INTRODUCTION

by Oliver Tappe, Tijo Salverda, Andrea Hollington, Sinah Kloß and Nina Schneider (GSSC)

Around the globe, the idea of restless ghosts that have suffered an untimely death is very common. In the Thai horror movie *Ladda Land*, malevolent ghosts of murdered people haunt a family who lives in an – at first – innocent-looking upmarket condominium. As in the case of many contemporary movies in Asian cinema – perhaps most notably the works of Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul – this box-office hit reflects the interrelations and tensions between 'modern' lifestyles and allegedly 'traditional' beliefs and representations. This tension only superficially appears as a struggle between reason and irrationality. The deeper situation is actually more complex and ambivalent.

Despite being a fictional, pop-cultural engagement with the supernatural, *Ladda Land* hints at the everyday interaction between humans and spiritual beings in contemporary Southeast Asia (see Bräunlein and Lauser 2016). Encounters and interactions with uncanny beings yield not only negative, but also often positive results: In exchange for rituals, donations, and prayers, spirits might bestow blessings and fortune (Ladwig 2014). Thus, non-human beings such as ghosts (or spirits, demons, deities, jinns, poltergeists, etc.) form part of the social fabric of many communities throughout the world. People venerate ancestor ghosts, perform rituals, or wear amulets to shield themselves from malevolent spirits, and try to communicate with spectral beings via diviners, mediums, and other ritual experts.

This special issue of *Voices from around the World* explores the social, economic, and political interactions between the human and the spiritual world. Be it in the countryside or in the urban centres of hypermodernity, ghosts either haunt the living or are assigned specific social roles, sometimes reflecting sociocultural disquiet and uncertainties concerning the past, present, or future. Uncanny apparitions may also indicate the contradictions and broken promises of modernity, as Andrew Johnson observes in the dilapidated investment ruins in the city of Chiang Mai (in fact the real-life setting of the movie *Ladda Land*): "The buildings are cracking. Ghosts come in" (Johnson 2014: 6).

Are ghosts modern, then? Indeed, 'Western' spiritualism flourished under the influence of 19th-century modernization and early socialism. In the Global South today (but not only there; see Parish 2015), it is evident that modernization and spiritual practices and discourses do not contradict each other. Popular 'animist' beliefs and ghost rituals form part of people's everyday life vis-à-vis a globalized economy (Endres and Lauser 2012). The unpredictable forces of 'the market' correspond with the elusive world of spectral entities. Facing economic risk, flexibility, and precarity, people approach spiritual forces for protection and good luck, resorting to ritual practices that sometimes contradict predominant religious orthodoxies.

The contributions in this issue engage with the interplay of human (alleged) rationality and unpredictable ghostly agency, with emerging modernities and (re-)emerging spiritualities. We consider the Eurocentric perspective of modernization theory (including binaries of science vs. religion, human vs. nature, and narratives of secularization and disenchantment) as not very helpful for an understanding of such entanglements. On the contrary, 'worldly' economic and spiritual spheres intersect, and ghost rituals are imbued with specific logics and calculations (whereas the finance system in the 'Global North' can also be marked by certain irrationalities).

When understood as concomitant to the expansion of global capitalism, ghosts arguably represent a countermovement in Max Weber's sense. However, we witness not only resistance to, but also local appropriations of, the 'invisible' market forces through ritual practice. Thus, spir-

ituality is reshaped, but not replaced, by 'modernity' and market economy (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Reconfigurations of 'traditional' spiritual systems provide a lens with which to study the practices and effects, as well as the localization and/or subversion of global capitalism. Besides the economic domain, addressing spiritual forces is also crucial for confronting the ghostly shadows and haunting aspects of violent experiences such as industrial warfare (see Kwon 2008 for the example of Vietnamese 'Ghosts of War').

Apparitions of uncanny beings may be symptoms of social problems or rapid transformations. In that case, they often play the role of moral instances (as ghost tales and movies demonstrate). Yet, as already mentioned, ghosts must be acknowledged as actual key agents within networks of sociocosmological relations that are essential for the reproduction of any society. Spiritual beings entertain varying relationships with humans and animals, sometimes dwelling in the respective material environment. If humans accept reciprocal obligations, mutually beneficial relations might result. However, if living humans ignore the needs of the dead, for example, ghosts may either disappear or harmfully haunt the ignorant living.

Finally, modern technologies certainly change such relationships across ontological divides. Instead of disenchanting and rationalizing the world, new technologies may even enhance the communication with ghosts – from the recordings of ghost voices in early-20th-century Europe to present-day smartphone calls.

Contributions

Numerous examples presented in this issue illustrate the "social vitality" (Kwon 2008) of spiritual entities in the Global South, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia. Rapid socioeconomic and environmental transformations in emerging economies such as Vietnam or Thailand arguably trigger shifts in the cosmological domain as well, and often lead to intensified interactions across ontological boundaries. Ghosts remain part of our world, even under conditions of 'modernity', but may change with

regard to their power, desires, and agency. In the first contribution, Paul Christensen introduces the *neak ta*, spirits from Cambodia, addressed by people from all backgrounds to receive advice, healing, or power. He provides informative examples of "spirited politics" (Willford and George 2004) – of how interactions with spirits contain a political dimension, as in the case of a ritual at the Preah Vihear temple, a contested heritage site between Cambodia and Thailand.

Ghosts appear to haunt, to transgress, to intervene in the human world, thus calling into question ontological certainties. In particular under conditions of socioeconomic crises, state violence, and feeling of insecurity, ghosts seem to proliferate (cf. Mueggler 2001). As Andrew Johnson illustrates with two ethnographic vignettes of interactions with uncanny beings in Thailand, attempts to maintain an ontological divide between humans and spirits can even be dangerous. The problem of the physical/spiritual divide is also addressed by Karan Singh who – in her discussion of spirit exorcism in North India – suggests that ghosts actually form part of living beings.

Considering the modernity paradigm, Edoardo Siani discusses the dark side and broken promises of modernity in urban Thailand. Ghostly appearances may be even more critical here than in allegedly 'traditional' society, actually challenging mainstream discourses of modernization and hinting instead at the lingering anxieties and precariousness that haunt present-day 'modern' lifeworlds. Kirsten Endres hints at the demand for new spiritualities in emerging economies such as Vietnam. Existing sacred sites are appropriated and reinvented by private developers capitalizing on the rereational and spiritual needs of a new class of affluent, rich Vietnamese. Reinterpretations of animistic ritual practices among ethnic minorities in upland Vietnam – until recently condemned as 'superstition' by communist state authorities – are the topic of Tran Hoai's account.

Patrick Keilbart discusses perturbations of social reciprocity within the relationship

between humans and spirits. Ignorance of the needs of local spirits might cause accidents for construction workers. In his case study on Muslim Indonesia, Keilbart also highlights the tension between orthodox religions and popular belief systems. This religious tension is an aspect of Jean Langford's contribution, too. She explores how Christianized Kmhmu (an ethnic minority from Laos and Vietnam that forms a small diaspora community in the USA) deal with ideas of sociocosmological reciprocity – in particular with the ambiguities of exchanges between the living and the dead that actually imply a primordial debt to the dead. Langford invites us to reflect upon the economic dimension of interactions with spiritual beings. Joseba Estevez' documentation of a shamanistic healing ritual among the Lanten (North Laos) also refers to the idea of the 'gift of life' given by ancestors and deities. Discussing cosmological aspects of Christianized uplanders from Southeast Asia, Tam Ngo illustrates the field of tension between old ancestor rituals and evangelical Christianity in a Hmong community in Vietnam.

Indeed, ghosts of the dead constitute a considerable concern of human societies around the globe. Erik Mueggler's fascinating contribution – including an audio file of ritual songs from SW-China last performed in 1949 – explores the question of how a dead soul might be matched to a particular form, in this case an ancestral effigy. Singing such songs, the living engage in an intimate relationship with their dead kin. In a similar vein, Nicholas Herriman emphasizes the social intimacy of ghostly encounters and witchcraft. In parts of Indonesia, witchcraft takes place at the very sites of everyday social exchange, and thus social reciprocity is the nexus where fears of sorcery emerge. While some authors of the 'modernity of witchcraft' paradigm (cf. Geschiere 1997) insist on the link between witchcraft and global capitalism, here the local ties seem to be more decisive.

Ghosts operate as social agents across ontological boundaries, often forming an uncanny, non-mediated presence. Haunting the living, they might also emblematize past tragedy and trauma: A forceful and permanent *Vergegenwärtigung* of – more or less recent, more or

less suppressed – violence and death that happened before and which still disrupts present sociocosmological configurations. Rather than abstract symbols of the past, spectral forces – again – intervene and interact. Marcelo Moura Mello provides an informative case study from Guyana where the ghosts of former colonizers are often blamed for the present violent antagonism between people of Indian and African descent. For example, malevolent 'Dutch' spirits of the first colonizers instill fear and suspicion in present-day Guyanese society.

Like Mello, Oliver Tappe stresses the specific sociality in which spirits participate and constitute an efficacious power. In Laos, appeasing unspecified, roaming ghost of war victims, feeding ancestor spirits, or addressing other powerful spirits for business success are everyday practices that indicate certain ontological ambiguity and fluidity. Michael Kleinod gives another example of ghost encounters in Laos, and argues that the relationship between humans and spirits is less a question of belief than of fear. Thus, transformations of modernity might both reduce fear – e.g. through greater control of natural forces – and increase anxieties and uncertainties with regard to unsettling 'modern' social, economic, and cultural changes. Both tendencies certainly affect the relations between humans and ghosts.

Christophe Robert, in his detailed discussion of a Vietnamese short story, relates the lingering memory of wartime violence to the agency of uncanny beings. His example of an ill-fated hunter illustrates the precarious balance between humans and animals as well as between the living and the dead. As the trailer for Barbara Meier's documentary suggests, ghosts as a potentially violent force may even participate in actual military conflicts. In Uganda, apparently, "spirits fight spirits". Consequently, they also play a crucial role in attempts at social reconciliation.

Other contributions deal with the effects of modern technologies on the relationship between humans and the domain of the ghosts. As Peter

Bräunlein points out in his discussion of Southeast Asian ghost movies, uncanny beings utilize information and communication technologies to intrude and threaten. As already mentioned, fear and modernity seem to interact. Even ghosts may suffer from trauma and emotional distress (cf. Bubandt 2012) which explains violent outbreaks and aggressive hauntings of the living world. However, human beings can deal with these forces, by ritual means as well as with help of new technologies. Not unlike ghost recordings in the early 20th century, the smartphone now plays a role in dealing with spiritual beings. As Pao Vue demonstrates, smartphones can be used to trap evil ghosts. Thus, some Hmong claim to be less afraid of ghosts thanks to the help of modern technologies.

The virtual world adds a new dimension to human-spirit interaction. In the case of Vietnamese online cemeteries, Anthony Heathcote describes how the spirits of aborted foetuses can be appeased by uploading diverse items into a virtual children's bedroom – not unlike the practice of burning votive paper offerings (from banknotes to cardboard-box motorbikes) during funeral rites. Given all these cases, Leif Jonsson's fake press release about a laboratory to detect ghostly voices in the wooden walls of old houses from 17th-century Massachusetts, does not seem too far-fetched. Rather, his intervention constitutes an eye-opening experiment to raise awareness of how ghosts of human sacrifice also haunt 'Western' societies. Finally, Anja Dreschke and Martin Zillinger present spirit possession and trance rituals of a Moroccan Sufi brotherhood – with a particular focus on the impact of modern audio-visual media on performance and transmission.

As a tentative conclusion, we would just like to emphasize that ghosts matter. Violence occurring in the name of reason, the return of the repressed, and sometimes unmediated spectral transgression: Wherever in the world ghosts reveal their uncanny agency, they may act as a social and moral corrective. Maybe ghosts have never been modern – much like us, as Bruno Latour might add.

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SPIRITS IN CAMBODIAN POLITICS
by Paul Christensen (University of Goettingen)

Introduction

Spirits are everywhere in Cambodia. During my research in 2012-13 I was confronted with wild spirits of the forests like *arak*, dangerous female spirits such as *beisaat* or *aab,* Hindu gods worshiped as protecting spectres, and spirits of the dead (*pret* or *khmaoch*).[1] The most popular spirits that Cambodians worship are spirits or guardians of a specific region, called *neak ta.* The majority of *neak ta* were celebrated defenders of the Khmer community against an (imagined) danger from outside, having become national heroes after defeating Siamese or Vietnamese troops in the Middle Period (15th 19th century), or as founders of villages who had tamed the wild and evil forces of the forest. Far from being mere symbols, spirits are in fact social beings, capable of engaging with the human world. Offerings are primarily made to the *neak ta* to ask for blessings and/or magical help. Spirits manifest themselves in dreams or visions, by manipulating natural phenomena like the weather, and of course, by possessing humans. Most of the spirit mediums (*kru boramey*) I met were possessed or advised by *neak ta*. In my fieldwork, I met *kru* and clients from all classes and backgrounds, including the political and economic elite, all interacting with spirits for advice, to receive prophecies, to be healed, and to gain magical power.

The statues of Sdech Khan (like this one at the port in Kep) have facial features similar to that of premier minister Hun Sen.

Spiritual legitimacy: the 'chosen' leader of the country

In Cambodian political discourse, leaders commonly draw on spirits for political legitimacy. As the legitimacy of the Cambodian territory was historically and inextricably linked to royal claims to power (Thompson 2004), Hun Sen has focused on reinterpreting these claims in terms compatible with his own more humble background. Since becoming prime minister in 1985, Hun Sen has consistently worked on legitimizing his position by positioning himself as the *logical* successor to Cambodian kingship.[2]

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[1] There are not as many ghosts of the dead as we might expect if we combine the conception of 'restless' spirits of the dead (for example in Vietnam see Kwon 2008) and the approximately 1.7 million victims of the Khmer Rouge era (between 1975 and 1979). These ghosts are not disturbing the living because in the Theravadin tradition of Cambodian Buddhism they are considered to have already been reborn.

After ousting his royalist co-premier minister Prince Ranariddh in a coup d'état in 1997, Hun Sen claimed to be the reincarnation of the 16th-century ruler Sdech Kan, who was known as the popular usurper of kingship. Whereas Sdech Kan's actions were generally condemned by kings in Cambodian history, Hun Sen cast him as a freedom-fighter who introduced class struggle and democracy to the world (Norén-Nilsson 2013). Through an investigation by a state-funded research team, Sdech Kan's home was found in the same province that Hun Sen came from. Hun Sen and some of his influential followers have increasingly stressed his spiritual legitimacy as righteous leader through numerous and diverse links to Sdech Kan. Indeed, for members of the elite, praising and honouring Sdech Kan by commissioning statues, financing films, or other public acts has become a means of acknowledging Hun Sen, and strengthening their ties to him.[3] This interpretation of non-royal legitimacy of power accompanied the strategic degradation of the Royal Party FUNCINPEC[4], who have not won a single seat in the last three elections (2003, 2008, and 2013). Hun Sen's main political opponent and former minister of FUNCINPEC, Sam Rainsy, has contested the narrative, praising Neak Ta Kleang Moeung for his alleged role in bringing the 16th-century king back to power by having "sacrificed his life to help eliminate a usurper"[5]. Although Sam Rainsy has continued to stress his rational approach to politics, he has acknowledged that it is vital, in imagining the political future of the country, to know the spiritual background of a current or potential leader. For his part, Hun Sen's efforts at spiritual legitimization appear to have paid off: many spirit mediums told me the prime minister cannot be defeated, even by spiritual attack, thereby undermining any subversive potential in their practice. The importance of spiritual legitimacy in Hun Sen's grip on power in Cambodia is exemplified by an incident at the funeral of Norodom Sihanouk (Cambodia's last powerful king) in 2012. Hun Sen told reporters that whereas members of the royal family could not light a candle next to the king's body, he had succeeded. The prime minister interpreted this as spiritual confirmation that he was chosen by the royal spirit of King Sihanouk to be the righteous leader of the country.

Cambodian discourses on magical supremacy

Khmer national identity is constructed through a complex set of discourses, an important one of which is the eminent connection to a glorious past in which temples like Prasat Angkor Wat and Prasat Bayon were built. Many Cambodians understand these as national symbols which define 'Khmer ancient heritage', not only as emblematic of former architecture and handicraft, but as the physical manifestations of magical power that enabled kings and their brahmans (*baku*) to construct them. Influenced by the colonial mission and its narratives, Cambodia's neighbours often describe the country as 'backward' and 'superstitious'. In Cambodia itself, the increasing numbers of spirit mediums have begun to take up this ascription themselves, thereby stressing their traditional knowledge and use of ancient magic. In maintaining these links to the past, Cambodians possess supremacy in magic, one of the only areas in which the country is apparently superior to its neighbours, especially Vietnam and Thailand. Today this discourse is reproduced in a number of popular narratives: bees and snakes bite only foreign soldiers; spirits make invading troops weak or sick, and the Cambodian soldiers and their (outdated) weapons stronger. Among soldiers near the Thai border, who are known as regular visitors to spirit mediums, this discourse explained why the well-equipped Thai troops, with their up-to-date weapons, had not simply invaded Cambodia and taken the contested

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[2] Parallels to Burmese military leaders are striking; see Schober 2005; Min 2001. Even in communist Laos, the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party claims to be the legitimate heir of selected 'patriotic' kings of the past – even though they left the last king of Laos, Sisavang Vatthana, dying in a re-education camp around 1980 (Evans 2009; Tappe 2013).

[3] For background information on Sdech Khan statues which have facial features similar to Hun Sen see Norén-Nilsson (2013): to read more about the production of the most expensive film ever made in Cambodia, which was funded by Ly Yong Phat, a tycoon from Hun Sen's privileged circle, see http://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/hun-sen-and-man-who-would-be-king

[4] Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, et Coopératif

[5]
https://www.facebook.com/rainsy.sam.5/posts/1008203205903079

temples of Prasat Ta Moen and Prasat Preah Vihear. Politicians like Hun Sen draw upon and reinforce the discourse of magical supremacy as part of Khmer national identity through various public acts.

People engage in a *larn neak ta* ritual. This picture was taken in the end of the ceremony, where the spirit mediums and their clients show their gratitude to the spirits of the hosting couple.

A public ritual for peace and/or magical supremacy

Bun Rany, the wife of Hun Sen and head of the Red Cross in Cambodia, performed a *krung palii* ritual at Prasat Preah Vihear on 1 August 2008, shortly after UNESCO declared it a World Heritage Site. With both Thailand and Cambodia claiming Prasat Preah Vihear within their national territory, political and military tensions had been high throughout the application process, and had escalated after the declaration and the ritual. Although *krung palii* is commonly held in rural areas to praise the spirits of the earth[6] and of the place (*neak ta*), the difference between this and a regular *krung palii* was clear to local observers: 1 August 2008 was an inauspicious date, with a partial solar eclipse – a source of bad luck – expected on that day. Moreover, holding the *krung palii* next to the contested temple, and with hundreds of soldiers present, could easily be interpreted as a form of magical defence, or even magical attack. In response, the nationalist-driven Thai media

asked followers to pray against the spiritual attack by "Khmer wizards", and to wear "yellow color clothes [*sic*] – the color of Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej – in order to stop the Cambodian magic spell".[7] Accusing Bun Rany of carrying out a spiritual attack is not significant so much for its ontological matter, but rather because Khmer spiritual practice is generally understood as a form of malevolent, black magic in the popular Thai imagination (Baumann 2015; Pasuk und Baker 2008). In performing the ritual, Bun Rany reinforced this ascription, without closing off the possibility of other, benign explanations. Playing with this ambiguity, Cambodian Minister of Tourism Thong Khon stressed that the ritual was an opportunity to "pray to the souls of our ancestors asking for peace", before adding that "we also pray for success in our defence of our territory".[8] With troops from both countries clashing again during the following weeks, Cambodian officials stressed the 'peaceful' interpretation, while soldiers from both sides understood the ritual as a form of magical defence and/or attack.

This picture shows a private ritual by a member of the elite to ask for defensive power against the Thai troops.

A private ritual for magical supremacy

I witnessed a telling incident in Poipet, near the Thai-Cambodian border, in September 2012. It was the night before a *larn neak ta*, a ritual to

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[6] There are at least three overlapping concepts of the spirit of the earth such as *preah thorani* (or *neang kongheng*), *krong bali,* and *preah phum*, see Guthrie 2004; Leclère 1898.

[7] See http://khmerconnection.com/topic/cambodia-use-black-magic-on-thais-981752
[8] See https://erikwdavis.wordpress.com/2008/08/01/what-is-the-krung-palii-ceremony-and-why-is-bun-rany-performing-it-at-preah-vihear/

praise a *neak ta*, at the house of a border policeman and his wife. The couple, who were both also influential spirit mediums in the region, had high-ranking police and military officials as clients. That evening, spirit mediums arrived and gathered around a huge spirit shrine (*bey si*) in the first floor of the house. Some had fallen asleep by about 11pm, when the vice-president of a province, a military official just promoted to the position, arrived.[9] He appeared impatient to speak to the spirit of Neak Ta Kleang Moeung, the *neak ta* mentioned above who reputedly gave his life to restore the rightful king. The spirit medium, a middle-aged woman, seemed intimidated by the request of the *neak thom* (big person, member of the elite) request that she become possessed. All the mediums still awake gathered before the *bey si*, and urged the spirit to enter the woman's body. However, the spirit declined the invitation for about 30 minutes. When he finally did enter the medium's body, he remained silent. Apparently unfamiliar with having his requests denied, the *neak thom's* mood changed from one second to another. He tried to convince the spirit with charm, then anger, then submissive begging, and at last by offering the spirit large amounts of money in exchange for help. To convince the spirit of the urgency of the situation, the politician begged: "the Thai troops plan a major attack on our land in the next month, *neak ta*; please, they have modern weapons, *neak ta*; please help us to defend our country!" With the spirit still refusing to talk for the next hour, the other mediums asked their spirits to explain why he remained silent. Around 1am, a spirit revealed that Neak Ta Kleang Moeung likes a certain type of 'ancient music' (*pleeng boran*), that would encourage him to communicate with the client. The *neak thom* called his staff, instructing them to find out what kind of music this might be. He then promised to fund further *larn neak ta* rituals to please the spirit, and to try out different kinds of music. He kept his promise. In the following three months, I attended another three *larn neak ta* at the house, an unusual number for a typically annual ritual. I saw the politician engage in many different parts of the ritual, including carrying the hosting couple on a palanquin around

the *bey si*, and donating rice to the village inhabitants. After four rituals, and a major investment of money and time by the *neak thom*, the spirits (still reluctant to talk) seemed pleased, with the mediums convinced that they had magically prevented a new outburst of fighting between Cambodia and Thailand at the end of 2012.

Conclusion

These examples of 'spirited politics' (Lauser und Endres 2011; Willford und George 2005) in Cambodia illustrate how spirits are not merely vague or symbolic. Rather, people from the political elite to ordinary citizens, negotiate every kind of political process with them, and make their decisions based on the spirits' reactions. I have provided examples of the agency of spirits, and how spirits who can be made to act in a variety of events; such as public debate about the prime minister's political legitimacy, or in reproducing the narrative of Cambodia's magical supremacy. In my forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation, I analyze the agency of spirits, how they emerge and their conditions of existence, as well as the lives of spirit mediums and their connections to politics in present day Cambodia.

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[9] To protect his identity, he remains anonymous.

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GHOSTS CAN BE PEOPLE: PHYSICALITY AND SPIRITS IN THAILAND'S NORTHEAST

by Andrew Alan Johnson (Princeton University)

Nu might have seen a ghost. He had been walking in the forest in his home province of Phetchabun, in Northeastern Thailand, when he came upon something standing in the middle of a stream. It looked like a person, but very small – no more than three feet tall, stark naked with gleaming white skin. Its hair would have dangled to its feet, but the ends were floating in the water. It stood staring into the water, arms poised and ready to snatch a fish should one pass. Stunned, Nu stopped and watched it hunt for a while until it wandered off. "It was a *phi kom koi* [liver-eating ghost]" Nu concluded, "but a real one."

Mae Reum, a woman in her late 50s, stopped him. "*Phi kom koi* aren't like that. They are short, yes, and look like people, but they have only one leg. They hop around the forest and if they catch you, they will eat your liver."

Nu protested: "Yes, that's what they say, but *phi kom koi* are real! They are a kind of prehistoric human that live in the deep forest. They don't eat liver – they eat fish from the stream. I saw it catching fish! And it had two legs, not one!" The young man, seeing Mae Reum's doubt and glancing at me for help explaining his idea to Mae Reum, looked for words. "It's not a ghost [*phi*]! It's a person! It has flesh! But it's a different kind of person."

Mae Reum remained unconvinced. "Ghosts can be people," she concluded. I asked her what she meant by that and she expanded, "They can be tangible [*mi neua*], it doesn't have to be like a spirit [*winyaan*]."

Mae Reum's statement that "ghosts can be people" deserves some unpacking. She does not mean here that ghosts are social beings that can be incorporated into the family. This latter concept is a common one around the world and especially in Southeast Asia: ghosts of dead kin remain social entities with whom one can communicate, or one might even "adopt" a ghostly child or be "adopted by" a ghostly mother (see Langford 2013 and Johnson 2016, respectively). Mae Reum, slightly older than Nu and not having gone through the long periods of migrant work that Nu and other

Northeastern Thai men of his generation engage in, had a more nuanced view of what constituted a "ghost." For her, "*phi*" meant something more like "uncanny being" (Baumann 2014) rather than the kinds of spectral presences indicated by the English term "ghost" or "spirit" and what Nu imagined by the word "phi." For Mae Reum, ghosts could be physical. They could, in the manner of the vampiric *phi phob*, be people that might occasionally turn malevolent. They could be guardian spirits. They could also be other kinds of humans that live in the forest. In short, the term "ghost" indicates for Mae Reum a presence from beyond the everyday, a horizon beyond which knowledge is incomplete. Whereas Nu attempts to categorize the physical, social, and spiritual worlds into tangible boxes (thus insisting that the *phi kom koi* was not a real *phi* because it was a person), Mae Reum offers a variant of Hamlet's admonishment to Horatio: "there are more things in heaven and earth … than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Mae Reum's challenge to a physical / spiritual divide is reflected in other "ghost stories" from North and Northeastern Thailand. Som, for instance, owned a house in a gated community in the Chiang Mai suburbs, one of those subdivisions with names either in English ("Chiang Mai Lake and Hill") or in archaic high-vocabulary Thai ("Lanna Thara"). The house was big – too big for her and her husband's belongings. They lived only on the first floor, and kept the upstairs dark, quiet and empty. Dark, quiet and empty also described the other houses along the street – many of them were owned by foreigners, investors, or Thais living in Bangkok. Som's husband was also a foreigner – an American military contractor working for Halliburton, who split his time between Chiang Mai and Iraq. When he left for his six-month-long tour of duty, Som found herself alone in the house.

But Som was not alone, and that was the problem. She reported seeing a *kraseu* floating down the streets at night: the severed head of a women trailing her intestines in long, glowing ropes behind her. Glancing down the dark neighborhood street, Som recalled how back home in the Northeast, the local authorities could deal with such beings: "We saw one once – the whole village saw it. It was flying in the middle of the rice field. So we called the police. When they showed up, they fired their pistols at it, and it flew away. Chiang Mai police wouldn't be so interested."

Here, the *kraseu* – hardly a "ghost" in its fear of the police and their guns – is dangerous because Chiang Mai police are less understanding of local ghosts. They, through their negligence, permit ghosts to run rampant through the streets of their community rather than responding to the danger. The Chiang Mai police here behave like Nu would; perhaps they might believe in an immaterial, insubstantial spirit, but such a thing would be the purview of monks or spirit doctors (*mo phi*) rather than a sign of disorder that they could themselves handle. For Som, because of this divide between physical and spiritual worlds, the police have in fact rendered themselves ineffectual and thus opened the gated community up to infiltration by dangerous forces (see Johnson 2014).

