

Gender, Spirits, and the Future of Spiritual Meaning in Lower Northeastern Thai Folk Culture

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Abstract

This conceptual article examines the relationship between gender, spirits, and the future of spiritual meaning in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture. It aims to explain how spirits function as cultural and moral structures, how gender and gender diversity are negotiated through spirit-related practices and mediumship, and how spiritual meaning is being re-signified under changing social conditions. The study employs a qualitative conceptual approach based on the review and thematic synthesis of relevant scholarship in anthropology, folklore, gender studies, Thai cultural studies, and spirit mediumship research. The analysis shows that spirits are not fading remnants of tradition, but adaptive cultural infrastructures that continue to shape moral life, ritual legitimacy, and community interpretation. It also finds that spirit-related roles may provide culturally intelligible spaces for negotiating gendered difference, although such recognition remains conditional and uneven. The article concludes that the future of spiritual meaning in Lower Northeastern Thailand is shaped less by disappearance than by ongoing symbolic reconfiguration as local communities renegotiate gender, morality, and personhood.

Keywords: Gender, Spirits, Lower Northeastern Thailand, Folk culture, Cultural futurity

Introduction

In Lower Northeastern Thailand (Isan), beliefs in spirits remain deeply embedded in everyday life. Rather than existing only as abstract matters of belief, spirits are encountered through houses, thresholds, shrines, and other culturally meaningful spaces that organize how people interpret misfortune, obligation, and belonging. In this sense, spirits should not be understood merely as residual or irrational beliefs; they continue to function as socially authoritative systems of meaning in contemporary community life (Pearce, 2011).

Gender is equally central to this spiritual landscape. As Baird (2014) demonstrates in his discussion of spirit mediumship in Northeastern Thailand, ritual life can become a socially intelligible arena in which sociocultural boundaries, including those related to gender, are negotiated and sometimes repositioned. Gender is therefore not peripheral to spirit culture; it is one of the key mechanisms through which spiritual authority is embodied, interpreted, and made socially legible.

Recent social change has made this relationship even more important. Public health and social research in Thailand indicate that LGBTQI+ populations continue to face stigma that affects dignity, well-being, and access to services (Moallem et al., 2022). At the same time, more recent scholarship on gender-diverse spirit mediums points to a more complex pattern in which ritual acceptance may coexist with everyday discrimination (Coleman et al., 2025). At the cultural level, this means that gender-diverse individuals may experience recognition in some social spaces while continuing to face exclusion in others.

Seen from this perspective, spirits in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture are better understood as flexible symbolic infrastructures than as fixed cultural artifacts. Sarakan et al. (2009) note that local cosmological life commonly blends Buddhist, Brahmanic, and spirit-worship elements into a living framework that sustains communal continuity while still allowing interpretive variation. That flexibility matters because, although spirits have historically helped regulate normative gender roles and sexual morality, the same symbolic elasticity may also allow spiritual systems to absorb ambiguity, transgression, and gendered difference.

A similar point appears in Pinthongvijayakul's (2019) analysis of spirit mediumship in Northeast Thailand, where ritual practice becomes a setting in which desire, embodiment, and sexuality are rendered culturally intelligible rather than simply deviant. Spirit-related roles may therefore provide socially sanctioned spaces in which gendered difference is reframed as spiritual capacity, ritual calling, or embodied giftedness. Yet such recognition remains conditional. It is often bound by ritual context and does not automatically extend to equality in education, employment, family life, or public legitimacy.

This tension between ritual inclusion and everyday inequality has not yet been fully theorized for Lower Northeastern Thailand. Although a growing body of scholarship has examined spirituality, personhood, and folk belief in Northeastern contexts, important gaps remain. Julakarn et al. (2025), for instance, show that *khwaay* continues to be a productive idiom for rethinking personhood and social recognition, but the implications of such spiritual concepts for gendered futurity remain underdeveloped. The issue, then, is not simply whether spirits survive under modern conditions, but

how they are re-signified as social understandings of gender become more visible, plural, and contested.

Research Objectives

This article aims to develop a theoretical understanding of the relationship between gender, spirits, and the future of spiritual meaning in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture. Rather than treating spirits as static remnants of tradition, the study approaches them as adaptive cultural structures that continue to mediate social life under changing conditions of gender visibility, moral order, and cultural interpretation. In this context, the article is guided by the following objectives:

2.1 To examine spirits as cultural and moral structures in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture.

2.2 To analyze how gender and gender diversity are negotiated through spirit-related practices, ritual roles, and spirit mediumship.

2.3 To explain how the future of spiritual meaning is being re-signified under changing gender configurations in contemporary Thai society.

