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PROOF for Review

1

CAN THINGS REACH THE DEAD? THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF OBJECTS AND THE STUDY OF LAO BUDDHIST RITUALS FOR THE SPIRITS OF THE DECEASED

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Introduction

During my fieldwork in one of the Buddhist monasteries in Vientiane,¹ I witnessed several cases of lay people coming to a monk and handing him an object. Often it was an umbrella, a shirt, a cooking pot or another item of everyday use. I was told that most of these lay people had had a dream in which one of their deceased kin appeared. Often the deceased person was lacking something in this dream. In the understanding of the lay person, the monk then ritually “transferred” the object to the deceased. The ritual transfer of objects to the spirits of the deceased also plays a crucial role in larger rituals that are part of the Lao ritual cycle such as *boun khau salak*, the festival of baskets drawn by lot.² Moreover, family rituals for honoring a deceased person, sometimes performed many years after their death, follow a similar pattern. In a ritual I observed in Luang Prabang in 2007, family and friends bought a small model house (*huean pa*) and filled it with items of everyday use. The monks then transferred the house to the deceased so that they could profit from it in the afterlife. In both cases, the transfer of objects to non-human beings plays a crucial role in establishing a link between humans and the spirits of the dead. Although the “reality” of this transfer is rarely discussed among the Lao themselves, more orthodox Buddhist monks and some lay people see these practices as “folk Buddhism” and deny the transferability of the object itself. Instead, they argue, it is only the merit (*boun*, Pali: *punna*) from this karmically skilful act of generosity that is transferred to the deceased. In this interpretation, the gifts remain in this world and are actually intended for the monks.

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 36

Over the last two decades, some of the major trends in social anthropology have focused on two concepts, which I would like to employ in order to explore some methodological and theoretical issues relevant to studying the ritual transfer of objects to the deceased among the ethnic Lao, contextualizing them in terms of Buddhist practice. The first concept, ontology, entered the subject in the early 1990s largely via Bruno Latour's (1993) exchanges with anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) and Philippe Descola (1998).³ Both have applied the notion of ontology to the study of spirits (Descola 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2007). The second concept, materiality, emerged a bit later and is linked to the first one. The return of the material derives from the critique of allegedly anthropocentric, subject-oriented understanding in the social sciences. Actor-Network Theory and other critiques of the nature/culture divide look at the wider interactions of humans with non-humans and the material world. Here, it is not exclusively the human subject that molds the material world through its agency, or projects meaning onto the object, thereby making it a representation or symbol. Instead, there are efforts to restore the role of objects and non-human entities beyond dead matter, fetishism, or representations and symbols (Gell 1998; Miller 2005; Keane 2005, 2006). A recent volume by Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell (2007), on which I draw, connects ontology and materiality. All these approaches in their own way aim at a wider understanding of objects, leaving space for their agency, power, and mediating capacities.

Instead of seeing spirits solely as objects of study, I would like to propose that a look at their ontological status and their involvement with materiality might enhance an understanding of spirits as social beings that are in dialogue with humans. In the first part of this chapter I suggest that despite their invisibility, the "traces" spirits leave in the material domain are important for understanding their needs, desires, and interactions with humans. I do not reject understandings of spirits and ghosts as representations, symbols, or symptoms of something else, but taking the materiality and ontological status of these beings seriously is—beyond all the theoretical apparatus to be used—also a methodological question. I then develop this theoretical discussion with regard to the two ethnographic examples from Laos I mentioned in the opening paragraph. Here I look at the transfer of objects (baskets and model houses) between the living and the dead with Buddhist monks acting in both cases as ritual mediators. I will then discuss differences in ideas regarding the ontological status of these spirits held by orthodox Buddhist monks and "modern Buddhists" on the one hand, and elderly lay people on the other. Some monks (and more rarely lay people) deny the transferability of objects, whereas more "traditional" lay people understand the objects as actually reaching the dead. I will argue that this modern understanding of communication with the ancestors can be understood as a result what of Latour has called "purification" (Latour 1993: 10), an ontological separation of and distinction made between humans and non-humans. I argue that this process is grounded in a rationalization

of Buddhism through socialist politics and the influence of Buddhist modernism and doctrinal orthodoxy. Throughout this chapter, my emphasis will be more on the theoretical and methodological aspects of the issues, and the ethnography will remain focused on specific ritual events without referring to the role of spirits of the deceased in other parts of the Lao ritual cycle.

