the argument, this article interweaves insights from interviews with shopkeepers and amulet collectors, mostly located in Bangkok, as well as analyses of her lore and surrounding material culture. It follows in three sections. The first section captures Nang Kwak's popularity through contemporary worship practices and narratives about her origin. Through these stories, she embodies a form of subservience in a parental hierarchy while remaining deeply embedded within the Buddhist pantheon and lexicon. Specifically, her legitimacy is derived from her role as a devoted, selfless daughter connected to lineages from Gotama Buddha's era and the *Ramakien* epic.

The second section addresses the material production of her image in temples by revered monks or spiritual leaders, whose rituals (ปลุกเสก, *pluk sek*) of "activation" or "enchanted" sacralize the object. Tha Prachan market vendors, among many others, capitalize on online wholesale shopping to marketize and sell their statuettes, amulets, and spiritual objects. These representations are deeply gendered, often enlarging or exaggeratedly sexualizing the female body. Elements of being comforted (ความสบายใจ, *khwam sabai chai*) and evoking desire are also salient for many of her devotees. While one might expect digital art and Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) to be sites heralding progressive changes, interviews with NFT artists instead demonstrate that

<sup>2</sup> This article draws from Dredge Byung'chu Käng's (2014) conceptualization of the Thai genderscape, which analyzes how the public performance of gender produces a rich set of relational categories.

Nang Kwak is firmly tied to traditional, familial values. Nevertheless, these forms of tradition are not foreclosed, as her formal representations present opportunities to subvert and critique entrenched gender norms.

The third section complicates notions of power, as Nang Kwak predominantly embodies charm, rather being associated with more common terms for power, as in *barami* (บารมี) or *amnat* (อำนาจ). Her devotees' affective motivations for worshipping her is centered on her ability to bring reassurance and comfort, constructed through her feminine traits. Analyzing these representations in tandem, the article reveals Nang Kwak as a figure at the nexus of continuity and change. Her enduring popularity and representations trouble sedimented dichotomies of commercialism and religion, as well as tradition and modernity, demonstrating an active site of negotiation through which elements of gender, religion, and power coalesce and diverge.

### **Nang Kwak's Popular Worship and Lore**

Nang Kwak's popularity can be traced to a confluence of social, cultural, and technological transformations in the past few decades that have produced a powerful combination of commercialism and religiosity. Scholars have interpreted the market as god, possessing divine attributes such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence (Cox 2016: 8). This worldview has its own set of myths (e.g., Michael Jordan as a hero), shopping rituals, and a liturgical calendar of shopping discounts (DeChant 2002). Kathryn Lofton (2017)

focuses on the way that this market ideology fundamentally reshapes social life, where the lines between celebrity/god, tourist/pilgrim, and corporation/sect have been blurred. Rather than a religion limited to antiquated cathedrals and sublime experiences in nature, consumerism has spilled over into what many consider traditional religious forms, blurring the lines between ritual practice and everyday life.

While the dominance of North American or Western cultural norms might make one suspect a shift towards a universalizing concept of market-as-god, Talal Asad (1993: 29; 2011) warns against universal definitions of religion. He claims that religion's "constituent elements and relationships are historically specific" and defines religion as a "historical product of discursive processes". It follows that a given religion must be placed within its social, cultural, and historical specificity. In Thai Studies, scholars have traced the ways in which cults of wealth and amulets have proliferated in the kingdom.

Peter Jackson (2022) proposes that cults of wealth have gained prominence since the 1990s due to the combination of neoliberal capitalism, new visual technologies, and renewed interest in religious enchantment. In an environment that has become increasingly consumeristic, wealth accumulation has come to the fore, alongside new digital media catalyzing these practices' popularity. Chris Baker & Pasuk Phonpaichit (2023) add that these magical rituals and practices offer a sense of security and solace in an

increasingly unpredictable world they term a "magical present".

To request these deities' helping presence, many have turned to acquiring amulets that bear the deity's image (Tambiah 1984; Pattana 2012; White 2016). Indeed, Buddhist Studies scholar Justin McDaniel (2008: 14) claims that ritual technology is often valued over meditational achievement and order, safety, and wealth are often prioritized over emptiness and asceticism. However, contemporary amulets go beyond images of a buddha and include monks, Chinese and Hindu deities, royal family members, and local spirits (McDaniel 2011: 264). Specifically, for good fortune and to address issues of uncertainty in one's entrepreneurial endeavors, many Thais would also venerate Kuman Thong, the Neko Cat, or Nang Goi.<sup>3</sup> The *linga palat khik* (ปลัดขิก), a sacred object based on Śiva's phallus, also promotes business and economic fertility when employed by merchants (Wilson 2008; Jackson 2022). Among Chinese deities, some observant individuals might even worship Budai (布袋) or Cai Shen (财神), associated with providing good fortune.<sup>4</sup> For Hindu deities, one can think of

<sup>3</sup> Nang Koi (นางไคย) is similar to Nang Kwak but has two hands raised instead of one. This implies a scooping or *koi* (ไคย) action, as opposed to beckoning or *kwak* (ก๊วก).

<sup>4</sup> Budai is a revered figure in Chinese folklore, symbolizing happiness and prosperity. He is depicted as an obese, joyful monk carrying an inexhaustible sack, sometimes associated with the future Maitreya Buddha. Cai Shen, the god of wealth, personifies prosperity and is traditionally shown in the garb of a high-ranking official, mounted on a black tiger. Together, these figures are revered for their association with financial prosperity, serving as cultural symbols of wealth and good fortune.