These objectives provide the analytical direction for the sections that follow, including the review of relevant literature, the development of the conceptual framework, the interpretive analysis, and the subsequent discussion of inclusion, exclusion, and symbolic transformation.

Conceptual Framework: Gender, Spirits, and Cultural Futurity

Building on the preceding literature review, this section develops an integrated conceptual framework for analyzing the relationship between gender, spirits, and the future of spiritual meaning in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture. The framework is explicitly theoretical. It moves beyond descriptive ethnography toward an analytical model that foregrounds power, ambiguity, and transformation. Rather than treating spirits as residual beliefs or isolated symbols, this article conceptualizes them as adaptive cultural infrastructures through which gender norms are regulated, negotiated, and re-signified over time. This starting point draws on classic and contemporary efforts to think beyond the simple opposition between tradition and modernity in Southeast Asian religious life (Tambiah, 1970; Brac de la Perrière & Jackson, 2022).

1. Spirits as Adaptive Cultural Infrastructure

This study treats spirits as a form of cultural infrastructure. In other words, spirits are understood as systems of meaning, authority, and practice that organize social life in ways analogous

to institutions, even though they are not formally codified. Morris (2000) and Kitiarsa (2005), in different ways, both suggest that spiritual worlds endure not because they remain static, but because they can be reworked, redirected, and attached to new social needs. Persistence, therefore, should not be confused with immobility.

As cultural infrastructure, spirits perform three interconnected functions. First, they perform a normative function by establishing moral expectations regarding conduct, sexuality, and gender roles. Through ancestor spirits, territorial spirits, tutelary beings, and local cults, gendered behavior may come to appear natural, sacred, and socially binding. Irvine (1984), for instance, helps illuminate how symbolic systems may authorize embodied expectations without requiring formal legal codification. Second, spirits perform an interpretive function. They provide culturally intelligible explanations for misfortune, bodily difference, uncertainty, and social disruption. Rather than imposing a single rational account, spirit idioms allow communities to translate ambiguity into shared moral narratives that can be acted upon through ritual, repair, and negotiation. Third, spirits perform a mediating function by linking past and present, human and non-human, and private suffering with collective meaning.

Seen in this way, spirits are best understood not as relics but as working cultural mechanisms. Infrastructure is rarely dismantled all at once. More commonly, it is repaired, repurposed, or hybridized. That logic is especially useful for understanding why spiritual systems continue to matter under changing social conditions.

2. Gender as a Structuring and Destabilizing Force

Within this framework, gender operates simultaneously as a structuring principle and a destabilizing force. On the one hand, spirit beliefs have often encoded and legitimized normative gender arrangements by embedding them within cosmological order. Tanabe (1991) shows how moral order, embodiment, and communal expectations can be naturalized through culturally authorized systems of meaning. Along similar lines, Walker (2006) highlights how social hierarchy and moral conduct may be reproduced through localized cultural logics rather than through abstract rules alone.

At the same time, gender, especially in its diverse, fluid, and non-binary expressions, introduces instability into this apparent order. Gender diversity exposes the contingency of categories often presented as fixed, natural, or sacred. Yet that instability does not necessarily dissolve spiritual systems. Quite the opposite: it may activate their interpretive elasticity. What appears disruptive in one register may be re-signified in another as charisma, ritual calling, moral exception, or embodied spiritual distinction.

This dual role is analytically important. Gender does not merely occupy spirit worlds as one variable among others. It helps organize the terms on which legitimacy is assigned, contested, and revised. Spirit systems, therefore, do not simply impose gender order; they also reveal the fragility of that order when confronted with embodiments that exceed conventional categories.

3. Spirit Mediumship as a Nodal Site of Negotiation

Spirit mediumship occupies a central place in the framework because it is one of the clearest sites at which gender norms and spiritual authority are negotiated. Mediums stand at the threshold between human bodies and non-human forces, so the body becomes a key site where legitimacy is embodied, contested, and interpreted. In this sense, mediumship is not merely a religious role. It is a social process through which recognition is produced and evaluated.

Analytically, mediumship can be understood through three mechanisms. The first is embodiment. Gendered and gender-diverse bodies become vehicles of spiritual force, allowing bodily difference to be reinterpreted as spiritual capacity rather than social deficiency. The second is authorization. Claims of possession, calling, or spiritual selection displace moral judgment away from the individual alone and relocate agency within a sacred source. This does not remove scrutiny, but it changes the terms on which legitimacy is assessed. The third is conditional inclusion. Acceptance is extended on the basis of ritual efficacy, communal usefulness, and moral comportment, rather than on the basis of universal equality.