Taking Ontology and Materiality Seriously

Most of us have encountered situations in the field in which certain “things” are imbued with special qualities, in which objects in specific contexts and events become living beings or take on roles that are beyond their everyday use. There are numerous examples of what could be called “ontological shifts”: people slipping from one form of being into another, passing from one sphere to another, or subjects becoming objects. In Amazonia, people are said to have “unstable bodies” and can transform themselves into animals (Vilaça 2005); among the Nuer, birds are sometimes regarded as being human twins (Evans Pritchard 1966); or certain gods in Nepal are ritually invited and then “live” in a statue (Ortner 1975). In the region I work in, statues of the Buddha made out of concrete are endowed with life in extremely elaborate consecration rituals and are regarded afterwards as living entities (Swearer 2004).

Anthropologists of different generations have usually followed one of the following ways for understanding these phenomena: either there is a purpose connected to these transformations (functionalism), they show how the brain works (cognitivism), they have to be interpreted (interpretivism), or these transformations have a metaphorical nature (symbolism) (GDAT 2010: 183). Early anthropology understood these phenomena of non-distinction as a *mentalité primitive* (Lévy-Bruhl 1975), in which a sort of prelogical confusion produces an inability to delineate between dream and reality, between subject and object. Other accounts have described these cases for Melanesia as being founded on socio-cosmic principles, in which humans and non-humans share certain substances that are the basis of their transformations (Leenhardt 1979). Some of these heavily criticized accounts of “primitive thinking” could in my opinion undergo a fruitful revision.⁴ More widely accepted and rehearsed has been the contribution of Mauss (1990), whose ideas about exchange is based on a participation of a certain principle or substance related to persons and things.

Focusing here only on objects that are used to connect human and non-human entities, the most widely accepted ideas about “explaining” these phenomena are related to the concept of representation. In the Durkheimian tradition,⁵ these objects are primarily of interest because they “materialize and express otherwise immaterial or abstract entities, organizing subjects perpetual experiences and clarifying their cognitions. The very materiality of objects, their availability to the senses, is of interest primarily as the condition for the knowability of otherwise

abstract or otherwise invisible structure” (Keane 2005: 198). Webb Keane and other proponents of the ontological turn in anthropology argue that this understanding reduces objects to our modern way of thinking in which the material world becomes a passive matrix of projection. According to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the conditions of knowability (using Keane’s words) are also questions regarding epistemology and representation. He states that with modernity we witness a “massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions—that is, questions of representation [in which] *objects* or things have been *pacified—retreating to the exterior, silent, and uniform world of nature*” (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 480). He then outlines the significance of the concept of ontology for going beyond this approach:

I think that the language of ontology is important for one specific and, one might say, tactical reason. It acts as a counter-measure to a de-realizing trick frequently played against natives’ thinking, which turns their thought into a sustained fantasy by reducing it to the dimensions of a form of knowledge or representation—that is, to an “epistemology” or a “worldview” (Viveiros de Castro 2003: 18).

