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# Multiform Transmission and Belonging: Buddhist Social Spaces of Thai Migrant Women in Belgium

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The Thai migration to Belgium is numerically a woman-led phenomenon, which has captured social attention for the last decades. This attention entails stereotypes about Thai migrant women as ‘workers’ in the intimate industry and/or ‘exotic wives’ of Belgian men. To challenge these stereotypes, the present paper explores the often-ignored dimension of Thai women’s sociality. Specifically, it examines the transmission dynamics occurring in their Buddhist social spaces, which shape and reinforce their sense of belonging. To do so, it draws from ethnographic fieldwork with Thai migrant women and key social actors within the Thai population in the country. Data analysis unveils that these women engage in multiform modes of transmission in their Buddhist social spaces. First, they transmit good deeds from the material world to the spiritual realm through merit-making practices and by seeking spiritual guidance in the temple. Second, they pass their socio-cultural ways of belonging to their children by engaging in different socializing activities. And third, they involve themselves in sharing religious faith, material symbols, and tastes described as part of Thai culture. Through this multiform transmission, Thai migrant women confront in subtle ways the common-held views about them at the intersection of their various identities as spouses, mothers, citizens, and Buddhist devotees.

**Keywords:** Belgium; Buddhist Social Spaces; Multiform Transmission; Thai Buddhist Temples; Thai Migrant Women



## INTRODUCTION

For my qualitative study of ethnically mixed families involving Thai migrants in Belgium, I frequented these migrants’ social spaces, such as Theravada Buddhist temples (*wat*) in the country. “Social spaces” in this context are understood as networked relations in Lefebvre’s (1991) sense. They are “the means”, “the outcome”, and “the medium of social and cultural activity” (Knott, 2005, p. 34). In two of the temples I regularly visited in Belgium, I found the altar a fascinating, vibrant social space occupied by sacred Buddhist figures, images, and objects

(jars, flower vases, candle holders, etc.) in lively colors (see Figure 1). Most of these sacred things had crossed state borders, notably traveling from Thailand to Belgium. The flowers, burning incense, candles, water in wine glasses, and food offerings in front of the altar reflected the active spiritual engagement of Thai migrants. This engagement brings to the fore the transmission dynamics across borders (spiritual, spatial, temporal), raising the question of how Thai Buddhist social spaces such as *wat* shape and reinforce Thai migrants' sense of belonging.



**Figure 1.** A vibrant altar in a Thai Theravada Buddhist temple in Belgium (photo by Fresnoza-Flot, 2014)

The focus of this paper on Thai Buddhist social spaces originates from the observation that studies about these spaces in Europe remain so far scarce (except Baumann, 1995; Plank, 2015; Webster, 2016; Xiu, 2015). In Belgium, the existence of Theravada Buddhist temples (De Backer, 2002) suggests that Thai migrants' sociality goes beyond the domestic and labor market spheres, which may produce or reinforce different senses of belonging. To find out the role of Buddhist social spaces in shaping these migrants' belonging, I investigate the case of Thai migrant women in the present study. These women quantitatively dominate the Thai population in Belgium, making up 86% of the 3,862 Thais present in the country (Statbel, 2022). Most of them enter the country through family reunification as fiancées or spouses of Belgian nationals. Thai migrant women generally reside in the Brussels capital and Flanders, the Flemish-speaking region of the country. They usually find employment in the restaurant sector, dry goods stores, supermarkets, and domestic service sector, working as cleaners and nannies.

Before unveiling the transmission dynamics in which Thai migrant women are engaged in their Buddhist social spaces, I present the analytical framework of my study that builds upon the concept of transmission while adopting an intersectionality stance. I also define in this section the key terms and concepts I mobilize in my paper. After this section, I revisit the corpus of works on migrants' religiosity and the question of belonging in the context of migration. This literature review aims to identify the forms of transmission in migrants' religious spaces, which may help explore Thai migrant women's Buddhist social spaces in Belgium. Following this state-of-the-art section, I provide a background context in which I unveil the social situation of Thai migrant women in Belgium at the intersection of various categories of difference. In a separate section, I describe my methodology and ethnographic fieldwork. The central part of the paper presents three forms of transmission occurring in *wat* and within the realm of the home of my research informants: transcendental, transgenerational, and transnational.

### UNDERSTANDING BELONGING THROUGH TRANSMISSION AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The focus in the present paper on belonging brings to the fore this concept's signification and how it can be understood. It is important to clarify its operational meaning and explain two possible ways to approach it within the context of migration.

Belonging is a polysemic concept, which reflects its complexity as a subjective experience and an empirical phenomenon. Yuval-Davis (2006) defines it as an "emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home'" (p. 197), or in the words of May (2011), "a sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings" (p. 368). Home and surroundings can mean different things to individuals or collectives. In a migration setting, they most often refer to one's group, society, or nation of origin, which suggests that belonging has something to do with identification and affiliation. However, Knott (2017) argues that "belonging" is "an ongoing and performed act" (p. 223), which therefore goes beyond the notions of membership (i.e., being part of a specific group or organization) and identity (i.e., subjective definition of oneself based on specific characteristics). These notions generally suggest fixedness rather than fluidity. Nonetheless, the notion of "membership" has become more and more fluid over the years (Grothe-Hammer & La Cour, 2020). In contrast, the notion of "identity" has become increasingly associated with the term identification that is more process-oriented (Hall, 1997). Like the term "identification", belonging is a process entailing the performance of certain identities through different practices.