This triadic model helps explain why gender-diverse individuals may achieve visibility or authority within spiritual settings while still facing stigma, exclusion, or vulnerability elsewhere. Put differently, ritual legitimacy and structural equality are related but not identical outcomes. A person may be recognized as spiritually powerful without being recognized as socially equal. The value of this distinction is analytical as much as descriptive: it prevents ritual recognition from being mistaken for broad-based inclusion.

4. Futurity: From Persistence to Symbolic Transformation

A major contribution of this framework lies in its emphasis on futurity. Instead of asking whether spirits will survive modernization, the framework asks how spirits are mobilized to imagine, negotiate, and normalize future social arrangements. Jackson (2012) is especially useful here because he shows that modernity in Thai contexts does not simply erase enchantment; it may also intensify new forms of supernatural visibility, controversy, and moral debate. From this perspective, the future of spirits is not reducible to survival alone. It concerns changes in meaning, function, and symbolic location.

Futurity is conceptualized here in three overlapping modes. The first is regulatory futurity, in which existing gender norms are projected forward through cosmological and moral authorization. In this mode, spirits reinforce continuity by stabilizing inherited hierarchies and values. The second is negotiated futurity, in which gender diversity is accommodated gradually without overt rupture. Difference may be recoded as spiritual calling, ritual specialization, or morally bounded exception. The third is transformative futurity, in which spirits are re-signified as affirmers of plurality, protectors of difference, or mediators of new moral possibilities. Here, spirits no longer serve only as guardians of inherited order, but also as symbolic resources through which alternative understandings of gender and humanity become culturally intelligible.

These modes should not be treated as mutually exclusive stages. They may coexist within the same cultural environment and may even operate simultaneously within the same ritual field. For that reason, the future of spirits is better understood as plural, contested, and uneven than as singular or linear.

5. Analytical Implications

This conceptual framework advances three analytical claims. First, spirits persist not because tradition passively resists change, but because spiritual infrastructures are structurally adaptable. Second, gender diversity does not inherently erode spiritual systems; under many conditions, it activates their capacity for reinterpretation and symbolic renewal. Third, the future of spirits is produced through negotiation rather than replacement. It emerges through re-signification rather than disappearance, although symbolic inclusion does not by itself resolve structural stigma or institutional inequality.

Taken together, these claims establish the conceptual foundation for the next section. They allow the article to move from literature synthesis to structured analysis by clarifying how gender, spirits, legitimacy, and futurity interact within Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture. On this basis, the following section develops the analytical argument further by examining how these dynamics generate specific patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and symbolic transformation.

Literature Review

This section reviews the main strands of scholarship relevant to understanding the relationship between gender, spirits, and cultural change in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture. Rather than attempting an exhaustive inventory of all available studies, the review is organized around five interrelated themes: (1) spirits as social and moral structures, (2) gendered spirit

mediumship and ritual embodiment, (3) gender diversity, queerness, and spiritual authority, (4) spirits, material culture, and cultural adaptation, and (5) key gaps in the literature and their analytical implications. Together, these strands provide the foundation for developing the conceptual framework that follows.

1. Spirits as Social and Moral Structures

Scholarship on Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia has long suggested that spirits should be understood not simply as objects of belief, but as institutions embedded in moral life, local authority, and community order. Cohen (2020), for example, shows that spirit mediumship often intersects with broader political and social formations, making spirits intelligible not only within ritual worlds but also within wider structures of governance and public morality. From this perspective, spirit practices endure not because they remain unchanged, but because they are repeatedly reorganized through ritual labor, reinterpretation, and shifting forms of legitimacy.

A related perspective appears in regional studies of the Northeast. Sawamoto (2001) argues that “culture” in the region functions not merely as inherited tradition, but also as a contested register of belonging through which communities negotiate continuity, difference, and shared futures. Read in relation to spirit beliefs, this suggests that spiritual worlds are not external to social life. They participate in how communities organize value, memory, and moral order. Spirits, therefore, may be seen as part of the cultural infrastructure through which social expectations become durable and meaningful.

2. Gendered Spirit Mediumship and Ritual Embodiment

A substantial body of literature indicates that spirit worship and spirit mediumship are profoundly gendered practices. As Lin (2019) notes in her discussion of women’s religious participation in Thailand, gendered religious labor often operates through informal networks of trust, obligation, and communal recognition rather than through formal institutional authority. This insight is highly relevant to spirit practice, where ritual competence and moral legitimacy are frequently embodied and socially affirmed rather than bureaucratically assigned.