At a recent discussion of the ontological turn held in Manchester (GDAT 2010), some participants stated that the study of culture is in many ways merely the study of meaning and interpretation of peoples’ epistemes, and neglects ontological questions. Quoting Tim Ingold, some participants argued that in this sense, culture is “conceived to hover over the material world, but not to permeate it” (Ingold 2000: 349). Another contributor said that “by contrast, ontology is an attempt to take others and their real difference seriously” (GDAT 2010: 175). At the same event, the claim was made that “an ontological approach, more than any other within anthropology, takes things encountered in the field ‘seriously’” (ibid.: 154). Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, referring to the link between ontology and materiality, argue in the same vein for taking a fresh look at objects: “The aim of this method is to take ‘things’ encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent or stand for something else” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 2). How can materiality and its connection to ontology then be taken “seriously” as a method? How can we understand objects and the way they present themselves without directly launching a project of symbolization and representation? And how can this illuminate the ways in which ghosts, spirits, and other non-human entities are studied?

When we stick to the claims made above, one could say that in anthropological analysis spirits, ghosts, and the material objects attached to their apparition and worship often have suffered the fate of too quickly becoming representations and symbols. Heonik Kwon, examining the ghosts of war in Vietnam, argues that apparitions also continue to play a role in the “modern” world, but that “their enduring existence is often unrecognized in modern societies because its domain of existence has changed from the natural to the symbolic” (Kwon 2008: 16). Again, then, spirits only “symbolize” and stand for something else. To make myself clear:

I think there is essentially nothing wrong with interpreting spirits, ghosts, and the objects surrounding them as symbols or representations of something else. Our job as anthropologists demands such work, and the most illuminating studies of spirits and ghosts have followed this method in various forms. Aihwa Ong's study of the possession of female factory workers in Malaysia takes spirits to be a sign of resistance to industrial discipline (Ong 1987). Janet Carsten argues that spectral apparitions are often linked to loss and memory and proposes that "excesses of grief cause these ghosts to appear" (Carsten 2007: 7). Heonik Kwon sees ghosts and their haunting as expressions of traumatic events, violence, and socially unprocessed deaths (Kwon 2008). Ghosts, on a larger comparative level, often stand for something that cannot be expressed otherwise; one could say that the "ghost embodies the disruption and alienation of that other which resists assimilation" (Buse and Stott 1999: 137).

However, I think that before we undertake an analysis of more abstracted representations and interpretations, it is worth keeping in mind that the first encounter with ghosts and other spirit entities in the field should be guided by taking their ontological status seriously. Ghosts can be beings with desires, with taste, with biographies. They appear in specific ways, at certain places at a certain time; they slip into objects, they live in them, they consume things and demand a certain treatment as social beings. A detailed and multifaceted interpretation or analysis of their representative qualities, their symptomatic nature, and their "meaning" can only be carried out with these things in mind. I think that the place for an ontological approach to spirits, and of their involvement with the material world, is the starting point from which we have to start understanding them, before we write about what they stand for and symbolize.

Invisibility, Traces, and Materiality. Lao Spirits of the Deceased

The problem we very often have is that the encounters with beings subsumed under the category of spirits or ghosts are marked by non-visibility and non-materiality, at least for most people and anthropologists. Some of our informants might regularly see ghosts and spirits, get possessed by them, talk to them, or even marry them. Unfortunately, this hasn't happened to me yet. While working on a research project at the University of Bristol concerned with Buddhist funeral cultures of Southeast Asia and China, my colleagues and I at one point realized that the main actors of our research were never present in the conventional sense. The deceased, ancestors, ghosts, or the spirits of people who died a bad death were in some sense omnipresent because all the things we researched (rituals, narratives, offerings, prayers, and so on) happened because of them, but they were not to be seen. This is a paradox that marks every religion to a more or less intense degree: "Humanity constantly returns to projects devoted to immateriality, whether as

religion, philosophy ... But all of these rest upon the same paradox: that immateriality can only be expressed through materiality ... The more humanity reaches toward the conceptualization of the immaterial, the more important the specific forms of materialization (Miller 2005: 28).