In these examples, we see a split between notions of *phi* as beings relegated to a spiritual, religious sphere versus *phi* as things that point to modes of being beyond the everyday. It is evident in Nu's frustration at Mae Reum's idea that "ghosts can be people" – Nu, a budding modern, takes the strange thing that he has seen and pulls it into the realm of the biological. But as Som's story suggests, perpetuating this divide may in fact be dangerous, permitting as it does an assumption that one knows how the world of people and the world of *phi* work, that one knows the divide between the spiritual and the biological. It suggests that one has always already dreamt the contents of heaven and earth.

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GHOSTS, MODERNITIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF MAHENDIPUR BALAJI

by Karan Singh (Govt. College for Women, Mahendergarh, Haryana, India)

Ghosts and Modernities

Writing under the colonial discourse of the enlightenment era, Dalpat Ram Daya, in his prize essay for the Gujarat Vernacular Society in 1849, while conceding that "*bhuts* and other *Devas* reside in *Bhut lok*" (Daya, 1990: 2), argued that these supernatural beings might have appeared on earth in the past, but now in the present age of science and enlightenment, one could no longer believe in them. Fired with a reformative zeal for what he considered a righteous fight against prevailing superstitions in his native society, he named his book 'The Destroyer of Superstitions Regarding Bhuts, et cetera'. Ghosts may be as ancient as human existence on this planet, yet true to their nature, they are changelings, capable of assuming shapes as per their cultural contexts. In addition to their cultural specificity, they also transgress limits of temporality by existing within the crevices of primitivism, modernity, and post-modernity simultaneously. Ghosts were baptised within a primitive mind which sought to concretise and externalise psychological experiences in symbols and analogous images. With the rise of empirical science and its attendant rationalism in the modern age, ghosts underwent another transfiguration and became an insignia of a resistance to the relentless march of scientific logic and pragmatism which sought to exclude all unusual experiences and realities from the officially accepted discourse and imposed a positivist framework on the interpretation of felt experiences. The acceptance of the term *shamanism* within the vocabulary of anthropology and psychology to signify a broad range of viable therapies that operated within discourses profoundly different from those recognised within the Western positivist model resulted from certain tendencies which manifested in an increasing denunciation of the cultural hegemony of the universalistic, Eurocentric model.

The Postmodernism of the late twentieth century, often referred to as an ungrateful child of its bourgeoisie parents, appeared more comfortable with spectral phenomena, not only due to its acceptance of cultural relativism but also because of its advocacy of fluidity as a defining marker of all phenomena. In contrast to the rationalist rejection of ghosts as a mere mumbo-jumbo, they became part of a cultural reaction which asserted itself against the growth of ratiocination. This subterranean current represented a shying away of the human mind from the staple, stale diet of cognitive interpretations which had held sway over human mind since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the West. Ghosts received a reinterpretation within the postmodern vocabulary, which resisted such binaries as science/religion and faith/reason through the deconstruction of these oppositions. Postmodern emphasis on variety and alterity brought with it tools which penetrated the label of superstition and primitivism that had formerly been associated with beliefs in spirits and ghosts. By recognising the cultural matrices within which all cognitive phenomena are situated, postmodern ideas made social scientists aware that physical phenomena are always understood and interpreted within the parameters of cultural beliefs and values, and exposed the fallacy of understanding them in universal terms – which were heavily influenced by positivist perspectives. One can thus detect a similarity of position in the effervescence of spectral experiences found in most cultures around the world and the postmodern position which advocated a fluidity of multiple stances, and celebrated the shifting nature of reality.

Ghosts and the Religious Idiom of Mehandipur Balaji

The temple of Mehandipur Balaji, one of the most prominent centres for the exorcism of spirits in North Indian state of Rajasthan, is visited by multitudes of people from all parts of India who are afflicted by some kind of spirit possession.

Temple of Balaji

Patients before the temple

Some of the figures related to these 'patients', as revealed by studies by D.C. Satija and others, dismantled many myths about the phenomenon of spirit possession. The study revealed that 82% of these patients were in the range of 15-39 years of age. Furthermore, 80% of the patients were educated, and showed a near parity of gender. Again, 80% of these pa-

tients had first tried allopathic medicines, which proved ineffective in solving their maladies, and were then advised by relatives and friends to visit the temple. Another interesting point is that the patients from urban areas comprised 82% of the total, against only 18% from villages. Furthermore, one quarter of the patients, who were mainly psychoneurotics, showed signs of improvement after the development of trance (Satija, 1981:249). Against popular supposition, the study revealed that the phenomenon of spirit possession is not related to illiteracy, ignorance of the modern medicine system, gender, or rural superstitions. Bodily infirmities due to aging are also found to have no relation with mental disorders, which affected mainly the young generation.

The religious narrative of Balaji, another name for the infant Hanuman, the famous devotee of Rama and Sita in the *Ramayana*, concerns the accidental discovery of the image of Balaji around 1,000 years ago on a rock by a priest who saw wild animals paying obeisance to it. The priest was ordained by a voice in his dream to establish a temple of Balaji so as to alleviate the suffering of mankind. Another related story it is that of the subduing of Pretraj, the king of ghosts, by Balaji. Pretraj used to torment whosoever passed this area with afflictions of metal disorder. When Balaji ordered Pretraj to surrender, there was a conflict between the two, leading to the ultimate defeat of Pretraj, who beseeched Balaji to forgive him and agreed to act as his deputy. Henceforth Pretraj, along with Bhairav, an incarnation of Shiva, became one of the two chief henchmen of Balaji, and now helps him in alleviating the sufferings of people tormented by spirits. The narrative, couched in religious symbolism, metaphorically represents the defeat of uncontrolled, chaotic forces in the human psyche by structural ones in which faith plays the role of an anchor and acts as a stabilizing agent. The wayward and self-destructive energy of 'id' impulses is channelized and tamed towards a useful end. On the sociological plane, the anecdote represents a conflict and eventual assimilation of aboriginal faiths into the Brahmanical system. The myth of Balaji syncretises characters from the classical epic with those of Dravidian/aboriginal belief systems

such as Bhairav and Pretraj. Even Hanuman as Mahavir, meaning a lord of spirits in his connection with Anjani, his mother, who belonged to an aboriginal stratum of the society, bespeaks of this syncretism of Aryan and non-Aryan elements in the myth. The amalgamation of abrahmanical elements with Sanskritic ones shows the displacement and substitution of one set of beliefs with another coexistent culture. Further it shows the polyphonic nature of living traditions wherein classical elements are seamlessly interwoven with the folk traditions.

The exorcism of spirits at the temple of Balaji acts under the template of legal procedure. The Temple of Balaji known as *Balaji ka darbar* (the court of Balaji) acts as a court of justice wherein Balaji is the chief judge, Pretraj and Bhairav are principal prosecutors, the attendant spirits are soldiers/messengers, and the possessing spirit is the criminal. A full trial takes place in the body of the possessed in which the reformed spirits act as messengers of the court of justice. The afflicted person has to make an *arji* or *darkhast* (Urdu terms for legal application) in the court of Balaji. The *darkhast,* comprising rice and *dal* (pulses) worth one and a quarter rupees and two *laddoos,* is in the form of *prasad* (offerings) to the presiding deity from which the afflicted person receives two *laddoos* back, which he/she then has to throw to the beasts and birds. If the *darkhast* fails to produce *peshi* (attendance/trance) due to strong resistance of the malignant spirit, there are further options in the form of *arji,* costing seventeen and a quarter rupees' worth of offering, and *badi arji* (strong application) at a cost of twenty one and a quarter rupees.

Shops offering *prasad* for Balaji

After registering his complaint to the deity regarding unjust suffering caused to him by the spirit, the afflicted person has to wait for some days before he/she receives a *pesi* in which the possessing spirit is visited by the *dut* (messenger) of Balaji. These *duts* are the benign attendant spirits of Balaji who were earlier exorcised from the patients and who have now become the allies of Balaji. In the trance, the possessed person speaks both in the voice of the spirit and in the voice of the messenger of the Balaji. The struggle between these two forces is revealed somatically in the form of convulsions and expressions of rage and fear. Sometimes the possessing spirit surrenders, reveals its identity, and agrees to leave the body of the person after a single trance. More powerful spirits put up a lot of resistance and are exorcised through more trances spread over many days. Sudhir Kakar, who studied the efficacy of trance state in treating psychic patients, considers factors such as the removal of stigma connected with madness, integration of the patient into the community of fellow patients, and the transference of guilt onto the culturally accepted symbols as decisive in treatment (Kakar 1982). Herein culturally induced belief in ghosts and the power of Balaji to control them soothes the unconscious guilt related to traumatic events by recalibrating the unconscious through surrender to the higher power of Balaji. McGuire notes the cathartic role of social beliefs in spectral beings which acts as a source for the transference of patient's guilt: "Dyadic categories, light and darkness, higher and lower worlds, purity and impurity, wellness and illness, good/evil, death/rebirth, *devi/pischach* are integral to the language, providing people with surrogates to express their emotions and feelings" (McGuire, 1983: 234).

Ghosts as an emblem of Suffering

Spirit possession, though a worldwide phenomenon, has cultural nuances located within the religious texts and folk beliefs. In India, there has been "a rich, dramatic, and concrete imagery of the *bhutas*" (Kakar, 1982: 75) which is determined by its rich mythological world surrounding people throughout their childhoods in the form of tales, classical texts, and syncretism

between diverse faiths such as Hinduism, Islam, Jainism etc. The *bhuta-preta* (ghosts) in the cultural context of folk beliefs of north India are seen as '*upri hawa*' (the airy ones), which have presences both within and without. They are capable of shifting, temporarily abandoning and coming back in the body, and there can be multiple presences in the single body of the afflicted person. The dialogic speech of an afflicted person during trances has a dramatic quality representing the exchange between warring spirits. This constantly shifting stance from subjectivity to objectivity, self to other, projects the duality of subjective-objective positioning and reveals the difficulty and inevitability of leading a life on the margins. The affliction of spirits in popular idiom is also connected with the weakening of strength/mind/'id' impulses, and is known as '*gan kamjor hona*' (weakening of *ganas*). '*Gan*' in conjunction with the word '*gunn*', meaning nature/quality/strength, as well as with another word '*ganas*', the body of attendant spirits of lord Shiva, represent the presence of Dionysian elements in the human psyche. The weakening of these Dionysian elements, which represents the ebbing of vitality and strength, leads to the opening of the human mind to disorder and confusion. The mind can be restored to health only through a reordering of elements and reconfiguring of these dominant passions.

Bhuta-pretas are further seen as '*dukh*' (suffering), an embodiment of unsatisfied desires which travel from one person to another. This idea of 'suffering' having a material presence which travels from person to person is close to Greek concept of Ate, a goddess of mischief and delusion who treads over the heads of men. These sufferings are a result of intra- as well as interpersonal encounters in the world, and have a life of their own. They afflict a person and can only be removed from him/her when they are made to pass from one person to another. These possessing spirits under the cultural context of North India are not evil *a priori* and in essence. They are *atript atma* (unsatisfied souls) which, when they enter a victim's body, transfer their unhappiness to him. Through their possession they themselves seek release (*moksha*) which is their eventual pur-

pose. But this does not mean these spirits would leave the body easily; they put up a great fight, and it is only when faced by a stronger force that they surrender, and are ultimately released from the body. Physical pain is often used as an antidote against psychic suffering, as the spirit-afflicted persons are frequently beaten, loaded with heavy stones, or put in chains. Even after a patient is cured, many erstwhile patients undertake arduous journeys to the temple by repeatedly prostrating themselves (*pet palinya*) and measuring the distance with the length of their bodies.

Pet palinya, Covering distance by bodily measurement

Bhuta-pretas are marked by a liminality of existence, remaining at a peripheral stage due to the incompleteness of their lives. They occupy a state between the mortal world and *pitr lok*, a plane where ancestral spirits reside. This liminality of their existence is noticed by Pakaslahti: "the *bhutas* are unhappy spirits of deceased people who have not found a fulfilment of their life due to untimely death caused by illness, accident, violence or, sometimes, because of non-performance of the last funeral rites (*antim sanskār*). They are still hungry for life and roam around looking for a human body into which they could enter in order to enjoy life once more." (Pakaslahti, 1998: 140). While they originate in the dissatisfaction of life's utmost passions, they haunt those who transgress their boundaries. Hence if a person urinates under a particular tree or strays into a certain house, he/she might become haunted by the spirit. Most of these spirits live on the boundaries—a secluded dilapidated house of an owner who died

tragically, a tree which is located at a strategic position and is uncommonly shady, a cross-roads etc. These spirits afflict persons when either some act of transgression/pollution has taken place or due to the volition of a tantric (sorcerer) who is prompted by some person having some 'lack' in his life – often childless or envious of a neighbour due to his/her better position. This feature of liminality, while positioning them between and betwixt, does not mark off their existence as separate from ordinary life; along with *pitris*, they have a tangible presence for most people. In the words of Kakar, they seem to populate a mental region that is "contiguous and has open borders with the land of ordinary consciousness in which normal everyday life takes place" (Kakar, 1982: 57).

The sufferings which manifest in the host's body as *bhuta-preta* cannot be destroyed, but can only be transmuted from negative energy to a positive one. The transformation from malignant to benign spirits, who act as prospective *saniks* (soldiers) for Balaji, connects them with unconscious forces which can be harnessed for recovery and healing. The ambiguity in the position of Pretraj, as a defendant of spirits as well as an adjudicator, indicates the complexity of separation and lack of clear-cut boundaries in this structural model of psyche. Ghosts as materializations of suffering are felt as living presences, wherein the transmutation of suffering from an abstractedly felt pain to symbolism of *bhuta-preta* is a culturally assigned framework which avoids the stigma associated with mental disorders. A conventional society which finds little sympathy for transgressors and envelops people in a normative structure of behaviour while proscribing deviancy, assimilates 'abnormality' and 'disorder' through a symbolic normalization under its religious paraphernalia. The healing centres like Balaji provide a space wherein 'self' regains its rightful place in the 'social self', and this reintegration takes place through the creation of trance, a psychodrama, which is rightly considered a "postmodern therapeutic technique" (Casoon, 2004 in Davar, 2009: 65).

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GHOSTS IN THE BANKOK NIGHT

by Edoardo Siani (SOAS, University of London)

Are ghosts 'modern'? Does it make sense to talk about ghosts in the contemporary world? Is there any good reason for ghosts to exist today?

Sometimes I have the feeling of having worked with ghosts in Thailand. The people I have conducted research with in Bangkok – diviners – are, after all, ghosts. I could see that very clearly every night, when, as the sun set quickly over the city, I reached the place anthropologists refer to as 'the field'. In this case, this was a market that clutters the footpaths around a shrine, at the feet of the spectacular skyscrapers that are typical of the downtown areas. Popular among Thai people of all age groups and social strata, the market comes to life at night, as approximately forty diviners take a seat at their tables in order to receive the first customers of the day.

The fact that the diviners I have worked with offer their services after dark should not be too surprising given that, in spite of their undiscussed popularity, they are often portrayed in Thai society itself as exponents of a lesser form of religiosity, if not as residues of an 'uncivilized' past that the country would be better off without. As Schnepel (2006) wrote, the ambiguous character of the night provides societies with a spatio-temporal dimension where/when the rules that govern public life are somewhat suspended. The Bangkok night, whose unique 'noir' flavour conveys an impression of lawlessness and abandon, plays a crucial role precisely in giving diviners as much as their clients an opportunity to meet in a public space that is less subjected to social scrutiny.

I remember that, on the first occasions when I went to conduct my fieldwork with the diviners at the market, the sight of the diviners' physical personas illuminated by their portable lamps along the dark footpaths elicited unusual sensations in me. More than once, I attempted to qualify their presence in my field notes, and the adjective I jotted down most often was 'ghostly'. Perhaps not surprisingly, a diviner also used the word 'ghost' to describe their ambiguous condition. We were talking about that form of hiding that many of them resort to during daylight in order to escape public judgement, when she noted that '[Only] a ghost sees a ghost' (*phi hen phi*). This expression is customarily employed by social groups that suffer from some form of stigmatization in Thailand, in order to suggest that, regardless of a great deal of self-imposed invisibility, these individuals are still able to recognize one another in all circumstances. To be a ghost, in this context, is therefore a strategy that Thai diviners and other marginalized groups employ in order to escape public shaming in a society that often perpetuates repressive discourses towards the Others of the day, whilst at the same time keeping the door open for them to assert their identities whenever possible – just like when Thai diviners provocatively light a lamp along the sidewalk at night, or when they recognize one another in a crowd.

Contemporary Thai ghosts exist in a less figurative form as well. More concrete – if this is the right word – kinds of ghosts can indeed be found everywhere in the kingdom – in banana trees in rural areas as much as along the high-streets of Bangkok. These ghosts are supposedly invisible, and yet nearly every Thai person will swear to have glimpsed one. They are often described as being like corpses of individuals who died in violent circumstances – with black circles around their eyes and purulent wounds exposed – but some of them are able to take on the appearance of irresistible young ladies. Ghosts are also said to exist in a variety of shapes, some varying from region to region. Some of the diviners I worked with claimed to be able to regularly see these ghosts. Indeed, seeing them often becomes an integral part of the very services they offer.

One night, I was sitting at the table of a diviner at the market, when an attractive young woman approached him asking for a reading. She was one of the many young women who regularly visit the shrine: my diviner friend and I spoke often about them. Some of them had made it to the very world of the skyscrapers that many people in Thailand can only dream of. They walked along the footpath among us, and yet

they appeared to belong to another world. That night, however, something deeply disturbing and extremely revealing happened, as my diviner friend noticed a ghost hanging from the shoulders of the young woman. This was the ghost of a child – the ghost of an aborted fetus. When the diviner told his client what he had seen, the woman admitted she had had an abortion, tears running down her cheeks. The woman that night left the divination market with a solution for countering the bad karma that her past abortion had allegedly generated. My diviner friend and I, on the other side, were left there with the sensation that the world of the fancy skyscrapers was in fact not too different from our own. What the ghost of that child had revealed was that even those people who had made it to the highest floors of the metropolitan skyline had scars on their backs that they were unable to heal; that the dream they embodied was little more than a bluff.

Diviners in the Bangkok night (author's photo)

The questions that open this article echo the concerns that motivate this special issue of *Voices from Around the World* in wondering whether ghosts may still find a place in contemporary societies. The presupposition of this line of enquiry seems to be that ghosts are 'non-modern', and that, as such, they must necessarily find themselves in contradiction with 'modernity'. This appears to be in line with Weber's prediction that 'beliefs' would have disappeared from societies with the achievement of modernity – a prediction that, as social scientists have argued, has hardly come true. Modernity has been achieved in Thailand, and discourses of modernity – the very discourses that

condemn diviners as a thing of the past – have been adopted by Thai society at large. Yet ghosts keep on reappearing in the places where one would least expect to find them.

I would like to suggest that ghosts may still find a place within the conspicuous modernity of downtown Bangkok precisely in order to challenge its discourses. The most powerful thing that diviners and 'child ghosts' do by simply *appearing* in the Bangkok night is indeed signalling that they exist. This entails suggesting that modernity has failed to arrive – or, even worse, that its arrival has not brought what it had promised. And, as their spectral presence shatters the myth of modernity, ghosts inevitably also challenge the very discourse that condemns them as a thing of the past. In a nation that, in spite of much apparent development and of the promises of 'happiness' made by its military leaders, is continuously plagued by social, political, and economic problems, the silent and powerful reminder of their presence may therefore be playing a more crucial role now than ever.

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"FANSIPAN LEGEND, INDOCHINA SUMMIT": A SPIRITUAL LANDSCAPE IN THE MAKING"

By Kirsten W. Endres (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle/Germany))

Since time immemorial, the forested mountains of Vietnam's northern highlands have been roamed by female spirits associated with the Palace of Mountains and Forests (Nhạc Phủ), one of the four realms of the Mother Goddess Religion. In the Kinh lowlanders' imagination they epitomize the lushness and abundance of the wilderness and the exoticism of the ethnic minority groups who live in the upland border region. They are impersonated during the ritual performances of Four Palace spirit mediums and enthrall their audience with colorful costumes and lively dances (Fig. 1; Endres 2011). Some have temples dedicated to them and are believed to be highly responsive to human attention and efficacious in bestowing divine favors and blessed gifts (*lộc*) upon their worshipers.


Female mountain spirit embodied during ritual possession

Three years ago, in November 2013, their lofty abodes must have been shaken to their very foundations. Material ropeways were installed on Vietnam's highest mountain, the Fansipan.[10] Construction machinery and material was hauled up to its wind-whipped summit. Cranes were erected and steel towers planted on its

rugged slopes. Rocks were blasted to pieces and pounded by jackhammers (Fig. 2).
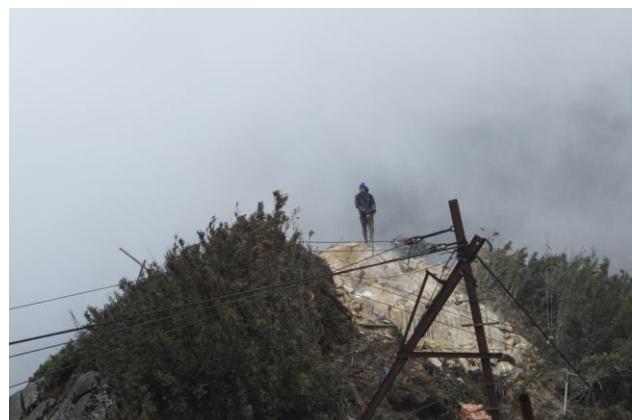
Drilling into the rocks with a jackhammer on the peak of mount Fansipan (March 2016)

A mountain terminal and visitors' platform was erected near its 3,143-meter-high peak. A lustrous entrance hall and base terminal were built on the fringe of Sapa town. Finally, a cable system was strung across the rice terraces of the Mường Hoa valley to span the 6,325-meter distance and 1,410-meter difference in elevation to the roof of "Indochina" (that is, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos). A legend was born: the "Fansipan Legend", a 200-million-US-dollar project invested in by the Danang-based Sun Group Corporation, one of Vietnam's leading theme park and real estate developers, and realized in partnership with the Austrian Doppelmayr/Garaventa Group, the world market leader in ropeway engineering and construction (Fig.3).

View from the Fansipan summit platform into the valley (March 2016)

In February 2016, the Guiness world-record-holding three-rope cable car was inaugurated.[11]

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[10] http://www.lcs-cablecranes.com/projects/fansipan-cable-car/

[11]   http://www.guinnessworldrecords.de/world-records/404879-highest-ascent-by-a-three-roped-cable-

Gone were the days when it took two torturous days to reach the peak of Mount Fansipan. Within 15 minutes, each gondola cabin can carry up to 35 passengers to the summit (Fig.4). The whole system is able to transport up to 2,000 visitors per hour. The ticket price for the round trip is steep: 600,000 VND (23 EUR) per adult and 400,000 VND (15 EUR) for children between 100 and 130 cm in height. In spite of this, 13,000 visitors used the cable car during the early days of the lunar New Year.[12]

This is the time when Kinh lowlanders go on pilgrimages to famous temples and pagodas throughout the country to pray for good things to happen in the New Year. Some of these places are located on mountains, such as the famous Yên Tử pagoda complex on Yên Tử Mountain (Quảng Ninh Province), or the historic Perfume Pagoda, a large complex of temples and shrines located in the limestone terrain of Hương Sơn (Hanoi). For centuries, pilgrims had to climb thousands of steps to reach the summits of these sacred landscapes. At the beginning of the new millennium things became much easier. On Yên Tử Mountain, cable cars have been taking pilgrims to Hoa Yên pagoda since 2002, and further up to the pinnacle since 2008. In January 2006, a cable car system leading up to the Hương Tích cave in the Perfume Pagoda mountains was inaugurated.

Each gondola cabin of Fansipan Legend has a capacity of 30 to 35 passengers.

"Vietnam may be one of the most cable car crazed nation in the world and the country is in the midst of a massive ropeway construction boom," Nick Chu wrote in a post on a website called *The Gondola Project*.[13] But the developers of Fansipan Legend obviously had more in mind than "just" a cable car for people who want to enjoy a once-in-a-lifetime panoramic view from the highest summit of Vietnam. They wanted to create a recreational place that people want to return to again and again, spend time, and consume. Mount Fansipan may be the tallest mountain in the whole of "Indochina", but it had hitherto not been a place of spiritual significance and pilgrimage filled with myths and legends. So why not turn it into a destination for spiritual tourism (*khu du lịch tâm linh*)?

The signpost that directs visitors out of the upper station arrival hall does not say "Viewing Platform", it says "Spiritual Area" *(khu tâm linh*, see Fig. 5). A staircase leads to the entrance gate of the "highland sanctuary", as it is called on the upper station map. In the future, visitors may navigate a whole circuit of Buddhist temples and shrines connected by concrete pathways and stairs (Fig.6, 7, 8).
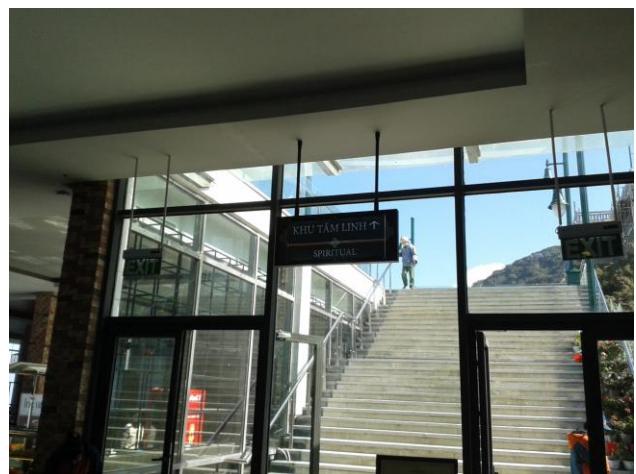
Guidepost to the "spiritual area" in the upper station arrival hall (March 2016)

car; http://www.guinnessworldrecords.de/world-records/404878-longest-non-stop-three-rope-cable-car
[12] https://www.vietnam-travel.org/news/more-than-13000-visitors-using-fansipan-cable-car.html.

[13] http://gondolaproject.com/2016/02/01/new-heavyweight-ropeway-champ-vietnam/

Entrance gate to the highland sanctuary just below the summit (March 2016)

Upper station map listing all temples and shrines of the "highland sanctuary"

ers capitalizing on the recreational and spiritual demands created by Vietnam's unprecedented economic growth in the past decades, but their reputation for "sacred efficacy" (*linh thiêng*) lingers on and continues to draw devotees to their shrines

The "Bottom Pagoda" (Chùa Hạ) on Mount Fansipan

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This temple ll presumably also include adjacent shrines dedicated to the legendary general Trần Hưng Đạo (Nr. 3 on the upper station map, see Fig. 7) and to the Mother Goddesses (Nr. 5, incorrectly translated as "Marian Shrine"), which is common for northern Vietnamese Mahayana pagodas. It is at this shrine that visitors may pay respect to the female mountain spirits that dwell in the northern highlands. Their realm may have been taken over by ambitious private develop-

BRÂU RITUAL PRACTICES: PERFORMING CULTURE, SEEKING SOLUTIONS, AND TRYING 'MORE POWERFUL BUDDHISM'

by Tran Hoai (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Germany)

Introduction

The Brâu (or Brao, Prao) constitute an interesting case study within Vietnam's numerous ethnic groups. Living in the borderlands of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, they are facing precarious political, economic, cultural, and ritual conditions. Focusing on the ritual life of this people, this paper illustrates how their ritual practices today are much more complex than that of a 'traditional agricultural group'.