The material and performative dimensions of ritual life reinforce this pattern. In their study of Tai ritual textiles in the Mekong Basin, Chatthiphot et al. (2025) demonstrate that ritual objects are not merely decorative accessories; they encode lineage, fertility, protection, and gendered labor in ways that tie embodiment to cosmological meaning. Seen in this light, mediumship is not simply a spiritual role. It is also an embodied performance through which ritual authority becomes visible, gendered, and culturally legible.

3. Gender Diversity, Queerness, and Spiritual Authority

Recent scholarship has expanded this discussion by examining the relationship between gender diversity and spiritual legitimacy. Coleman, et al, (2018) suggest that gender-diverse identities in Southeast Asian spiritual contexts often become intelligible through culturally specific frameworks of embodiment, ritual calling, and social recognition. Their work helps shift the discussion away from a simple binary of acceptance versus exclusion and toward a more layered understanding of how legitimacy is differentially distributed across social settings.

This interpretation resonates with Wilson's (2004) broader analysis of gender and sexuality in Thailand. Rather than assuming that recognition is uniformly granted or denied, Wilson shows that identities become legible within uneven moral and social fields shaped by work, intimacy, consumption, and hierarchy. Applied to spirit-related contexts, such a perspective helps explain why ritual life may open spaces for recognition while everyday institutional structures continue to sustain inequality. In other words, spiritual authority may coexist with social vulnerability rather than cancel it out.

4. Spirits, Material Culture, and Cultural Adaptation

Another important strand of scholarship emphasizes that spirit traditions persist through adaptation rather than stasis. Tiwattanon and Tansrisook (2024) show that religious life in Thailand frequently evolves through blending, reinterpretation, and local recomposition rather than through a strict divide between orthodox religion and popular belief. This is especially relevant for spirit traditions in Isan, where Buddhist, Brahmanical, and animist elements have long interacted within fluid systems of ritual meaning.

A useful contrast emerges when earlier and later interpretations of spirit phenomena are placed side by side. Earlier psychiatric work, such as that of Suwanlert (1976), tended to classify possession phenomena as pathology. More recent folklore and ethnographic approaches, however, have treated such narratives as culturally embedded responses to fear, misfortune, and social anxiety, as illustrated by Wattanagun (2025). A similar shift in interpretive emphasis appears in Fordham's (2014) work on morality, illness, and biomedicine in Thailand, where changing regimes of knowledge do not simply erase local explanatory systems but instead interact with them in complex ways. Taken together, these studies show that spirit worlds remain meaningful precisely because they can be reinterpreted under changing social and moral conditions.

5. Gaps in the Literature and Analytical Implications

Although the literature offers valuable insights, several important gaps remain. First, detailed research on gender-diverse spiritual life has often concentrated on broader Thai or comparative Southeast Asian contexts, leaving Lower Northeastern Thailand comparatively under-theorized as a distinct cultural field. As a result, the specific relationship between regional folk culture, spirit practice, and changing gender configurations in Lower Isan has not yet received sufficient conceptual attention.

Second, while existing studies frequently show that ritual contexts may provide culturally intelligible spaces for ambiguity, they less often connect such recognition to broader structures of inequality. The literature is stronger at describing ritual acceptance than at explaining why spiritual legitimacy may coexist with institutional exclusion, social stigma, or limited access to everyday forms of equality.

Third, although the literature on material religion and symbolic adaptation helps explain how spirits endure, fewer studies address futurity directly. That is, the question of how spirits participate in imagining, stabilizing, or contesting emerging moral orders under conditions of gender change remains insufficiently developed.

Finally, there is also a conceptual gap. As Boossabong (2025) suggests in a different but relevant register, socially meaningful inclusion may operate through culturally grounded forms of empathy, legitimacy, and recognition rather than through formal rights language alone. This insight is analytically useful here because it highlights the need for a framework capable of explaining how inclusion, exclusion, and symbolic authority are negotiated within local moral worlds.

For these reasons, the next section develops a conceptual framework that treats spirits as adaptive cultural infrastructures through which gender norms are both regulated and renegotiated over time. Such a framework makes it possible to move beyond description and toward a more systematic explanation of how spiritual meaning persists, changes, and acquires new significance in contemporary social life.

Research Methodology

This article employs a qualitative conceptual approach. Such an approach is appropriate when the purpose of the study is interpretive explanation rather than statistical measurement, and when qualitative inquiry is guided by a conceptual logic of analysis (Green, 2014). It is designed as a theoretical study that synthesizes existing scholarship in order to explain the relationship between gender, spirits, and the future of spiritual meaning in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture. Rather

than collecting primary field data, the study draws on published academic literature and uses interpretive analysis to develop a coherent analytical framework for understanding how spiritual meaning is negotiated under changing gender configurations.