Lakṣmī as the goddess of fortune.<sup>5</sup> Or for the technologically savvy, one could even set an auspicious mobile phone screensaver wallpaper from apps such as Mootae World to enhance auspiciousness (Patpicha 2022).<sup>6</sup> Nang Kwak’s popularity is connected to the genealogies of the cults of wealth and amulets, beckoning wealth through her representations in blessed objects (เครื่องราง ของขลัง, *khruelang rang khong khlang*), especially in statuettes and amulets.<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, the spread of Nang Kwak imagery in shopping malls [FIGURE 2] is also accompanied by e-commerce and technological developments. Sites such as Line Shopping, Lazada, Shopee, and Facebook groups have become key channels through which her statuettes and amulets are traded. Vendors have online shops and thousands of members regularly post to trade on these online platforms. Mae Mani (แม่มณี), a cartoon version of Nang

Kwak and mascot for Siam Commercial Bank’s (SCB) payment application, can also be widely found. Even brick-and-mortar shops in the Tha Prachan amulet market utilize these technological developments and e-commerce logistics. Traders at the market were eager to show me videos of sacralization or “activation” ceremonies that verify a statue’s authenticity, following which they would order that image at wholesale quantities and rates. As Chari Hamratanaphon elsewhere in this Special Edition demonstrates, these technological developments shape transnational meaning-making practices of Nang Kwak beyond the borders of Thailand, as Vietnamese vendors and devotees use these sites to trade enchanted objects, as well as exchange interpretations or provide insights on Nang Kwak.

Alongside the sociocultural and technological conditions for Nang Kwak’s popularity, are specific ways of worshipping Nang Kwak. This is in alignment with the widely cited cultural concept of *kalathesa* (กาลเทศะ), a term derived from Sanskrit (*kāladeśa*) which refers to the appropriate time and space in which particular actions may occur. Anthropologist Penny Van Esterik (2000: 40) describes *kalathesa* as “the coming together of immediate circumstances in time and space in a certain fashion”. Close analogues for this Thai concept in English would refer to a suitable or correct set of circumstances, but this translated phrasing does not fully capture the importance of the rules governing *kalathesa* (Nidhi 2537). These rules range from the ways in which, for example,

<sup>5</sup> Lakṣmī is revered for embodying abundance and fortune, often depicted on a lotus, symbolizing purity and beauty. As Viṣṇu’s consort, she ensures the universe’s harmony, celebrated widely during the Hindu festival of lights (Diwali) for blessings in wealth and well-being.

<sup>6</sup> Importantly, it is not a matter of simple substitution (one for another) in this pantheon of deities, but a careful curation based on an affective motivation of what consumers like or brings them comfort and reassurance; the combination of deities that one worships matters. For example, Rachele Scott (2017: 239) suggests that pairing Nang Kwak and Kuman Thong “serves to extend the power of their narratives beyond their individual stories from the Thai folk tradition and link them to the broader prosperity network”.

<sup>7</sup> This phrase is the referent for Nang Kwak’s statuettes and amulets in this article. When referring to amulets of Nang Kwak as *phra khruelang* (พระเครื่อง), a more common term for amulets, many interlocutors were uncomfortable because of the association of *phra* (พระ) with monkhood.



FIGURE 2: Nang Kwak Mascot at the SookSiam Festival, Icon Siam Shopping Center, Bangkok, November 2023 © Al Lim

one dresses in government offices or conducts oneself in particular social settings, each change signifying a shift in context and cultural rules which has been evocatively described as a set of “phantom walls” (Baumann 2017: 236, as cited in Jackson 2020: 20).

In accordance with *kalathesa*, spiritual leaders have offered ways by which it

is deemed appropriate to worship Nang Kwak. For example, one would light incense sticks while reciting the relevant verse or *khatha* (คาถา). Different monks known as *khrua achan* (ครูบาอาจารย์) have proposed their own chants and versions of these *khathas*. Luang Pho Te (หลวงพ่อเต้; 1891–1981) from Wat Sam Ngam (วัดสามง่าม) in Nakhon Pathom

province,<sup>8</sup> begins his incantation for worshipping Nang Kwak with some Pali chanting, followed by reciting:

มาช่วยกันค้า  
มาช่วยกันขาย  
กวักเอาเงินมา  
กวักเอาทองมา  
กวักเอาโชคลาภมา

This phrase translates as: “Come help with trade / Come help with sales / Bring money / Bring gold / Bring fortune”. Nang Kwak’s role is no secret—she is there to facilitate incoming trade and sales.

Nang Kwak’s lore has also centered on two primary narratives, which I reconstruct from interviews, online marketplaces, and popular songs. The first story portrays her as Nang Suphawadi (นางสุภาวดี). She is born into a family residing in the town of Michikasandhanakara (มิชฌิกาสันถนนคร) during the time of the historical Buddha (สมัยพุทธกาล, *samai phutthakan*). When her family decides to increase their commercial reach, they acquire a cart and bring Nang Suphawadi along with them. During one of these trips, she hears a sermon by the arahant Phra Kuman Kassapa Thera (พระกุมารกัสสปเถระ). Some versions also mention her meeting the arahant Phra Sivali Thera (พระสีวลีเถระ). These sermons inspire her to embrace Buddhism wholeheartedly; her newfound fervor and devotion to the religion so impresses the arahants that they

bestow blessings of good fortune on her and her whole family.

This narrative reflects Nang Suphawadi’s role in supporting her family through their commercial aspirations. Material prosperity is directly connected to the meeting with arahants, as Nang Kwak’s convincing display of pious Buddhist practices resulted in blessings and she facilitated social mobility for her family. By demonstrating the connection between one’s karmic acts of worship and the ability to attract wealth, this story also acts as a model for Nang Kwak’s devotees to follow her behavior to attract their own forms of wealth.