A border group

The Brâu speak a Mon-Khmer language from the Bahnaric branch. All Brâu people of Vietnam currently live in a frontier village, 10km from the Lao, Vietnam, Cambodia border junction (Dak Me village, Bo Y commune, Dak Glei district, Kontum province). With a population of only about 400 within Vietnam's territory they are one of the smallest ethnic groups in Vietnam. In other word, they might be seen as "a nearly-extinct (*tuyệt chủng*) group" – as one district cadre responsible for cultural issues put it to draw my attention to the Brâu group as well as to explain why this group have received many economic, social, cultural supporting programs from the state in order to preserve, to save their community. Actually, there is a remarkable number (total 27,700) of Brâu people living just across the border, on Lao and Cambodian territory. As a villager taught me about the history of the Brâu, they used to live together in a large valley called Dak Me (Me river) which now belongs to the Cambodian side. After the victory of the North Vietnamese Communists in 1975, the border lines between Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were demarcated; this separated the original Brâu Dak Me people into different national zones.

The small Brâu group in the current Dak Me village in Vietnam is dealing with this situation. On the one hand, as a "nearly-extinct group" they have been the subject of many supporting projects from the government. On the other hand in daily life, they keep going across the border to visit their relatives, looking for future partners, and exploring land for cultivating or for ritual exchanges. Modernity has affected Brâu spiritual life. Vanished agricultural 'technical rituals' have reappeared in cultural heritage performances; curing rites still play a role In addition to hospital treatment. The Brâu people have also started trying what they consider more effective rituals of state-considered religions such as as Buddhism in order to solve worldly difficulties.

There are stories which I have learnt from Thao La, a Brâu man in his late 50s who hosted me during my stay in Dak Me village (January 2016).

From agricultural technical rituals to heritage performances

Like other groups living in the Central Highlands, the Brâu used to practice agricultural technical rituals for every step of a rice crop (choosing land; clearing land; seeding; harvesting, etc.). Since 1975, when they arrived at their current settlement, the Brâu have been under the state's fixed cultivation scheme (*định canh định cư*) which means they had to abandon their custom of doing shifting cultivation. "Since then, almost all of the agricultural rituals have gone", Thao La states. "We only do them [rituals] when the government opens their pocket, investing money for us to run certain rituals as cultural events in this village or as performances in Hanoi. That's it. If we were still doing shifting cultivation on our former mountainous fields, there would be still rituals". Their rituals today are mainly curing practices for sick people.

Thao La and his wife in Brâu traditional costume

Curing sick people: between scientific hospital and spiritual rituals

Almost every Brâu family in Dak Me village has a ritual column in front of their house. It is sign that a buffalo offering ritual has been performed in order to appease ancestors' ghosts to spare sick persons; or to wish for good luck. Besides this, Brâu people also do small rituals which involve offering a chicken and a jar of wine to treat certain light illnesses. Two years ago, Thao La's wife became ill. More than one month's treatment in hospital had not brought any positive result. La's wife was approaching a critical condition; she was almost unable to eat anything. La decided to go to ask a fortune teller for advice. After a small guessing-ritual using a chicken's egg to check what was happening to La's wife, the fortune teller said that her illness was due to Thao La's father's ghost wanting to "eat" a buffalo.

A buffalo offering ritual was then held four days later. Many of La's relatives and friends from far away (Mo Ray, Đak Xu) came to attend. The ritual cost Thao La approximately 25 million VNDs (1,100 USD). "You know, in the ritual, just when we brought the buffalo home, even when we had not offered it yet, my wife could sit up and ask to eat rice soup. She is fine now since the ritual as you can see, right?" he asked me. I asked Thao La what he thought about the state's and outsider's criticism that their rituals, especially offering buffalo rituals, are truly un-scientific and wasteful? La replied, "I know what outsiders say. It is a modern time now and our rituals disturb government. But, first of all, one must understand that we never do rituals randomly. There must be a reason to do rituals, for instance to heal sicknesses or to ask for good luck. As in the case of my wife: I had brought her to the district and province hospital but she had not been healed. In this case, a ritual must be performed even if it would cost 10-20 million VNDs. It means that you have tried every chance to help a sick one". I asked him what would happen if a ritual cannot heal a sick person. Thao La responds: "It is also something normal, like being treated in hospital. One family may have paid 100-200 million VNDs treating an ill member in a good hospital in HCM city but their patient may die ultimately. It's fate! Doing rituals is like processing treatments. When we have done all but the patient still dies in the end, at least we have tried all the options".

"Please let me know which ghost harms me?": Fortune teller was doing a testing-ritual for a patient

Trying "more powerful Buddhism"

Some Brâu families, including Thao La's family, have recently begun to ask a female Vietnamese ritual master to perform rituals to ward off bad luck (*giải xui*) from their family. The female master has been Thao La family's friend for a long time. She runs a private temple at home; Thao La understands, considers and explains to me that the temple is a general Buddhist temple, "a place for worshiping Buddha" (*nơi thờ Phật*) as La's words. "During that time, my family had met many unlucky things", Thao La explains to me why he asks for the Vietnamese ritual. "Try to quit that situation; we had done Brâu rituals but bad things still there. I then try a Vietnamese ritual". The rite was held in Vietnamese style, which cost him nearly 2 million VNDs. Responding to my question whether that ritual works, La said that "things seem just a bit better; I do not know". He then repeats his usual argument: "but at least we have nothing to regret because we have tried all the possibilities".

Thao La even tries asking help from Buddhist temple is in Laos. He shows me one picture of him, his wife, and his son and family, who are living in Laos. They were standing in front of one of a very famous Buddhist temple in Attapeu, Laos; the picture was from a trip in August 2015. Going to the temple, Thao La has learnt from his son to ask for rituals conducted by monks (*a chan*) asking about his future. But most importantly La asks *A Chan* to do special harmful rituals in order to attack his debtors in Laos who had owed to La money from a gong- and buffalo-exchange business for over ten years ago but avoided paying it back. The ritual cost him 4,000 Laos Kip. Thao La happily shows me a buffalo as the first result of the effective ritual. He said that, this kind of ritual was only effective when repeated frequently; monthly is the best. "I will keep going to that temple [to ask for the harmful ritual] until all debts are paid back", he affirms.

I asked him why he chose to ask for help from the Vietnamese ritual master and to go to a Laos Buddhist temple. Could a Brâu ritual master not perform certain rituals to remove a family's bad luck, to read one's future, or to help him to demand payment of debts? Are those Buddhist spiritual rites more powerful than those of Brâu ritual masters? Thao La explained to me that there are Brâu-style rituals for getting rid of one's own or one's family's bad luck, but the ritual run by Vietnamese female master is different in that the female master uses special talismans (*bùa*) and written prayers in her ritual. "It looks more forceful than what Brâu ritual masters do as they only pray to Gods [*yang*] using words", La evaluates. He then adds, "the Buddhist temple also has its *yang* [God] – its Buddha". Moreover, in La's eyes, the Buddhist temple must be authoritative because it is considered by the government as not as strict as in the case of Christian Church. "To be considered by the state, Buddhism must be more powerful (*có quyền hơn*)" Thao La concludes.

Thao La and his family in front of a Buddhist temple (Attapeu, Laos)

Conclusion

The stories that a Brâu man has shared with me illustrate the complexitiy of the ritual/spiritual life of an upland group today. Natural Gods (*yang*) of rain, wind, rivers, streams, and land who used to support for the Brâu's shifting cultivation of crops now mainly appear in heritage performances. Traditional healing rituals still play a role besides hospital treatment. Recently, powerful rituals performed by masters from an authoritative religion such as Buddhism have become effective solutions for them to rely on in order to solve their worldly difficulties.

GHOSTS IN YOGYAKARTA, INDONESIA: REFLECTIONS FROM A SEMI-URBAN FIELD, A CITY IN TRANSITION.

by Patrick Keilbart (University of Cologne, Germany)

Doing research on the Indonesian martial art and national sport *Pencak Silat*[14], my research focus is not primarily on ghost stories and paranormal phenomena. However, martial arts in general are closely tied to war magic and warrior religion (Farrer 2014), and the Javanese are well known for their mystical tradition and prevailing beliefs in supernatural forces, spirits, and the like (Mulder 1998). Furthermore, Javanese people love stories and representations of supernatural and extraordinary feats, about ghosts, spirits, witches and heroes with great martial prowess – narratives that are often referred to as *cerita silat* – "silat stories". So during the twelve months of fieldwork I spent in Yogyakarta and Java (2015-16), I often came across peoples' accounts of uncanny experiences and successful coping strategies. The role and function of *Pencak Silat* experts in such matters, and the *Pencak Silat* audience of corresponding media contents will not be covered further here. It has recently been addressed within the context of narrative traditions and social implications of ghost movies in Southeast Asia (Keilbart 2016). Yet in this short essay, encounters with and stories about ghosts in the environment of the quickly developing city of Yogyakarta (Central Java) will be reflected upon. Gentrification processes and big construction projects, as well as smaller, individual building projects provide good examples of how ghosts' agency functions in emerging (semi-)urban modernities.

Right at the very beginning of my research in Yogyakarta, I was immediately confronted with belief in ghosts and ghosts' agency. Looking for a place to stay, I visited a homestay (*rumah kost*) in the north-eastern part of Yogyakarta that had been recommended to me by a friend as "green *kost*". The owner and manager of the homestay (host mother – *ibu kost*) was an In-

donesian lady married to a Dutch man, who lived with him and their children next door. She showed me around and I was glad the recommendation proved justified; the *kost* was located slightly outside of the city center, it was partly surrounded by bamboo and other trees, and promised a pleasant living and working atmosphere. The *ibu kost* and I sat down in the in-house cafeteria and talked about available rooms. She explained to me that currently the last free room was positioned at the far edge of the building, adjacent to the small bamboo grove. Therefore, she could not rent the room to Indonesians, because at night, when the wind rustled through the leaves, they were afraid of ghosts that were believed to live there. I told her I was not afraid of ghosts, and that I liked the sound of wind rustling through bamboo leaves. She laughed at my answer, but then became serious again and added that later, in case it troubled me, I could probably change to another room. Then she told me about her own experiences with the ghost in her house, who was said to reside in the big tree next to the building. Ten years before, when she and her husband had bought the property and started to build their house, the local people and neighbors had warned her about the ghost. She never saw it, but when the house was finished and her husband was away on business, every night she heard strange noises, voices or footsteps, and could not sleep well. This kept happening, she told me, until one night she climbed onto the roof of the house and screamed into the night, addressing the ghost: "Okay, I'm sorry I built my house here and disturbed you. You were here first, long before me. I don't want to upset you. Maybe we can both live here without disturbing each other?! I beg you, please give me a chance!" From that night on, the *ibu kost* told me in a solemn voice, she had never heard anything from the ghost again.

The next day, I moved in at the homestay and took the reputedly haunted room. Explanatory approaches for the ghost stories my *ibu kost* told me evolved during the year I lived there. Before the homestay was built, the neighborhood was a small-scale industrial area (rather than a tourist or student area), with a stonemason's business, a chicken-processing factory,

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[14] In my PhD thesis, I analyse education of the senses in *Pencak Silat* schools compared to the informal acquisition of media knowledge and the impact of media technologies on ratios of sense perception.

and fish farming. A small river, riverside woodlands, and rice fields characterized the landscape. Lately, urban planning and expanding infrastructure, development of the tourist sector and expansion of the local universities – and therefore of the student home business – had influenced the character of the neighborhood. After the homestay of my *ibu kost* and her husband was finished, other high-standard student residences (so-called *kost eksklusif*) followed, a bit closer to the town and the universities. Students from different parts of Indonesia and foreign people (like me) came to the area. Students discovered the riverside and the main bridge as suitable places to meet and for leisure-time activities, especially in the evening. Some of the long-established residents of the area were not pleased with these developments. One of the *Pencak Silat* masters who lived nearby told me that in former times the river was used for *kungkum*. This is a form of meditation in which the practitioner sits in the flowing water up to his neck, for several hours during night time, in order to achieve a certain kind of openness to divine guidance or mystical insights (cf. Maliszewski 1996: 83f.). Today, the *Pencak Silat* group uses another river for *kungkum* in the mountain area of the volcano Merapi, because the river nearby was "polluted", as the master told me. Similar expressions of dissatisfaction or implicit rejection of the local development could be found amongst the fish farmers and stone workers, always in relation to the river and the unwelcome (foreign) students there. Since my *ibu kost* told me that her husband, and she herself as well, with their extensive building project, had a hard time becoming accepted by the neighborhood, I assumed there was probably a rational explanation for her encounters with the "ghost" in their house. Although there never was any proof of a break-in or burglary, it appeared likely that some of the neighbors – who had warned her about the ghost – entered the *ibu kost*'s property at night to incite fear and to convince her that higher powers opposed her building project. In the first few months when I was staying at the *kost*, one of the domestic servants told me that resistance from local residents against the homestay eased off when my *ibu kost* and her husband contributed a significant amount of money for the reconstruction of the old bridge over the

river nearby. This confirmed my conviction that neighbors working in the small-scale industries were behind the nightly disturbances at my *ibu kost*'s home. The fact that she and her husband contributed to infrastructural improvements of the area probably had more to do with the pacification than her nightly apology and plea for reconciliation at the rooftop had.

Another personal account of ghost encounters showed a comparable development and similar structures. A Catholic *Pencak Silat* practitioner and masters student, with whom I worked (at university and for my research) and made friends with, reported continuing challenges at his home. Things went missing, broke, or stopped working. My friend assumed a *tuyul* or a *genderuwo* was at work – both supernatural creatures of the Javanese folklore, and two of the "more conventional" Indonesian ghosts (cf. Bubandt 2015: 214). A *tuyul* is characterized by the childlike appearance of a human toddler; it can cause havoc in a household and can be used by its 'owner' to secretly get into other peoples' houses and steal money or valuables from them (Quinn 2009: 33). In Javanese mythology, a *genderuwo* is known as a giant water demon who disturbs peoples' sleep by throwing pebbles stones at their house, or haunts women for sexual intercourse (Suryono 2007: 58). The reasons why my friend assumed a *tuyul* or *genderuwo* was wreaking havoc in his house were that things went missing, he had sleeping problems, and water damage occurred repeatedly. To counter the ghost threat, my friend visited the "Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus" at Ganjuran, about 15 kilometres south of Yogyakarta, he prayed and meditated, and he collected some water from the sacred spring there (as many pilgrims do). Using the holy water from Ganjuran, he wished to fight off the ghost of whatever kind and to expel it from his house. After some weeks, when I asked him about the state of affairs, my friend told me that he still suffered from sleeping disorders, but that the sacred water had at least kept the *tuyul* or *genderuwo* from further damaging the house.

In this case, too, rational explanatory approaches for the disturbances in my friend's house evolved during my one-year stay in Yogyakarta.

My friend is a young adult Catholic, married, with no children yet. He studied in Australia, is now doing his masters degree (in cultural and religious studies) and also works as a freelance translator. He has several large tattoos, owns two dogs, and every now and then drinks alcohol (traditional fermented beverages) with his fellows from a local tattoo community in Yogyakarta. My friend told me several times that he did not get along with his neighbors very well. His liking for tattoos, dogs, and alcohol might be perceived as negative contribution to the uneasy relationship in the mixed Muslim and Christian Catholic neighborhood. I have never investigated further, but my friend's *Pencak Silat* master told me in an interview that some of the Muslim residents of the area were rejecting or even hostile towards their Christian neighbors. Particularly recently, an increasing influence of groups rejecting foreign "Western" life styles could be observed in Yogyakarta, visible, for example, in the sales ban on beer in local supermarkets (cf. Yulisman and Harsaputra 2015). Violent enforcement of this sales ban by Muslim youth groups were reported several times during my research year in Yogyakarta. This confirmed my conviction that, similarly to the nightly disturbances at my *ibu kost*'s home, probably some of my friend's dismissive neighbors were behind the occurrences in his house. My friend's wife instead simply kept the two dogs responsible for the damage inside the house.

It is not only small, individual building projects or houses – and private conflicts – that set the stage for ghost stories and ghosts' agency. Gentrification processes and big construction projects in Yogyakarta also became occasions for expressions of disquiet about consequences, both mundane and supernatural. During the year I spent in Yogyakarta, four big shopping malls were opened in the provincial capital. The "Hartono Mall", which was then under construction (it was opened in November 2015), is now claimed to be the biggest shopping center in the province of Yogyakarta. In connection with the building process, the following ghost story was circulating among citizens of Yogyakarta:

At the beginning of the building process, a *waringin* tree (*Ficus benjamina*) was standing in the way. Local construction workers refused to fell the tree, because it was believed to host a powerful ghost. The foreign investor and construction management insisted that it be felled, so woodcutters tried to cut down and remove the obstructive tree. In the attempt, one of the woodcutters had an accident and died. For many people it was obvious that the ghost in the tree had protected its home and caused the fatal accident in order to prevent the felling of the tree. On the strength of the incident, and under pressure from the construction workers, the investor and construction management agreed to relocate the tree instead of felling it. Thus, the tree was uprooted and replanted, and the construction process could be continued. Unfortunately, the *waringin* tree did not survive its relocation, and died shortly afterwards. Just a week later, part of the scaffolding at the construction site collapsed and 12 workers died. For many people it was absolutely clear that the ghost had taken revenge on the workers for the death of its host tree. People say it haunts the new shopping mall to this day.

During my research year in Indonesia, I came across a number of further, similar ghost stories in which problems and conflicts were addressed. Rational explanatory approaches for the ghost stories I heard usually evolved over time. From the standpoint of a scholar, I concluded that the reason for ghost stories and the mediating agency of ghosts lay in "a corresponding element in the attitudes of the Javanese, which is to avoid at all costs controversy in public" (Koentjaraningrat 2009: 44). Nobody wanted to criticize others directly, publicly, so ghosts functioned as mediators, and ghost stories implicitly communicated criticism among the people. Controversial gentrification processes and big construction projects, as well as smaller, individual building projects and related private conflicts were handled that way.

However, for ghost stories of a different kind, about good-natured, helpful and supportive ghosts or spirits, these explanations appeared to be inappropriate. My experiences in the course of participatory observation and appren-

ticeship in *Pencak Silat* schools, in the so-called *aspek mental-spiritual*, added another dimension to the ghost stories and "urban legends". Meditation and training of the senses is an intrinsic part of *Pencak Silat* mental-and-spiritual education. In traditional Javanese conceptions, this entails the chance and the risk for practitioners to become more open towards the spirit world. After a few months of training, meditation late in the evening, usually before I went to bed, became part of my daily routine. On the 16th November 2015, I wrote in my research diary:

"Last night I met my *ibu kost*'s ghost! I came home from training quite late, so I did my meditation shortly before midnight. When I went to bed afterwards, I felt very relaxed and calm. I heard the wind softly rustling in the bamboo in front of the window. Just before falling asleep, in the intermediate state between being awake and asleep, suddenly I had the feeling I was not alone in my room. I felt a presence and had the vague impression it wanted something from me, but I didn't know what it was. A moment later, I had the feeling someone was lightly touching my face. Immediately I was fully awake again. Yet I found myself alone, everything was quiet – besides the bamboo leaves rustling in the wind and light rain that had begun tapping on the window. The ghost was gone, and so was my feeling of being an "object of desire", the feeling that someone wanted something from me. What a strange, but not really unpleasant experience. I'm curious about the reactions and assessments of my *ibu kost* and my *Pencak Silat* friends."

More stories about good-natured, helpful and supportive ghosts or spirits, as well as reflections on *Pencak Silat* education of the senses and the *mental-spiritual* will be provided in my dissertation.

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THE IMMEASURABLE DEBT TO THE DEAD: INSIGHTS FROM KMHMU SPIRIT ECONOMIES

By Jean M. Langford (University of Minnesota)

In *The Gift,* Marcel Mauss wrote that the dead "are the true owners of the things and possessions of this world" (1990, 16). One way to imagine such ownership is through a recognition that the living receive their very lives from the dead through ancestral bloodlines. In this understanding, which underlies material reciprocity with the dead in many parts of Southeast Asia, life itself is a condition of indebtedness to the dead. As Christian converts, however, most of the Kmhmu[15] emigrants I met in a U.S city in the late 1990s dissociated themselves from direct reciprocity with the dead. "We don't pray to ghosts", one man, John, assured me. "We pray for the person to get into heaven. We take the things to the church. During the mass the priest names the things that people are offering. The diocese allows us to do that." Despite the disclaimer, the very practices described by John take on a certain hybridity in other accounts. "We know what kind of food our ancestor likes", Julie said, "so we buy that kind of food and offer it to him. If someone offers that and eats that, then the ancestor will receive it." Julie explained that because she was born with a unique vulnerability to contact with the dead, she had abstained for most of her life from eating any food consecrated to the dead.

> "I could never eat that. I don't know if I was afraid or if my mom said I couldn't eat it or what. But since I've started coming to this church, I eat it. Because the catechists say, 'Oh here's some food. Eat it.' And then later they tell me, 'You know where that was from?' And I say, 'Where?' And they say, 'That was from the offertory.' And I say, 'Oh my God.'"

Material reciprocity still haunts this Christian offertory, the food retaining physical traces of its connection with the dead.

Cheuang, a Kmhmu healer, whose conversion to Christianity did not prevent his pursuit of pre-Christian rites, described the importance of material gifts in preparing his mother's body after her death.

> We said: "Here's some money. Whatever you want, you take, and leave us what you don't want." We wrapped the coins in black and white cloth and put them in her hand. In one hand we put sticky rice, and in the other meat. We put other coins in her mouth for her to buy her way to *mìang róoy* [the spirit town]. If we put them in a pocket we'd worry that somebody would steal them. In her mouth we know they're safe.

His story again signals the concreteness of the gift, as well as the return of part of the gift to the giver, and the care taken to avoid any interference in the exchange with the dead. Reflecting on these practices another woman, Kampheang, mused, "Some people put the money in the mouth. And if you ask why do you do that, [it's] because he needs to have that money to go buy a new place for himself. That's how we translate it out." Safe passage or spiritual real estate, the gift of money slides from a visible capitalist economy into a shadow economy of the dead, one currency translated into another.

This material reciprocity is referenced in a Kmhmu folk tale told by Kam Raw about two brothers whose mother was seriously ill (Lindell, Swahn, and Tayanin 1977-1995, Vol. 3: 83-84). The younger son cared attentively for his mother, but the older son did not. When the mother died, and the youngest son asked his brother to help with the burial, he excused himself, insisting that he had too much work to do. Following the burial, the younger son offered rice to his mother each morning at the burial site. One day

he found a stone at the gravesite. The next day he heard the stone singing and whistling. Eventually he took the stone home with him where it began to sing at his command. When he boasted to some merchants about the stone, they wagered everything they owned that the stone could not sing. Winning the bet, the son became rich. When his older brother learned about the stone he asked the younger brother to let him borrow it so he could become wealthy as well. The younger brother refused, saying, "It is something mother gave to me to return [my] kindness and good care. I cannot give it to you!" So the older brother stole the stone and made a bet with another group of merchants that the stone would sing at his command. He agreed to enslave himself to the merchants if he lost. Of course, the stone would not sing for him, and he became their slave. Kam Raw concludes,

> He did not love his parents. When his mother was ill and going to die he did nothing to cure her. When she died and he was asked to go and bury her he did not go. It was only his brother who took care of her all alone. Thus the younger brother received his mother's blessing, while he did not get any blessing from her.

Drawing Heidegger's and Georges Bataille's thoughts on the gift into dialogue, Rebecca Comay (1990) has written of an indebtedness that is simultaneously an infinite gratitude (for time, for other beings, for being itself).[16] Comay suggests that this indebtedness marks a sociality prior to exchange and a responsibility prior to law. It is gratitude so profound in the face of generosity so extravagant, that no payback can be conceived of. David Graeber reasons that if we might be said to "owe an infinite debt to humanity, society, nature, or the cosmos (however one prefers to frame it)", no one could "possibly tell us how we are to pay it", in which case anyone who delineated amounts of debt would be presuming "to calculate what cannot be calculated" (2011, 68-69). Within European philosophy such an infinite gift, and the gratitude it pro-

vokes, is usually imagined as a gesture toward immaterial abstraction, rather than a moment of material exchange. Although the gift exchanges with the dead recounted above hold some of the resonance of that radical Heideggerian gift, they simultaneously exhibit a gritty physical existence: sticky rice, meat, coins. Jean-Luc Nancy and Richard Livingston (1991) note that for "Western" thinkers, the concept of sacrifice is "spiritualized" such that true sacrifice is necessarily figurative rather than literal. They point out that philosophers from the Greeks through Bataille consider the more literal sacrifice practiced by peoples around the world a vulgar economism. Yet they observe:

> When someone says to his gods: "Here is the butter. Where are the gifts?", it may be that we do not know what he is saying, since we know nothing of the community in which he lives with his gods . . . We need to admit that what we consider as mercenary exchange ("here is the butter…") sustained and gave meaning to billions of individual and collective existences, and we do not know how to think about what founds this gesture. (We can only guess, confusedly, that this barter in itself goes beyond barter.) (1991, 26, 35)

For "gods", in this statement, we might substitute "the dead". The parenthetical caution that barter may go beyond barter is provocative. Yet, rather than resign ourselves to the absolute foreignness of a more literal sacrifice imagined by "billions" of humans, might we learn to sense what is at stake in a material reciprocity with the dead?[17]

At the time of our conversations, the Kmhmu man, Lt. Phanha, was contemplating converting to Christianity. His one hesitation was his loyalty to *róoy kàan*, the paternal ancestor spirit that he credited with protecting him during battles in Laos. "Whenever there was danger ahead," he said, "I always had a dream." He was unwilling to abandon his ancestors, he said, until he

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[16] Heidegger speaks of this indebtedness as "guilt", casting it in a distinctively Christian light (2010 [1953], 284).

[17] See also Chakrabarty (1998) on the persistence of gods and spirits in modern practices.

could make arrangements for their well-being. "If I ever have the opportunity to go back to Laos", he said, "I will have a big Buddhist ceremony for my parents, and tell them: 'If you want to find me, look for me at the church.' I want to inform them in a kind way. Otherwise they will be waiting for me to make an offering every so often."[18] When I asked why he would choose to do a Buddhist rather than Kmhmu ceremony for *róoy kàan*, he answered, "Kmhmu don't have a place for our ancestors. We just bury them anywhere. In my family we used to say the dead went to a certain lake. But now I see that some people have a place where they keep their ancestors. For instance, Buddhists keep the ashes in a temple. I want my ancestors to have a place to stay. That's why I have been keeping two *rit* [practices, rites], *rit* Kmhmu and Buddhism." In Laos, Lt. Phanha's debt to his ancestors would have been paid by dressing and acting in specific ways – handling the rice pot gently for instance – on the anniversary of the day that *róoy kàan* had died. Such practices have been replaced in his community by the offertory made to a Catholic parish in the name of the dead. Meanwhile the mountain landscape where *róoy kàan* were once said to reside was reordered for Lt. Phanha by the war operations in which he spent his early adult life.[19] For years he has not crossed the distance to that place of ancestors, either in imagination or funeral songs. No one in his local community today chants the soul of the deceased along such a route. Lt. Phanha therefore contemplates a renegotiation with his ancestors, mediated by a Lao *wat*, during which he will redirect them to the offerings he will make in a U.S. church. In this way he hopes to continue to pay his debt to the dead.

Derrida has explored that inherent paradox of the gift, that in the very instant it is recognized as a gift, it is no longer a gift as such, but rather an exchange, or to put it another way, the establishment of a debt. The giver develops the expectation of a counter-gift, even as the receiver becomes conscious of the call for a counter-gift (1992; cf. Derrida 1995).[20] In the exchange with the dead, however, there is little certainty regarding whether a gift to the dead was received, or whether the value of a gift exceeds or falls short of a prior gift traveling in the reverse direction. It is impossible to erase the risk of dangling and unclaimed gifts, unknowingly accepted gifts, and mysterious remainders of debt that, being beyond calculation, might be neither repaid nor repayable. Gifts offered to the dead, therefore, might take on some of the exteriority of a "pure gift" in relation to political economy. The exchange quickly falls into darkness, unfolding in a time out of time, exaggerating the quality of incommensurability that is already inherent to the gift (Comay 1990, 67). There is, finally, a bottomless quality to reciprocity with the dead, gifts mirroring gifts into an infinite distance, signifying an immeasurable debt to the dead that can only accumulate with time. Such spirit economies seem to mark a certain limit to capitalist expansion, registering the extent to which any living economy is encumbered by a debt to the dead, and to other forces beyond human life.