1. Nature of the Study

This study is a theoretical and literature-based inquiry. Its purpose is not to measure attitudes statistically or to report findings from field interviews, but to construct an analytical explanation from existing bodies of knowledge. As Varpio et al. (2020) clarify, theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework are closely related but analytically distinct elements in qualitative inquiry. In line with this distinction, the present article adopts a conceptual review strategy and treats the framework not as a decorative addition, but as a substantive guide to interpretation, a role also emphasized by Garvey and Jones (2021). Bringing together relevant scholarship from anthropology, gender studies, folklore studies, Thai cultural studies, and research on spirit mediumship, the study examines how spirits continue to function as cultural and moral structures, how gender diversity is negotiated within ritual contexts, and how spiritual meaning may be re-signified in contemporary society.

2. Scope of the Study

The primary study context is Lower Northeastern Thailand, or Lower Isan, which serves as the cultural focus of the article. The analysis concentrates on spirit beliefs, ritual practice, folk culture, and forms of spiritual meaning associated with this regional context. At the same time, selected studies from other parts of Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia are used where necessary for comparison, clarification, and theoretical extension. Such comparative use is intended to strengthen conceptual interpretation, while the central analytical emphasis remains on Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture.

3. Sources of Data and Selection Criteria

The data used in this study consist of secondary sources in the form of academic books, journal articles, ethnographic studies, and related scholarly works relevant to spirits, spirit mediumship, gender, gender diversity, ritual embodiment, and cultural change. Source selection was guided by four criteria. First, the sources had to address spiritual belief systems, spirit practices, or spirit mediumship in Thailand or closely related Southeast Asian contexts. Second, the sources had to contribute conceptually to the analysis of gender, sexuality, embodiment, recognition, or social legitimacy. Third, priority was given to works that helped explain the relationship between ritual inclusion, symbolic authority, and broader social inequality. Fourth, the selected materials had to

provide analytical value for interpreting the future of spiritual meaning rather than merely describing ritual practice in isolation.

4. Research Tool and Analytical Procedure

The main research tool in this study was conceptual analysis through thematic synthesis. The selected literature was read comparatively and organized into recurring analytical themes. These themes included: (1) spirits as social and moral structures, (2) gendered spirit mediumship and ritual embodiment, (3) gender diversity and conditional spiritual legitimacy, (4) spirits and cultural adaptation, and (5) futurity and the re-signification of spiritual meaning. Consistent with Pasque and Gilbert's (2023) argument that theory should be congruent with the overall logic of the research design, the analytical procedure was structured to align closely with the article's theoretical purpose. After the materials were grouped under these themes, the study identified convergences, tensions, and conceptual gaps across the literature in order to build an integrated analytical framework. The analytical procedure involved document review, thematic categorization, interpretive comparison, and theoretical synthesis.

5. Data Processing and Presentation

Data processing in this study refers to the systematic organization and interpretation of documentary sources rather than numerical analysis. The contents of the selected works were classified according to their relevance to the objectives of the article. Similar concepts were grouped, contrasting arguments were identified, and theoretical implications were extracted for further discussion. Following the logic of qualitative analytical framework development outlined by Yip Zeng (2025), the study moved from recurring meanings in the reviewed sources to broader conceptual categories and higher-order interpretive patterns. The findings of this process are presented in four successive forms: a review of relevant literature, a conceptual framework, an interpretive analysis of the core themes, and a theoretical discussion leading to research propositions. In this way, the study maintains methodological consistency with its conceptual objective while presenting the analysis in a structured academic form.

Data Analysis

This section presents the analytical synthesis of the selected literature in relation to the objectives of the study. In this article, data analysis refers to the interpretive examination of recurring themes, tensions, and conceptual patterns identified across the reviewed scholarship. Rather than reproducing the literature already discussed, this section consolidates the main analytical insights that

emerge from the conceptual review. The analysis is organized around four interrelated dimensions: spirits as gendered moral authority, conditional spiritual legitimacy, negotiated inclusion in spirit mediumship, and futurity as symbolic reconfiguration. Together, these dimensions show that the relationship between gender and spirits in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture is not static. Rather, it is continuously produced through moral negotiation, ritual embodiment, and changing forms of social recognition.

1. Analysis of Spirits as Gendered Moral Authority

The first analytical pattern that emerges from the study is that spirits function as gendered moral authorities. Spirit beliefs do not merely explain unseen forces or ritual events. They also help define what kinds of bodies, behaviors, and relationships are treated as proper, improper, desirable, or dangerous within a given cultural setting. Through ritual structures, domestic arrangements, moral expectations, and inherited cosmological logics, spirits become part of the symbolic order through which communities regulate conduct and interpret social life.