In order to grasp belonging, the lens of "transmission" – a process of passing something to someone (Treppe, 2000) – appears useful because of its broad scope encompassing other social processes, such as the phenomenon of transnationalism in the context of migration. Basch et al. (1994) define "transnationalism" as the maintenance by migrants of various forms of social ties linking their society of origin and destination. This process entails constant passing and receiving or, in other words, transfer of information, symbols, values, and objects across borders of nation-states. Another related process that the concept of transmission can analytically capture is what social and cultural psychology scholars call "transgenerational transmission"

(Fornaro, 2019). In the migration setting, this topic has attracted scholarly interests in different disciplines, focusing mostly on vertical (parent to children), horizontal (sibling to sibling), and reverse (children to parent) transfer of what Fornaro (2019) enumerates as “themes, ideologies, normative values, relational and emotional traits of one’s own culture of belonging” (p. 308). Among these elements, the transmission of socio-cultural “ways of belonging” (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) occupies the central stage. These ways are “practices that signal or enact identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group” (p. 1010). Finally, the concept of transmission can illuminate what individual migrants intend to transmit from the material world to the spiritual realm through their religious practices. Through the conceptual lens of transmission, the present paper investigates the key role of Buddhist social spaces such as *wat* in Thai migrants’ life in Belgium, specifically the enactment of their sense of belonging.

This enactment process may involve individual characteristics or categories of difference based on factors such as gender, social class, and ethnicity. Gender is the socially constructed difference between men and women, signifying power relations (Scott, 1986). Drawing from a Marxist perspective on economic inequalities and Bourdieu’s institutionalized form of cultural capital, such as educational diploma (Bourdieu, 1997; Bottero, 2014; Van Hear, 2014), the concept of social class in this paper encompasses both economic resources and education attainment. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is defined here as a marker of otherness used to describe differences among socio-cultural groups (Pieterse, 2003). In heterogeneous countries like Thailand with several regions, languages, and religions (Cohen, 1991; Kitiarsa, 2005; Luangthongkum, 2007), the term “internal ethnicity” (Light et al., 1993) appears useful for this paper to make sense of Thai migrants’ enactment of belonging at the local level. The term “global ethnicity” (Light et al., 1992) refers to national belonging and appears effective in identifying Thai migrant women’s link to the Thai nation.

To understand the influence of gender, social class, and ethnicity (internal or global) in Thai women’s enactment of belonging, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) appears an effective analytical approach to be adopted. It focuses on the simultaneous interaction at a given place and time of various factors or categories of difference, which (re)produces the social subordination and marginality of minority women. It is originally applied to the case of Black women in the United States of America (ibid.) but has increasingly been adopted in recent years to study other cases of minority women in the context of migration (Butratana & Trupp, 2021; Fathi, 2017; Fresnoza-Flot, 2022; Lévy, 2022). Aligned with the theme of the special issue that the present paper is part of, I borrow this approach of intersectionality to understand Thai migrant women’s belonging through multiform transmission practices in their Buddhist social spaces.

### **MIGRATION, RELIGION, AND BELONGING**

The literature on religion in the context of migration shows the plural role of this social institution in the lives of migrants in their receiving countries and, more recently, in their social spaces traversing the borders of nation-states (Levitt, 2003; 2004). One of the important functions of religion identified in this literature is its facilitating and reinforcing role of migrants’ sense of belonging.

Migrants manifest and affirm their sense of belonging through ritual performances during key life-course events (births, marriages, funerals) and through material, symbolic, and spatial consumption while demonstrating their religion-based moral values. These “ways of belonging” (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) demonstrate individuals’ various memberships to a faith-based population, an immigrant community, and one or several nations. They also point to religion’s crucial role in the life of migrants: as an “expression of identity”, “community formation”, “refuge from oppression”, and “site of resistance and activism” (Bonifacio & Angeles, 2010, p. 10).

Moreover, belonging appears anchored in geographic places. Migrants in their receiving countries usually congregate in their places of worship that fulfill a socializing function. These places provide different opportunities for migrants in terms of housing, economic possibilities, and access to socio-legal information (Fresnoza-Flot, 2010). Religious activities such as pilgrimages and organized prayers create and perpetuate social spaces (Liebelt, 2010; Skrbis, 2007), producing a collective feeling of being part of a larger community at the intersection of social differences. These activities connect migrants with their countries of origin (Bava & Capone, 2010; McAlistar, 2002; Socorro Flores Tondo, 2010), facilitate their incorporation into their receiving country (Bastelier & Dassetto, 1985), and link them to other migrants of the same faith in other countries (McAuliffe, 2016). Places of worship also facilitate the reproduction of linguistic and other socio-cultural traditions among migrants and their descendants (Maliepaard & Lubbers, 2013). At the same time, migrants reinforce their faith and spiritual connections by frequenting these places and other sites socially considered sacred, which allows them to become and/or portray themselves as good, enlightened, or respectable individuals (Ambrosini et al., 2021; Pande, 2017).