The second story centers on Nang Kwak as the daughter of Pu Chao Khao Khiao (ปู่เจ้าเขาเขียว), or the Grandfather of the Green Mountain from the *Ramakien* epic. The popular song *Nang Kwak Maha Sane* (นางกวักมหาเสน่ห์) begins with:

โอมปู่เจ้าเขาเขียวมีลูกสาวคนเดียว  
งามเพียบพร้อมมบุญหนัก  
โสภาก่อองค์ยิ่งน้กเธอชื่อนางกวัก  
ใครเห็นใครรักลุ่มหลง

Here is a translation of the passage:

OM. Grandfather of the Green  
Mountain  
Has but one daughter,  
Beautiful and full of merit,  
So radiant and charming is she,  
Her name is Nang Kwak,  
Whoever sees her is enchanted.

When speaking to vendors, this refrain was most frequently repeated when they were trying to explain Nang Kwak’s origins (ที่มาที่ไป, *thi ma thi pai*). The rest of the story follows an Asura

<sup>8</sup> See the *Thai Rath* online article, คาลาบูชานางกวัก เรียกทรัพย์ ค้าขายดี พร้อมวิธีบูชาด้วยรูป 9 ดอก [Khatha for Worshipping Nang Kwak to beckon wealth and good business, along with how to worship with 9 incense sticks], 14 March 2023: <https://www.thairath.co.th/horoscope/belief/2652468/>.

demon called Thao Kok Khanak (ท้าวกกขนาก) who was friends with Nang Kwak's father and cursed by Phra Ram (Rama). The demon had to weave a monk's robe from lotus petals to offer to the future Maitreya Buddha. The demon's daughter, Nang Prachant (นางประจันตร์), was so engrossed in the task of weaving the robe for her father that she did not have time to sell wares or manage her family's shop. Recognizing their predicament, Pu Chao Khao Khiao sent his daughter Nang Kwak to live with Nang Prachant's family. Nang Kwak's merit, presence, and self-sacrificial act attracted numerous affluent nobles to Nang Prachant's home to bestow all manners of money and gifts.

This second narrative focuses on Nang Kwak's quintessential female virtues of beauty and daughterly devotion. The title of the popular song, *Maha Sane*, means great allure or charm, as her beauty is a prized part of her character and lore. Nevertheless, the depth of Nang Kwak's allure is not merely skin-deep, as her spiritual devotion forms an equally important part of her charm. She follows her father's request by going to help Nang Prachant; it is noteworthy that Nang Prachant herself also demonstrates her filial piety by weaving the monk's robe for her father.

These two primary narratives of Nang Kwak provide insight into her popular contemporary conceptions. They go beyond simple folklore, showing how she is embedded in a set of dynamic cultural narratives. Specifically, she is a symbol of the intricate interplay between secular desires and religious commitments, evoking a blend of spiritual dedication, community support, and

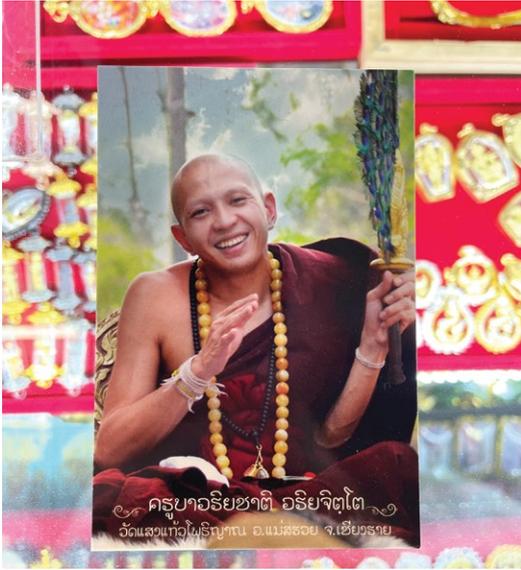
receiving merit for attracting material wealth. Steeped in filial piety, her character thus attracts financial blessings as an emblematic figure of female beauty, virtue, and devotion.

### Nang Kwak's Shifting Bodies

Returning to Singapore in mid-2023 for a conference as part of my doctoral fieldwork in cryptocurrency in Southeast Asia, I entered a Grab taxi and noticed the driver hanging a few amulets from his rearview mirror. This piqued my interest. Recalling how amulet scholars often mention that talking about one's collection can be a great icebreaker, I enquired about the driver's collection. It turns out that he ran his own amulet shop in Singapore, selling Thai amulets, and drove Grab in his spare time to earn some supplementary income.<sup>9</sup> When mentioning that I was writing an article about Nang Kwak, he responded, "You must know the famous Kong Que Wang (孔雀王), the King of Peacocks". He was referring to Khruba Ariyachat (ครูบา อริยชาติ; b. 1981) [FIGURE 3], a famous monk from the north of Thailand. Khruba Ariyachat's statuette of Nang Kwak, called the *udomsombun* (อุดมสมบูรณ์) or *tuinui* (ตุ้ยนุ้ย) has been one of the most popular and sought-after in the market [FIGURE 4].<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Singapore has become a hub for trading Thai amulets, with Chinese-Singaporean dealers playing a key role to commoditize and sell sacred objects (Nattakarn & Somrak 2023).

<sup>10</sup> *Udomsombun* translates to abundance, and *tuinui* means plump or chubby; by using these adjectives, her physical size is linked to good fortune. Another name attributed to Khruba Ariyachat's statuette is "the woman of a thousand scales of gold" (แม่ทองพันชั่ง, *mae thong phan chang*) (Pisith 2018: 221).