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[18] Mary Steedly found that a recent addition to the spirit world in Indonesia were those spirits whose Christian kin no longer provided for them (1993, 145).

[19] According to Kam Raw, there were two spirit villages in Northern Laos, one where a large ficus tree grew, and another at a vast lake (also described as a "quagmire". Both were actual geographical locations that were not visited by living Kmhmu (Lindell, Swahn, and Tayanin 1977-1995, v. 3, 11, 313).

[20] This is an insight variously articulated by Bataille (1988, 70), as well as Marx, Hegel, and Nietzsche (Comay 1990, 66).

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LEARNING 'SHAMANISTIC HEALING' AMONG THE LANTEN (YAO MUN) OF LAOS

By Joseba Estevez (University of Münster, Germany)

In the Northern Lao province of Luang Namtha, the Lanten (Yao Mun), one of the 39 ethnic groups that populate the area, conduct 'shamanistic healing' ceremonies (Lanten: *ai kwa*), aimed at identifying the socio-cosmological origin of a particular 'disease' (Lanten: *sang goon*; see Estevez 2016).

For the Lanten, 'disease' is the result of the weakening or the loss of one or more 'souls' (Lanten: *hon*). The *hon* is conceptualised as a 'gift of life' that has been granted by the deities and the ancestors. Disruptions to the relationship with those who give life can cause the withdrawal of their gift, which will cause disease and, if not properly treated, death.

When somebody in the house is 'sick for a long time' – that is to say, not responding to traditional or modern remedies – the head of the household requests a 'shamanistic healer' (Lanten: *kwa mun*), also called 'healing master' (Lanten: *kwa tai*). This ritual expert will try to identify the deity, group of deities, or the ancestors responsible for the withdrawal of the gift of life. When *ai kwa* is successful, the *kwa mun* can recommend a suitable ceremony that will re-establish the balance of the socio-cosmological relationships of the patient as a whole, which also includes all the family members, animals and crops of his or her household.

The *kwa mun* is a ritual expert who has been previously ordained as a 'priest' (Lanten: *tao kong*) and 'master' (Lanten: *tai kong*) and has accomplished a ritual training referred to as 'learning shamanistic healing' (Lanten: *ho kwa*). In the course of the ceremony, the attending apprentices receive a spirit-horse (Lanten: *ho kwa ma*) along with 'military training' that is conceptualised as the knowledge required to 'ride' the stars with their spirit-horses and to 'fall' back to the Earth. Moreover, they learn and practice diverse 'shamanistic healing' tech-

niques and study selected elementary manuscripts about healing.

Nowadays, the *ho kwa* ceremony is rarely conducted amongst the Lanten of Laos. In the last decade, the role and tasks of the 'shamanistic healers' have been incorporated into those of the 'priest' (Lanten: *tao kong*).

The following images correspond to a *ho kwa* that took place in 2013 in Nam Lue Village, Luang Nam Tha, Lao PDR. This three-week-long ceremony, which includes all the required stages to become *kwa mun,* was documented as part of my ongoing anthropological research on the role of the Lanten ritual experts.

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Photos

The ceremony starts with the preparation of the altars (Lanten: *tan*). The ritual experts and the apprentices work together on the making of the ritual decoration. Centre of the picture: A fruit tree made of paper that will feed the visiting deities and ancestors; the ritual experts will make its fruits delicious in the Otherworld.
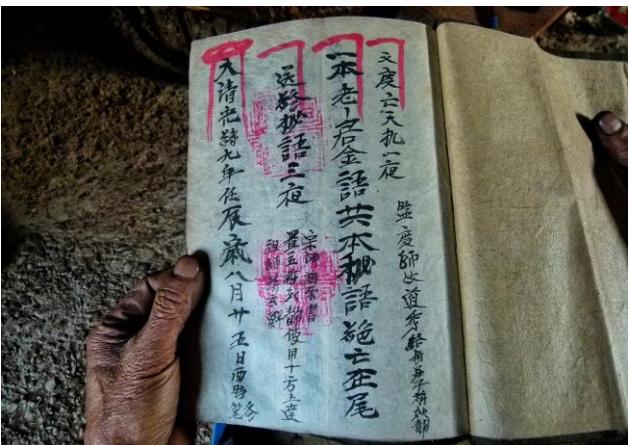
The Lanten manuscripts play a fundamental role in the transmission of the ritual knowledge and in building a hierarchy among the ritual experts. In Nam Lue Village, there was only one copy of this particular manuscript and its owner had to be invited to lead the ceremony so his manuscript could be available for the ceremony. The 'magic' (Lanten: *pap*) of the manuscripts is transmitted from masters to apprentices only after the apprentices have copied the text, learnt how to use it in the ritual context, and fulfilled the agreed ritual payment. Without the associated 'magic', a ritual expert cannot use the manuscript or perform the ceremony; with-

out the related manuscript(s) a major ceremony cannot take place.

The two attending 'tea ladies' (Lanten: *cham cha kwan*) must be unmarried Lanten girls. During the ceremony, all the participants will drink a special blend of tea collected by the ritual experts in the forest. The duty of the 'tea ladies' is to keep the cups always full. They may also receive ('be possessed by') a spirit-horse. If this is the case, they have to receive the proper training. This occurrence was not unusual in the past, and neighbouring villages such as Nam Dee have had well-known female 'shamanistic healers'.

Once the ritual decoration and the altars are ready, the apprentices must visit all the ritual experts in the village and request their blessing and assistance. As a token of respect, they offer them two glasses of rice whisky.

The owner of the manuscript that opens the ceremony announces its commencement to the Lanten deities and the ancestors of the participants.

A general view of the house where the ceremony took place. Note the white cloth on the ceiling. Rolls of cotton cloth made by the Lanten women are used in this ceremony to connect the altar of the masters with that of the apprentices (left and right sides) and the house with the road so the spirit-horses can easily find their way in. In the centre, traditional Lanten food is ready to be consumed by the male participants.

A view of the altar of the masters. On the left side of the picture are the bamboo sticks that will be used to call the spirit-horses. On the right of the picture, a ritual expert writes down the names of all the invited deities and ancestors. In the centre, the ritual expert who opened the ceremony follows the required procedures.

The apprentices start calling their spirit-horses; they will hit the ground with bamboo sticks for hours. Although the apprentice's ancestors usually send these horses, however, other deities can also provide them. Two to four boys will get their spirit-horse each day.

Four ritual experts lead the ceremony; they represent the four Deities of Healing (Lanten: *pat teen;* also *kwa man*). In the picture, the ritual experts check the shoulders of the boys looking for signs that may reveal the presence of the spirit-horse in the body. This ceremony had not taken place in Nam Lue for thirty years and attracted many visitors.
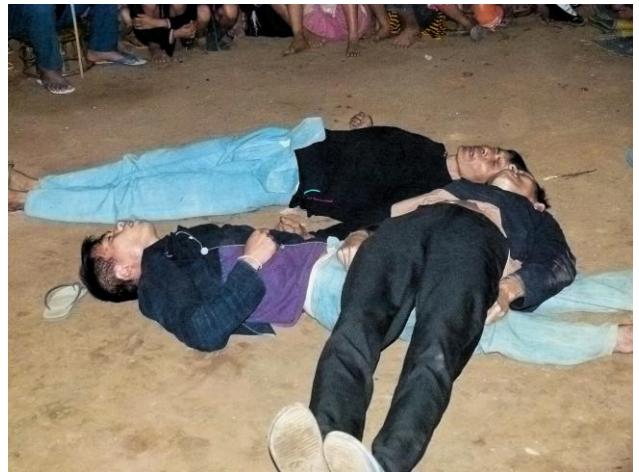
The two ritual experts who 'tame' the spirit-horse take turns until the extenuation makes the boy collapse. They will fall to the ground and 'die' to be 'reborn' again as a 'shamanistic healer'.

One of the boys has received his spirit-horse. It will be 'tamed' by the ritual experts who will make the boy 'ride' the room until he physically collapses. The ritual experts, in the context of this ceremony, imitate the movements and sounds (i.e. whinny) of a horse and keep their hands on their backs to control the reins of their spirit-horse. Although horses were common in the caravans that crossed the Southwest Silk Road route that connected Yunnan (China) with Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, there have not been horses or mules in Northern Laos for decades.

The attending ritual experts lead the boy to the altar of the masters where his feet will be in contact with the wall, i.e. the altar that constitutes a bridge to the deities and the ancestors. For the rest of this part of the ceremony, he will be a member of the 'herd' and will assist the masters in the 'taming' of the forthcoming spirit-horses.

On the right-hand side, a ritual expert announces the introduction of the boy to the 'herd'. On the left, a ritual expert gives the boy war-horse garments such as a saddle, stirrups, flanges, and horseshoes. In this realm, the bronze stamp and the bamboo papers create and represent all these objects, which are made real in the Otherworld by the ritual expert's spiritual assistants.

A boy receives a new ritual identity. It entails a ritual name and two spiritual guides that are selected by means of a raffle. The names of the deities that qualify as spiritual assistants are wrapped in bamboo paper. One of the small packets will fall in (or be picked up by) the left hand, another in the right hand. From now on, the boy will honour these two deities, invite them to any ceremony that he leads, and request their mediation and assistance when it is required.

The full list of the deities invited to the ceremony hangs on the wall (centre of the picture). Each apprentice offers two small pigs to his ancestors after receiving his spirit-horse. His offerings are added to those required to initiate the ceremony. The assistants will consume all the sacrifices. Nowadays, the high cost of this ceremony has made it a rarity. The apprentices cannot attend school or join work parties for three weeks, a situation that was difficult to combine with living the modern life in the Lao P.D.R.

The masters ride their horses at the masters' altar. Note the hands on their backs holding the 'reins'. If one of the ritual experts falls out of the wooden bank where all must stand together while 'riding' the spirit-horses – that is to say, if he 'loses control' of his horse – he may be disqualified as a master.

The apprentices learn how to 'ride' the stars. Sheets of paper on the ground create a path – an asterism – that the apprentices must follow. Although diagrams representing asterisms such as the Big Dipper appear in many Lanten manuscripts and even in one of the bronze seals used by the ritual experts, the Lanten lack knowledge about the celestial objects. In the ritual context, the Sun (Lanten: *manoy*) and the Moon (Lanten: *laa*) are a couple and the stars (Lanten: *ting dao*) are their children. The stars are divided into those that are close to the viewer and those that are far.

that can be considered comic relief.
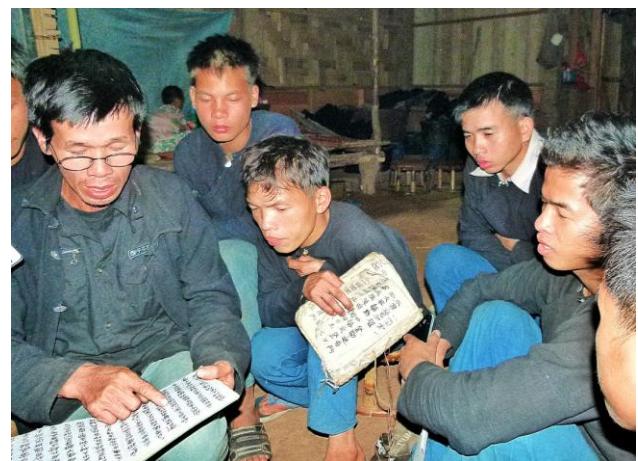
A master teaches the basic healing texts. For many of the apprentices in this ceremony, this was their first contact with the Lanten written language. Although most of the boys in the village have been ordained as 'priest' (Lanten: *tao kong*) and 'master' (Lanten: *tai kong*) few had pursued further training. The Lanten ordination (Lanten: *jai sai*) only provides the accreditations and the socio-cosmological relationships with the masters, ancestors, and deities.

The masters demonstrate how to forward roll on the ground, which represents 'falling back' to the Earth. This exercise is conceptualised as 'military training'. It also offers a great entertainment and attracts many viewers as all the old ritual experts show their skills. The major Lanten ceremonies such as learning shamanistic healing (Lanten: *ho kwa*) and ordinations (Lanten: *jai sai*) include parts with performances

A ritual expert shows the most basic technique to identify a particular deity accounted with retaining ('eating') the *hon* of a person. The major deities are asked one by one, while grains of rice are dropped over a cup containing water and a straw crossing its rim. If one or more grains of rice remain on the straw when a particular deity is questioned, the event is taken as a token of accountability. Experienced ritual experts enter trance states and 'ride' their spirit-horses looking for the lost soul(s). These techniques are combined with questions about the

activities of the sick person and those in the household. The 'shamanistic healer' acts as an investigator who dictates the origin and cause of the disease and prescribes the proper treatment (ceremony).

One of the masters demonstrates how to consume 'malevolent magic' (Lanten: *deh*) out of a sick person. The spirit-horse can feed on the cursing that has triggered the disease, and temporarily neutralises it until the proper ceremony that counteracts the cursing can take place. Lanten healing is combined with visits to the hospital and the use of modern medicine. However, for most of the Lanten, modern doctors and drugs can only treat the symptoms and not the origin of the disease, so only by re-estabilising the appropriate socio-cosmological relationships with the deities and the ancestors can a person fully recover.

THE NEW WAY: PROTESTANTISM AND THE HMONG IN VIETNAM

by Tam T. T. Ngo (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Goettingen)

On the eve of the Lunar New Year, 2005, I helped Mr. Gi prepare the last ritual of the Hmong traditional New Year. He was grateful for my assistance in setting up a new altar for the *dab txhiaj meej,* the spirit of wealth and prosperity, and the *dab roog,* the guardian spirit of the house, for he and I were alone in the house. A bunch of freshly plucked chicken feathers and a ceremonial paper in his left hand, Mr. Gi slowly hoisted himself up onto a wobbly little wooden chair. Keeping the chair steady with one hand, I held out with the other a little bowl, half full of glue made of cooked sticky rice flour. Dipping his thumb in the glue and smearing it on the paper, Mr. Gi carefully attached the ceremonial paper onto the wooden wall right above the outside of the main door, and then the chicken feather on top of it. The door was significantly taller than in most Hmong houses, so decorating its lintel was a rather arduous job; but finally, it was done. Still standing on the chair, Mr. Gi began to recite an incantation. The relatively short chant sounded melancholic. The night grew gloomier.

Ordinarily, the task of preparing for the New Year would be shared among all members of a Hmong family; but, after quarreling with him all afternoon about his desire to carry out the ancient rituals, his wife and three adult children had gone to a neighbor's house to listen to an Evangelical radio broadcast. Accustomed as I had become to the family's frequent conflicts since coming to stay with the Gis more than a month earlier, I was still taken aback by the intensely sad atmosphere in the house that night. Like the Chinese or Vietnamese, most Hmong avoid conflicts at this time in the hope of ushering in a harmonious year. For them, the New Year is the most important time of the year, a vital moment in which ties with ancestors are renewed. The ancestral and domestic spirits of the family are honored through the renovation of altars in and around the house, and food is offered by the head of the family.

The Hmong New Year only becomes meaningful once these rituals are performed in the household. For this reason, it is also the time when the unity of the family and the household is affirmed and ritually sanctioned. On New Year's Eve, it is essential that the family stay together. Yet the performance of this all-important ritual had caused dissension and discord in the Gi family.

What had happened? The brief answer is that after nearly a decade of 'experimenting' with Christianity Mr. Gi had chosen to return to his ancestral worship, while Mrs. Gi and all the children preferred to remain members of the Church. The divergent ways Mr. Gi and his family chose to mark New Year – he by performing ancient rituals, his wife and children by listening to a religious program broadcast from America – encapsulate some of the tensions between old and new caused by the introduction of evangelical Protestantism among the Hmong of Vietnam since the 1980s. About one third of the more than one million Hmong living in Vietnam have converted to Protestantism. The rest include some who have steadfastly resisted the appeal of Protestantism or, as in the case of Mr. Gi, have chosen to return to their ancestral faith. While Mr. Gi clings to old religious beliefs and practices that are at the core of Hmong identity, his wife and children are connected via these radio broadcasts to the transnational Hmong diaspora that came into being after the end of the Second Indochina War (1965-1975). This diaspora encompassed not only Vietnam but also Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, America, France, and Australia. Mr. Gi and his family are part of the story of the spread of evangelical Protestantism throughout the world, a phenomenon that is at once highly local and global.

My book *The New Way. Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam* (University of Washington Press 2016) addresses the interplay between the global reach of Christianity and the ways in which it is articulated in the Vietnamese Hmong society. It approaches the emergence of Hmong Protestantism from various perspectives, those of the Hmong converts and non-converts as well as those of the deconverted, of the Vietnamese state authorities, and of the missionar-

ies. One of the classic narratives of Christian conversion is modelled on that of Saint Paul: a sudden flash of insight and a complete transformation. In fact, however, conversion is a complex social phenomenon that takes place in specific political circumstances. Conversion to Christianity in the Roman Empire is different from conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism in early modern Europe and from conversion under colonial or postcolonial conditions. In all these cases the relation to state power is crucial. In Vietnam therefore conversion not only means change of belief, but also a different relationship with the state and, very crucially, with one's relations with one's kin group. While the emphasis in the narrative of conversion is on the individual's change of heart, it is actually the social situation that is transformed in the first place. This is immediately clear in the fact that the Hmong convert en masse, although not in their entirety.

To explore the different social and individual aspects of what conversion means for the Hmong, this book pays close attention to the way in which Hmong people—converts and non-converts—make sense of their community, locality, and identity in space and time, especially in the face of the material and moral challenges that globalization presents to them. In describing the perculiar way in which the Hmong received the evangelical message, I explain that the initial appeal resonates with the Hmong's own messianic beliefs. I also address their longing to escape conditions of marginality – geographic, socio-economic, and political – and their aspiration to modernity, however defined over the course of the twentieth century, by different actors: the Vietnamese state, with its sudden shifts in policy, or the US-based Hmong diaspora which supplies both missionaries and audio-visual illustrations of global modernity. What is the impact of conversion on the converts' sense of self through their discovery of sin? The New Way, as converts often refer to evangelical Protestantism, reshapes crucial dimensions of Hmong lives; it even affects those who refuse to convert, or who, having converted, decide to return to their old beliefs and practices. All must interact and be affected by the New Way, including the Vietnamese state authorities.

THE SONG OF THE GHOST IN ITS BAMBOO CRADLE

By Erik Mueggler (University of Michigan)

Before 1950, death ritual was at the center of social life in many highland Tibeto-Burman-speaking communities in Southwest China. In the township of Júzò in north-central Yunnan Province, kinship and social relations among the living were given material form in ritualized actions for the dead. The major funeral rituals performed for every person who died in this community began with Emerging from the House (*hek'ǝdo̠*) and Emerging from the Court-yard (*kukæ̠do̠*) performed from evening until dawn two or three days after death, after which the corpse was buried. Seven days after a woman's burial or nine days after a man's buri-al, Dawn-to-Dusk Sacrifice (*nihèpi̠*) was held around the empty space in the courtyard where the coffin had lain. During the tenth lunar month, Tenth-Month Sacrifice (*tsɨhonèpi̠*) was performed during the day around an effigy built for the dead person on a terrace below a central hill of graves. And two or three generations after a death, also during the tenth lunar month, Sleeping in the Forest (*likádùhè*) was held at night in a grove of gigantic trees near the same hill of graves. Especially when performed for an elderly person who had died well, these events all involved people from nearly every household in the community.

While the Communist Party did not ini-tially forbid large-scale gatherings for rituals when it began to conduct land reform in Yun-nan's highlands, the Party made it clear that all such funeral events were to be considered wasteful and distracting. Sleeping in the Forest was performed for the final time in 1949. The other major death rituals continued, diminishing in scope, until the Great Leap Forward began in 1958. For several years after the Great Leap Famine (1959-1960), the dead were buried without ceremony. Soon afterwards, people began to hold small, quiet Emerging from the House, Emerging from the Courtyard, and Dawn-to-Dusk Sacrifice vigils, slaughtering three small goats, instead of the dozen large goats these ceremonies had once required, and replacing goats with rabbits in the chaotic early years of the Cultural Revolution. In the early 1980s, these ceremonies again were held openly, and they gradually grew in scope through the end of the century. At present, death ritual is more central than ever. Like many places in rural China, Júzò has lost much of its youthful population to migration. Most young women and many young men have moved to the cities to find work that does not involve farming. The elderly stay to die; older migrants return home to die; younger migrants return to participate in rituals for dead parents and grandparents. Funerals have replaced the collective rituals of socialism, becoming the only opportunities for people to gather with their kin and friends. People in Júzò are using practices of death to experiment with new ways of think-ing about how persons are inserted into history and new understandings of how people – even "backward" people – might exhibit and internal-ize characteristics associated with modernity.

Two of the funeral events central to social life before 1950, however, have never been re-vived. At the center of Tenth-Month Sacrifice and Sleeping in the Forest was a spectacular feat of memory — an eight-hour-long chant in two versions, each composed of 72 "songs" (*chæ̀*). In the 1940s, only a few ritualists, all men, could perform this chant. These ritualists were very busy during the tenth lunar month, and they were well rewarded for their skill, tak-ing home a whole goat, minus forelegs and pelt, after each performance. This small group of men suffered enormously between 1958 and 1978. Their treasured ritual implements were confiscated; they were starved, made the tar-gets of struggle sessions, and sentenced to hard labor. The spirit familiars, or "ghosts of speech" (*pi̠nè*), who inspired them to remember the great chants, also persecuted them, making them ill because they were no longer allowed to perform. By the 1980s, all in Júzò who had once memorized the great chants were dead or very ill. People who wanted to hold Tenth-Month Sacrifice for their parents or Sleeping in the Forest for their great grandparents could not find anyone to preside and sing.

In 1993, the author met Li Biyong in his home in a small mountain hamlet about a day's walk from Júzò. Li Biyong had learned the great chants as an apprentice ritualist as a youth. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, he performed nearly every day during the tenth lunar month. He fled Júzò before the Great Leap Forward and settled in a mountain house his family had used for herding goats in the summer. He set up the effigy for his tutelary spirit in his house and performed the chants for it secretly every year in order to ward off a chronic illness. In return for a payment that now seems shamefully small, Li Biyong reluctantly agreed to perform the chants for the author and to allow them to be recorded. Li Biyong died in 1995 of the illness that he believed was inflicted on him by the tutelary spirit who possessed him as he chanted.

The great chants for Tenth-Month Sacrifice and Sleeping in the Forest can be divided into three sets of twelve to twenty-four songs each. The first set of songs brings a world into existence and populates that world with living beings. The second set of songs describes the souls of the dead, placing them high in a monkey's nest looking down on animals killing each other; raising them high in a coffin above a courtyard, looking down on sons and daughters killing goats and pigs as sacrifices; and raising them high in an eagle's nest with piles of snakes, blood, and bluebottle-fly maggots. The final set of songs discuss the origins and nature of the material bodies for the dead – a very large effigy, used during Tenth-Month Sacrifice and then destroyed, and a small ancestral effigy, kept in a house for several generations after a death.

The "song of the ghost in its bamboo cradle" is from the final set of songs. The audio clip presented here is excerpted from the middle of the song, between opening and closing sections that are largely identical across all of the songs of the two chants. While some songs are unique to one version of the chant or the other, this song is present in both. This excerpt is from the Sleeping in the Forest version, and it displays the two identifying features of that chant: it is sung in a slow cadence, and the meaningless syllables *à le* are inserted into the middle of

every line. Li Biyong occasionally pauses or repeats words as he struggles to remember the song, but the transcription does not record these stumbles.

The song tells of the origins of the ancestral effigy, or *nètsɿ* — a small straight pine twig bound into the crotch of a forked chestnut twig with seven turns of thread for a woman, or nine turns for a man, and set on a woven bamboo platform and placed high on the innermost wall of a house below a "flower" of twelve chestnut leaves (see Figure). In the recording, Li Biyong breaks off singing at the song's climactic point to tell its story in his own words. A man rides out on his horse, careful not to lend it out to others. At his cousin's house, he turns back and rides home again, stopping to camp for the night. He ties his horse to a tree by a spring and hangs its saddle on a branch. Seven monkeys appear in the night. A monkey drops from the tree onto the saddle; the saddle drops onto the horse; the horse drops into the spring. The man borrows staffs from officials, kings, carpenters, and shamans to probe the spring for his horse, but he does not find it:

mò cæ à le tsæ̀ te to
ŋo mò cæ wù kú à le bo̠ mà go
bo̠ kú à le wù mà go

kò lɔ mò cæ à le tsæ̀ k'ò lɔ
mò cæ à le si k'ò lɔ
ts'i tí à le kè̠ chè ka
tsi' nì à le kè̠ lí ka

mùu he à le tsɨ̀ ka næ̠
yi dù à le m mæ hè̠
lɔ dù à le m mæ hè̠
si̠ væ̀ à le mò p'æ du̠
ká væ̀ à le ho chæ du̠

shɹ̀ wú à le mo yi vi
sɨ k'ə à le sɨ mà k'ə
mo jù à le ho lɔ t'è̠
ho jù à le mò lɔ t'è̠
mò jù à le t'è̠ lɔ t'è̠

[conversation]

mo jù à le ho t'è̠ je̠
ho jù à le mò t'è̠ je̠
mò jù à le t'è̠ ka tè̠
kò lɔ à le tsɨ̀ lɔ p'u chá ve

mà lɔ à le cæ cha ve
ké̠ lɔ à le hè̠ cha ve
pi̠ lɔ à le bæ̀ cha ve
sa cha à le ŋo ve va

mò va à le mò ma po̠
kò lɔ mò cæ à le cha ru va

mò va à le mò ma po̠
t'à zò à le sa tsi po̠
wu zò à le sa cha po̠

t'à zò à le à bò pe̠
wu zò à le à mo pe̠
nè væ̀ à le nè mà pe̠
nè k'u à le nè ts'ɨ̀ pe̠

I rode out on my golden horse
did not lend my golden horse
did not lend it

turned and rode the golden horse back home
rode the golden horse back
led it through eleven gullies
led it over twelve ridges

as the night grew to dark to see
followed closely as it went
followed closely as it came
tied the horse to a big tree
hung the saddle on a thick branch

seven raucus monkeys appeared
in the dead of the night
a monkey fell into the saddle
the saddle fell onto the horse
the horse fell into the spring

[conversation]

a monkey dropped into the saddle
the saddle dropped onto the horse
the horse dropped into the spring
turned and borrowed an official's silver staff

borrowed a king's golden staff
borrowed a carpenter's iron staff
borrowed a shaman's wooden staff
I borrowed three staffs together

probed for the horse without finding it
turned and borrowed a tapered bamboo

probed for the horse without feeling it
probed with three pine trees
probed with three tapered chestnut trees

made the pines into father
made the chestnuts into mother
there is no greater ghost than this ghost
bound the ghost together to make an
ancestral effigy

The pine twig of the ancestral effigy is the dead father; the chestnut twig is the dead mother; the woven bamboo bed is the mother's brother, the affine who supported the couple in life and continues to support them after death. In the Tenth-Month Sacrifice version, the man seeks the horse along twelve streams. A pine tree and a chestnut tree block his way, and he understands that the pine is his father and the chestnut his mother. This parallels a ceremony in which an orphaned son, accompanied by his mother's brother (or the latter's substitute) walks up the mountain, shoots a crossbow bolt into a pine tree, and carries the tree down on his back to fashion into the male part of the ancestral effigy.