Overall, it is evident that migrants’ religious social spaces are venues of transmission of faith, socio-cultural traditions, and material objects across national, generational, and spiritual borders. The present paper investigates the dynamics of this multiform transmission in Thai migrant women’s Buddhist social spaces in Belgium. Doing so provides fresh insights about these migrants’ religious sociality and agency. The objective here is not to replace common-held views about them with religion-shaped perspectives but to reveal their silenced identities and multifaceted social lives, which can question essentializing views about them in their receiving country.

### **THAI MIGRANT WOMEN AT INTERSECTING CATEGORIES OF DIFFERENCE IN BELGIUM**

At the time of the study, Thai migrant women, like other migrants in mixed couples in Belgium, were experiencing social and political scrutiny, notably concerning the authenticity of their relationship with Belgian citizens. This situation unveils how Thai women are viewed in Belgium, and the intersecting categories of difference that (re)produce stereotypes<sup>1</sup> about them.

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<sup>1</sup> This term refers to “social perception” about individuals based on supposed or imagined attributes, which generates generalizing “impression” (Lippman, 1922, as cited in Tao & Chen, 2017, p. 22).



During my fieldwork, some Thai women criticized the reality television series called *Exotische liefde* (exotic love) broadcasted on the VT4 channel in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of the country) for its portrayal of Thai women as being ‘only after money’. The word “exotic” in the title of the series implies, on the one hand, a foreign country geographically far from Belgium, and on the other hand, someone who is stereotypically imagined as different from the Belgian population in socio-cultural terms. Thai migrant women in the aforementioned television series were portrayed as exotic wives or partners of Belgian men. In this exoticism of Thai women in Belgium, religiosity appears not highlighted; rather, these women’s feminine qualities are viewed as part of the encompassing category of Asian women. One Belgian man married to a Thai woman remarked to me during an interview, “there is an image, a phantasm, this kind of phantasm of the Asian woman, attentive, submissive”. This remark corroborates the stereotype about Asian women that Heyse (2010) observed in her study of Russian-speaking marriage migrant women in Belgium. Her informants distanced themselves from “Thai and Philippine women, who are not highly educated and are used to ‘serving their husband, being docile and obedient”” (pp. 76-77). Although studies show that exoticism entails the notions of religiosity or spirituality (Hélie-Lucas, 2001; Shields, 2010), Thai women in Belgium appear mainly viewed as “Asian women” with feminine qualities suited for couple or family formation.

Aside from gender stereotypes, sexual and ethnic stereotypes about Thai migrant women abound in Belgian society, as can be observed in several online commercials about Thai massage parlors, often featuring sexy photographs of women presented as Thais. At the beginning of the study in 2012, there were 75 Thai massage parlors in Brussels alone, and these parlors were mostly offering erotic or body-to-body massages (Serve the City, 2010). As our fieldwork among Thai migrant women progressed, it became clearer that these women’s bodies were most often genderized, sexualized, and ethnicized in commercial advertisements to attract clients. This stereotyping occurred against the backdrop of the Belgian state’s control and regulations of binational marriages due to the rising cases of marriage of convenience in the country. The Belgian state examines the “authenticity” of binational relationships through the lens of romantic love (Mascia & Odasso, 2015; Maskens, 2015). Since most Thai migrant women are much younger than their Belgian partners, their union often attracts the Belgian society’s critical gaze.

In short, at the time of fieldwork for the present study, the stereotypes about Thai migrant women in Belgium were exotic wives or partners of Belgian men who were ‘only after money’ and/or workers in the intimate industry. As we will see, the Thai women interviewed in this study revealed other aspects of their lives beyond common-held stereotypes.

#### DATA-GATHERING METHODS AND PERSONS INTERVIEWED

The present paper draws from my three-year research (2012-2015) on children of ethnically mixed families in Belgium, specifically from my case study of Thai-Belgian families. My ethnographic fieldwork for the research mentioned above took place in the three regions of the country: Wallonia, Flanders, and Brussels-Capital. I adopted

qualitative data-gathering methods such as interviews, observations, and informal conversations. Aside from ethnographic fieldnotes, my fieldwork generated more than a hundred interviews, including 19 interviews with Thai migrant women and 12 interviews with key social actors<sup>2</sup> within the Thai immigrant population (i.e., two temple abbots, two Thai embassy officials, three Thai language teachers, and five association leaders).

informants (pseudonyms)	age	duration of immigration (in years)	education level	profession	children
Phailin	60	25	none	retired dressmaker	1
Prisana	43	20	bachelor	translator	1
Malisa	43	18	bachelor	factory worker	1
Daw	43	24	elementary	office cleaner	1
Ruang	43	14	bachelor	cook in a restaurant	0
Malee	49	17	bachelor	home cleaner	2
Farung	46	10	postgraduate	Thai teacher/entrepreneur	1
Nin	44	10	vocational	housewife	1
Piti	50	20	vocational	caregiver	1
Nom	37	12	bachelor	home cleaner	1
Pim	45	30	secondary	shop manager	4
Solada	57	34	elementary	entrepreneur	3
Siriporn	47	25	elementary	home cleaner	3
Mai	43	13	bachelor	housewife	2
Kanya	43	25	elementary	housewife	4
Pailin	62	25	elementary	home cleaner/entrepreneur	1
Siri	49	26	bachelor	housewife	3
Dao	50	22	bachelor	housewife	0
Som	53	15	bachelor	office worker/language teacher	0