**FIGURE 3: Picture of Khruba Ariyachat from a Nang Kwak vendor in Tha Prachan, Bangkok, April 2023 © Al Lim**

In the previous section, Nang Kwak's feminine qualities of beauty and devotion were traced through narratives surrounding her. This section expands on this by investigating her representations across amulets, statuettes, and digital art forms or Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs). These representations center her ideals of feminine beauty, while becoming legitimized by their associations with male spiritual figures. Thus, these forms of representation continue to be deeply contested as the site of reproducing tradition and ideal familial values while also acting as a site for cultural critique.

I started my research on Nang Kwak in early 2023 by searching for her amulets in Thailand. These were challenging to locate in stores and many vendors indicated that it was uncommon for people to be enquiring about these

amulets, especially someone from my generation (under 30 years old at the time of writing). At the Tha Prachan amulet market in Bangkok, mostly Nang Kwak statuettes or *yantra* cloths were available. I did find several amulets in the shops at the Chatuchak weekend market. On the amulets, she is depicted as seated and left-facing with her right hand raised [FIGURES 5–6]. For the two Nang Kwak amulets in FIGURE 5, the vendor mentioned that they were from “Mrigadayavan [มฤคทายวัน] in Prachuap Khiri Kan—a very sacred site”. The one on the right was a newer one that he was selling for 3,800 THB (about 100 USD in 2023), while the other was apparently 200 years old and priced at 15,000 THB (about 410 USD).

The provenance of these objects matter; the place where they were produced and the monk who produced them are also deeply important. Some amulets can generate entire industries worth millions of baht. Luang Pho Khun (หลวงปู่คุณ; 1923–2015) and Chatukham-Ramathep's amulets are characteristic of these massive financial undertakings and the revenue drawn from these sales have been integral to financing many temples since the 20th century (McDaniel 2021; Jackson 2022).<sup>11</sup> In this case, the old Nang Kwak amulet is unlikely to have been from 1823 (200 years ago), as the

<sup>11</sup> Luang Pho Khun was a revered Thai monk known for his amulets which are believed to multiply his devotees' personal wealth. Chatukham-Ramathep amulets were popularized by Khun Phan (1898–2006), a local hero and policeman in Nakhon Si Thammarat. These amulets fetched prices up to several thousand dollars, as some of the most famous examples of a multi-billion-dollar industry (Pattana 2012; Jackson 2022).



**FIGURE 4: Chubby Nang Kwak (Tuinui), Bangkok, September 2024  
© Piyamon Tanya Boonrawd**



FIGURE 5: Nang Kwak amulets from Chatuchak market, approx. 12mm x 8mm (left) and 30mm x 20mm (right) © Al Lim

Mrigadayavan Palace was built during the reign of Rama VI (1910–1925) several decades later. The nearby Wat Neranchararam’s (วัดเนรัญชราราม) ordination hall was also built in 1834 with the image of Luang Pho Thong (หลวงพ่อทอง) cast in 1935. Rather, these were likely sales tactics to increase the price and apparent potency of the amulet. Importantly, these amulets also reproduce the image of the slim, seated version of Nang Kwak, as found in FIGURES 5–6.

Provenance also matters for statuettes, which are much more commonly sold and displayed than amulets. When speaking about Nang Kwak to my interview respondents, many also cited specific places and masters where her statuettes are produced, such as Luang Pho Im (หลวงพ่อิม; 1863–1937) from Wat Hua Khao (วัดหัวเขา) in Suphanburi province. Nevertheless, Khruba Ariyachat’s Nang Kwak Tuinui has been the outsized



FIGURE 6: Nang Kwak amulets from Chatuchak market, approx. 30mm x 20mm © Al Lim

favorite among vendors and consumers.<sup>12</sup> Vendors repeatedly showed me pictures of Khruba Ariyachat, mentioning that he is one of the most important monks producing these amulets through his temple at Wat Saeng Kaeo Pothiyan (วัดแสงแก้วโพธิญาณ) in Chiang Rai province. Returning to the statuette [FIG. 4], the base reads: นางกวักเจริญทรัพย์ (*nang kwak charoen sap*), roughly translating to “Nang Kwak, prospering in wealth”. For the statuettes that were made directly from the temple, vendors mentioned that this can be verified by locating the temple’s stamp on the bottom of the statuette. Many websites that sell this statuette of Nang Kwak feature Khruba Ariyachat’s biography on their site, following his life from childhood to becoming a novice, practicing Buddhism across many temples, and even building his own at the age of 25. His use of a

<sup>12</sup> Statuette vendors noted that their Thai clientele prefer the slim, seated Nang Kwak in Thai attire, whereas Chinese or Chinese diasporic clients tended to be the ones purchasing other versions of her figure.

peacock is cited as a symbol for avoiding danger and disaster while evoking wealth and power. He is also identified as part of Khruba Siwichai's (ครูบาศรีวิชัย; 1878–1938) lineage from Khruba Chum (ครูบาชุม; 1899–1976) of Wat Chai Mongkhon (วัดไชยมงคล) in Lamphun province (Pisith 2018).