At the song's center is the slapstick sequence: monkey drops into saddle, saddle drops onto horse, horse drops into the depths of the spring. This sequence deploys a series of near homonyms: *mo*, monkey; *mò*, horse and, absent but implied, *mó*, underworld. The songs of the two great chants describe the souls of the dead as monkeys (*mo*), abandoned in the forest before being located and given material bodies. The songs portray coffins as strong white horses (*mò*), which carry the dead to their destination. In the songs, a dead soul becomes a complex, layered assemblage, which includes wild (monkey) and domesticated (encoffined) layers. The monkey dropping onto the saddle and the saddle onto the horse enacts this layering. Finally, the horse drops into the spring, the underworld, *mó*.

The song contemplates the problem of how a dead soul, lost in the depths, might be found and matched with the material body of an ancestral effigy. This problem was made more difficult when people in Júzò, under pressure from the imperial state and local Confucian elites, replaced cremation with burial in the late nineteenth century. Earlier in the song, a conventional passage about gifts ends with a couplet unique to this song, which seems to come from the time when the dead were cremated at the mountain's foot and their ashes buried beneath small stones.

a k'ə̀ ŋə thə̀ t'à si̠ ŋə́ tsɛ
smoke ascends along paired green pines
kà lì pe̠ mo gə̀
[we] gave you a wide grave site

Now that burial has replaced cremation, the smoke of corpses no longer settled on green pines, and this material link between the dead body and the ancestral effigy that replaces it is lost. The buried corpse descends into the profound depths of the underworld, and the search for the dead soul must rely upon contingency — the flight of the crossbow bolt, the pine or chestnut trees rearing up the orphan's path. The absence of any material link between corpse and effigy means that the living can never be certain that the soul is actually found and installed in the body. This uncertainty is one of the reasons that funerals are repeated again and again for decades — not only in the major rites already mentioned, but also in smaller rituals that occur every year.

The parallel problem of how living souls might be reliably and stably matched with living bodies came to dominate political life in Júzò during the three decades that followed the final, public performance of the Tenth-Month Sacrifice version of the great chants in 1957. All of the state campaigns of the socialist period insisted that identities be fixed and that people be held responsible for their attitudes, affects, words, and histories. People in rural China were disciplined to admit to the identities assigned to them during Land Reform (landlord, rich peasant, middle peasant, poor peasant, local bully, purveyor of superstition), to feel approved emotions with authentic sincerity, and to mouth appropriate phrases with heartfelt feeling. In Júzò, people responded by insisting on the difficulty and contingency of the project of matching souls with bodies. They understood the young local activists of the Cultural Revolution to be possessed by Chairman Mao. They concluded that the most destructive of these activists were possessed and killed by a set of ancestral spirits they had insulted. Many found themselves possessed by ghosts of those who died during the Great Leap Famine and afterwards. During the

1980s, many funerals were devoted to settling the wandering souls of the dead of the socialist period, who possessed their descendants, making them ill and killing them. Today, every death is seen as a bad death, unloosing a wild soul that will inevitably find its way into the living bodies of others.

These contexts involve living bodies as well as living and dead souls. But the question they raise is nevertheless fundamentally parallel to the question raised by the "song of the ghost in its bamboo cradle." The song suggests that the match between souls and bodies is mysterious and uncertain, and that creating and stabilizing this link requires dedicated work as well as a measure of luck – searching along twelve streams until one's path is blocked, or borrowing the staffs of officials, kings, carpenters and shamans to probe in vain. This suggestion opposes the modernizing insistence that souls and bodies must be seen as naturally and fundamentally bound together (identities, affects, words, or histories, owned by or embedded in particular bodies). This opposition is the underlying theme of the many secret histories of relations between living persons and invisible beings that are woven through the encounter of highland communities in Yunnan with secularizing socialism and post-socialism.
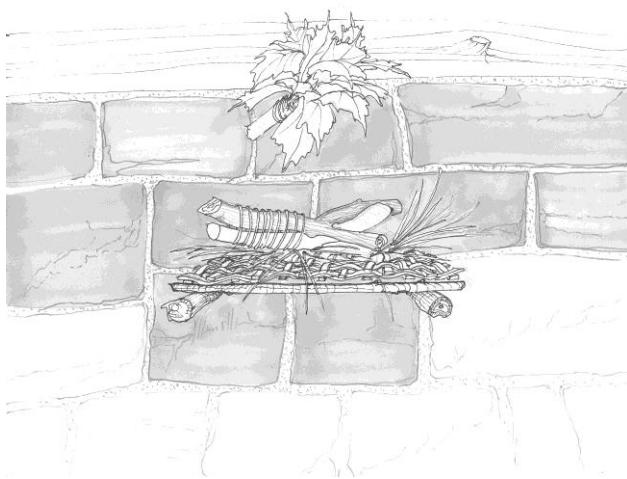
An ancestral effigy – a pine twig (father) bound to a chestnut twig (mother) lying on a bamboo bed (affine) and gazing up at a flower of chestnut leaves.

GLOBAL AND LOCAL: THE LOCUS OF SORCERY IN FAR EASTERN JAVA

By Nicholas Herriman (La Trobe University, Australia)

In 2002, I was busy undertaking fieldwork in Banyuwangi regency, on the eastern tip of Java. I was researching the practice of killing sorcerers and what this can tell us about state-society relations. Local residents often related stories of 'sorcerers' featuring everyday giving and receiving; requesting and denying; and lending and paying. The story I was told about Sukardi was a case in point. A woman named Ainah lent Sukardi a small amount of money as an interest-free loan. Afterwards, Sukardi returned the money to Ainah, but also gave her what is euphemistically referred to as an 'abnormal' illness. In 1998, Sukardi's neighbours gathered together to kill Sukardi, but he managed to escape. Sukardi was one of the luckier ones. Around 100 other people, accused as sorcerers, were killed by their family, friends, and neighbors in 1998.

Since the 1980s, one idea has strongly influenced anthropological research concerning ghosts, witches, sorcery and the like. It is called the 'modernity of witchcraft'. This holds that evil, 'supernatural' phenomena express the contradictions, despair, and inequities of capitalism and modernity. The rise of this theory provided a profound new insight into witchcraft and related phenomena. But the theory risks overlooking the local and reciprocal elements of the supernatural. In what follows, I outline the modernity of witchcraft idea. I then introduce my fieldwork village, Tegalgaring, in Indonesia, outlining patterns of sorcery in relation aspects of the economy of that location. I conclude that sorcery emerges from 'traditional' bonds and reciprocal economy; and that part of the appeal of capitalism and modernity is the possibility of escape from this.

Modernity of witchcraft

The preeminent anthropological studies of witchcraft in the 1980s and 1990s argued for what could be called the 'modernity of witchcraft'. Ghosts, spirits, witches, and sorcerers using supernatural powers for their own gain, not to mention to cause the suffering of others, are integral to globalisation. Indeed, such 'supernatural' phenomena, scholars have argued, provide an accurate way of understanding the machinations of capitalism and modernity. So, the argument concludes, rather than dying out, magical beliefs become increasingly relevant as societies undergo transformation.

Geschiere (1997; 1998; 2001), who coined the term 'modernity of witchcraft' demonstrates, for example, that for many in Africa the idea of witches flying across the globe provides an understanding of the flight of international capital in a global economy. Just as witches fly through the night sky, money flies from one country to another. The Comaroffs (1993) see magical ritual partly as a way of getting access to the wealth associated with modernity, especially in areas "'where 'modernity' has failed to deliver on its promises'". Taussig (1977) maintains that Colombian peasants understand capitalism as an evil supernatural force – for example, to be a productive laborer one must make a pact with the devil. Finally, Ong (1987) argues that when female factory workers in Malaysia are possessed by spirits, this is actually a "protest against the loss of humanity" brought upon by factory work (Ong 1987:8). They fall in a fit on the floor when possessed; Ong analyses this as a form of protest. Thus, beliefs and practices associated with the supernatural are not remnants of traditional thinking, but rather, according to the 'modernity of witchcraft' idea, are integral to the experience of the contemporary world.

Limitations of the Critique

This 'modernity of witchcraft' research has stressed the importance of global flows and capital in understanding magic. And, to the extent that the mundane has been affected by global flows and capital, the research provides a valuable corrective to the idea that magic is merely traditional. "Nobody", writes Geschierre (2016), defending himself and the Comaroffs from his critics, "ever maintained that witchcraft was only about people's struggles with modern changes". Nevertheless, with its close focus on globalization, modernization and capitalism as a

way to approach magic, the 'modernity of witchcraft' theory obscured the local nature of magical beliefs and practices. In my fieldwork location, I found that analysing sorcery in terms of local economic and social relations paints a different picture of capitalism.

Banyuwangi and sorcery

Banyuwangi Regency (population 1.4 million at the time of fieldwork) is located on the eastern tip of Java. I undertook fieldwork for 12 months in the years 2001-2002 in an Osing village called Tegalgaring village studying what might be called the 'problem' of sorcery. I lived among 'sorcerers' and their attackers. Initially people I spoke to denied holding 'superstitious' and 'backward' beliefs about sorcery. By their accounts, they were 'good Muslims', and Islam clearly forbids the use of sorcery.

Rather than focusing on what people said they believed about sorcery, my ethnography focused on cases of perceived sorcery and recriminations for it. Clear contrasts emerged. Notably, almost everyone I met who initially denied believing in sorcery in fact demonstrated a sincere belief in the threat of this evil force. They put up amulets to repel sorcery, mourned the death of a relative at the hand of a sorcerers, identified people they were intimate with as sorcerers, or even took part in recriminations against 'sorcerers'. Such recriminations included infrequent actions against those so accused. These ranged from stoning their roofs, to ostracism, to attacking and even killing them.

Another contrast emerged in the distance at which sorcery works. For instance, my informants stated that sorcery can work over hundreds of miles even on different continents. If a sorcerer wanted to, he or she could reach me in Australia or America; nowhere was safe. Actually, in every case I studied – and I conducted over 150 interviews throughout Banyuwangi regency in addition to my village-based ethnography – the identified 'sorcerer' was another local person. Rather than miles, I would say that sorcery occurred over several hundred yards at the most! In the sense that interviewees talked

about such people as their own uncles or even spouses; the sorcery was extremely intimate.

These 'sorcerers' attacked were thought to cause 'abnormal' misfortune in their victims—illness, poverty, madness, and so on. They are normally accused 'after the fact'. Specifically, if an altercation arises among friends, family, or neighbours, one of the parties might subsequently suffer a misfortune. Suspicions will be aroused such misfortunes occur frequently enough after altercations (or even perceived altercations) with the same person. A 'witch-doctor' (*dukun*) or a Muslim religious specialist (*kiai*) might confirm the suspicion.

As for those accused of 'sorcery', they were actually few in number. Tegalgaring had a population of about 5,000, but, as far as I could tell, only about 15 were suspected of sorcery. I had no evidence that these people identify themselves as 'sorcerers'.

We can see accusations of sorcery and subsequent killings closely related to relationships of reciprocity in several examples. I spoke once to an elderly man named Turok. He recounted, that decades earlier, a local man named Tajeri approached his wife, asking for some left-over cloth, but she refused. After this, Turok became sick. Turok 'knew' that Tajeri was a sorcerer 'according community information' and that Tajeri had caused his illness. He eventually took part in, and probably led, a violent attack on Tajeri.

A local doctor took me to a village near Tegalgaring to visit a terminally ill patient, Susi. Susi's stomach was enlarged. She attributed the malady to her sister-in-law, who was a prostitute. She lived next door. She needed, I was told, a lane for her clients to drive into to access her services. The lane she proposed would run across Susi's property, but Susi denied her this access. Subsequently, Susi developed the enlarged stomach. This was explained to me by Dr Nyoman as being due to ascites – the accumulation of fluid in the abdomen – usually caused by hepatitis. The dying woman ascribed her swollen stomach to sorcery. Indeed, swollen

stomach was one of the most common effects of sorcery.

Woman with enlarged stomach 'caused' by her sister-in-law.

Misradin had once been a village official. He had married his cousin; an atypical marriage in Banyuwangi. Misradin's mother-in-law, Asemi, was also his aunt. But Asemi, he told me, was a sorcerer. Twice he had reported her to the army. Twice, also, local residents had exiled Asemi from the village. She had used sorcery against her own brother, Misradin's father.

Misradin's father owed Asemi money. When she came to collect, he couldn't repay. Then Misradin's father had a dream that he was being sprayed with water. (Spraying people with water is a common way to use magic on them in Banyuwangi.) Misradin's father woke to find his stomach swollen.

Although he was jailed for the killing, he denied any role in it. Nevertheless, he maintains, Asemi, and in fact boasted that he had turned her over to the army on two occasions. Moreover, he told me, Asemi had been banished from the village twice. A case Misradin focused on was her using sorcery against his father.

Eventually Asemi became one of the victims of the outbreak of sorcerer killings in 1998. The perpetrators were, Misradin explained, local people. Misradin himself was jailed for the murder, but denied any involvement.

Neighbours (and clients) of the landowner harvest chillies.

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The Intimacy of Sorcery

Relatives, friends, and neighbours are closely involved in the everyday give-and-take of life. The economy has capitalist and reciprocal elements. Crops grown in the fields around the village; local bamboo handicrafts; labourers working the tourist strips of Bali; roadside sellers of snacks – these services and goods are tied up with a national and international flows in the market. But alongside these, ties of give-and-take also take priority. The labourer on the field might be a client of a local landowner; the bamboo handicraft workers are hired by their uncle; the labourer; friends and family are obligated to buy their snacks from their aunt. The principle of maximizing profit coexists, uncomfortably, with a principle of building and reinforcing emotional and social ties.

Soy bean harvest: again neighbours (and clients) of the landowner at work

Reading the 'modernity of withcraft' literature, one would expect that the market flows and capitalism might be expressed in sorcery accusation and victimization. However, it seems that local ties are just as important, if not more so.

A group of friends—all bachelors—in Tegalgaring.

This shows in ritual meals. Famously described by Geertz as '*slametan*', in these a host provides food and friends, and neighbours provide blessings. But it is exactly these neighours and friends who attend ritual meals who might accuse one among them of being a sorcerer. Indeed, I recall often hearing of the killers and the bereaved family joining together in ritual meals as part of the mortuary rites of a slain sorcerer. This makes sense from the perspective, outlined above, that it is usually friends, neighbours, and family – the very people who would be invited to a ritual meal – who identify

one among them as a sorcerer. Nevertheless, the fact possesses a larger theoretical significance. That the giving and taking of everyday life – ritualized and sacralized in the ritual meal – is the nexus from which sorcery fears and recriminations are born.

Neighbours plucking a chicken for a ritual meal

Author (centre) flanked by religious specialists at a ritual meal

Conclusion

'Modernity of witchcraft' authors have described international capitalism and globalization as an 'evil' and 'supernatural' force in the lives of local people. However, my research in Banyuwangi indicated that the 'evil' and 'supernatural' force of sorcery was tied up in local, reciprocal relations. Indeed, from a local perspective, capitalism and the market offered some reprieve. Many people have a sense of being pulled towards, and yet wanting to escape from the people they interact with from day to day. For such people, the underbelly of dependence and com-

fort is feelings of suspicion and sometimes fear; being shackled and condemned, they seek to break the ties that chain them to those around them.

Neighbours eating leftovers from a ritual meal

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ON GHOSTS, JUMBIES, AND PHANTAS-MAGORIC PRESENCES IN GUYANA

by Marcelo Moura Mello (Federal University of Bahia, Brazil)

Stanley Greaves, People of the Garden City, 1962, oil on hardboard, 32 × 48 inches. From the series People in the Pavement. Copy reproduced from http://bombmagazine.org/article/2607/stanley-greaves (Access: May 30 2016). Reproduced with authorization of the author[21].

"I have this theory that the conditions of the land affect the conditions of our own internal landscape"[22]

Stanley Greaves.

Phantasmagory

Images and narratives about Guyana seem crowded by spectral forces. Very often, academic writings, art works, literary pieces, official discourses, newspaper columns, and daily conversations reverberate presences immersed in amalgamated temporal chains (see Mello 2014a; 2014b).

"People of the Garden City", created by the Guyanese artist Stanly Greaves, is, among other things, a portrait of a transition, the extension of which goes beyond constrained temporal markers. The suffocating setting of the painting contrasts with the landscaping of the capital of

Guyana, Georgetown, known at the time of the composition of these artworks as the "Garden City" due to the finesse of the landscape gardening – materializations, as the colonial buildings, of the orderings of the colonial rulers, the British. The pallid and grayish tonality of People of the Garden City is accentuated by red and shady hues that seep and project themselves over beings impregnated by marks that have suppressed, or paralyzed, their senses – the leaves portrayed by Graves are wandering ones.

Speak in contrast is, in some sense, potentially confusing. In the 1950's and 1960's Georgetown was the epicenter of the anti-colonial and pro-independence struggles of the major ethnic groups of Guyana, Indo- and Afro-Guyanese (or Indians and Africans). Their leaders, Chedi Jagan and Forbes Burnham, united their efforts under a single party, the PPP (People's Progressive Party) but at the end of the 1950's the PPP had split along ethnic lines, and the independence of Guyana from Britain in 1966, was preceded by violent conflicts between the two groups that caused the deaths of hundreds of people and even in the proposition of the creation of two new nations (Smith 1995). At that time, the lawyer Forbes Burnham lead the foundation of another party, the PNC (People's National Congress) whose supporters were mostly Afro-Guyanese. The PPP, in turn, continued to be led by Jagan, who counted on the support of almost the entire Indo-Guyanese population[23]. Consequently, the rise of an independent nation was, simultaneously, a moment of inscription of a shift in the relationship with the old Metropole (Britain), and of deep fissures inside the country. Graves' work portrays wandering beings confined in small rooms. People of the Garden City offers a glimpse of the reverberation of broad political histories in each space, small as it may be. Like the stained figures of People of the Garden City, many individuals carry with them, contemporaneously, marks of violence crystallized in reminiscences and bodies.

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[21] I would like to thank Stanley Greaves for his support and stimulus, as well as Sinah Kloß for her interest.
[22] Interview with Anne Walmsley in 1993, and published in "Bomb Magazine". Available: http://bombsite.com/issues/86/articles/2607. Access in May 30, 2016, at 07:40 AM.

[23] More details can be found in: Despres (1967:62-66), Glasgow (1970:128-132); Hintzen (1989:32-37; 51-54; 63-70; 2004:112-117).

In fact, it's impossible to ignore the constant allusion of Guyanese people to the long-term effects of this transitional moment (the Independence period), whose phantasmagoria hover over the living. Far from being a fixed frame, the schisms of this period still resound, even in the form of narratives of losses, absences or resentments, even as an explicative resource for the tensions that emerged in other periods. It's not uncommon to hear in Guyana the sentence *this is a divided country*.[24]

The remembrance of these conflicts conjures a practically invisible presence in contemporary Guyana: the British. Allocating responsibilities, Guyanese stress, very often, how determinant the deliberate actions of the British were in inciting animosities. The strong affirmation *they divided us and then left the country* is verbalized with some frequency in Guyana. Indeed, the white population in Guyana (0.01% according to the 2002 census) does not reduce the spectral force of the former colonizers.

In the 1960s, through an alliance with the United Force, a political party led by businessmen, and with support from Britain and United States, the PNC won the majority of Parliament seats, so Burnham became Prime Minister, keeping his power, according many authors, through massive election frauds until his death in 1985 (Hintzen 1989: 52-56; Trotz; Peake 1999: 54; Williams 1991: 271).

By the way, part of Graves's work is under the guardianship of Castellani House, the national art gallery and former residence of Burnham, a controversial personage known by his association with *obeah* – a term that encompasses several practices related to the manipulation and control of supernatural forces which are associated, in the Anglophone Caribbean, with witchcraft (Gibson 2001:18-19; Vidal & Whitehead 2004: 73) – and by following opposition to

his regime, the controversial politician is accused by many of causing the economic deprivation of Guyana during his ruling, of *destroying* the country, and even of *cursing* it.

After Burnham's death, the PPP won all elections between 1992 and 2010. During the electoral process of 1997 and 2001, several confrontations between Afro- and Indo-Guyanese took place, many people were killed, and hundreds of women raped. (Trotz 2004: 1-4). In April 2001, stores owned by Indian shopkeepers were burnt in Georgetown area. In 2006 no serious events were reported. During the 2011 election I was in Guyana, and no serious conflict took place, but Georgetown became a 'ghost town' for several days after 4:00 P.M since many people were afraid of disturbances. It's important to mention this atmosphere because certain moments, like the election period, seemed to be haunted by past events.

Basically is that scenario, about which I have presented only brief elements, that several academics mention to explain how Guyana was built as a racialized nation haunted by the colonial legacy. According to authors such as Brackette Williams (2001: 18-19) it is fundamental to understand how the nation-building was marked by attempts to deal with the colonial past and with the new contradictions that were raised during and in the years following independence. The relationship between several feelings of belonging – especially ethnic ones – and national identity in new independent states like Guyana was stressed in the specialized bibliography.

The most sophisticated venture in this line of investigation is William's work, *Stains in my name, war in my veins*, where she explores how "race, class, ethnicity, and culture had entangled in the historical development of particular ideological fields" (Williams 1991). It would be impossible here to cover all the details of the accurate analysis of Williams (see Mello 2014a: 61-66; 396-400). For the purposes of this article, sufficient is to say that Williams pays close attention to the historical constitution of what she calls "Anglo-European hegemony" in Guy-

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[24] Italic expressions refer to native expressions. Similar expressions that regard the tensions and conflicts between Indo and Afro-Guyanese are: *Guyana is a split country*; *Guyana is a racial country*; *People in Guyana are very racial*.

ana, the "ideology" of which was marked by "racialized values". In her vision, such "hegemony" took root in the country, assuming "phantasmagoric contours" after independence. In some measure, the attempts to "exorcize" the "ghost of colonialism" fostered "new hierarchies" based on the "structures of Anglo-European hegemonic domination" (Ibid.: 251-272).

According to the author, due to the process of decolonization of the country and to the authoritative PNC government, "fragments of colonialism hovered over the lives of Guyanese" (Ibid.: 127). The "process of homogenization intrinsic to the formation of a new nation" was counteracted by previous "heterogeneities and hierarchies" in such a way that Guyanese "struggled", in their daily lives, against their "past and their present". The "ghost of Anglo-European hegemony", combined with the political and economic reality of the post-independence period, "could not be ignored by Guyanese population" (Ibid.: 257). This hegemony (in Gramsci's sense) is defined as "ghostly" by the author because the colonizers (the British) were physically absent from the country – they avoided Guyana in the aftermath of independence. However, the "continuous influence" of this "pattern of past hegemonic domination" was, in several ways, "more powerful" in the 1970s and 1980s. The ghost of colonialism, in sum, was an "even-present presence" (Ibid.: 224) hard to fade out.

Daily and deep presences
The use of metaphors like these to think about and describe historical process is not free of consequences, since ghosts, spirits, and deceased persons are not merely allegorical historical mechanisms, iconic forms of social relations or symbolic expressions of secular realities, but instead beings with concrete existence in the daily lives of humans. (Cf. Chakrabarty 2001; Kwon 2008; Mello 2014b; 2016; Palmié 2014). In fact, Guyana is a country inhabited by several jumbies (spirits of the dead) and all of my field research, for ten months between 2010-2012, was marked by spiritual agency.

In my first day in the country I heard about jumbies, spirits of humans who had suffered a violent (murder, accidents or due to witchcraft) or early death. Usually, jumbies are vengeful beings, unstable, resented, and evil, which change the state of mind of living persons, causing problems, sufferings, tragedies and apprehensions for them. Attached to earthly life, jumbies demand offerings of beverages and food, and even the sacrifice of animals (roasts, for instance), to be propitiated. The length of their existences depends, in that manner, on the performance of rituals that satisfy the wills of jumbies.

Something different occurs with another class of spirits, the *Dutch*. The *Dutch*, as Guyanese people say, are the spirits of the first colonizers of the three main regions of the country – Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo, three different Dutch colonies between 1650 and 1803, when they were taken by the British that unified the regions, in 1831, under the name of British Guiana. Guyanese people often associate the memories of the early settlers of the country with bloody events, particularly the taking of the three colonies by the British in 1803: in the disputes with the English, many Dutch families committed suicide (especially to avoid murders), while others individuals of Dutch descent were killed and raped; dispossessed of wealth, land, properties, relatives and friends, the former colonizers did not receive the appropriate funeral services. The nature of the first colonizers during their lives, marked by the urge to get rich at the expense of others (in this case, enslaved people) combined with the terrible moments of their deaths, became established as an indelible mark on the landscape of Guyana: dispersed throughout the coastal area of the country until today, the places of residence of these spirits are the old sugar plantations which they controlled centuries ago.

Due the unique circumstances of their raising, Dutch spirits have certain peculiarities. Some individuals, especially those versed in *obeah* practices, are able to invoke and control jumbies to harm other people, but no one has the capacity to master a Dutch spirit. These spirits tend to act only in self-interest, are not easily placated, and seek to retain the prerogatives of being the *owners* of the land (*masters of*

the land, or *boundary masters*), that is, the first inhabitants and owners, from the perspective of residents of the coastal region of Guyana, of the territories located in the country.

In sum, Dutch spirits tend to *possess* those who live in the places where they lived in the past, causing disturbances in the daily life of contemporary Guyanese not only because of their jealousy or vindictiveness, but also to experience pleasures that they abruptly ceased to have in their former lives. Often, these spirits have sex with people (both women and men) in the realm of dreams, and cause diseases, mental confusion and disordered desires (compulsion by the consumption of drugs or alcohol, high libido etc.).

The pervasiveness of Dutch spirits in the daily lives of my main interlocutors in Guyana – members of the Kali worship, a Hindu sect where deities *manifest* themselves in the bodies of humans – was remarkable. In the place were I conducted my fieldwork, a Kali temple named Blairmont, several individuals, most of them of Indian descent, seek assistance and healing from Hindu deities due to the *afflictions* caused by Dutch spirits – illness, sickness, tragedies, diseases, bad moods, depression, alcoholism, and so on.

The descriptive and interpretative task could conceive of the very existence of Dutch spirits as native historical views of the disputes between colonial powers over Guyanese territory (see Williams 1990 for a stimulating analysis), as representations of the colonial past of the country, as images from the past created and recreated through rituals, remembrances, and narratives. That kind of interpretation is valuable since Dutch spirits do have 'historical identities' – several reports about them stress their *origins* – but are not, I claim, a mere reflection, or epiphenomenon, of more 'real' ground 'facts' (history, politics, economics etc.). My own work (2014), influenced by Espírito Santo & Blanes (2014) is an attempt to trace the (long-term) effects of Dutch spirits in the daily lives and the ritual sphere of Guyanese people, as creators of society, as entities enmeshed with the biog-

raphies and trajectories of humans, as forms of existence, to quote Espírito Santo & Blanes (2014: 6) "manifested (and ultimately knowable) through their extensions […] on a social and even historical plane, where extensions leave markings, traces, paths, and ultimately, 'evidences'".

Often, Dutch spirits, as well as jumbies, are labeled as mere expressions of Guyanese folklore, as if they could be reducible to the sphere of 'belief' – of course, no question is raised regarding the authoritative (Cf. Asad 1991) perspectives of interpreters, as if we were the only authorized persons capable of uncovering the 'realities' behind 'social representations'. The challenge is not to unveil the 'truths' behind the narratives, but to evoke a sociality which is inseparable from the presences of spirits (Cf. Cardoso 2007): In sum, to treat, analytically and conceptually, spirits as agents in the world.

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BOMBS AND BUSINESS: INTERACTIONS WITH SPIRITS IN LAOS.