This moral authority is gendered in at least two ways. First, spiritual roles are often distributed through assumptions about appropriate femininity, masculinity, caregiving, ritual responsibility, and bodily discipline. Second, gendered distinctions are not simply reflected in ritual; they are also reproduced by it. Mediumship, shrine care, ceremonial participation, and ritual labor all contribute to the social organization of gender by assigning moral value to particular forms of embodiment and behavior. Yet the analysis also indicates that such authority is never fully fixed. Because spiritual legitimacy depends on interpretation, performance, and communal recognition, it remains open to contestation. Spirits therefore operate not as rigid instruments of control, but as living moral structures whose authority is repeatedly stabilized and renegotiated.

2. Analysis of Conditional Spiritual Legitimacy

A second major finding concerns the conditional character of spiritual legitimacy. Across the selected literature, gender-diverse individuals do not appear simply as outsiders to spiritual worlds. In many cases, spirit-related settings provide spaces in which gender variance becomes culturally intelligible and, under certain conditions, socially valued. Bodily difference may be reinterpreted as a sign of spiritual calling, ritual sensitivity, or special capacity. This is one of the most important analytical insights produced by the study: ritual recognition can emerge precisely where broader social recognition remains incomplete.

At the same time, this legitimacy is conditional rather than universal. It is not granted on the basis of generalized equality, but on the basis of ritual usefulness, communal acceptance, and moral

credibility within particular settings. A gender-diverse individual may be respected as a medium, ritual performer, or spiritual intermediary while still facing exclusion in education, family life, employment, or public interaction. The analysis therefore reveals a crucial distinction between being spiritually recognized and being socially equal. This distinction matters because it shows that spiritual inclusion may coexist with structural inequality rather than displace it.

3. Analysis of Negotiated Inclusion in Spirit Mediumship

The third analytical pattern is that spirit mediumship operates as a form of negotiated inclusion. Mediumship provides a culturally intelligible site in which difference can be managed, interpreted, and sometimes legitimized without requiring full transformation of the wider moral order. In this sense, ritual space is neither a simple zone of liberation nor merely an extension of social domination. It is better understood as an intermediate arena in which communities accommodate ambiguity through culturally available symbolic forms.

Gendered and gender-diverse embodiments may therefore become acceptable when they are framed through spiritual service, ritual discipline, and perceived benefit to the community. Inclusion, however, is not unconditional. It is achieved through a process of negotiation in which bodies, performances, and claims to authority are continually evaluated.

This negotiated inclusion depends on three linked processes. The first is embodiment: the body becomes the medium through which spiritual force is displayed and interpreted. The second is authorization: legitimacy is relocated from the individual alone to the spirit that is said to call, possess, or act through that individual. The third is audience evaluation: ritual inclusion depends on whether communities regard the medium as morally credible, spiritually effective, and socially beneficial. These processes show that inclusion in spiritual contexts is never automatic. It must be enacted, recognized, and repeatedly sustained. Mediumship, therefore, does not abolish social boundaries, but selectively rearranges them.

4. Analysis of Futurity and Symbolic Reconfiguration

The fourth analytical dimension concerns futurity. The literature reviewed in this study does not support a simple narrative in which modernization causes spirit beliefs to disappear. What appears instead is a pattern of reinterpretation. Spirits endure not by remaining unchanged, but by being re-signified under new social conditions. For that reason, the future of spiritual meaning should be understood not only as a question of survival, but also as a question of symbolic reconfiguration.

As gender becomes more visible, plural, and openly negotiated in contemporary society, spiritual worlds are also pressured to absorb, resist, translate, or reshape these changes. The future of

spirits is therefore tied to their capacity to remain culturally meaningful within altered moral landscapes.

Three modes of futurity can be identified from the conceptual synthesis. The first is regulatory futurity, in which spirits continue to reinforce inherited gender norms and communal hierarchies. The second is negotiated futurity, in which gender diversity is partially accommodated through bounded ritual roles, symbolic exception, or spiritual calling. The third is transformative futurity, in which spirits begin to function as symbolic resources for imagining broader moral plurality and more flexible understandings of personhood. These modes may coexist, overlap, or compete within the same cultural field. For that reason, the future of spiritual meaning in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture should be understood as plural and contested rather than linear or uniform.

5. Synthesis of the Analysis

Taken together, the analysis supports three broader conclusions. First, spirits continue to matter because they function as adaptive cultural infrastructures rather than as static survivals of tradition. Second, gender diversity does not simply challenge spiritual systems from outside; it often reveals the internal flexibility through which those systems reinterpret difference. Third, spiritual recognition does not automatically resolve structural inequality. Instead, it frequently produces a pattern in which ritual legitimacy and social marginality coexist.