In this manner, Khruba Ariyachat's temple's production of Nang Kwak Tuinui is seen as an extension of his existing virtue as a key figure in the Thai Buddhist landscape. In the documentary series *Legends and Beliefs* (ตำนานชุดความเชื่อ, *tamnān chut khwam chuea*) by Amarin Television in 2018, one episode focuses on “The Legend of Nang Kwak”. Khruba Ariyachat himself was interviewed in the episode, recounting how his involvement with the Nang Kwak statuette came about. He mentions that he saw a beautiful angel (นางฟ้า, *nang fa*) in a vision, who said that she would help him build his temple. After that, she transformed from a beautiful (สวย, *suai*), slim figure into a fat and cute (อ้วนและน่ารัก, *uan lae na rak*) woman with her hand raised. Khruba Ariyachat, speaking in the third person, explains that “Khruba sees that Nang Kwak is a bestower of fortune and wealth, so she should be *udomsombun*, and also bring us comfort and reassurance [ครูบาก็เห็นว่านางกวักเป็นผู้ให้โชคให้ลาภ ก็น่าจะมีอุดมสมบูรณ์ด้วย ก็ทำให้เราสบายใจด้วย]”. He points out that her fat and cute figure corresponds to her ability to bring in abundant fortune and wealth, reshaping her body according to the figure he saw in the vision, adapting her slim beauty into plumpness.

In addition, not only are Nang Kwak figures depicted as material objects, such as amulets and statuettes, but she has also been featured in online media

such as Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs). NFTs are part of the cryptocurrency industry, pieces of art that use blockchain technology, offering a way to verify authenticity and establish one's ownership. During my research interviews, many participants drew similarities between cryptocurrency and amulets. One participant even mentioned, “Amulets are cryptocurrency 101”. He was referring to the ways that both are wrapped up in beliefs, forms of legitimation, and ethereal market-making practices. He continued, “if an amulet becomes popular, its price will be high like how the price of cryptocurrency works”. This perspective, in which value is determined at least in part by popularity rather than functional use or the cost of production, illuminates how amulets and cryptocurrency are detached from conventional scales of value, constituting distinct pathways of circulating currency.<sup>13</sup> The volatility of prices and the allure of making money quickly have resulted in many shifting their livelihoods towards statuettes and NFTs, setting up their own businesses and pursuing new career opportunities, such as becoming amulet vendors or NFT artists.

<sup>13</sup> In several interviews, middle-aged workers highlighted the limited salary growth within the Thai labor market, where the average monthly salary is around 15,000 THB (about 410 USD). They explained that their annual salary increases would be significantly lower than the potential gains from alternative investment or career strategies, such as those involving amulets and cryptocurrency. This dynamic further recalls how Zelizer (2017) writes of “earmarking” multiple kinds of money and Chua's (2023: 276) investigation of the way startup money was a different kind of money that “flowed more impetuously and bounteously to the products and people that impressed it [the startup world]”.

Amulets and cryptocurrency are both deeply reliant on marketing strategies. Consider how a Certificate of Authenticity (บัตรรับรองพระแท้, *bat rap rong phra thae*) verifying that a statuette or amulet has undergone the requisite sacralization ceremonies—such as a monk’s blessing at a high-profile temple—creates legitimacy through what is essentially a narrative of the object’s history. Or how miracle stories are attached to amulets and are popularized through social media channels. One can map this onto the ways that white papers, funders, and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) for cryptocurrency products or NFT collections are signs of legitimacy as they market their project.<sup>14</sup> As an amulet vendor explained to me:

Amulet experts create hype [ปั่นกระแส, *pan krasae*], similar to how people create hype around stocks or cryptocurrency, just that amulets have a material object [วัตถุ, *watthu*] as a lure [ตัวล่อ, *tua lo*]. In the amulet industry, famous figures talk about how they worship certain amulets, and then their followers start buying those amulets as well.

Crafting attention-grabbing narratives or having the appropriate figures endorse a product are ways to increase the price of an amulet or NFT.<sup>15</sup> In other

<sup>14</sup> White papers are informational documents often used by blockchain or cryptocurrency projects to detail their technical, financial, and commercial aspects.

<sup>15</sup> This is often done through airdrop campaigns, where consumers are promised a certain number of the project’s tokens in exchange for participating in

words, these are forms of marketing (การสร้างตลาด, *kan sang talat*) at their best. While the production and marketing of these assets can be studied in an extended comparison, this article focuses on tracing the representations of Nang Kwak across these media.

My initial assumption was that NFTs would offer a new way to analyze Nang Kwak, given their technological advancement as a digital form of art sold in a marketplace that consisted of a predominantly younger generation. Contrary to my expectations, however, my interviews indicated otherwise. Open Sea, one of the most popular marketplaces for NFTs, exhibited several pieces of Nang Kwak art [e.g., **FIGURE 7**]. A prominent collection, 8SIAN, was launched in 2021 as a Malaysian project that featured 8,888 NFTs of Asian women. The project emphasizes a shared Asian cultural heritage through artwork deemed elegant and beautiful. An exclusive set of 36 goddesses are in this collection and Nang Kwak is one of them. Her NFT was last sold on the marketplace for 20,249 USD in January 2022 and has not been resold for at least another two years.<sup>16</sup> That she is featured in this collection at prices consumers are willing to pay underscores her prominent role among an Asian pantheon of beautiful historical and spiritual figures.

Local NFT projects also feature Nang Kwak. I spoke to Mike, a freelance graphic artist who launched his own collection of pixel art and Thai ghost NFTs, ranging from Nang Nak (นางนาค)

marketing activities (quests) or testing the product (e.g., testnet activities).

<sup>16</sup> See: <https://etherscan.io/nft/0x198478f870d97d62d640368d111b979d7ca3c38f/3533> (last accessed August 2024).