**Table 1.** Thai women interviewed in Belgium

As table 1 shows, the women interviewed were mostly in their 40s, and many had lived in Belgium for over 20 years. Most of them had migrated to Belgium for or by marriage. Only two had no children, and six informants had offspring from previous relationships with Thai men. Although many were married to Belgian men, the informants did not become completely economically dependent on their Belgian husbands. They mostly engaged in the labor market but none in the massage industry at the time of my interview: for example, as home cleaners, language teachers, and entrepreneurs. All but seven of the interviewed women had tertiary-level education: two with vocational degrees, nine with bachelor's diplomas, and one with postgraduate education. The high number of informants residing in Belgium for a long time and with tertiary-level education might be the effect of the snowballing approach I adopted, as I met some of the women interviewed through the referrals of a Thai association leader who introduced me to her Thai friends as a researcher. To vary

2 Social actors in this context refer to individuals who fulfill specific roles within the Thai immigrant population in Belgium and have regular contact with their fellow migrants. They are involved "in processes and in carrying out initiatives" (Sénécal, 2012, p. 37).



my sample in terms of educational attainment and economic situation, I frequented Thai Buddhist temples - the main social spaces of Thai migrants in Belgium. In these spaces, I presented myself as part of a 'mixed' family and as a mother of ethnically mixed children. This way of self-presentation allowed me to attract Thai informants with modest social class backgrounds.

With the informants' consent, I recorded my interviews with them. These interviews and my informal conversations with them were carried out either in French or in English, which represents a limitation of my study. To gain some contextual information about Thai migrants in general (e.g., history of immigration, estimated population, associations founded, places most frequented, and common challenges encountered), I did not only interview key social actors within the Thai immigrant population, but also drew from scholarly literature and available statistical data on Thai migration in Belgium. Except in a few cases in which friendship blossomed during fieldwork, my relationship with the Thai women informants can be generally described as a typical researcher-informant relation, characterized by reciprocal exchanges of symbolic gestures (e.g., sharing foods and drinks) and personal information about our family and immigrant lives.

During my fieldwork, I identified four temples: one in Wallonia, that is, Wat Thai Dhammaram, and three *wat* in Flanders, namely Wat Dhammapateep, Buddharama Temple, and Wat Phra Dhammakaya. I carried out fieldwork almost every weekend at Wat Thai Dhammaram and Wat Dhammapateep, which attracted many Thai migrants and Belgians. These temples are located in a European-style house or building, unlike Thai Buddhist temples in other destination countries of Thai migrants, such as the one in Wimbledon in the United Kingdom (see Chuenglertsiri, 2020). Based on my observation, the main room of these temples, where one can find the Buddhist altar, can only accommodate about 15 to 20 people. Nonetheless, both temples have spacious surroundings, where outdoor activities such as flea markets and festivals can be organized. Compared to the temple in Wallonia, the Wat Dhammapateep in Flanders was at that time located far from the city center.<sup>3</sup> This temple was not easy to reach due to the limited number of public buses passing in its location. It was not surprising that Thai migrants I met in this temple usually came by car.

For the present paper, I draw from my fieldnotes and interviews to unveil the transmission dynamics in Thai migrant women's Buddhist social spaces, notably temples. The names of my informants that appear in this text are pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

## MULTIFORM TRANSMISSION AND BELONGING

The *wat* and other Thai Buddhist social spaces, specifically home altars, are transmission sites for Thai migrants. I observed during fieldwork that this transmission has several dimensions, namely transcendental, transgenerational, and transnational. These dimensions are related to other aspects of Thai migrants' Buddhist social spaces in Belgium.

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<sup>3</sup> Before the temple moved to a new location in the same region, it took about 15 minutes to reach it by public bus from the main station in the nearest city.

### Transcendental Transmission: Offerings for and Guide from the Spiritual Realm

The question of transmission goes beyond the mundane world for Thai migrant women in the present study. These women's Buddhist social spaces, notably the *wat*, unveil the transcendental transmission they actively engage in, transforming good deeds into merits by transferring them from the material world to the spiritual realm. The boundary between these spheres is the "most important boundary" and not the one "between men and women" (Plank 2015, p. 208).

Offerings are the most common practice for transcending the spiritual realm. Many Thai migrant women regularly visit a temple to pray alone or with their family members. During this visit, most of them offer thanks in different forms: giving to the monk mineral water, clothes, vegetables, and financial donation, among others (Fieldnotes, 5 March 2015). Such offering is widely observed among Buddhists in Thailand and also in migrant populations of different religious backgrounds in their receiving countries (Bonifacio & Angeles, 2010; Levitt, 2003), which attests to the role of religious sites such as temples and churches as spaces of socialization. For Thai migrants, a *wat* is an ideal place to pray and meditate. In fact, meditation sessions are available in *wat* for Thais and non-Thais. Most Thai women participate in these sessions without their Belgian husbands, thereby demonstrating their religious subjectivity detached from their husbands, who are mostly non-practicing Christians. Coming alone or with their young children to the temple allows these women to highlight their other global ethnic, religious, and gender identifications as Theravada Buddhist Thai women and mothers.