These findings provide the bridge to the next section. Having identified the major analytical patterns emerging from the conceptual review, the article can now move to a more explicit discussion of their theoretical implications. The following section therefore develops these insights further by explaining how gender, spirits, legitimacy, and futurity interact as mutually constitutive processes in the evolving cultural life of Lower Northeastern Thailand.

Discussion

This section discusses the theoretical implications of the preceding analysis by clarifying how spirits, gender, legitimacy, and futurity interact in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture. Rather than treating spirits as passive remnants of tradition, the discussion approaches them as active symbolic formations through which moral meaning continues to be organized and contested. Gender diversity, likewise, is not framed here as an external force simply acting upon an otherwise stable cultural order. Instead, both spirits and gender operate as mutually constitutive elements in the ongoing production of recognition, hierarchy, and social negotiation.

1. Spirits as Gendered Moral Authority

One of the clearest implications of the analysis is that spirits continue to function as forms of gendered moral authority. Their importance lies not only in their supernatural status, but also in their capacity to authorize expectations concerning bodily conduct, sexuality, ritual responsibility, and social propriety. As Allen and Coleman (2017) suggest in comparative discussions of spirit mediumship, spiritual legitimacy is often produced within embodied and socially negotiated settings rather than through fixed doctrinal rules alone. This helps explain why spirit worlds remain significant even when social norms are being questioned or revised.

Yet this authority is not singular or unchanging. Bilmes (1995) reminds us that ritual credibility is always subject to interpretation, performance, and audience evaluation. Applied to the present analysis, this means that gendered moral authority is never fully stable. A role once treated as self-evident may later be reinterpreted when charisma, ritual efficacy, or communal benefit become more important than inherited assumptions about gender. What emerges, then, is not a rigid moral order, but a structurally negotiable one in which authority is preserved precisely because reinterpretation remains possible.

2. Gender Diversity and Conditional Spiritual Legitimacy

A second implication concerns the uneven relationship between gender diversity and legitimacy. The analysis shows that spirit-related contexts may offer culturally intelligible forms of recognition for gender-diverse individuals, particularly when difference is framed through ritual calling, service, or spiritual efficacy. This insight becomes clearer when placed alongside broader discussions of social inclusion in Thailand. According to the UNDP (2019), visibility and tolerance do not necessarily translate into institutional equality; they often coexist with exclusion in education, work, and family life.

A similar pattern appears in more recent work on social vulnerability and recognition. Srikummoon et al. (2022) show that public acceptance may remain highly conditional, depending on the specific setting in which gender difference becomes visible. This conditionality is crucial. Gender-diverse individuals may be accepted when they occupy ritually meaningful roles or when their difference can be interpreted as socially beneficial. That same acceptance, however, may not travel beyond ritual space. In this way, spiritual recognition may coexist with structural marginality rather than displace it. The discussion therefore reinforces a central argument of this article: ritual legitimacy and structural equality are related, but they are not identical.

3. Spirit Mediumship as Negotiated Inclusion

The analysis further suggests that spirit mediumship is best understood as a mechanism of negotiated inclusion. It creates a cultural space in which ambiguity can be managed without requiring the complete reorganization of the wider moral order. Taywaditep (2001), in discussing the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality in Thailand, points to the importance of socially bounded recognition. That perspective is useful here because it helps explain why mediumship can accommodate difference without necessarily normalizing it in universal terms.

This point is reinforced by Matzner and Costa (2015), who show that gender diversity in Thai contexts is often recognized through hierarchically structured social frames rather than through egalitarian inclusion. This process depends on a delicate balance. Mediumship may permit the embodiment of difference, but it also subjects that embodiment to ritual discipline, public scrutiny, and moral evaluation. Inclusion is therefore negotiated rather than guaranteed. The medium becomes acceptable not because all difference is embraced, but because spiritual practice supplies a recognized framework through which difference can be interpreted as purposeful, beneficial, and culturally manageable.

4. Futurity and the Re-signification of Spirits

A final implication concerns futurity. The analysis does not support a simple narrative in which spirit beliefs either survive unchanged or disappear under modern conditions. What becomes more visible instead is a struggle over how spirits will be interpreted in relation to changing understandings of gender, legitimacy, and personhood. Meyer (2003), writing on social stress and minority positioning, is helpful here because he shows that cultural meanings are often reshaped under conditions of tension rather than abandoned altogether. Applied to this article, such a perspective suggests that the future of spirits is tied not to decline alone, but to reinterpretation under pressure.