FIGURE 7: NFT of Nang Kwak, created in 2024 © Owned by 6372AD

to Kuman Thong (กุมารทอง).<sup>17</sup> During the interview, he mentioned that creating the Nang Kwak NFT was neither for him or his customers usurping the traditional worship of Nang Kwak through figurines, but rather an extension or adaptation of tradition into a more modern and enjoyable medium:

It's like [...] a trend for those who are in commerce,

<sup>17</sup> Pseudonyms such as “Mike” have been used to ensure participants’ confidentiality. *Kuman thong*, “golden prince”, is a popular and powerful spirit in Thai folk religion, worshipped for wealth and protection. See article by Saran Suebsantiwongse, this Special Edition.

wanting to have some connection to beliefs and customs that they have previously practiced. The artists would change characteristics to make the figures cuter, more beautiful, or more modern [ทันสมัย, *than samai*]. Is it as serious as traditional worship [สายเก่า, *sai kao*]? Probably not. But seeing her there, one would probably feel more reassured [สบายใจ, *sabai chai*], knowing customers can come all the time.

Mike highlighted that he was not overtly religious (ไม่จริงจังกับศาสนา, *mai ching chang kap sasana*) and not the kind of person who would talk in detail about their religious beliefs. Yet he still believes in worshipping Nang Kwak, pointing out that he would follow his family traditions in reproducing those cultural practices which were ingrained in childhood. Moreover, he brings up the notion of reassurance in this quotation, mirroring a trope from her lore similar to the one found in Khruba Ariyachat's description of his inspiration for his own Nang Kwak Tuinui statuette. Besides Nang Kwak, Mike worships Thao Wessuwan (ท้าวมเวสสุวรรณ), also known as Vessavaṇa, the guardian of the North, believing that he would open the doors to wealth, and Phra Phikanet (พระพิฆเนศ) or Gaṇeśa for creativity and intellect as an artist. Thus, these practices complicate notions that technology, art, and the new generation are causing a shift in the gender norms and values represented by Nang Kwak. In fact, these practices suggest the opposite—that familial values are reproduced through these very modern but also everyday cultural practices and beliefs.

As mentioned, this finding was unexpected, given that I had assumed that NFT artists might have wanted to use these technological developments to depart from existing traditions rather than reproduce their families' beliefs. Put another way, a popular sentiment among the older Thai generation might be that the younger generation would undergo moral decline through alienation from religion. This is problematized through the reproduction

of these practices. While Nang Kwak NFTs may seem to be forging new technological frontiers, these practices instead complement existing traditions, re-instantiating core practices of Nang Kwak's worship.

So far, these representations emphasize aspects of Nang Kwak's devotion and beauty in a more traditional form of representation. But Pathum Thani artist Achan Joe turns to focus on Nang Kwak's sex appeal through a statuette with revealing attire. He wants to make her figure more modern and relevant to his consumers (Petch 2022). He claims that this form of Nang Kwak is particularly well-received among Chinese, Taiwanese, Hong Kongers, Singaporeans, and Malaysian customers. He sells each statuette for 4,000 THB (about 120 USD today), approximately eight times the cost of a normal statuette of the same size. Achan Joe has attracted criticism online for this, as many conservative devotees criticize whether this kind of statuette of Nang Kwak is appropriate to Thai Buddhism and proper practices of veneration. Nevertheless, he insists that this makes her more relevant and modern. Here, the feminine qualities of Nang Kwak's body are emphasized, where desire is stoked through an alternative form of beauty that sexualizes her body.

But that does not mean to say that his figures are only constructed along strict male-female gender binaries. Entering the lobby of House of Heals, a trendy destination for drag performances on the 33rd floor of the Renaissance Hotel in Bangkok, owned by prominent drag queen Pan Pan Narkprasert (ปิ่นปิ่น นาคประเสริฐ), also known as Pangina Heals

(แฟนใจนำ ฮีลส์), one is greeted by a Nang Kwak figure perched on the counter. Seated with her right hand raised, Nang Kwak's depiction is far from traditional. Set against metallic streamers and bathed in a purple neon glow, she sports a bowtie and glasses instead of her traditional headdress. She wears a plain, tight-fitting dress instead of Thai attire. Her left hand touches the floor instead of a bag or pot of gold. These iconographic shifts depart from traditional symbolism that emphasize prosperity within the conventional frameworks of family and business success through devout moral practices. The inclusion of queer-coded accessories and dress suggests an intention to appeal to a different audience, where heterosexual notions of beauty and comfort are reshaped. Here, Nang Kwak's bodily representations become the site through which essentialized female values of beauty and cuteness are contested, subverting dualistic gender binaries [FIGURE 8].

Taking these formal representations into account, a pattern emerges—Nang Kwak remains integral to the Thai belief system, shifting in form through physical and digital media, yet primarily emphasizing essentialized female qualities of beauty—whether through a seated lady clad in Thai attire or one that shows far more skin. Further, her popularity is not simply constructed as an abstracted female figure but intimately connected with the monks and spiritual figures who produce her statuettes. Khruba Ariyachat, Luang Pho Te, and Achan Joe are some of the well-known figures whose biographies and charisma are channeled through these rituals and statuettes to bless those who purchase

her figures to display in their shops. Khruba Ariyachat's Tuinui features an authenticating stamp to certify that the master monk has blessed it. Tuinui images are then spread for popular worship—reproduced in the appropriate *kalathesa* by subsequent generations, many following their parents' practices. Nevertheless, the boundaries of femininity and gender are not absolute, as queer forms of representation offer one of many avenues to reshape popular practices and beliefs.