Thai informants continue their praying and meditation practices in their homes, where one can generally find a small Buddhist altar. This altar is a micro-social space that attracts visitors' gaze when showcased in 'public' spaces such as a living room or on the side of the stairway in the informants' home. Thai informants told me during my interviews or informal conversations that they were responsible for arranging and decorating their homes, including where to put their Buddha images and/or small altar. This role at home partly reflects the gender division of domestic labor in these women's families, where they usually accomplish the reproductive work from cleaning to cooking. In many cases, the Buddhist altar is accompanied by an image of the king of Thailand (Figure 2 below) and decorations such as elephants. The type of materials of the sacred decorations (wood or stone), from where they were brought (in Thailand or in Belgium), and the way they are positioned at home (sporadically or in a specific place) partly suggest the social class belonging of Thai informants. Hence, the specific place in the Thai informants' home, where the Buddhist altar and other sacred images/objects are positioned, stems from the intersection of these women's gender, social class, and global ethnicity.

Interestingly, informants with traumatic difficulties in the past, such as problematic divorce, loss of investments, and near-death experiences, seem to devote a lot of time and energy to expressing their faith. One interviewed woman I call Solada (57 years old), who maintained an altar, invited me to see it in her bedroom. While standing in front of the altar, she narrated to me her near-death experience and encounter with floating lights or souls trying to enter her lifeless body. She also shared with me her spiritual understanding about her reincarnation and sufferings in



**Figure 2.** An altar in the living room of an informant's home (photo by Fresnoza-Flot, 2014)

this life due to what she did in her past life. Like other informants, Solada emphasized the uselessness of paying attention to the past on the one hand and the importance of focusing on the present on the other hand.

What I do wrong, what I don't do wrong, I don't forget, but I don't put [them] in my mind anymore. I don't want to live in the past, I want [to] live now. Yes, that is important. Otherwise, you [are] not happy, never, you cannot. [...] you have to accept what you have. You have to when something happen(s). Try to pray [to] forget our problem, but not sit like that, like a dog. (interview transcripts, 28 April 2014)

The “present” means being a good human being and praying for the future. To have a hint about their future and prepare for it, some women go to the temple and seek advice from the monk to find solutions to their problems. They also resort to fortune-telling using fortune sticks (*Seam Si*). In one temple, I met an informant named Pai (43 years old), who showed me how they glimpsed the future. She and other women inside the temple first prayed before the Buddhist altar. After that, they went to the corner of the temple and shook a bottle filled with thin, red-colored wooden sticks. Each stick was numbered. After shaking the bottle, they made one stick fall and opened the corresponding paper that contained a message written in Thai, English, and Chinese about their lives. One example of such a message in English is reproduced below:

Just like a flower, blooming under the angry sun, but managers [*sic*] to look fresh. Like a little bird learning to fly a strong wind, falls down [*sic*] to the

ground. Life would be enjoyable in the future. Patient recovering. Not likely to find a good mate at this stage. Legal case not favorable. Some good luck exists [sic]. Despite some hardships at present, it would be better not too long. (fieldnotes, 4 May 2014)

Pai was happy to see the message she got from her stick. Fortune sticks offered her a sense of hope in her complicated life (being in a third relationship and trying to be a mother to children with different biological fathers and residing in three distinct countries). Women with difficulties (economic and/or familial), such as Pai, find a way to come to grips with their future in *wat*. Turning to *wat* for moral and spiritual support seems to result from the interaction of these women's social class (in economic terms) and gender roles as wives and mothers.



**Figure 3.** Offerings for the monks during *Songkran* celebration (photo by Fresnoza-Flot, 2014)

During *Songkran* (New Year) celebrations, Thai migrants, their families, and friends congregate in *wat*, offer gifts to the monks, and eat together to obtain additional blessings and merits. In one *wat* during the *Songkran* celebration in 2014, Thai migrants hung colorful small gifts on a wishing tree next to a house transformed into a temple. Next to this tree was a table filled with ready-made offerings as Figure 3 shows: wrapped gifts with bottles of mineral water, instant noodles, canned goods, and small plastic bags of rice. Visitors could buy these offerings for the monks (fieldwork photos, 27 April 2014). The social class background of Thai devotees can be observed in the way they dress (formal or informal clothes, traditional Thai clothes or European-style clothing) to present themselves before the sacred. Merit-making activities, offerings, and seeking spiritual guidance in the temple reflect the transmission dynamics in which Thai migrant women are implicated in this world towards

the spiritual, sacred realm. This transmission that allows them to underline their religious and global ethnic belonging at the intersection of gender, social class, and global ethnicity also has a transgenerational dimension.