This means that the future of spiritual meaning is not singular. Some trajectories may reinforce inherited gender hierarchies, others may allow limited accommodation, and still others may support broader symbolic transformation. The future of spirits, therefore, should be understood as plural, contested, and uneven. What matters most is not whether spirits remain in some abstract sense, but what kinds of moral worlds they come to authorize as communities negotiate changing forms of difference.

5. Research Propositions (RP)

RP1: In Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture, spirits function as gendered moral authorities that reproduce normative expectations of bodily conduct, sexuality, and social roles, while remaining open to reinterpretation through ritual performance and communal evaluation.

RP2: Gender-diverse individuals engaged in spirit-related roles are more likely to gain localized ritual legitimacy than durable structural equality, producing a pattern of conditional inclusion that varies across settings, audiences, and institutional contexts.

RP3: Spirit mediumship operates as a mechanism of negotiated inclusion by making gendered difference culturally intelligible within ritual frameworks, while leaving broader hierarchies of stigma and exclusion largely intact.

RP4: The future of spiritual meaning in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture is shaped less by the decline of spirits than by their re-signification under changing gender configurations, producing regulatory, negotiated, and transformative modes of futurity.

RP5: Symbolic recognition within spiritual domains does not by itself eliminate structural inequality; rather, it reveals the uneven relationship between cultural legitimacy, moral authority, and broader social inclusion.

6. Concluding Note to the Discussion

The discussion has shown that gender and spirits are not separate domains brought into contact from time to time. They are mutually constitutive dimensions of cultural life. Spirits help organize gendered meaning, while changing gender configurations expose the elasticity, limits, and future trajectories of spiritual authority. In Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture, this relationship is especially visible because spirit beliefs continue to function as living infrastructures of moral interpretation. The next section concludes the article by restating the central argument and clarifying its broader significance for the study of gender, spirituality, and cultural transformation.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the future of spiritual meaning in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture cannot be understood apart from changing configurations of gender. Rather than treating spirits as static remnants of tradition, the study has conceptualized them as adaptive cultural infrastructures that continue to organize moral life, ritual legitimacy, and community interpretation under contemporary conditions of social change. Through a conceptual synthesis of relevant

scholarship, the article has shown that spirits remain socially significant not because they resist change, but because they are capable of absorbing, translating, and re-signifying it.

In relation to the first objective, the analysis has shown that spirits continue to function as cultural and moral structures in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture. They shape understandings of propriety, social obligation, embodiment, and communal order, while also mediating the relationship between inherited cosmologies and lived social realities. In relation to the second objective, the article has demonstrated that gender and gender diversity are negotiated through spirit-related practices, ritual roles, and spirit mediumship in ways that are culturally intelligible yet socially uneven. Spiritual settings may open spaces for recognition, but that recognition is often conditional, localized, and dependent on ritual legitimacy rather than broader equality. In relation to the third objective, the study has argued that the future of spiritual meaning is being re-signified under changing gender configurations, producing multiple possible trajectories of continuity, accommodation, and symbolic transformation.

A central conclusion of the article is that ritual legitimacy and structural equality are not the same. Gender-diverse individuals may gain spiritual recognition within particular ritual contexts while still facing exclusion, stigma, or vulnerability in everyday institutional life. This distinction is critical because it prevents overly celebratory readings of spiritual inclusion and allows for a more precise understanding of how recognition operates across different domains of social life. Spirit mediumship, in this regard, is best understood neither as a fully emancipatory sphere nor as a mere extension of domination, but as a negotiated cultural space in which difference can become meaningful, legitimate, and yet still bounded.

The article therefore concludes that the future of spirits should not be framed as a question of simple survival or disappearance. What matters more is how spirits are interpreted, mobilized, and re-located within emerging moral worlds. Some trajectories may reinforce inherited gender hierarchies, some may allow limited accommodation, and others may support broader symbolic transformation. The future of spiritual meaning in Lower Northeastern Thai folk culture is thus plural, contested, and historically open. It is shaped by ongoing struggles over legitimacy, gender, morality, and the terms through which communities recognize what it means to be human.

In theoretical terms, this study contributes to scholarship on gender, spirituality, and Thai folk culture by proposing that spirits should be understood as living infrastructures of cultural interpretation. This perspective makes it possible to move beyond the binary of tradition versus modernity and toward a more dynamic account of how moral worlds endure through adaptation. Future research may build on this argument by examining more closely how different local

communities, ritual practitioners, and gender-diverse actors negotiate spiritual meaning across specific provincial and subregional contexts in Lower Northeastern Thailand.

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