By Oliver Tappe (Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne)

When the old Lao lady stole an anxious glance at the overgrown bomb craters on the ancient temple grounds, I asked her about the ghosts. "They are here", she whispered, "I am scared." Then she lit some candles and incense sticks at some derelict stone stairs – ruins of the old Buddhist temple in Muang Souy (Xieng Khouang Province, Lao PDR) that was destroyed by US American bombs in the late 1960s during the Second Indochina War (known as the 'Vietnam War' in the US, and the 'American War' in Southeast Asia). A young monk dressed in bright orange stood nearby impassively, smoking a cigarette. To him, born long after the war, old people paying homage to the dead was just an everyday routine (fig. 1-2).

My research assistant brought me there in 2010 to make a stopover with his family on the way to our research site, the province Houaphan far up in the mountains of northeastern Laos. He grew up in the cratered landscape of Xieng Khouang province where the US forces had dropped tons of cluster bombs and other kinds of ordnance for nine years until the ceasefire of 1973 (fig. 3). Like many other Lao country-kids in the late 1970s, he and his brother liked to play with unexploded 'bombies', the countless small bomblets filling the cluster bombs that littered the Plain of Jars (an estimated 80 million in Laos, one third of them not detonated; fig. 4). They tried to make them explode by throwing stones at them, and sometimes they even picked up the bombies to throw them into craters or ravines to detonate. One day a bombie detonated in his brother's hands, killing him.

Almost thirty years later, my friend assisted a Swiss photographer in Xieng Khouang – the province in the meantime cleared of a lot of unexploded ordnance, at least along main roads and buildings. When they left the provincial capital, Phonsavan, on National Road No 7 towards the Vietnamese border, a forgotten bomb detonated next to the road just after they had passed the site. The car jolted only a little due to the blast, yet all the dark memories of post-war Laos resurged in my friend's mind. In the following night, he suddenly woke up, feeling a strange pressure on his chest. In the dark doorway he spotted a human shape, motionless for some moments, which then disappeared into the dark. "After a while I realized that this was my brother", he told me, recollecting that very night. "I felt reassured and knew that nothing can happen to me traveling the roads. My brother protects me."

That was one of my first encounters with ghostly apparitions in Laos, and many were to follow. I have learned about the different kinds of spirits (Lao: *phi*) dwelling in fields and forests, about the ancestor ghosts that expect to receive food and other offerings, about the famous Prince Phetsarat who allegedly could transform into animals and whose images nowadays protect bus drivers, about the malevolent *phi pob* who can kill people, and about Buddhist monks inviting the ghosts of ancient kings into their new monuments (as in the case of the statues of Fa Ngum and Anuvong). Such spiritual beings seem to be everywhere, powerful agents within the social world of the different ethnic groups in Laos, Buddhist and non-Buddhist societies alike (see the contributions in this issue by Estévez, Johnson, Vue, and Kleinod).

In 2014, I met my friend again in Vientiane after returning from another research trip to Houaphan. He had become a successful businessman by then, no any longer driving *falang* around. Proudly placing his three expensive mobile phones on the table where we had some sticky rice, spicy papaya salad, and the indispensable bottle of Beerlao, he told me about the recent developments in the Lao capital's real estate sector. "A lot of money!", he exclaimed. However, he had only recently gone through a time of crisis: being cheated, troubles with the police, losing money. In sum, bad luck. Thus, he had sought the advice of a spirit medium. The spirit medium, an old lady, sang herself into a trance until possessed by 'her' ghost. Through the harsh voice of the ghost, she explained that my friend's house was built on the site of an old palace ground. The spirit of the prince who once lived there was angry, feeling disrespect-

ed. "What can I do?" my friend asked the medium. "Build a new palace!"

Later, my friend showed me the new 'palace' in his lush garden: A particularly elaborate spirit house (Lao: *ho phi*), much larger than the ordinary ones that are usually placed in front of a house to honour the spirit of the place (fig. 5-6). He had put the obligatory glass of rice liquor, incense, fruit, and flowers in front of the entrance. In addition, two toy cars constituted a special element in this ritual constellation, emblematizing prosperity and fortune related to business. And indeed my friend's luck had changed shortly after he had installed the *ho phi*. Apparently, the spirit of the ancient prince had reciprocated this token of respect with blessing. A few days later my friend invited me to a ceremony in his house, a so-called *basi* to recompensate the service of the spirit medium and especially her ghost (fig. 7). Otherwise this ghost might get angry as well.

As these brief observations suggest, spiritual beings are part and parcel of the social fabric of Laos, while at the same time reflecting past trauma and present anxiety. Spirits entertain manifold relationships with human beings, and sometimes the ontological boundaries between the two worlds become blurred. People may feel the physicality of spirits, or develop spectral qualities themselves. From the anonymous dead soldiers of the Indochina Wars to present-day labour migrants with their years-long absences from their villages: Humans may have an elusive character that indicates various layers of spectrality instead of a clear-cut human/spirit dichotomy. As other contributions in this special issue illustrate, the question at stake is perhaps not about modern or non-modern/traditional, but about the ontological intersections in a rapidly changing world.
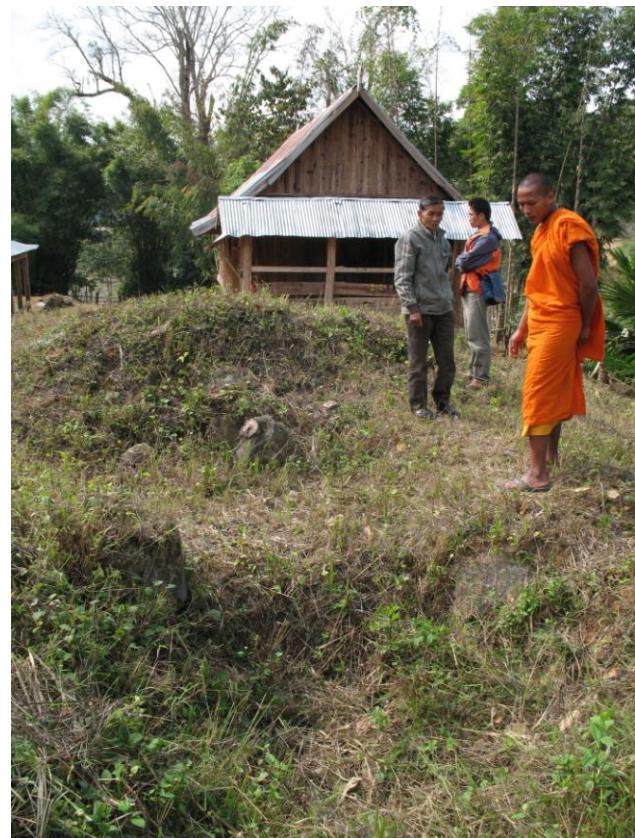
Bomb crater at the old temple grounds.

Appeasing the spirits of the dead

Remnants of war.

"Bombies"

Ho phi (luxury version; note the toy cars flanking the 'palace' entrance)

Ho phi (standard version)

Basi ceremony for the diviner's spirit.

DON'T PLAY WITH FOOD: AN ANECDOTE ABOUT UNDERSTANDING SPIRIT BELIEF

By Michael Kleinod (University of Bonn, Germany)

The problem of understanding spirit belief in Southeast Asia is intriguing. It is as fundamental for understanding regional nature relations as it is for understanding oneself. This makes it a veritable mess to investigate. Spirits are not only common, even central agents in Southeast Asian ecologies; they are also attractive, appealing to the desires of observers, researchers or tourists, who are disillusioned about modernism and its discontents. In understanding spirit belief, that is, the identity and alterity of research "object" and subject entwine inextricably so that the clarification of locally specific ecologies comes with a blurring of the boundaries of the research process itself.

Entrance to the spirit forest

I will not deal with this mess systematically here because I cannot. I would rather relate an anecdote as a case in point. It is set in the National Protected Area of Dong Phou Vieng in southern Laos, in a village of the Katang ethnic group and adjacent to a spirit forest that was my focus of investigation but which is of minor importance here (see Kleinod 2014 and forthcoming). Among other things, I wondered whether the claim by conservationists was true – that, partly because of clandestine evangelization, spirit

belief is on the decline – with serious implications for the endangered monkey species which inhabit the spirit forest. But: *was* spirit belief truly in decline? How to find out?

I would soon get a hint. The scale of spiritual concern in Katang communities became clear on the second day of my 2014 fieldtrip. During a village walk a thunderstorm approached so that my informants and I went to take shelter under the stilt-house of my host, the village head, or *naaibaan*. Upon return, I was obligated to buy lizard (*laen*) for dinner from our hosts: I was with a bunch of policemen and a district official ("for my safety"); and my informant advised me that serving wildlife when officials are present is standard procedure. When the animal was brought to us, neatly tied up, I felt the irresistible touristic urge to take pictures of it. The thunderstorm seriously drew in, more severe than either my assistant or I had ever experienced before. Some of the policemen, Katang themselves, became visibly afraid, and especially when lightning hit the simple electrics of the house under which we were taking shelter, causing sparks to fly.

Not to be played with

After the storm was over, villagers were agitated about a tree hit by lightning, not far from our position. The charred mark on the bottom of its trunk was sure a sign that *phanya in* (Lord Indra) was angry with me for taking pictures of the lizard. Villagers kept making gestures of photographing followed by rubbing their neck with the side of a hand. I understood that Indra

was going to kill me, for lizards are food, a serious matter not to be played with. The policemen were quick to downplay to me the seriousness of it all, claiming that the villagers were of course only joking and that this was just their culture (*watthanatham*) – in other words, harmless custom. I was not so sure about this explanation, which became even less convincing when the storm returned: we were just conducting a group interview when another lightning strike hit the house so that it shook. The *naaibaan*, obviously afraid, jumped up and at once cancelled the session. Fearing that I might be killed in his house by Indra, we had to immediately perform a ritual of my submission to Lord Indra's power: we all held hands and the *naaibaan* approached me with a large knife, which he then rubbed with its blunt side across the side of my neck. So that was what villagers were trying to tell me. And believe it or not, the storm receded.

The *naaibaan*'s house

This experience verified to me the existence of spirit belief among these villagers. But it also showed, and in quite an intense way at that, what had occurred to me already before: that when dealing with "superstitions" you may become superstitious yourself. Or at least I do. For example, although I am officially a baptized and confirmed Protestant, I usually avoid attending

church services and place myself somewhere between atheism and agnosticism – but when in Laos, not the last thing to do before heading for the field was visiting Vat Sii Meuang to seek protection for safe passage by Chao Mae Sii Meuang, the guardian spirit of Laos' economic, political and cultural center, Vientiane. To return to the story, the thunderstorm had abated somewhat in its force but remained strong enough to make me worry about going outside (which was at some point necessary in order to wash or go to the "toilet") – not just because I could be hit by lightning but also because of You Know Who. Could the forces on my side – the Christian God, my uncertain disbelief, and Mae Sii Meuang, protectress of a "civilized" lowland Lao polity – truly brave this fearsome and "wild" Hindu-Lao-Katang master of the peripheral upland sky? Who could be sure…?

So, what about spirit belief in Southeast Asia? Instead of truly succumbing to Lord Indra's power, let us turn materialistic for a change. Apart from problems with the term "spirit" in the Lao context, the term "belief" is quite blurry and misleading: what was written over the *naaibaan*'s face when he jumped up was not belief but, more precisely, genuine fear. Fear thus seems more adequate here, and it calls for profane pragmatism rather than religious dedication and faith. This fear more or less directly derives from the brute conditions of existence: for the researcher as much as for those researched, a thunderstorm in a rural Lao village, given the lack of brick houses and lightning conductors, is of an experiential quality very different from one in a "developed" town or city. Spiritual fear is, first of all, a function of existentially being *at the mercy of* something or somebody, it echoes existential precariousness.

There is thus an overlap of research subject and "object" which can be carried even further. During its history, Western culture had sought to eradicate animism, but it seems that the unfolding crisis of scientist instrumentalism serving sustained capital accumulation, and the growing severity of its unintended consequences, increasingly lay bare the deadly contradictions and limitations of capitalist culture – which brings us back to a state of being existentially at

the mercy, not of the immediate "natural" environment but of an uncontrolled, exhausting global social system. And that is my final point: spirit belief may mean similar but different things for Westerners and Katang. While, for rather abstract reasons like the "ecological crisis" etc., the former somehow "want to believe" in spirits for the "alternative cosmology" they embody and the related utopian hope they carry, the latter might be happy to escape the immediate ecological precarity and fear that spirits mean to them. And if they did, who would be in a position to judge?

BREEZES OF CONTAGIOUS DEATH IN NGUYEN HUY THIEP'S "BIGGEST PREY" (1971)

By Christophe Robert (CET Academic Programs, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam)

The Forest of Ghosts

Years ago an old couple settled in the hamlet. No one knew where they came from. They moved into an isolated cabin near the edge of the woods known as the Forest of Ghosts.

The old man is a hunter by trade. His wife sells game meat to villagers. His hunting skills are almost superhuman. "The old hunter was like the spirit of death of these forests" (Thiep, 11). The other hunters fear him. They are afraid that his relentless killings, his overhunting of the woods, will bring retribution from the spirits of animals killed wastefully. Exchange pacts between hunters and animals, between the world of the living and that of the dead have been upended. The precarious balance of interconnected natural and supernatural relationships in the forests surrounding the village is upset. Chaos, famine and madness ensue.

The old man has hunted game to extinction. The woods are depleted and empty. In the distance villagers hear faint echoes. These may be distant rumblings of combat and war. Strange phenomena take place. Healthy trees suddenly lose their leaves. All is quiet in the forest. Animals have vanished. Unnamed, unknown predators began to roam in the far reaches of the woods, adding to the villagers' sense of ominous threat as they peer fearfully into the margins of the Forest of Ghosts. The old hunter and his wife are nearly starving. Killing game is their only form of sustenance. Every day, he ventures deeper into the forest, obsessively seeking the vanished animals. He disappears for days on end, sleeps in the woods and stalks in silence. He feels he is on the verge of a big kill, perhaps of one of those unknown new predators said to roam the far depths of the forest.

Other villagers who have long resided in these forested valleys fear these invisible crowds of the dead, these "spirit multitudes" (Canetti,

Crowds and Power, 1984, 43). They fear the errant souls of animal spirits that roam and haunt the landscape to seek redress for their unjust and violent deaths.

Retribution comes. The tale comes to its violent end.

In this early short story, "The Biggest Prey" (1971), Nguyen Huy Thiep sounds like a storyteller of old. One may be tempted to read this text as an allegory, concerned with war, death and retribution. Instead, I dwell on the potential of Thiep's storytelling techniques to question allegorical readings. This short story is part of a cycle of ten short stories, "Winds of Hua Tat" (first published in 1986). These stories form a mythical chronicle of preternatural, natural and human forces in highland valleys of northwest Vietnam. I examine notions of exchange and hospitality in relation to the figure of the stranger as developed by Georg Simmel. The violence of this alien, relentless hunter threatens the very existence of highland communities through violations of ritual exchange between tutelary spirits and humans. I conclude by revisiting the question of allegory. I ask whether Thiep's chronicle of "folk tales" could in fact open up new pathways of thought in contemporary Vietnamese literature by giving voice to anxiety-producing, destructive thresholds of violence and desire through the foil of legendary events, thus slyly undermining authoritarian political discourse in Vietnam.

Tales told in fog-bound high valleys

In the prologue the narrator presents these remote highland valleys, and the local hospitality that leads to storytelling and the sharing of oral lore. Did Thiep "transcribe" these stories from the highlands? Not exactly.

Thiep imagines and describes a poetic act rooted in hospitality and sharing. What he shares is not solid truth, nor scientific protocols for recording folk tales and local legends passed down orally. His narrator suggests the creative role of the itinerant writer, who invents, writes, shares and re-invents some of the tales from "Winds of Hua Tat." Thiep writes that some stories in these remote regions are so old they are

half-forgotten. His versions of folk tales and local stories are poetic renditions. He gives us hints about writing and reading or interpreting these stories. Hua Tat, he begins, is located up remote valleys in the highlands of northwest Vietnam. The elevation makes travel difficult. These valleys are continuously blanketed in fog. The mists move in strange shapes over the landscapes, drifting through changing wind patterns. The narrator tells us that this eerie atmosphere permeates all encounters and conversations in Hua Tat. One rarely sees the full contours of what appears nearby. The remote valleys, the strange mists and rains give an otherworldly feel to these high places, and not simply for outsiders. Several stories relate uncanny and ominous occurrences, and fateful encounters in strange weather.

The prologue ends with an elegy. Thiep narrates how inhabitants of Hua Tat tell these tales and to whom. If hosts trust visitors as honest people, they narrate some stories of old for them. Legends and tales are shared with guests – gifts of language, magic and memory – along with dried venison and rice alcohol. The hospitality extends beyond food and shelter. It includes language, in stories, words and songs, to help strangers decipher the land and local mores. Hosts and storytellers act as cultural translators. With these tales they ferry guests across the land, and help them see more clearly the contours of highland communities. But that too is transient. When the serving dishes are empty and all bottles drunk, the contours of the stories are fuzzy like the mist outside – half remembered, partly forgotten, fragmentary and fleeting. "Like the breezes in Hua Tat," Thiep concludes.

These stories are distant messages. They flutter in the wind, echo briefly and fall silent. But they are now located on the printed page. Who speaks here?

The thought from outside: toward an ethics of discomfort

The prologue locates the remote valleys that shelter the hamlets of Hua Tat. Thiep proposes one version of how stories are shared and re-

told. It is a commentary on the emergence of stories in literature.[1] We are no longer hearing storytellers sharing local "folk tales" or stories of common people, extraordinary events and supernatural deities and forces. We now read these stories – as legends, as tales – written by a contemporary Vietnamese writer struggling with censorship from the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1980s Hanoi.

The Prologue indirectly presents a theory of narrative and literature. Ephemeral and transitory, breeze and mist are two key images (and metaphors) in this cycle of short stories. The narrator encourages us to think of these tales as distant echoes in the breeze, as mists rising and setting over narrow valleys. All is transitory and bound for oblivion. With time a few stories are shared and remain, rewritten and reimagined anew by succeeding generations of storytellers, by modern writers, by hosts in remote highland villages who share local fables and tales over rice alcohol and evening meals.

We witness here the inclusion of fragments of mythical themes, elements of traditional folk tales, and innovative narrative techniques by Nguyen Huy Thiep. Now we can date (1971, 1981, 1986, etc.) the time and place when these stories entered into the public sphere, and moved out of oral storytelling or diary writing and daydreaming. The mute speech[2] of these tales, presented as stories shared by village storytellers in upland valleys echo across the lowlands to reach bewitched readers and the scandalized Communist Party censors and literary establishment of 1980s post-war Vietnam.

The prologue ends with a meditation on historical contingency and transitory lives. Nguyen Huy Thiep undermines socialist realism, and its bland diet of heavy-handed clichés, its morality tales of nationalist fervor, righteous war and the building of a new post-war socialist society. He challenges readers to an ethics of discomfort, of movement, contemplation, awe and study. Intellectual study and a sense of the sublime are essential; they foster surprise and elaboration. Thiep dismisses current Vietnamese society and political culture for its grotesque kitsch, its

greed, hypocrisy, and intellectual laziness. It is stunted literature.

He writes of melancholic narrators who drift afar and return to villages where they grew up ("Run River Run"), of urban dwellers who awkwardly (re)visit the countryside ("Lessons from the Countryside"). Those who stay put experience temporal discontinuities and disorienting changes in daily experience, status and wealth as society undergoes radical and near-instant changes in the post-war reform era of the 1980s and 1990s ("The General Retires", "There Is No King," "Crime and Punishment," etc.).

Contemplation is a corollary of movement and travel. One needs to observe to decipher new customs and ways of life, as Thiep does in new places, through conversations, encounters and the hospitality of tribal highland groups in northwestern mountains beyond Mai Chau, Dien Bien, Lao Cai and Ha Giang.

Contemplation is needed to daydream, write, and be able to see. Writers record a surfeit of details. Thiep is awed by the eerie echoes and mists of upland valleys. These stories originate from echoes carried by the breeze. It matters little if they originate from the pen of Thiep. Drifting mists of memory gifted their place of origin. We can now trace and interpret the replacement of oral tales and fables by short stories published in serial formats in the contemporary Vietnamese press of the post-reform period (from the 1980s on).

Nguyen Huy Thiep does not treat as backward or primitive those remote places where he says the stories originate. He often draws on isolated, mysterious locales in his writing. Yet these highland tribal villagers are coeval with us, readers of Thiep's written tales. He does not seek primitive purity. This is not a doomed search for noble savages in the writings and observations of ethnographers and local chroniclers. He writes on the basis of reporting or narrating stories, for which he imagines distant and foreign origins. He writes in the Prologue that these stories originate in local tribal lore shared in family gatherings, and with strangers who

pass by on their way to highland markets and deeper reaches beyond Hua Tat.

Thiep self-consciously writes literature and often addresses readers playfully in his texts in ways reminiscent of "post-modern" writers such as Calvino, Handke, or Kundera. Literature is what he writes with this cycle of short stories, published in modern media outlets in an authoritarian communist state. Yet he maintains and stresses the link with storytelling, the sharing and disseminating of stories that form the spine of local mythologies. For Thiep these fables and tales originated in conversation, in traditional oratory and song, in epic poetry recited and old stories told again. He emphasizes the coeval nature of this exchange: words and stories, songs and poetry are shared over food and drink, as part of hospitality in remote highland villages. Listening is how these stories emerged. We read and listen to the mute speech of Thiep's short stories as he sends us false directions through mists of time and literature.[3]

Messengers of death
The old hunter and his wife live near the edge of the woods in an isolated area called the Forest of Ghosts. There is something uncanny in the old man's hunting prowess. He is an extremely skillful hunter. He is also an obsessive and cruel killer. Unlike animal predators, he kills indiscriminately. "Some say they once saw him kill a peacock in full display. (…) Only love could get it to display its tail feathers this way. But – "boom" – the gun shook in his hands and a red tongue of fire shot out." (Thiep, 12). The other hunters are jealous of his skill but fear his reckless killings. They fear retribution for the excesses of death he spreads everywhere. He creates spaces of death in his path.

His wife is silent. No one has heard her voice. She is not a ghost. She is alive, and up and about in the village and the woods, but without language. She is outside the social world of women in the village. Villagers keep their distance, and do not extend hospitality networks to the old couple, who remain nameless and mysterious. At the market the old woman does not

chat. She shares no gossip and no news. She does not participate in social life and is prevented from doing so by the fear of villagers. Her distant muteness renders her uncanny and threatening. Her features and those of her husband are monstrous and animalistic. They show signs of strangeness well-known to folk tales and myth.[4]

These strangers are different from the poor and strangers of Georg Simmel. For Simmel, strangers are both near and distant, simultaneously inside and outside the group. Their membership in the group is paradoxical. They are members of the group by virtue of their collective identification as strangers. This is not fully "identity": others identify you, or with you, or against you, *qua* stranger. By the same token, these collective others are strangers to you. The dual articulation of inside and outside is superseded by more complex social forms based on mutual recognition of difference and wider possibilities for interaction among groups in larger settings, such as in schools, markets and temples.

The old hunter and his wife are both inside and outside the village. As strangers, they appeared in the village unannounced. Villagers do not know where the old couple came from, and fear them. They live in the far margins of the village, near the Forest of Ghosts. They live by graves of the dead at forest edge, among rotting carcasses of their kills tossed behind the cabin.

Yet they exacerbate some of the features of Simmel's strangers, and complicate his analysis of the position of traders as strangers. The old couple are strangers who bring in radical, irreducible difference into public view. They differentiate themselves from the community by daily association with killing and violent death, and their relentless hunting. Contagious, violent death rubbed off on them, and now threatens to contaminate others by contact. They become taboo. From the perspective of other villagers, the dead spirits of animals killed by the old man risk coming back to harm the hunter and his wife, and by association, other villagers. Being haunted here means haunting by the death

power of souls of all the animals he killed. Souls of animals are potentially the reincarnated souls of humans, as all sentient beings participate equally in the cosmos. The hunter and his wife break multiple taboos at once. His reckless killing upset rules of social exchange and relationships with the forest. He does not simply hunt, he depopulates. His relentless hunts killed and scared off forest animals. The woods are silent. Other calamities flow in his wake. The forest is empty. The animals are all gone. Starvation hangs over the village.

Eventually, in a last fit of paroxysmic violence the old hunter aims his killing inward. Compulsion finds new targets closer to home. The margins of the forest of ghosts colonize the village in uncanny ways, by means of odors of death.[5]

The mounds of rotting carrion behind the cabin, the stench of dead animals over this disturbing place are now brought uncomfortably close to social life. Though in a liminal threshold position, the uncanny death-bound world of the old hunter contaminates and undermines social relations in the village – based on hospitality and reciprocal exchange – by foregrounding the haunting hold of violent death over life.

One explanation is that contagious deaths rubbed off on the old hunter and his wife. Their physical associations with death, with blood, viscera, and the stench of carrion burst through the threshold zone they inhabit between the village and the Forest of Ghosts. The stench from rotting carcasses reeks across from the forest margins toward the village. The old hunter and his wife are scavengers, they are animals of death. The savage, animalistic "black blood" of hunters flows in their veins.[6]

Are they messengers of death? Have they become death because of their ceaseless killings? Hunting is the old man's trade. We do not know if he enjoys it. But he is ruthlessly efficient at it. He cannot restrain his killing instinct. His skill with the hunting gun inspires fear. His shooting accuracy seems beyond human capacities and almost magical: "It was as if his flint rifle had

eyes. Every time he raised his rifle, birds or forest game would fall dead" (Thiep, 11).

Yet hunting is also how the old couple eat and survive. No kills means nothing to eat. They are not farmers. One imagines that in a realist story we would read more about the old hunter and his wife's trade in game meat. There are other hunters in this highland village. We do not get explanations and context for the hunting economy of the village.

Contagious death, rebounding violence and retribution

"Large predators" disturbed the forest. The trees lost all their leaves. This is a dystopian poetic image. We imagine the relentless fear of blind violence from the great predators out there in the far reaches of the forest. These phenomena can be read in various ways, including as wartime devastation, the burning chaos of bombing and artillery, and defoliation by means of Agent Orange spraying.

This results in the extinction of all life. Death, first understood as the old man's killing to nourish his family, proliferated over time to inflict destruction on a broad scale. His relentless killing upset the balance between animals and the guardian spirits of the forest. Local guardian spirits – such as *Then*, the tutelary spirit of the forest – are said to seek retribution from humans who upset balanced relationships with the supernatural and the forest, source of all life. The distant threat of violence, a spectral ominous presence compounds the extinction of game in the Forest of Ghosts. Rebounding violence permeates the forest and creeps into the village. Death overflows and seeps into villagers' minds.

The ghostly presence of the silent old crone at the market and in the village freezes social relations. Markets are lively places of banter, gossip, and exchange. Here, the old woman sells game meat in silence. The villagers keep their distance from the old couple and keep them isolated from social life. Exchanges are reduced to impersonal interaction, minimal contact focused on the dead meat bought and sold. Further, fearful exchanges with the old crone point to something (from) beyond, the violent deaths of forest game.

The violent imbalance imposed by the old hunter's gunshots leads to chaos and threatens the survival of the community. Because of the old hunter's violations, the forest is now barren. Its emptiness is threatening and uncanny. All leaves have fallen, unnamed predators roam the woods, and the stench of carrion from killed game disrupts the boundaries between life and death. Rotting death comes into view. Odors cannot be turned off or ignored. The violence of the killings is brought home at the moment of starvation and threats of collective retribution. These anxious thoughts were previously shut out of mind, ignored by both the old crone selling forest meat and silent buyers exchanging nods over dead game.