One way to study immaterial beings and take their apparitions seriously would be to analyze under which circumstances they appear to which people, or how images of them are, for example, caught on media. Gregory Delaplace has developed this idea in relation to spirits in Mongolia and has proposed a notion he labels “regimes of communicability.”⁶ Regarding the materiality of these invisible beings, I would like to use the idea of the “trace,” which I also take as being part of a regime of communicability. Ghosts and spirits leave material traces in this world. A trace might indicate the places where they appear, the materiality of the ritual items to deal with them, or with the offerings they receive. The trace is in a sense a track, a footprint, or an imprint—a sign left in the material domain of something that by its nature is not graspable for those people not endowed with the special capacities to do so. The trace is never a “direct” reference to the being in question. The trace as I use it as a concept is only partial, never revealing the whole being, but nevertheless pointing to certain features of the entity and its way of being.⁷

In the context of the above-mentioned project on death rituals, we decided to look at the materiality surrounding the apparition of non-human entities. However immaterial these beings might be, they must find expression in the material world. In my own contribution, I explored one Buddhist festival for the deceased that marks the end of a period of two weeks (usually in September) in which an intensified communication between the living and the dead takes place: the aforementioned *boun khau salak*. In this ritual, food, but also other objects of exchange, are constitutive of the communication between the living and the dead. In addition, I also looked at a ritual I researched in Luang Prabang in 2007 that aims at honoring a deceased ancestor by providing a small model house filled with items for daily use. I will here only present the basic structure of the rituals, briefly introduce the beings addressed, and point to the similar mechanisms at work there; namely, the transfer of objects and/or merit to the deceased with the help of Buddhist monks. After that, I will return to the question of ontology and materiality.

The Lao festival *boun khau salak* usually takes place in September and closes the period of the dead, which is opened two weeks before by a festival called *boun khua padab din* (the festival of rice packets decorating the earth). The festivals have to be understood as one ritual complex, but I shall here focus only on *boun khau salak* as the question of the transfer of objects is most apparent here.⁸ This ritual focuses on ancestors that are labeled either generally in Lao as *phu day* (dead person), *phi* or in Buddhist terms as *vinyan* (Pali: *vinnana*, conscience).⁹ In the case of *boun khau salak*, the category primarily refers to recently deceased relatives who are still known by name. *Boun khau salak* is a yearly ritual; it occurs in a temple, and involves baskets labeled with the names of the donor (sender) and de-

ceased relatives (recipient). On the day of the festival, family members bring their baskets to the temple early in the morning. The baskets contain mostly food, with some of the items being chosen according to the taste of the deceased. Moreover, there are also items for everyday use: cigarettes, umbrellas, pencils, or a comb (the latter object will be crucial in the analysis below). In a large public ritual, an



Figure 1.1: Basket for the deceased presented at *boun khau salak*. The paper indicates the receiver and the donor of the basket. Photograph by Patrice Ladwig, 2007.

elaborate system of gift allotment distributes the items equally among the monks. Each basket gets a number, which is passed on to the owner of the basket. Then the monks draw lots from a pot, written on small paper slips; on these slips are written the numbers of the baskets. This practice gives the ritual its name (*salak* signifies lottery). Then, over the space of an hour or more, each person is called to the front where the monks sit and they give their basket to the monk who has drawn the number of their basket from the pot. Each monk usually ends up with several baskets. After all the baskets have been distributed, they are assembled in front of the main statue of the Buddha. The monks chant a dedication prayer and transfer them to the dead. This transfer is understood by most lay people, and more so by monks, as a simultaneous transfer of merit (*boun*), as the skilful act of presenting a gift to a deceased relative through a monk. The “fruits” (Pali: *phala*) of this karmically positive act are then also transferred to the deceased. After the ritual, the monks collect the baskets, empty them, and use their contents.

In the second ritual, *boun huean pa* (festival of the cloth house), we observe a very similar mechanism, but the rite is based on kinship groups and the neighborhood of the family initiating it. The ritual is rarely seen in Vientiane, but seems to be a local tradition found in the northern provinces of Laos like Luang Prabang, Oudomsay, Luang Namtha and Sayabouli.¹⁰ To my knowledge, there is no ethnographic account of this rite in the older literature on Lao Buddhism. The rite is sometimes performed one week after the death of a family member, but in many cases years after death has occurred. In both cases, the family prepares a wooden model house (usually bought in a shop), which gives the ritual its name. *Huean* signifies house while *pa* refers to the roof of the house that is sometimes made out of white cloth, probably due to the widespread use of white cloth in Buddhist funerary culture. Several informants in Luang Prabang pointed out that this also refers to the purity (*khwambolisut*) of the intentions of the donors.

