



In the Place of Origins: Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand (Body, Commodity, Text)

By Rosalind C Morris



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In the Place of Origins tells the tale of modernity in Northern Thailand, discerning its oblique signs in the performances of contemporary spirit mediums. In a world driven by the twin fantasies of pastness and newness, Rosalind C. Morris reveals that spirit mediumship is not simply a theater of atavistic tendency but an arena in which it is possible to read the relationships between new forms of representation and subjectivity, as well as new modes of magic and political power.

Through her careful examination of the transformations of spirit mediumship wrought by the mass media, Morris takes readers into the world of the northern Thai past to discover the anticipations of future histories. In this process, she finds new objects for anthropological inquiry, including romantic love and epistolary poetry. She then turns her eye toward the relationships between commodification and prosaic form and photography and the discourses of gendered and national identity. Attending to these issues as they manifest themselves in the practices of mediums, Morris describes both the mundane activities of spirit mediums and the grand ambitions to political authority that are embodied in the increasingly spectacular forms of possession that are becoming so popular with both tourists and local culture brokers. *In the Place of Origins* traverses this ground with accounts of right-wing militarism and ritual revival during the 70s, and of the democracy movement of 1992, when a global mass media was galvanized by images of military repression and the spectacle of traditional ritual power in cursing. Finally, considering the claims that mediums make to magical power in the face of both AIDS and the Asian economic crisis, Morris reveals the potency of extrajudicial forms of power and violence in the late modern era.

This provocative study will interest anthropologists, historians, Asianists, and those involved in gender, performance, media, and literary studies.



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Review

“Traveling from spirit mediumship to the ethnography of the finance capital market, *In the Place of Origins* combines theoretical bravura with brilliant narrative skill. As it comments on ethnographic self-fashioning in Thailand, it also examines the mediumship of disciplinary ethnography, and the alterity it so anxiously seeks to expell. This is a text of dazzling instructive simplicity.”—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Columbia University

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