An allegorical reading could frame this story as a reflection on the madness and terrifying consequences of mindless killing, and violated rules of hospitality and ritual exchange. The predators in the depths of the woods could be interpreted as allegorical figures of soldiers and distant war. I have foregrounded a less narrow and predictable reading of Thiep's early text. Granted, he writes about social and supernatural disruptions from abusive violence. But the foil of "folk tales" opens up broader interpretive possibilities, while allegory as a mode of symbolizing tends to promote compulsory readings of events and characters.[7]

Folk tales are quick and concise. They engage with mysterious places, monstrous beings, and violent occurrences by disrupting time and space. They do not psychologize. They open up magical possibilities in the midst of humdrum lives upended by inexplicable events and strange beings.[8] "Folk tales" read in print indirectly suggest the frailties of human memory, the ambiguous possibilities of the hospitality of storytellers, and the work of writing. In this cycle of short stories, inaugurated by "The Biggest Prey" (an early text followed by a ten-year silent gap), Thiep began to dislodge clichés of political propaganda passed off as literature. His canny

reworking of mythological themes and Vietnamese historical figures opened up narrative possibilities in Vietnamese literary landscapes stunted by political censorship and sloganeering. This "estrangement effect" is not heavy-handed. It does not dictate a unitary, politically driven reading. Instead Thiep's stories invite multiple, possibly unsettling interpretations, and point to no final answers – but to distant echoes of songs and tales rippling in the breeze and upland mists. One notes that Thiep's writings never engage directly with war. Brutal combat and war deaths remain in the distance and mysterious. They are only known anxiously through after-effects that undermine notions of a glorious, sacred war of national resistance. He takes oblique side paths through highland valleys, ghostly mist-covered forests and deserted ferry crossings. He renders "typical" Vietnamese villages and towns deeply unfamiliar and strange. Echoes of storytellers of old resonate in his short stories, though in ways familiar to modernist narrative. In these "folk tales" time and place are fragmented and punctuated by death. Morality and social norms are undermined by violence – unredeemed brutality that tears through social exchange, hospitality and literary clichés of socialist realism.

This early short story by Thiep comes to a violent end. With the extinction of animal life in the forest, the old man's compulsive drive for the hunt goes askew. Unmoored, adrift in violent and extinct emptiness, he turns his gun on his wife and on himself. He shoots and kills her. In his desperate search for one last prey, he mistook her for a large peacock. His death is mysterious. He may have killed himself. Perhaps he was shot by a villager taking revenge. Days later his crumpled body is found in the Forest of Ghosts. Their gruesome, lonely deaths suggest that they have become forest ghosts, and now haunt the village margins. He had used his wife's corpse as bait at the forest edge. "He wanted to hunt the biggest prey of his life. (…) But Then [the guardian spirit of the forest] punished the old man. No animal came to him. Only death." (14)

Notes

I am using the edition of "Winds of Hua Tat" from Nguyen Huy Thiep, *Khong co vua* (*There Is No King*; Hanoi: NXB Van Hoa Thong Tin, 2011). Translations from Vietnamese are mine.

1. Jean Starobinski examines how scholarly discourses of mythology displaced fables in the 18th century. His point is broader: he analyzes relations between fable, myth, and education and literature. See "Fable et mythologie au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles" in *Le Remède dans le mal: Critique et légitimation de l'artifice à l'âge des Lumières* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

2. I borrow the term from Jacques Rancière's reflections on literature in *La parole muette* (Paris: Hachette, 1998) and *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007).

3. Here, and throughout, I am drawing on Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968).

4. In "Qu'est-ce qu'un mythe?", in *Le Bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), René Girard discusses the monstrous attributes of heroes like Heracles, and persecution and stereotypical accusations against "scapegoat" victims.

5. In this discussion of the uncanny in relation to odors of death, I am referring to James T. Siegel's "Images and Odors in Javanese Practices Surrounding Death."

6. See Bertrand Hell*, Sang Noir: Chasse, forêt et mythe de l'homme sauvage en Europe* (Paris: L'oeil d'or, 2012), pp. 45 ff.

7. The question of allegory in literature is nearly endless. I rely here on Angus Fletcher's *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Walter Benjamin's chapter "Allegory and Trauerspiel" in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London & New York: Verso, 1998) undermines received notions of allegory by insisting on its contradic-

tory nature (p. 175), a subtle restatement to which I cannot do justice here. I also wish to refer to Fredric Jameson's polemical notion of "national allegory" (in Jameson's "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* (15), 1986).

8. Italo Calvino wrote a brilliant, playful analysis of narrative characteristics of folk tales, and his interest in them. See "Quickness" in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage, 1993). I am indebted to his analysis of the nimble, disruptive features of storytelling in folk tales.

FIGHTING SPIRITS

By Barbara Meier (University of Münster, Germany)

'Human beings fight human beings. Spirits fight spirits. You can't fight a spirit.'
(Esther Aol Luk)

What do difficulties during pregnancies, repeated road accidents, constant family quarrels, returning rebels, and a traumatised society after 28 years of violence have in common?

Spirits have an impact on every sphere of social life among the Acholi in northern Uganda. Ancestral spirits protect individuals, families, clans and the entire Acholi society. They are challenged by wild, anti-social spirits that cause misfortune and suffering in Acholi communities. A carefully maintained exchange process is the only way to safeguard a balanced relationship and keep the social and natural environment in order.

When things get out of control calamities like epidemics, bloodshed, barrenness, and other afflictions befall communities. The wild spirits take control by taking possession of individuals, diviners and rebel leaders. In northern Uganda such a situation has led to a brutal war between the rebel group the 'Lord's Resistance Army' of Joseph Kony and the state's army ever since the takeover of power by the current Preseident Yoweri Museveni in 1986. The rebels left the region in 2006 and people gradually returned to their destroyed villages. To rebuild their livelihoods people call on their ancestors once again for support and protection.

I am alive, I want to change the seeds.

A film by:

Barbara Meier, social anthropologist (director, author, project head) Phillipp Offermann, (camera, sound, editing) Kinyera Paddy Banya, (subtitle translation, assistance) Philips Ogwang Clipper, Sabina Lawiro, Mathew Watmon, Odida (music)

A production of the Cluster of Excellence 'Religion and Politics in Pre-modern and Modern Cultures' of the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster

www.uni-muenster.de/Ethnologie/ProjForsch/RelPol/projects.html

GHOST MOVIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND BEYOND

By Peter J. Bräunlein (University of Göttingen)

In the middle of the Asian crisis in the late 1990s, ghost movies became major box-office hits. The emergence of the phenomenally popular 'J-Horror' genre inspired ghost-movie productions in Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Singapore in unprecedented ways. Most often located in contemporary urban settings, these films feature frenzy, ghastly homicides, terror attacks, communication with the unredeemed (un)dead, and vengeful (female) ghosts with a terrifying grip on the living: features that have since became part of the mainstream television and film entertainment narrative pool. Southeast Asian ghost movies reflect upon the identity crises and trauma of the living as well as of the dead. Ghost movies are embedded and reflected in national as well as transnational cultures and politics, in narrative traditions, in the social worlds of the audience, and in the perceptual experience of each individual.

Ghosts and the Biases of a Master Narrative

The prevalent discourse on ghosts and spirits is part of a wider discourse of modernity. Modernity is considered rational and secular, and this basic assumption carries with it a fundamental divide between the 'us' of reason and progress and the 'them' of irrational beliefs and 'not-yetness' (Chakrabarty, 2000: 8, 249f.). In other words, modernity as a master narrative not only transmits interpretive patterns and a value system, but also works as an ideological force.

Historically viewed, however, the fascination with the uncanny is a characteristic of Western modernity, which began in the 18th century through literature. Horace Walpole (1717-1797), Gottfried August Bürger (1747-1794) or Mary Shelley (1797-1851), to mention but a few authors, initiated the enduring and distinctly modern genres of gothic and horror writing, which would remain popular throughout the 19th century (Wolfreys, 2001). Pleasure in anxiety and enjoyment of fear were and are part of the emotional makeup of the modern individual. The literary aestheticization of the uncanny was thus a reaction to the demand of the reading public, especially the educated middle classes. Around the 1850s, this class was fascinated by the spiritualist movement in the US and Europe, which has been re-evaluated in the recent past.

Aside from the (re)discovery of the fantastic and spectral imaginary in the history of Western modernity, awareness is growing that modernity itself is somehow 'uncanny'. In his *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida lists the ten plagues of the global capital system, thereby introducing the term 'hauntology'. Fascinated by the essential feature of the specter, the simultaneity of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, Derrida argues that the logic of haunting is more powerful than ontology and a thinking of Being. Hauntology harbors eschatology and teleology within itself (Derrida, 1994: 10). Through Derrida the reference to haunting, ghosts and spectrality became an accepted, even fashionable trope in academia. He initiated, probably unintentionally, a 'spectral turn' which gained ground in the 'uncanny nineties' (Jay, 1998).

Despite such a 'spectral turn', in Western academia the topic of ghosts and spirits invariably invokes debates about modernity, reason and unreason, belief and knowledge, religion and science, 'us' and 'other'. Even if the scholar subscribes to a methodological agnosticism, ghosts and spirits are commonly discussed against the background of 'belief' and 'knowledge': *they* still believe in ghosts; *we* do not.

Precisely because spirits are a provocative antithesis to enlightened reason and the promises of modernity, they make a highly interesting leitmotif in studies seeking to gain insight into social transformation processes in Southeast Asia. Indeed, this leitmotif also provides insights into cultural peculiarities of Western modernity: looking from the 'periphery' to the West is revealing.

Film and the black box called cinema are inseparable concomitants of modernity. The medium adds a new dimension to what the modern

man considers the realm of the 'real'. Cinema generates and distributes influential narratives and imaginations that constitute, at least to some extent, the social imaginary of the global mediascape.

The contributors to the volume *Ghost Movies in Southeast Asia and Beyond: Narratives, Cultural Contexts, Audiences* (ed. Peter J. Bräunlein & Andrea Lauser; Leiden: Brill; forthc.) share the conviction that imagination and the imaginary are powerful forces in the human lifeworld. Blockbuster movies are imagination machines which work as 'models *of*' the state of things as well as 'models *for*' the way things ought to be, to borrow Clifford Geertz' famous phrase (Geertz, 1973: 93). Moving stories, regardless of whether they are told by the bonfire, or through literature or film, reflect *and* reshape the world. Both aspects are of equal importance. These assumptions underlie the analytical perspectives of all contributors. We consider this fact to be the strength of our efforts: underscoring the multifacetedness of the ghost movie genre by constituting a kaleidoscopic approach. A kaleidoscope is based on the principle of multiple reflection, allowing the user to view numerous different, surprising and colorful patterns by a slight turn of the mirrors. This analogy is helpful to elucidate our intention of scrutinizing ghost movies from different viewing angles.

Cinema Spiritualism

The term *spiritualism* refers to a period of rapid transformation in the West when spirits of the dead were evoked through trance-mediums and new media such as photography, telegraphy and radio. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, spirit séances were a complex event that straddled ritual, stage magic, entertaining spectacle, and scientific experiment. Such staged trance performances polarized the audience, provoking in equal measure accusations of fraudulent behavior, and fascination with the possibility of communication with the departed. The mediation of ghosts has been constantly renewed in the course of over 150 years of media history. A hundred years after the heyday of spiritualism, and particularly since the turn of the 21st centu-

ry, ghosts have once again become prevalent across a diverse range of media, including films, television series, and video games.

With these remarks on spiritualism, we do not wish to maintain that today's ghost-movie fans can be simply equated with the spiritualists of 100 years ago. In no way do we suggest that a naive audience is so mesmerized by mediatized ghosts that they mistake screen reality for that outside the cinema. Nevertheless, the reference to historic spiritualism calls attention to some common aspects. From early on, Murray Leeder asserts, "the cinema has been described as haunted or ghostly medium. […] Deliberately or accidentally, it has become a storehouse for our dead" (Leeder, 2015: 3).

The spiritualist's stage performances as well as the cinematic performances of ghost movies offer a space for such acts of imagining, in which 'what if's', or skeptical popular subjunctivity, can be tested (Koch and Voss, 2009). The main hypothesis being tested is the question of whether ghosts exist or not, whether there is 'existence' after life or not.

Post-Mortem Cinema, Trauma and Identity Crisis

The appearances of ghosts on television and in cinema provide some sort of information about afterlife. The common fear of death, of dying badly and of not remaining dead is linked to concepts of condemnation and redemption, which fall within the fields of traditional religious competence, but are reflected in the products of entertainment industries.

Against this background, we want to refer to the prominent, invented genre label 'post-mortem cinema'. In their introduction to film theory, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010) identify this new genre, which has flourished since the 1990s, as a recent development of Hollywood film. The authors do not exclusively deal with ghost movies. Rather, the term 'post-mortem cinema' has a broader scope. The authors point to movies such as *Lost Highway* (dir. David Lynch, 1997), *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), *American Beauty* (dir. Sam Mendes, 1999), *Memento* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000), *Mulholland Drive* (dir. David

Lynch, 2001), *Donnie Darko* (dir. Richard Kelly, 2001), *The Others* (dir. Alejandro Amenábar, 2001), *Volver* (dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 2006) and many others.

One of the key questions of this genre is: "What if you were already dead?" The narrations, including *how* the story is narrated, have their own characteristics. Elsaesser argues that many mainstream Hollywood films deal with after-life, survival, parallel lives, and simultaneously with memory, memorization, and trauma. Coming to terms with the past and the preservation/reconstruction of history, either collective or personal, is central to this genre.

Southeast Asian ghost movies fit in a very literal sense to the label 'post-mortem cinema', because these movies explore and depict forms of postmortem existence in various ways. But they also fit the label as specifically elaborated by Elsaesser and Hagener. Southeast Asian ghost movies reflect upon the identity crises and trauma of the living as well as of the dead. The impositions of modernity, individualization, growing violence, new gender-relations, and the need to re-invent and adapt the self to the demands of modern life, take their toll. Ghost movies mirror a changing understanding of the self, haunted by new anxieties and new kinds of spirits. In many such movies both the living as well as the dead are portrayed as confused and in need of psychological and religious guidance. Precariousness, insecurity, and even chaos are parameters of the present. Naming chaos and taming unpredictability by spirit rituals and narratives of ghostly intrusions are strategies to cope with the effects of urban modernization (Johnson, 2012).

Ghost movies of the early 21st century are located in an urban and middle-class ambience. Ghosts most often utilize information and communication technologies to intrude and threaten. The ghosts in such films never transform into protective forces. They stage a melodramatic tribunal by their own rules. Ridden by insatiable anger, they cannot be appeased. There are no heroes and no happy endings— the invasion of ghosts is enduring. Ghost movies of this kind belong to the horror genre and

they are about fear. The study of ghost movies provides insights into the cultural construction of fear, but also into the shortcomings of modernity and their frightening effects.

In fact, it is the trope of trauma and identity crisis that unites Western and Asian ghost movies. There are links between spirits and changing conceptions of self in a global world, as Nils Bubandt argues, comparing Indonesian spirit cults with popular US-American television series such as *Ghost Whisperers* (dir. John Gray, 2005–2010), *Medium* (dir. Glenn Gordon Caron, 2005–2011), *Supernatural* (dir. Eric Kripke, 2005–present) and Hollywood movies such as *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1999):

> In Indonesia, ghosts are becoming traumatised, while in the West spirits increasingly struggle with emotional problems. In different ways, […] spirits are becoming implicated in the globalisation of an interiorised and psychological understanding of what it means to be human. As humans are encouraged to think of themselves as psychological beings, human spirits and ghosts are reinvented in a variety of ways—East and West. (Bubandt, 2012: 1)

Mediated Ghosts: Southeast Asia's Haunted Modernity

In recent years, a number of scholars, primarily anthropologists, have investigated and theorized the persistent presence and agency of invisible forces and supernatural agents in Southeast Asia. The scholarly interest in ghosts and the occult is not driven by a curiosity about folk-traditions or popular religiosity but rather the potential links between the (re)emergence of the supernatural and the visible ruins of progress (Johnson, 2014), the destructive effects of neoliberal politics, bursts of state violence, the erosion of communal cohesion, financial crises, and the growing sense of individual insecurity in daily life. The uncanny moments of everyday life (and politics) are intensified by media of various kinds.

In their works, Rosalind Morris (2000), Alan Klima (2002) and James Siegel (2006) depict the dark side of Southeast Asian modernity, reflected in the mirror of fantasies, specters, and phantasms. Authoritarian rule, state violence, massacres, and war are the driving forces which bring ghosts into play. "Wherever there is violence in Southeast Asia […] there are ghosts", Morris (2008: 230) asserts. Premature, violent death generates a restless ghost as well as trauma among the survivors, and the obligation to conciliate the desolate angry specter.

Politics, the occult and ghosts depend on media and mediation to be communicated. Aesthetic forms and their techno-mediated characteristics are crucial: they make the invisible and unseen both plausible and efficacious.

The ubiquity of ghosts explains the attraction of Derrida's 'hauntology' for many scholars working on politics, religion, media and modernity in Southeast Asia. Derrida's concern with apparitions, visions, and representations that mediate the sensuous and the non-sensuous, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, and his idea concerning ghosts are based on a single literary source: Act I of Shakespeare's "Hamlet", as Martha and Bruce Lincoln (2015: 192) critically note. Through Derrida, specters and spectrality became manifold applicable metaphors to reflect on suffering, injustice, gendered violence, paramilitary terror, trauma, the dead, and other affective figures of the imaginary. But what about the ghost, not as a conceptual metaphor but as actuality? (Blanco and Peeren, 2013b: 2–10). What about the agency of intangibles (Blanes and Espírito Santo, 2014b)? What if ghosts are "slamming doors, cracking branches, causing illness, and demanding clothes and cigarettes"? (Langford, 2013: 15).

'Hauntology' denies ghosts' ontological status, translating specters into textual tropes, rationalizing and distorting irritating aspects of the phenomenon. To overcome this theoretical shortcoming in a Southeast Asian environment, Martha and Bruce Lincoln (2015) conceptualize a 'critical hauntology'. In their efforts to this end, they hint at common features shared by primary and secondary haunting, namely their use of ghosts (whether in metaphoric generality or semi-concrete individuality) to arouse strong emotions (terror, dread, shame, and remorse) and reconnect the living and the dead, while advancing ends that are personal and social, political and moral, analytic and pragmatic. (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015: 211)

It is the social lives of spirits and their power to compel mourning, humility, and compassion among the living that is addressed by the Lincolns' critical hauntology. They underscore the importance of ghosts in the collective memory, the public sphere, and the political arena of contemporary Southeast Asia. Politics, as Nils Bubandt (2014a: 120) rightly maintains, "is always haunted by those phenomena that it seeks to repress but which return as ghosts".

In his attempt to develop a particular cinematic paradigm to answer the question "What is Asian Cinema?", film scholar Stephen Teo focuses on the experience of watching and analyzing Asian film as a cumulative whole. In his book "The Asian Cinema Experience" (2013), one section is devoted to "Asian horror and the ghost-story style". The horror genre as such, he argues, is transnational, and the horrifying thrills and excitement of the horror narratives can be experienced without any knowledge of cultural signs and motifs (Teo, 2013: 92). Despite the transnationalism of horror, there is nevertheless something distinct in Asian horror movies. It is "the sociality of spirits [that] sets Asian horror apart from a mere genre of horror affect", Teo (2013: 94) maintains, pointing to a specific Asian ghost-story style rooted in folklore, legend and oral tradition, *and* in the socio-cultural experience of ghostly horror. Teo identifies the figure of the 'Asian monstrous feminine', being both abject and heroic, as emblematic of the Asian ghost film and the tensions and anxieties it generates. The authors in this volume share with Teo a focus on exploring Asian cinema as experience, utilizing emotion and bodily affects as theorizing factors, and linking ghost movies to the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) of the movie-audience.

… and the Audience

Studying ghost movies from an interdisciplinary perspective implies the necessity of bringing the audience into focus. The viewers' perspective is of tremendous importance because it reveals something about emotions and affects, imaginations and worldviews, entertainment and identity, and, above all, the spectral side of modernity.

The audience, setting out to encounter ghosts, enters the cinematic world: be it in a theatre, at home alone, or with family, friends or neighbors. In doing so, the viewer implicitly agrees to accept filmic alternatives to so-called everyday reality and, most importantly, to accept the rules and conventions of the specific genre. Ghost movies do not affect everyone. On the contrary: the genre divides the audience into factions.

The penchant for certain film genres carries a value judgment that happens "against the background of the viewer's own knowledge, education, culture, experience and taste" (Fourie, 2004: 282). Contemporary film scholars acknowledge that audiences "are self-conscious about their practices, and this self-consciousness plays an important role in modern identity formation" (Hoover, 2008: 38).

An individual's decision for or against a certain genre (be it comedy, romance or horror) has (and has had) reflexive potential. Even if one assumes that popular cinema is 'only' entertainment, without doubt it still constitutes a productive resource for cultural identity (Jackson, 2006). Identity in the postmodern world is not formed by a search for a solid, over-arching rational essence, but by exercising options. This is 'identity as choice', as Lash and Friedman put it (1992: 7). What fits best to me? What makes me distinctive?

Ghost-movies offer valuable clues about the condition of modernity and the anxieties of its audience. To what emotional needs do ghost movies respond, and what peculiar sort of affects are aroused by the genre? To what extent do age, gender, and class effect the decoding of ghost films? How is entertainment related to individual worldviews and religious convictions? Are the products of the global film industry sources for the viewers' sense-making, or do they simply produce forms of 'banal religion', as outlined above? Such far-reaching questions are central for the study of ghost movies but are rarely addressed, much less empirically researched. Indeed, audience reception in the fields of the controversial horror genre is surprisingly underdeveloped. If the relevance of such a research focus becomes plausible, one goal of this volume will have been accomplished.

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TO CATCH A NYUS VAIS FOREST SPIRIT WITH A CELLPHONE

by Pao Vue (Xeempov Vwj) (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

One afternoon in late March of 2014, I was hosting a Hmong focus group discussion on forest spirits/guardians/ghosts (hereafter spirits) in relation to hunting and resource extraction for economic gains when one of the villagers asked if I would be interested in possibly catching a *nyus vais*. I was shocked. One does not simply go and try to catch a *nyus vais*. In fact, Hmong children historically are taught from an early age to do what is necessary to avoid coming into contact with such a powerful and malicious forest spirit.

To put the shock in perspective and understand the significance of this offer, we must familiarize ourselves with a few basic concepts associated with traditional Hmong religious practices and spiritual beliefs.

Hmong cosmology consists of two worlds. The *yaj ceeb* or living world, and the *yeeb ceeb* or spirit world. A person's well-being is dependent on maintaining a harmonious relationship between these two worlds. The relationship is maintained by respecting the many spirits that are found in all living and non-living objects (Tapp 1989). Respecting these spirits means that a person should perform various rituals to honor and appease them, including when hunting or extracting resources in the forests. In addition, one should not commit actions considered taboo while in the forest. Many of these taboos are environmentally friendly in nature. For example, a person should not cut down trees or branches in a forest to make fire. Instead, he should gather branches that have already fallen to the ground. Other taboos include shooting rare animals, shooting an animal more than twice, starting large uncontrollable fires, plugging waterways, and dumping liquid wastes. Committing one or more taboo acts will infuriate the spirits and they will retaliate with devastating consequences. This belief is what primarily shapes how Hmong traditionally view and interact with forest resources.

Perhaps the most famous forest spirit within the Hmong ethnic group is the *nyus vais*. The *nyus vais* is most commonly described as a creature weighing at least 20 kilograms and physically resembling a cross between a macaque and a gibbon (Figure 1). Its body is covered in whitish or silvery hair, except for the chest, which is covered in bright red hair. It usually walks on all fours but is capable of walking on two legs as well. In addition, it seems to enjoy swinging on and hanging from tree branches. However, the *nyus vais* is a shapeshifter, and as such it can take many other animal and non-animal forms. It is also one of the most evil and vengeful forest spirits. When it gets angry or offended by people in the forests, it will make its presence known in two primary ways. The first is through obvious fear-invoking tactics such as conjuring up powerful winds, making high-pitched screams that can be heard for kilometers, conjuring up noises as if it is swinging on and breaking tree branches around where the people are camping, and thrashing and running back and forth in the darkness just out of sight of the terrified human intruders. The goal is to frighten the people to the point that their own spirits or *ntsuj plig* will flee the physical body. Once an *ntsuj plig* flees the physical body, it either wanders off and eventually gets lost in the forest, or is captured by the *nyus vais*. The terrified people are then allowed to leave the forest and return to their village. However, those who have lost at least one of their *ntsuj plig* can no longer maintain the harmonious relationship between the two worlds that is necessary to be in good health, and as such they will soon become gravely sick and die. Thus, the *nyus vais* accomplishes its goal of eliminating those who have offended and angered it. The second way that a *nyus vais* will cause harm to a group of people that have offended it is more direct. Here the *nyus vais* takes the form of a person, casually approaches the people who have offended it, and introduces itself as just another person looking for goods to harvest in the forests. On many occasions the form it will take is that of a person that someone in the group knows, while at other times it will be of a complete stranger. Regardless, the *nyus vais* will ask if it can join the party around the campfire. Once it receives permission to stay (and it always receives permission due to cultural

norms), it will sit down and start friendly conversations on various topics ranging from hunting to family matters. The *nyus vais* will then innocently pull out an edible item such as a banana or a piece of meat jerky from its bag and proceed to eat it. Unbeknownst to the excursion party, the *nyus vais* is actually consuming both the physical body and spirits of one of the party members. Sometimes, the person being consumed will die instantly, while on other occasions he will fall severely ill and die within a few hours. The *nyus vais* will politely excuse itself and leave once it has killed enough people to satisfy its anger at being offended. In short, encountering a *nyus vais* is a sure guarantee of becoming severely sick and likely dying. Thus, it is in the best interest of villagers to avoid *nyus vais*. This was why I was shocked at being offered an opportunity to try to catch one.


***Nyus vais**: Illustration by Yinkong Vue*

To return to the story in the beginning of this essay, having heard horrific stories about *nyus vais* growing up as a Hmong child in the United States, I stammered: "Aren't they dangerous?" The villager smiled and said that they are. However, people are now more powerful due to advanced technologies, so it possible to capture a *nyus vais* if one knows how. After the initial shock, my eyes gleamed and I replied: "Okay, but how do we do it?"

"Quite simple", he answered: "First, we need four mirrors and a cellphone with a loudspeaker attached. Tape recorders work too but it is not as good as cellphones because we cannot remotely activate tape recorders but we can with cellphones. Next, we make some snares, and that is it. Now the actual process is a two-step

process. The first step requires getting a recording of *nyus vais* howls. The best way to do this is go into a forest and deliberately do things to get the *nyus vais* angry so that it will come howling. Record its howls when it does, and then run. Once you have the recording, you can then proceed to the second step. In this step, take the mirrors and place them facing each other in the area where you are going to set up the trap and then place the speaker-attached cellphone with the howls set as the ringtone at the center (figure 2). Now as before, commit taboos on purpose to get the *nyus vais* angry so it will come looking for you. Once it is near, call the speaker-attached cellphone so the ringtone will play. The *nyus vais* will think there is another *nyus vais* intruding and challenging it for control of the area, and will move toward the cellphone to accept the challenge. It will then see its own reflection in one of the mirrors, think that it is the *nyus vais* challenging it, and run toward the reflection to fight, only to be snared by the trap that was placed in front of that mirror. Once a *nyus vais* is snared, it loses some of its power but is still quite powerful, so call the cellphone again so the ringtone will play again. Repeat the process and soon it will become so weak from being snared by multiple traps that you will be able to capture it. Once you have done so, it takes the form of an animal and you can then do what you want with it. More importantly, you can proceed to do whatever you want in the forest and not have to worry about it coming for you."
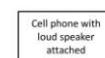
***Nyus vais* trap**

Two weeks later, I was in one of my research villages talking to a villager when I brought up the idea of catching a *nyus vais*. He smiled and said he would take me if I really wanted to try to catch one. The next day, we, along with two other villagers were on our way to the hills south of the village where a malevolent *nyus vais* is believed to live. After about three hours of scootering and walking, we arrived at our destination. After settling down, we proceeded to disrespect the *nyus vais* by committing various taboo acts. That night we waited but nothing came, not even a puff of wind was felt or the sound of a breaking twig was heard. The next morning as we were making our way back toward where we had stashed our scooters, the villager said to me with a smile: "Oh well, we can try again another time if you want to but I do not think it will come just like it did not come this time. You see, we are stronger than they are now. We are more powerful because Laos is now becoming modern and with modernity comes advanced technologies that we can use to make us more powerful." He then took out and showed me his smartphone.