The house, measuring approximately 1.5m in height, is elaborately decorated with bank notes hanging from the roof, and it is filled with items intended for daily use such as clothing, cooking pots, fans, food, sleeping mats, and so on. It also has a small ladder leading into it, and sometimes even has windows. Several monks enter the house, are ritually fed, and then perform a chant of auspiciousness (Pali: *mangala sutta*) and finally a chant of dedication. The latter signifies the transfer of the house to the deceased. The house is sometimes so heavy that it has to be carried by several men who then bring it to the temple by car, where it is disassembled. Like the baskets at *boun khau salak*, the house is labeled with a sign that lists the name of the deceased (the receiver), the donors (usually his family), and a short phrase of dedication containing the wish that the *vinyan* (consciousness, soul) of the deceased finds the right way to paradise (*sukhadi*).

An elderly woman I met in the temple compound while observing the transport of the house pointed to the sign above its entrance and explained the ritual to me like this:



Figure 1.2: *Boun huean pa*: House with items and some couture for the spirit of the deceased. Photograph by Patrice Ladwig, 2007.

This is for the father of the family. He has died many years ago. The children and other relatives get together; they miss the deceased. They are afraid that the deceased does not have a place to stay after his death. Here, see, there is a sleeping mattress; they put all the things into the house that one needs for living. Then today they performed the ritual. They pray to Buddha and the monks come to the house and chant. The *vinyan* descends from heaven. It receives the house and can take it with it. Then they [the lay people] pour water (*yad nam*) and transfer the merit to the deceased.¹¹

Then, as in *boun khau salak*, the house is transferred or dedicated (*uthid*)¹² to the deceased. Both rites use signs to label the gift, the receiver, and the sender. Again, the monks are supposed to act as intermediaries transferring the object to the spirit of the deceased, but they “keep” the items intended for the dead and use most of them. The point that they use *most of them* will later become crucial in the analysis: in both the rites, most of the items presented to the deceased can actually be used by monks, but the baskets and the houses often also contain objects which are of no use to monks. Due to their special life-style as renouncers or because of the meticulous code of conduct for monks laid down in the *vinayapitaka* (“basket of discipline” – one of the three parts of the Buddhist canon), not all of them can be used.

Ontologies in Competition: Objects for the Use of the Dead or the Veneration of Monks?

I now turn to aspects of materiality in the ethnography and use these for exploring the ontological status of the spirits of the deceased. With reference to both rituals, I refer to differing and conflicting ideas about the ontological status of the dead. I shall describe cases in which the objects provided for the deceased point to a potential conflict between a “modern” form of the ontology of the dead advanced, for example, by orthodox monks and a more “traditional” one proposed by elderly lay people. This rift is also related to a wider field of discussion about rationality, superstition, and the modernization of Buddhism in Laos, but also reflects a discussion that is apparent in early Buddhist textual sources.

As I have already noted, *boun khau salak* mainly addresses the spirits of the recently deceased. Despite the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation, Lao Buddhists continue to feed these spirits long after they have died. This is done especially with deceased parents or siblings, but can theoretically be extended to anyone. I described above how the offerings are labeled: lay people put a stick with a paper into their basket, which states the name of the recipient (*khun hab*) and the sender (*khun song*). Many informants compared this to sending a letter, or making a telephone call. Without a correct address, the basket will not reach its intended recipient. Several informants told me that there is also an administration in the “other world” where the ancestors live and therefore an address must be attached to the basket. This transfer to the spirits of the dead—whereby an object passes from one ontological sphere (the world of the living) to another (the world of ancestral spirits)—is usually not an act of dispute among Lao Buddhists.¹³ Rituals are mainly performed and few think about the “reality” of the acts. Moreover, discourse may say one thing, whereas in practice people might still perform these acts despite denying their reality. As among Buddhists in Chiang Mai, most Lao Buddhists in Vientiane generally believe that “although the offerings are given to monks, they are thought to be used by the deceased as well” (Davis 1984: 193).