### **Transgenerational Transmission of Socio-Cultural Ways of Belonging from Mother to Children**

During my fieldwork in a Thai Buddhist temple in Flanders, a young Belgian-Thai boy with his Thai mother participated in the *Song Nam Phra* (water bathing ceremony). The Thai woman taught her son how to behave before the monks and perform the nonverbal greeting called *wai*.<sup>4</sup> During large ceremonies such as *Song Nam Phra* and *Songkran*, one can see and meet many Thai-Belgian families with their children in the temple. During these events, one can also witness the religious transmission from Thai mothers to their children.

Like other places of worship, such as Christian churches (Fresnoza-Flot, 2020; Maliepaard & Lubbers, 2013), *wat* plays a key role in transgenerational transmission in migrants' families. Thai mothers bring their children to the temples to celebrate different key moments of life. Practices around these moments are ways of belonging that perpetuate the practices they learned in their country of origin. For instance, I once witnessed a ceremony of hair cutting of a Thai-Belgian baby in a Thai Buddhist temple in Flanders. During the ceremony, money was attached around the wrist of the baby, and a small quantity of the baby's hair was cut and buried at the foot of a large tree in the vicinity of the temple. After the ceremony, the Thai kin of the mother celebrated through commensality. They brought food to the temple and shared it with other temple visitors.

Commensality is one of the venues for transgenerational transmission (Bailey, 2017), which can be observed in *wat*. One young Thai woman I call Pat, who visited a temple in Flanders with her Thai mother, told me that "every lunchtime, women and other people in the temple sit ... around the monks" and the "monks give some information and pray" (Fieldnotes, 5 March 2014). Pat was among the few young adult children of Thai migrants who visited the temple from time to time. During my fieldwork, I observed that most children of Thai migrants who regularly frequent the temples in Flanders and Wallonia were minors of very young age. Their Thai mothers rarely came to the temple with their Belgian husbands. The mother-child dyad appears to be a salient figure in Thai Buddhist temples, which challenges the stereotypical social image of Thai women in Belgium as "spouses" of Belgian men and not as "mothers".

Temples are also places where the Thai language and traditional cultural practices are transmitted. For example, one Thai temple in Flanders provides Thai language and traditional Thai dance classes for children of Thai migrants during weekends, whereas the temple in Wallonia offers classes on traditional Thai musical instruments (Fresnoza-Flot, 2019). It is Thai mothers who introduce their children to these activities. Ruang, for example, explained below the importance of transgenerational transmission of the Thai language from her to her daughter.

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4 This gesture involves "bringing open palms together and synchronizing with a dip of the head or a bow (low, lower, or lowest, depending upon the level of veneration to be shown toward the person or object being addressed)" (Welty, 2009, p. xi).

If we go to the temple, we speak Thai. I say that ‘now, you have to speak Thai. You have to know the Thai way. You have to know the Thai [language]. You have to learn everything, how to speak, how to write, everything’, and when you go back [to Thailand], they [will]? say ‘ah your mother teaches [you] good, your father teaches you good’ [something] like that. (interview transcripts, 7 April 2014)

This narrative conveys how Thai migrant mothers such as Ruang are influenced transnationally by their country’s conception of *Thai-ness* based on the mastery of the Thai language and what they call ‘Thai culture.’ Interestingly, Thai mothers reinforce their internal ethnicity during their interactions in the Thai temples, thereby transmitting such affiliation to their children. During my fieldwork in a Thai temple in Flanders, Pat remarked that most Thais frequenting the temple originated from the Northeast region (Isan) of Thailand, that these migrants communicated with one another using their local language, and that the foods prepared in the temple were mainly Isan food<sup>5</sup> (Fieldnotes, 28 June 2014). Many of these migrants brought their young children to the temple, where they were exposed to these socio-cultural ways of communication and commensality. In this case, gender and internal ethnicity intersect, producing a nuanced intergenerational transmission. Nonetheless, the classes organized for children in *wat* is the Thai national language, and outside of the class, children used to communicate with one another using the Dutch language. One informant named Farung, who regularly brings her child to the temple every weekend, confided me her frustration:

Actually, I have to go to the temple, almost whole day [...] I cook in the morning. I prepare the food, and then around lunch, I go to the temple, and I eat there. And one o’clock (is) the class, the children’s (Thai) class, but sometimes, I bring Bryan [his son] you know from (the) beginning, but now I know he got more forward (progress). He got better than (before), but the good thing is he can talk to other kids, but they talk in Dutch, yeah, together. [...] so, I’m not really pleased with that. (interview transcripts, 14 July 2014)

Social class-based groupings or identifications were also salient in Thai Buddhist social spaces. Most Thai association leaders I interviewed were university-educated. One of them confided the difficulty that association leaders encounter in Belgium when trying to obtain the cooperation and active involvement of Thai migrant women of working-class background (mostly from Isan) in their activities. The transmission of social class belonging from Thai mothers to their children takes place against the backdrop of a class divide, which most often has an internal ethnic dimension. During my fieldwork, Thai women who talked to me referred to themselves as “Thai” (*khon Thai*), their global ethnicity of being born in Thailand. This self-presentation usually occurred the first time we met when they mistook me for a Thai woman and asked me if I was Thai. After several interactions, some of them emphasized their internal