Stories and conversations such as these convey a powerful message in that they suggest that ordinary people (non-shamans or non-magic-users) can challenge and overpower forest spirits with modern technological gadgets such as cameras and smartphones. This new aura of confidence was evident when talking to villagers about forest spirits and resource extractions. For example, a villager grinned widely and proclaimed that technology has made Lao citizens 'modern' and 'intelligent' so the forest spirits are now afraid of the people because people are more powerful than they are. Another villager states that forest spirits are afraid of people now because many people have cameras and camera cellphones. They are afraid that someone will take their pictures and show the 'technologically-advanced' countries of the world. If people from these advanced countries find out that these forest spirits exist, they are going to come look for and try to capture them. The forest spirits are afraid of this, which is why they are harassing hunters less and less. Thus, villagers can go into a forest armed with nothing more than a smartphone and extract all the re-sources they find without having to fear any forest spirits. These comments suggest that the majority of Hmong who believe in forest spirits do not believe that such spirits and ghosts are ceasing to exist in the face of modernity. Instead, they believe that there are now fewer confrontations because the spirits are becoming more secretive and less confrontational in order to continue to persist in a rapidly modernizing world.

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AN IMAGE OF A CHILD'S BEDROOM: ONLINE OFFERINGS AND GHOSTS OF THE ABORTED DEAD IN VIETNAM

by Anthony Heathcote (Adelaide University)

(Image www.nhomai.vn)

The child's bedroom, above, is lovingly arranged in purple and white, decorated with pictures of beehives. It is an image which evokes feelings of comfort and security, the play of childhood and a world of bright colours; the lively bees swirling around the room will bring no sting. The room is one where a child could fall asleep in the crook of their parent's arm. And yet, the first time I encountered this image was within the Vietnamese online memorial *Nghĩa Trang Online*[25], a vast website for remembering the dead in Vietnam, be it for parents or grandparents, friends or partners, revolutionary martyrs or children and babies: the remembrance is multifarious. In this case, an aborted fetus was being remembered in an online tomb and so it reflects a different world; this is a bedroom for a child that exists only in thought, an abstraction of a child. The warmth of the bedroom becomes antithetical, haunted by the absence of a body. The image also throws light on the cultural, spiritual and economic entanglements which arise when Vietnamese women remember an abortion online.

To understand the context of this image, a brief introduction to how Vietnamese remember the dead is required. Ancestor worship is a vital relationship for Vietnamese between this world

and the other. It is an act which springs from filial piety and also an awareness of the continued existence of ancestors after death. Vietnamese feel that the dead need to be looked after with a proper burial, ritual attendance to the tomb, death days and lunar dates, as well as through ancestor offerings. These can include the burning of incense and votive paper offerings, and the offering of real food and drink. Votive paper offerings are extraordinary diverse, with everything from paper umbrellas, hats, gold and money, to the latest iPhone and motorbike. These votive offerings are displayed and subsequently burnt and, via the smoke, transmuted to the other world. In being remembered and provided for, the dead in turn bring well-being and guidance to the living in a circular act of reciprocity. It is important to point out that ancestor worship is not tied to all acts of remembrance; a friend remembering a classmate does not perform ancestor worship rituals, though they might certainly light and candle and incense for them.

In Vietnam, like anywhere else in the world, a proper burial and ritual attendance is not always possible. For those who die away from the home, in tragic and violent circumstances, for those who pass away before producing offspring who themselves can continue the ancestral lineage; these are forms of bad death. The bad dead in this understanding are perceived as being stuck between the world of the living and that of the dead. Known as hungry ghosts or angry ghosts (among many other terms), these spirits haunt and torment the living.

The act of abortion in Vietnam creates all kinds of bad death. It is death before life, and often one without a proper burial. As Tine Gammeltoft (2010: 66) identifies in her productive body of research concerning abortion in Hanoi, 'If the fetal body was not decently buried, women explained, the fetal soul might keep haunting them, feeling resentment (*oan*) against their families for not allowing it to live'. In this sense, 'as a restless and angry spirit, the fetal soul might cause problems such as maternal mental imbalances or illnesses in the family children' (ibid). Such a finding and fear was also found in my own research. One possible avenue for mit-

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[25] *Nghĩa Trang Online* (Cemetery Online) is also known as *Nhớ Mãi* (Remember Forever). Founded in 2008, it is the largest Vietnamese online memorial, with roughly 60,000 members. It can be accessed at www.nhomai.vn.

igation was through *Nghĩa Trang Online*, an online medium which allowed a place for the fetus to be 'buried'. For Vietnamese women, in particular, who were using the online memorial, it created a potential link for communication to the aborted fetus: online they could apologise, pray to, and also ask for assistance from the fetus. They could 'light' online incense and candles, as well as send ritual appeasements in the form of uploaded offerings (for discussion see Heathcote 2014 and 2015).

Objects which were uploaded onto the tomb were often similar to votive paper offerings, but even more unlimited, with everything from milk bottles and children's toys, through to coloured towel sets for female or male fetuses, as well as the purple and white image of the bedroom. This uploading of images onto online tombs is a new form of ritual attendance unique to these online interactions. The images, the written messages left by the women and others, the candles lit, work together to form a sustained conversation with their fetuses. Such a spiritual deployment does not happen in isolation – in the darkness, and then the pixels of light on the computer screen – it is shaped by the cultural forms of remembering in Vietnam.

The online relationship with a fetus is entangled in the wider economic and spiritual dimensions of everyday life. A religious revival following the economic open-door policy of the đổi mới (renovation) in 1986 is well established, and votive paper offerings, funerals and burials reflect economic change. The dead and their ritual attendance have become in part tied to a person's economic means: expensive tomb renovations, lengthy pilgrimages, elaborate paper votive offerings, and offerings transcending the simple to include modern consumerist needs. As stated by one informant, 'the dead need their iPhones'. Vietnamese scholar Shaun Malarney (2003:187) writes that the ascension of votive paper offerings in regards to the economy is 'one of the most interesting manifestations of social change in Vietnam'. To build on his statement then, the uploading of offerings by Vietnamese women after an abortion shows a deep connection to religious revival in Vietnam, to technological change, and also to the sur-

rounding economic circumstances. For the woman, computer access and knowledge, along with private personal time, are usually required, and these circumstances are not available to all. For the fetus, the offerings uploaded reflect their potential aspirations – in this case, the perfectly designed and richly equipped bedroom. Modernity, and our new communicative technologies, were thought by some to be the harbinger of spiritual decline, but online memorial research aligns with Vietnamese scholarship in finding a spiritual flourishing and, in addition, an engagement with internet technology that both reflects the historical and transforms it for the 21st Century.

And so we return to the central image which began this discussion, seemingly simple and benign, and yet from it we can see how online forms of remembering spring from core beliefs and economic circumstances surrounding the dead in Vietnam. The online memorialisation of aborted fetuses is a reflection of contemporary concerns of ghostly fetuses and potential hauntings, and also interacts and creates tensions with technology and economic means. On a final personal note, this image of a child's bedroom was less complicated to me when undertaking this fieldwork than it is now, with the birth of two children having taken place in my life since beginning this research into Vietnamese online memorialisation. As I help decorate the bedroom of my daughter with pictures of Upsy Daisy and Bob the Builder, I experience a keen sense of the absence in that other room, of the ghosts that are conversed with and appeased online.

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ANCIENT SOUND IMPRINTS
by Hjorleifur Jonsson (Arizona State University)

"This is not a ghost" (Press release).

Arizona State University anthropologist Hjorleifur Jonsson, who works in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change, is surrounded by colleagues who study such exciting things as human origins, ancient DNA, and the ancient dynamics of state formation. As a mere cultural anthropologist and a fieldworker, Dr. Jonsson has long felt left behind by his more advanced colleagues. But he has now abandoned research in Asia and turned his analytical skills to important moments in US American history. Associate Professor Jonsson has developed a new scientific technology that recovers ancient sound imprints from preserved wood, primarily from the walls of old houses.

This new research technique regarding ancient sound has yielded preliminary results, based on actual research in Salem, MA. In his laboratory at ASU, Dr. Jonsson was able to reconstruct conversations from the sound-imprint left on the walls of particular buildings in English Pilgrim communities of ancient Massachussets. Partial reconstruction (the research is ongoing) has revealed repeated discussions regarding the fate of unarmed teenage girls of color (white) who happened to walk around in their neighborhood but later were reduced to ashes by certain adult local people.

One wall in particular indicates the voice of a prominent member of the Pilgrim community who on repeated occasions declares the following: "I burned her on the stake in self-defense: She had witchcraft and she was aiming it at me and I caught her just in time and tied her to the stake. It was a close call because this danger can really wipe out a whole community of law-abiding people. Teenage white girls are a menace and a threat and there are only so many ways to respond."

Professor Jonsson indicated in an interview that his days of research in Asia may be over. The humid tropics are very destructive of old wood and bamboo; there is thus practically nothing to work with regarding ancient sound, while his expensive laboratory needs research funding to keep the equipment running. But the recovery of ancient proto-US American conversations is already producing solid results (statistical comparisons of the sounds from different walls suggest a reliability measure of .05, which indicates scientifically valid results at the rate of 95%), and this may contribute to some socially relevant science. The professor concluded the interview on the note that his discovery coincided with Halloween, and that he was going to take part this year. He will be dressed up as an unarmed white girl from the seventeenth century, even if the prospect of leaving the laboratory armed only with this knowledge makes him quite nervous.

The true elements in the above fake press-release-thing are my name and position, my university and school, and the descriptions of my accomplished colleagues and their research orientations. The rest is made up; my reasons for doing so are many and various. My professional career has focused mostly on ethnic minority peoples in Thailand and to a lesser extent in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Even if I am just some white, male, Western academic, I am also professionally, and by association, in the minority slot within Asia. Meanwhile I live in the United States where every month there is some big news about a scandal where in some city the police have gunned down an unarmed teenage boy who happens to be black, African-American. The whole thing is outrageous because such episodes are almost an everyday affair in this country, and no one seems to recognize that this is human sacrifice and that it is recurring on a frightening scale.

Roughly eighty years ago, Ruth Benedict (1934, Patterns of Culture. Boston: Beacon Press) wrote about how society can make people blind to some everyday patterns of abuse. She took the example of the witch-scare in the old Pilgrim community, and declared that no one could notice the madness of the old men in charge because they were the moral guardians of the society. Something about the regular occur-

rence of deadly shootings by the twenty-first-century US police force, in one city after another, triggered my recollection of Benedict's work. In contemporary news coverage the police will regularly be quoted as saying that they only shot in self-defense, and this certainly helped set up the notion of my claimed laboratory-extraction of ancient sound-imprints.

The contemporary self-image of US American society does not allow for the possibility that human sacrifice takes place there, much less that it may be an everyday occurrence that is performed by agents of law enforcement. This is roughly what led me to invent a laboratory and a research project. The enterprise, The Evolving Door Research Theater, is meant to be fun and surprising, but we will also occasionally take on some issues of social relevance. So far, the work has been done by me and some imaginary friends/colleagues. That is, not only have I invented a laboratory and research findings; some of the scientists are made up, too.

The project was set in motion by the realization of a parallel between the fate of some twenty-first century teenage black boys and that of some seventeenth-century teenage white girls. Once we realized that this parallel was (apparently) not admissible in contemporary US American society then the laboratory and the research staff came into being. That is, the findings occasioned the research process. We had seen/heard a ghost, and needed to use some (apparent) trickery to call attention to it.

The refraction of parallel ghostly voices between the seventeenth- and twenty-first centuries cannot be identified by science as it is conventionally conducted. Something about modernity's self-image appears to have made it unthinkable that human sacrifice was a regular part of life in the United States, or that it took place in the seventeenth century. In the spirit of René Magritte's painting of a pipe that declares that it is not a pipe, we shall of course announce that our laboratory experiments did not extract any ghostly voices from the old wood.

BLURRED SPIRITS. VHS-AESTHETICS AND NOSTALGIC EXPECTATIONS IN THE TRADING ZONE OF TRANCE

by Anja Dreschke und Martin Zillinger

Narratives of modernity tend to claim an unfolding of progressive events along technological developments. In this context, trance mediumship and spirit possession are often archaized as "survivals" and pre-modern practices. Since the 19th and early 20th centuries, trance mediation has been localized in the peripheries of "modernity" and attributed to women, children, and strangers. Despite the allochrony (Fabian 1983) continuously ascribed to spirit mediums, ethnography's archive amply demonstrates that trance mediumship has been part of spiritual modernization movements and has gained new ground in the trading zones of globalization. Debates about the "modernization" of technological media have triggered debates about the modernization of trance mediums and vice versa – debates that have characterized the introduction of new technologies in the 19th as much as in the 20th and 21st centuries (cf. Schüttpelz/Hahn 2009). As we have written elsewhere, spirit mediumship and audio-visual media share structural similarities: They produce an interface of different temporalities by presencing someone from the past or from another world, in the image and during the ritual; both create a certain uncanniness by bringing into the present something that belongs to the past, thus disturbing simultaneity through the interaction of two different temporalities; both bridge the spheres of life and death; and both, spirit mediums as well as the person photographed, filmed, or otherwise recorded, experience some sort of radical dispossession and radical self-estrangement by becoming an Other (cf. Behrend/Dreschke/Zillinger 2015: 18-19).

In Morocco since the early 1980s, ritual experts and their clients commissioned local video studios specialized in wedding videos to film their trance rituals. Many Sufi brotherhoods and their trance experts—dealing with spirit possession and various forms of spiritual crises—established what we suggest to call "trance media archives" in which these films were kept and contextualized in a variety of ways: to commit an event to memory and revisit it, to demonstrate ritual genealogies, to establish and document one's ritual prestige, and not least, to examine and further develop the ritual practices that, using this collection, could be adapted to differing needs and requests and help to open up new ritual networks and economic opportunities.

Rituals are "indexical occasions", as Richard Werbner once noted; they "provide an index, in effect a Who's Who, of people and relationships important to the sponsors" (Werbner 1977: XXV). Increasingly, the ritual space proves to be a transnational space, in that it is triadic in character, spanned between individuals who live scattered around the world but identify themselves as members of a ritual community of cooperation; the (ritual) contexts of the countries of origin; and the contexts of the respective sites of residence. In the extending networks of transnational migrations, the indexical occasion of ritual gatherings is mediatized. Trance adepts use technical media during the ritual to record the event or to integrate adepts over distance. After the ritual, they often circulate ritual film recordings. By exchanging CDs and DVDs, the brotherhoods and their followers send a ritual topography with their sign practices, social relationships, normative expectations, and holy places en route (Zillinger 2014). More recently, they upload video stills or small video clips on Facebook to situate themselves in the ritual networks of migrating acolytes of trance and to demonstrate ritual genealogies.

The "genealogical depth" of spiritual relationships plays an important part in this context. When Tami (name changed), a powerful seer and leader of an 'Isāwa brotherhood, arrived as a clandestine migrant in Europe, he quickly posted a video still to announce himself (Skhykh Tami) as the "son" of Moussa (weld Moussa) and to commemorate his well-known spiritual master (rahima llah—may God have mercy on him).

19. August 2011 · ⊙

ckhykh Hamid Bouhlal Weld Moussa rahimaho llah

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For adepts of Moroccan trance cults, the video still is easily recognizable as an image of what is called "lion trance". The women, possessed by the spirits of lionesses, kneel down to confront the attack of male lion spirits and their mediums, the male trance dancers. The animal spirits of the ʿIsāwa take form in the body movements during trance. In the cosmologies of the brotherhoods, these spirits force their mediums into action—an action that generates resemblance in mimetic performance (Kramer 1993). This sequence of animal trance marks the ritual depicted as "gharbaoui", as part of the "western" rural traditions of the ʿIsāwa. By posting this film still, Tami claims his spiritual origin (al-aṣl) in the villages and homesteads of Morocco's western plain (gharb) and a legitimate place in the transnational ritual, social, and economic networks of the brotherhoods and their possessed clients. For migrating acolytes, the brotherhoods provide an important resource. On his way through Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, Tami, too, headed for other trance adepts, who willingly helped him by providing a place to stay, helping him find his way around, or connecting him with other ʿIsāwa across Europe.

For his Facebook site, Tami chose a video still from a recording that has been kept in high esteem among the ʿIsāwa diel gharb and their followers in Morocco. Circulated on VHS tapes, copied by repeated filming from a TV screen

and subsequent digitalization and digital copying from visual CDs to visual CDs, the video recording has gained a peculiar aesthetic imbued with an aura of pastness.

Michael Gilsenan has aptly characterized Moroccan trance rituals of the *gharb* as "shot through … [with a] nostalgic expectation, a dream or fantasy of grace that has before and may again suddenly strike" (Gilsenan 1990: 113). The ritual techniques of individual and communal trance are strongly connected with a longing for a (social) place of origin, *al aṣl*, a term comprising a sense of roots and emotional attachment. The term "nostalgic expectation", the longing for an experience of "ritual intimacy" during a night-long ritual, is epitomized by the very pastness that the aesthetic of the trance video conveys. The elders (*al nass al-kbār*), the ones who celebrated the rituals before, stand in for the way "things have to be done" properly and for perfect devotion to the founding saint and the spiritual path of the brotherhood. While the trance adepts can identify each and every one of the ritual community depicted in the video and can thus prove their intimate knowledge of spiritual kinship and ritual sociality, the blurred aesthetic brings the formal features of trance practice to the fore—the festive garments, the culminating body movements, and the ritual choreography, during which the trancer gets "lost from his [or her] socially constructed self" (Crapanzano 1977: 9). The individual expertise of elderly trance dancers and musicians is cherished among the recipients of the videos. But the blurred aesthetics of the videos draw attention to the de-individualized devotion of those who follow the calling to trance—manifest in the tunes of the oboes that

mark the festive soundscape of the ritual. To follow the elders from the *gharb* is to follow the *ḥāl ḥlū,* the sweet trance of the countryside that dissociates those *ma mtebtinš* who willingly succumb to the ritually invoked powers and possessing spirits. The videotaped ritual that took place in a village in the western plain of Morocco is vividly remembered by the elderly trance adepts. Their spiritual masters and artful examples of musicians, dancers, and singers were still alive, but they, too, were already young *muʻallimīn*, experts of trance, while their children were participating, watching, and learning.

Baraka, is what a trance ritual is about, it is ritually operationalized and materializes in the body techniques of the trance dancers. The video-recording makes the manifestation of ritually evoked baraka, the goodness (*al-khayir*) brought about by the ritual gathering, picturable and reportable. People from all over the *gharb* were drawn together for the ritual festivities and commemorated their deads. The spheres of life and death are inverted, first in the ritual that brings other-worldly-beings to life, and then in the video, in which deceased mediums and mourned family members appear and move in time with the music and *ḥāl* of the ritual. Commonly translated as "blessing", *baraka* describes a whole complex of forces constituting, governing, and affecting the world in mostly positive ways, inhering in persons, places, actions, or things (cf. Gilsenan 1973:33f, Crapanzano 1973: 18ff). Since it needs to circulate in order to become effective it gains force through its being mediated through time and space. Technical media are part of this mediation work and enhance the ritual efficacy of

trance: the longer the chains of mediation – the more effective trance mediumship becomes – and the further the "trading zone" of trance expands to include diverse audiences and actor-networks (cf. Zillinger 2015).

Watching the video, one follows the cameraman who accompanies the entranced leaving the village.[26] All night long, they have celebrated the *līla*—the ritual—organized as a *ṣadaqa,* an offering to God and the public in order to share some of the good one has received. Religious passion has been on the rise throughout the night, brought about by the common dancing in time with the music of the brotherhood. Together, they mourned over those who died and about the hardship and sorrow they have endured during the last year. Time and again, the *muḥibbīn*—the followers of this particular Sufi path—fell into trance, dancing in ecstasies, enchanted by *baraka*, the divine blessing and power of the ritual.

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[26] The text oft he following paragraph is taken in parts from Zillinger (2010), see also our video-installation *Trance/Media. The ʻIsāwa in Morocco 1992-2012,* (Dreschke/Zillinger 2012).

Their passion culminates in the ḥāl (trance state) of the camels. Heat rises inside them; they "depart from the world as it exists," and their spiritual master, *sheikh and muqaddim* Moussa leads them out of the village. The trance "strikes them" and so they run frantically, shouting, growling and bellowing as camels do, in search of the *hindīa*, the savaged cactus pear (Opuntia ficus-indica) which can be found in many Mediterranean landscapes, and which covers wide areas of the Moroccan countryside. We see men mounting the cactus, numb to the pain of the thick, long thorns, some of which drive into their feet, their hands, their bodies. The "sheik" of the camels stands on the cactus bush and agitates the musicians and the dancers; and, in turn, he is empowered by the music and the crowd. Some fellow 'Isāwa try to calm him, to prevent him from being hurt, but the ḥāl asks for its tribute and the dancers reject any attempts to interfere. The *baraka* of the founding saint and therefore of God, the Beneficent and the Compassionate, protects and empowers those who are enchanted.

In time with the drums and the oboes, the women, too, perform the trance-dance, clinging to the pieces of the *hindīa,* pressing them close to their bodies while the spirits drive them deeper and deeper into trance. In order to "cool down," they have to find their way into the course of the ritual.

The crowd moves on, and the spectator of the film is immersed in what the camera shows, now among the men and women on their way out of and then back to the village. The procession stops, and we watch male and female camels in need of "playing with each other." Playing cools them down, and eases the tension between them. The women kneel down, encircled by the men, who walk, or rather stalk, around them, bouncing up and down, their arms folded behind their backs, snapping at the women, who snatch back at them. The music stops and the air is filled with the howling and shrieking of the animal-spirits.

The men challenge each other, dancing in line with a choreography that has been handed down to them by their fathers and forefathers, driven by the forces of the wilderness. They rub shoulders and let each other go again, they snap at the women and pause time and again: They kiss each other's cheeks and ask for forgiveness; they are exasperated in trance, acting and moving beyond the ordinary social norms of everyday life. At the same time, they are grateful for the mutual assistance to act out their *ḥāl* of divine possession, "cooling down" the "heat" that "rose" in them along with the spirit of the camel.

The congregation, however, is divided—whereas some adepts adhere to the *ḥāl* of the camels, others enact the *ḥāl* of the lions. When the heat rises, they do not go for the *hindīa,* but for a sheep, slaughtered and immediately torn apart by the lions and lionesses. Even though both engage in this *frīsa* (literally tearing apart), it is the male lion who enters the body of the sheep first with his fingers, breaking through the skin and tearing it apart. He then rips out the liver, where the power resides, and hands it over to the women.

Often, however, the sight of blood and the slaughtered animal escalates the trance-states of the attending lionesses, and some women try to get away with its body, the heat inside them becoming paramount, driving them away from the ritual assembly and into a fight for the prey and its innards.

Other members of the congregation take care of the ecstaticized women and try to calm them, and their ḥāl. Returning to the general crowd, their tension is declining through contact with the sheep, the taste of its blood, liver, and the common trancing in time.

Upon return, male and female counterparts engage in a common trance choreography. The women, their clothes still stained with blood, kneel down, hiss, and bawl at the men, their hands crossed and their arms ready to strike the approaching male counterparts.

The lions line up and approach the women with swaying steps. Suddenly, a jackal approaches and kneels down in between them. The lions encircle him, and tension rises. They have to get him down, but if they are not masters of their ḥāl, the jackal will bite them and will not let them go without a violent battle. Therefore, one of the experienced dancers needs to grasp his nose and bend him down. Now it is the jackal who fears the confrontation. He lies down and feigns death. The lions pull back his shirt and check if there is any "life" in him—if they feel his abdomen move or any respiration, they will tear him apart as they tore apart the sheep, or so it is said. Fitfully roaring and howling, they dance around the jackal, who dares not to move.

The entire village seems to be on its feet watching the social drama unfold, and the viewers of the film, family members in places far away from their village in Morocco, the adepts of the brotherhood who could not take part in the ritual, or strangers encountering these ritual techniques and the unfamiliar experience of es-

trangement for the first time, join in via the camera.

Time and again, the women bystanders chant and praise the Prophet, the forefather of all Muslims, in whose sign they assemble and enact their social relations, taken over by spirits and forced into the heat of the trance. The sheik of the lions takes care of his followers, releases exhausted men and women from the course of the choreography, kissing his or her forehead, and entrusts them in the care of the assembly. Time and again, the men line up, stamping the earth, and rushing towards the women, jumping, slapping the ground and trying to unveil them. The women, in turn, protect their respectability and defend themselves, trying to strike the lions, who, moreover, engage in mock-fighting among themselves. Once every spirit is tamed and the heat of the trance cooled, the assembly returns to the homestead of the host.

Haptic Visuality

The blurry VHS video images are so distorted and pixelated because they have repeatedly been remediated in new media formats that they are almost unrecognizable. They show the characteristic flickering effects of VHS materials interrupted by the white noise known from TV screens. What do people recognize in these pictures? And how do they relate to them? Obviously their value is not determined by visibility in the general sense; rather, they seem to have certain inherent affective capacities that can be designated as haptic visibility. We borrow this term from film scholar Laura Marks (2000), who introduced it to describe a special kind of multi-sensory image in what she calls intercultural cinema, an image characterized by the need "to

appeal to embodied knowledge and memory in the absence of other sources" (ibid. xiii). In Marks' view, intercultural cinema addresses a new film aesthetic that developed along with the global mobility of people and images in the metropolitan centers of the global North. It differs from commercial mainstream media as well as from Western avant-garde cinema basically in two ways: on the one hand, it is not grounded in the supremacy of optical visuality, and on the other, it "stresses the *social* character of embodied experience: the body is source not only of individual but of *cultural* memory" (ibid., emphasis in original). The videos of the 'Isāwa brotherhoods are made significant not only through the people, places and objects they depict, but also through the modes these CDs and DVDs travel in the transnational networks of the acolytes (who has brought me this video?), the layers of their re-mediation, referring to its continuous social use and high esteem, and through the situations of its reception (with whom shall I view these recordings?). The haptic visuality of this trance-video-culture emerges from the specific history of this socio-technical assemblage and is conveyed by the pixelized aesthetics of these videos. Drawing on phenomenologically inspired theories of embodiment and the sensory perception of moving images, Marks suggests that we conceptualize the specific materiality of film and video and their various modes of reception as being similar to the properties of skin. Both share skin-like tactile and contagious qualities that appeal to embodied knowledge and memory in the absence of other resources. From this perspective, the stains and marks on the video images are like cutaneous scratches and scars, a metaphor that also can be extended to the old VHS tapes with handwritten inscriptions or the self-burned DVDs circulated among the trance brotherhoods showing various kinds of traces of usage—and the way the videos are constantly remediated in other media formats, with each generation adding a new layer of pixelation. The cinematic intelligibility of these blurry video images lies neither in their visibility nor in their documentary character alone, it is linked to the kinaesthetic effects these videos have on the trance adepts. The circulating images of these videos trigger inner images of ritual experience, which connect the recipients to the ritual topog-

raphies of trance through time and space. The memory of collectively experienced rituals is mediated by the bodily sensations these videos convey for those who have already succumbed to the possessing spirits during trance. As the 'Isāwa sing during the rituals*: [If] you have not tasted from the glasses of the ḥāl, you have not experienced what has happened to me*.

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