### Nang Kwak's Allure and Affect

Given the deeply gendered construction of Nang Kwak's narratives and bodily representations, how do these complicate existing ideas of power and spiritual potency in Thailand? Among a constellation of terms related to power in Thai, *barami* (บารมี) is often highlighted, derived from the Pali word *pāramī* (perfection or excellence); its scriptural context refers to the ten virtues that a buddha-to-be should possess (Siani 2019: 269).<sup>18</sup> In popular usage today, *barami* encompasses a blend of charisma, moral integrity, social influence, and spiritual merit. One accumulates *barami* through virtuous actions, wisdom, and good karma. Further, one attains a special aura through *barami* to inspire and lead others. While *barami* is a central word for power, Nang Kwak's allure is more commonly associated with charm or

<sup>18</sup> Thai notions of power usually revolve around *barami*, and *saksit* (ศักดิ์สิทธิ์) or the “magico-divine power possessed by holy objects, spirits, or humans”, and *amnat* (อำนาจ) being the “raw, amoral power that may be used for either good or evil and which is accumulated and maintained by sheer force” (Jackson 2010: 33).



**FIGURE 8: Queer Nang Kwak at a drag club, Bangkok, July 2023 © Al Lim**

sane, as evidenced in the *kalathesa* of her worship practices and her worshippers' affective motivations.

In the television feature “The Legend of Nang Kwak” (2018), Achan Hattha Lekchit (อ. หัตถา เลขจิต), an expert on astrology and ritual practices, offered a detailed explanation of how to worship Nang Kwak in the appropriate manner. He stated that her offerings should include colored water, a bracelet placed on her right hand, as well as five fruits—pineapple, pumpkin, banana, young coconut, and wax gourd—which evoke senses of growth (งอกเงย, *ngok ngoei*) and new beginnings (ความเริ่มต้นใหม่, *khvam roem ton mai*). He further insisted that an offering of *modak* (โมกกะ, *motheka*)

must be included, but since this Indian sweet dumpling made from rice or wheat flour is difficult to find in Thailand, red or white coconut dumplings (ขนมต้มขาว ต้มแดง, *khanom tom khao tom daeng*) would be acceptable. In addition, five sticks of incense were also necessary, with preference for jasmine or rose scents; these five sticks symbolize the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, one's parents, and spiritual leader (พระพุทธรูป พระธรรมพระสงฆ์พ่อแม่และครูบาอาจารย์, *phra phut phra tham, phra song, pho mae, lae khrua achan*). Nang Kwak can be worshipped any day of the week; the direction she should face is towards the shopfront. Also, he explained that her right hand must be higher than her mouth. If it were lower than her mouth, it means that one might not have enough to eat.

For the placement of the statuette, Achan Hattha explained that Nang Kwak should be placed higher than one's eyes to ensure her potency in bringing in wealth. He explains that she can also be placed on a table but should be on the right side of her owner. Another collector mentioned that she should not be placed on the same level or height as images of a buddha. Compared to the worship of other images, these rules are relatively flexible. In the same episode, another amulet collector even contended that the height of Nang Kwak's hand does not matter and that it is up to the sculptor's artistic decision.

During my visits to shops or stalls that venerate Nang Kwak, I did not observe a uniform placement of her statuette. While many place her on the worship altar, some placed her on cash registers or on a table. Placement below images of a buddha is not out of the

ordinary, but placing her atop packets of dried longans on a table to the owner's left, was surprising. An amulet vendor at Tha Prachan even told me that she should be hidden (ต้องแอบเอาไว้, *tong aep ao wai*), because customers might not appreciate sensing that their money is about to be taken.

If Nang Kwak has such power, as in *barami*, why is she placed on a table instead of an altar, or even hidden? The relative flexibility of her worship practices, since she is featured lower than buddha images and placement to the owner's left (even though she is supposed to be on the right) amid wares suggests that Nang Kwak is not considered similar to the practice one sees in the worship of figures which are primarily attributed with *barami*.<sup>19</sup> Anthropologist Edoardo Siani (pers. comm.) ventures that the oddity of this placement might point towards how her allure and attraction are more akin to that of female workers beckoning customers, rather than that of many of her counterpart deities or national leaders' *barami*. Indeed, many interlocutors prefer describing Nang Kwak as having *sane* rather than *barami*.

The word *sane* stems from the Sanskritic root *snehaḥ*, referring to love and affection. The Thai term is often used with enchantment, spells, or creating an endearing appearance that attracts one's

affection. *Sane* is not a strictly feminine trait yet can be co-constructed with gendered dimensions. For example, in the long folk epic *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, one of the protagonists, Khun Phaen, is "handsome and dashing" (Baker & Pasuk 2013: 216). He is often referred to as having a "thousand intimacies" (ขุนแผนแสนสนิท, *khun phaen saen sanit*), portraying his charm and *sane* as a male protagonist (FAD 2460). Nang Kwak's allure, or *sane*, is inflected through her ability to bring comfort and reassurance, grounded in her traits of daughterly devotion and beauty in the song *Maha Sane*, as well as her devotees' affective motivations for venerating her figure.

In an interview with a shop owner from the Sikh community in Bangkok who said he had placed Nang Kwak on his shop's altar for 29 years, venerating her was primarily about comfort or reassurance. He brought up the analogy of going to a temple and being greeted by an offer to shake hands instead of the traditional *wai* (ไหว้) greeting. He considered this an example of an inappropriate action in the context. In the same way, he elaborates that having Nang Kwak in his shop is one way to follow local customs and beliefs in the appropriate context, bringing him reassurance, using the same term that Mike, the NFT artist, mentioned earlier.