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5 Many Thai migrants I met during fieldwork in Flanders and Wallonia mentioned glutinous rice and papaya salad as typical Isan foods.



ethnicity as someone coming from Isan and speaking the Lao Isan language. During conversations with them, Thai informants distinguished themselves from other Thai migrants not only in terms of internal ethnicity (i.e., local origin and regional language spoken) but also in terms of social class belonging (specifically education attainment or previous employment in Thailand) and the motivation behind their mixed marriage, as Nom with university education explained below:

They (other Thai women) have a different meaning, I think. For me, I married with love, [...] I think the women who (have) high, different mentality for education, if high education, I think, they would love to go with men that they can talk to, that can build together, that can side by side share, share something like that (with them). But for women who (have) low education, I think a little different, to have a better life, yes, I think. (interview transcripts, 8 June 2014)

By stressing the romantic aspect of her relationship with her Belgian partner and highlighting her social class belonging, Nom appears to challenge the stereotype about Thai women in Belgium as exotic wives who are only after money. Her case is representative of other informants' cases showing how stereotypes about Thai women in Belgium shape their narratives of belonging. Frequenting the temple with their children and engaging in religious practices of praying, offering presents, and meditation allow Thai women like Nom to make visible and transmit to their offspring their valorizing identities at the intersection of gender, religious affiliation, social class, and global and/or internal ethnicity.

Thus, Thai Buddhist temples as a place of socialization (Butratana & Trupp, 2011; Plank, 2015; Webster & Careta, 2016) address Thai mothers' needs and assist them in transmitting 'Thai culture' or, for those from the Northeast region, their internal ethnicity to their children. However, as I explained elsewhere (Fresnoza-Flot, 2021), this changes when children grow up, engage in several activities with their peers, integrate into the labor market, and refuse to frequent their Thai mothers' spaces of socialization. After learning their Thai mothers' socio-cultural ways of belonging, these grown-up children immerse themselves deeply outside their mothers' social spaces to experience different subjectivities.

### **Transnational Transmission: Faith, Material Symbols, and Tastes**

On 24 May 2014, a famous Thai nun from Thailand visited one of the Thai Buddhist temples in Flanders. Many Thai women arrived in this temple dressed in white to listen to her on that day. This event suggests that the temple can be a transmission site, linking one country to another and forming "transnational social spaces" (Faist, 1998). Such a transmission crossing national borders entails geographical movements of people and objects carrying, transferring, and sharing faith, material symbols, and tastes.

The visit of the Thai nun in Belgium was not the sole transnational practice we can observe in Thai Buddhist temples. There are monks from Thailand and other European countries who visit a Thai Buddhist temple and stay there in Belgium. Thai migrants from neighboring European countries arrive in Belgium in a rented

bus for their pilgrimage to a Thai Buddhist temple and to visit renowned touristic places. In one case, a group of Thai migrants, together with the abbot of the Thai Buddhist temple they frequent in Switzerland, first proceeded to the Netherlands to see tulip gardens before coming to Belgium and visiting one of the Thai temples in Flanders (Fieldnotes, 5 March 2014). Pilgrimages such as those observed among Thais in Europe appear widespread among migrant populations worldwide (e.g., Liebelt, 2010; Skrbis, 2007). During these pilgrimages, religious faith is celebrated, shared, and reinforced among visiting migrants and those welcoming them in their place of worship. Belonging not only to the Theravada Buddhist institution but also to the Thai nation as its (former) citizens, Thai migrants' religious affiliation intersects with their global ethnicity in this regard.

Aside from pilgrimages, Thai migrant women visit Thai Buddhist temples outside of their country of residence for other purposes. For example, after a recorded interview with me in her home, Pim (45 years old) showed me on her mobile phone a photo of her and a Thai friend wearing traditional Thai clothes during the *Songkran* celebration in a Thai Buddhist temple in France (Fieldnotes, 14 April 2014). I met a few Thai women residing in the Netherlands who visited Thai *wat* in Belgium to donate things to Thai monks. One of them is Mai whom I met for the first time in a Thai Buddhist temple in Flanders during a *Songkran* celebration. She told me that there were Thai temples in the Netherlands, but she liked the Thai abbot in the temple where we met. In one event in the Thai temple in Wallonia, I was surprised to meet Mai again. This time she came with her friends from the Netherlands to offer sacks of potatoes, onions, tomatoes, and pots of flowers to the abbot of the temple (Fieldnotes, 4 May 2014). Women with good economic resources like Mai most often engage in such a transnational practice, in which social class belonging intersects with their religiosity. Visits and offerings in a Thai Buddhist temple in another country appear here as an enactment of multiple belonging to a privileged social class and to a complex Theravada Buddhist transnational community in which religious hybridization is taking place as in Thailand (Jackson, 2020; Kitiarsa, 2005): for example, occult practices such as using fortune sticks to get a hint of the future (see the section on transcendental transmission).

Temples also act as transnational transmitters to Thailand of the remains of deceased Thai Buddhist migrants, specifically of those with no economic resources and no family members in Belgium. The intersection of women's social class and family situation results in this situation. Ruang explained to me what she observed in one temple she regularly frequented:

Sometimes they (Thai women) stay here (in Belgium) and kill themselves because they have so much problem, and nobody knows. [...] (someone) bring(s) the ash to the temple and bring (it) back to Thailand because no people [...] can bring (it) because they have no family here. (interview transcripts, 7 April 2014)

In addition, material symbols from Thailand can be easily spotted in Thai Buddhist temples. For example, during the flea market organized every first Sunday of the month in the temple in Wallonia, even the decorations in the temple and the materials used for activities, such as traditional music classes for children, originated

from the country. Likewise, the tools used in fruit-carving classes in one of the Thai temples in Flanders and in soap-carving sessions during a Thai cultural festival in the region were brought from Thailand.<sup>6</sup> As Figure 4 illustrates below, at a monthly flea market in a Thai Buddhist temple, one can find a variety of Thai specialties being sold, which accentuates the Thai sellers' global ethnicity (i.e., being part of the Thai nation) and their identity as 'workers' not in the intimate industry but in the socio-cultural sector. Foods sold are prepared using ingredients and utensils mostly brought from Thailand. Indeed, as Plank (2015) remarks, "religion can also be translocative as it links the diaspora to their homeland in different ways through time and space – often through symbolic links" (p. 220).



**Figure 4.** A section of the flea market behind a Thai temple (photo by Fresnoza-Flot, 2014)

Hence, Thai Buddhist temples in Belgium may be small in terms of their physical dimensions but appear truly global and cross-border in terms of their social breadth. As social institutions, they are nodal points, or in Naidu's (2012) terms, "central nodal actor(s)" (p. 297), as they connect Thai migrants not only in Belgium but also in Europe as well as between Europe and Thailand. Indeed, Thai Buddhist temples serve as social hubs for Thai migrants (Webster, 2016), offering a feeling of home, a sense of emotional security, and economic opportunities (e.g., for selling Thai specialties).

<sup>6</sup> Thai temples of Thai diasporic populations are often affiliated with other temples in Thailand and sometimes receive financial support from the country. In Belgium, one example is the Wat Thai Dhammaram in Wallonia; it obtained support from the Thai government and the Sangha Supreme Council in Thailand (see <https://www.buddhism.be/fr/10-associations/29-wat-thai-dhammaram>).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present paper unveils how Thai Buddhist social spaces, specifically *wat*, shape and reinforce Thai migrant women's sense of belonging by serving as sites of transcendental, transgenerational, and transnational forms of transmission. This finding points to how Thai women's sociality is anchored in the sacred in the context of migration and the intersecting categories of difference that shape their multiform transmission practices.

Through ritual performances, sacred practices, and gift-giving, Thai migrant women transform their good deeds into merits and transfer them from the material world into the spiritual one. They transmit their socio-cultural ways of belonging across generations (from parents to children) and nation-state borders (from Thailand to Belgium). These forms of transmission highlight their multifarious belongings at various scales: to a faith community, to an ethno-regional group, to a social class, to their family, and to the Thai nation. Therefore, Thai Buddhist social spaces are a global platform where both the confluence and the affirmation of social differences and identities take place, enabling Thai women's sense-making in their receiving country. The religious sociality of these women reveals the other face of their subjectivity, one that showcases their moral self, reputable and spiritually guided. Thai migrant women's religion-shaped subjectivity challenges the essentializing stereotypes about them as solely exotic wives and/or workers in the intimate industry in Belgium, stereotypes that confine them within the reproductive and productive spheres of social life and silence their multiple identities. Thai migrant women navigate the common-held views about them in subtle ways at the intersection of their various identities as spouses, mothers, citizens, and Buddhist devotees.

The case explored in the present paper reconfirms that migrant women have multifaceted roles in their receiving and origin countries (Cole, 2014; Piper & Roces, 2004) and that places of worship play a significant role in their self-(re)construction (Werbner & Johnson, 2010). What differentiates this paper from previous studies on religion in migration settings is its simultaneous focus on the various forms of transmission in religious social spaces, which uncovers the nuances of migrant women's belonging. This paper also reveals that gender, social class, and (internal/global) ethnicity are the main intersecting categories of difference that influence Thai migrant women's various transmission practices. Sexuality is not salient in these women's Buddhist social spaces, unlike in the outside secular world, where its intersection with gender and ethnicity produces stereotypes of Thai migrant women as 'workers' in the intimate industry and as 'exotic wives' or partners of Belgian men.

The present paper, albeit methodologically limited, offers a starting point for future studies of transmission dynamics in Thai Buddhist social spaces. It suggests several possible themes for these future studies. First, the religious dimension of how Thai migrant women are exoticized in their receiving country will be worth exploring, notably how these migrants' religiosity reinforces certain stereotypes about them. Second, it would be worth exploring what is lost and passed on from Thai mothers to their children, from one space to another, and from the mundane world to the spiritual ones. Studies on this theme will be more insightful if the role of Buddhist social spaces on the ethnic identifications of young people is taken into account. And

third, although it may pose methodological challenges, a study on how Thai mothers, their husbands, and children negotiate, manage, and navigate religious socialization is urgent to gain multiple perspectives on transmission dynamics in Thai migrants' families.



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The author declares no conflict of interest.