Close analogs of *thuk chai* (ถูกใจ) or *chop chai* (ชอบใจ)—whatever you like or desire—have also been repeatedly used to describe one's relation to Nang Kwak. When asking vendors about Nang Kwak's popularity and distinctiveness, several insisted that it was up to the person buying the amulet. One shopkeeper stated: "Whatever they like,

<sup>19</sup> One example of how *barami* is conceptualized is through Sopranzetti's (2020) dialectical analysis of *amnat* (authority-based power) and *barami* (moral charisma). He explores how several key (male) leaders in Thailand have attempted to balance these principles since 1932, striving to find an equilibrium between them to sustain their power.

that's the most important (เขาชอบอะไร สำคัญที่สุด, *khao chop arai samkhan thi sut*). These motivations and desires are closely linked to the way she embodies provision and reassurance, shaped by her female qualities of beauty and devotion.

Additionally, Nang Kwak's provision does not replace diligence and hard work. Vendors mentioned that most of their success would come from running a business efficiently. According to a noodle vendor at an open-air market, "Customers should get 5-star treatment and that is 80% of the shop's success. The extra 20% might come from Nang Kwak as motivation (กำลังใจ, *kamlang chai*). Other vendors also mention honesty and competitive pricing. A nearby food vendor quipped, "Sometimes, I joke with Nang Kwak and say, 'Don't just sit still. Help me sell too!'".

Nang Kwak's position as a mother and nurturer is often highlighted in these settings and through these affective motivations. While calling her "mother" (แม่นางกวัก, *mae nang kwak*) is not uncommon, as with other deities like Phra Mae Thorani (พระแม่ธรณี) or Mae Phosop (แม่โพสพ), who are also referred to as mothers, she evokes an element of nurturing associated with reassurance and comfort.<sup>20</sup> Nang

Kwak embodies a figure of provision, able to align the desires of shopkeeper and purchaser while drawing legitimacy from her position as a daughter in a lineage with popular narratives dating from arahants during Gotama Buddha's life and the *Ramakien*.

Nang Kwak's *sane* and her reassurance shares resonances with Charles Keyes's (1984) article that characterizes Buddhist mothers primarily as maternal nurturers and secondarily as lovers or mistresses, based on a selection of texts from northern and northeast Thailand. While there may be overlaps with some of my findings, I echo Van Esterik's (2000: 70) critique that "no one story has the truth; there are hundreds of stories and hundreds of truths, because particular acts lead to particular consequences in individuals' lives". Retaining this outlook, while many of my interlocutors' narratives portray Nang Kwak as a female nurturer whose charm, beauty, and devotion can support their livelihoods, these narratives far from predetermine a concretized archetype that closes her production and reproduction off from creative and even potentially subversive adaptations.

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<sup>20</sup> Phra Mae Thorani and Mae Phosop are revered figures in Thai and Buddhist mythology. Phra Mae Thorani, also known as the Earth Goddess, is often depicted wringing out her hair to call upon the Earth to witness the enlightenment of Gotama Buddha (Pattaratorn 2022). Mae Phosop, or the Goddess of Rice, is a deity associated with fertility, agriculture, and abundance, often invoked for bountiful harvests and prosperity. Indeed, the motherly trope is used in many religious contexts outside of Thailand too—consider the Mother Mary in Catholicism or the Hindu deity Ma Durga, for instance.

The everyday worship of Nang Kwak in Thailand is reinscribed through her lore, representations, worship practices, and potency—a deeply gendered process that entrenches a set of essentialized female qualities, constructing her charm or *sane*. Popularly known for her ability to facilitate commercial transactions, she acts as an attractive force that brings

various forms of desire into alignment. This recalls Alfred Gell's (1996) writings of artworks as traps, as they materialize and bring into alignment a nexus of intentionalities, as between a predator and prey. In a similar fashion, Nang Kwak massages the hopes and desires of her devotees into being through her invisible hands.

Amid the richness of Thailand's genderscape, many of Nang Kwak's representations continue to reinforce feminine tropes. Nang Kwak's alluring corporeality becomes a catalytic medium in commerce, through which her female beauty, daughterly devotion, and maternal support bring a sense of reassurance to her devotees in their pursuit of wealth. Her bodily adaptations by famous monks, NFT artists, and even her revealing attire in Achan Joe's statuettes reflect the shifting boundaries between traditional elements and contemporary aesthetics.

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To mirror Nang Kwak's beckoning, this article invites a reflection on the intriguing significance and expansiveness of spirituality through time, space, and across (digital) media. What happens when *barami* is reconceptualized with attention to gendered relations? And how might *sane* overlap with or destabilize more commonly discussed notions of Thai power that have revolved around *barami*, *amnat*, and *saksit* (Jackson 2010; Ünaldi 2016; Sopranzetti 2020)?<sup>21</sup> In addition, the very site of entrenched feminized tropes may also be a site of subversion, much as the subversive political humor in Katherine Bowie's (2017) reconstructed reading of the *Vessantarajātaka* or Siani's (2023) interlocutors who politicized and co-opted hegemonic cosmologies. The boundaries of Thailand's categories of sacrality and gender thus remain open, as new technologies, generations, and deities continually come into being.

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<sup>21</sup> It is vital to note the multi-faceted aspects of these forms of power, especially through their relations with Thailand's complex class dynamics. Ara Wilson (2008: 635) notes that Nang Kwak "has long been used by low-level merchants". While many of my research participants could be placed in this category, Nang

Kwak's recent popularity and circulation suggests a far more dynamic interest across classes. She is both a symbol of aspirational social mobility and a marker of class position based on the type of figure that one venerates.

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