However, more orthodox monks in the urban setting of Vientiane whom I interviewed about *boun khau salak* stated that this belief is only “peasant Buddhism” (*phutasasana khong sauna*) or “false belief” (*khwamsuea pit*), adding that the deceased obviously cannot receive gifts. The gifts were, they claimed, only “symbols” (*sanyalak*), and they denied that a real transfer of the objects occurred. One of them told me in an interview: “you are an educated man from Germany and you know that most Lao people are peasants that have not yet understood that the dead cannot receive things. It is their wishful thinking.” He advanced a Buddhist interpretation and said that the gifts are given to, and intended for, the monks, honoring their discipline during the three-month rain retreat (Buddhist lent; Pali: *vassa*). Giving this an additional Buddhist spin, he stated that the merit generated through this karmically skillful act is then transferred to the dead. This

is also congruent with the interpretation of many Lao lay people, but they expect both things to happen: a transfer of the object and the transfer of merit generated through the act of giving. This difference in interpretation became most apparent when one monk insisted that the gifts are chosen, even by lay people, according to the needs of the monk, and are intended for them and not for the dead. He said that this kind of superstition only survives in the countryside, but not in Vientiane. I told him about the umbrellas in the baskets, and he replied that monks also need umbrellas. Then I remembered the comb a friend of mine had found in one of the baskets: monks shave their hair and do not need combs, I pointed out. The monk gave me an annoyed look and brushed off my remark. The conversation had come to its end.

With regard to the *huan pa* it was harder for orthodox monks to advance a coherent interpretation referring to certain sources of doctrinal Buddhism. Although monks can use most of the items placed within the house, they often contain things that monks cannot use, such as shirts. Most monks in Luang Prabang were less orthodox in that regard than their colleagues in Vientiane. I had a discussion with an abbot of one of the large monasteries in Luang Prabang regarding the house for the deceased. Asking him about the invitation addressed to the *vinyan* of the deceased to enter the house via the ladder, he did not directly deny the transferability of the object, but referred to different understandings of the rite among people of different ages:

In our belief one is supposed to give offerings to the monks. After the monks have received them, the lay people pour water and transfer the merit generated through this act of generosity to the deceased person. The crucial thing, however, is that the *vinyan* of the deceased is made happy and that he or she has to be informed that there is a dedication being performed [referring to the invitation]. It might be possible that the things reach the dead or not—we simply don't know. Some monks and the younger people actually don't think so, but the older people who do the *boun huan pa* think that the deceased's *vinyan* really comes, receives the house and takes it away.

However, some monks also classified this practice as “folk Buddhism,” denying the fact that the objects could reach the dead, but due to the kind of objects presented it was hard for them to claim that the items were actually intended for the monks. Again, as in the case of *boun khau salak*, reference was made to “wishes” (*khwambattana*) of lay people and the fact that they miss (*kid hood*) the deceased and therefore symbolically construct a house for them. Several monks answered that the items that could not be used by monks are usually distributed among poor families in the neighborhood of the temple, giving these, in a sense misplaced, objects a charity appeal.

So when we try to take ontology and the role of objects seriously, how can we understand these different attitudes toward objects in both rituals? Arjun Appadurai has proposed that instead of only looking at human actors and their intentionality, is also valid to look at exchange from the point of view of the objects exchanged: “Even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (Appadurai 1986: 5). When objects “speak”, when objects are the vocabulary in which the living and spirits of the dead communicate with each other, I think that there is indeed a large difference between more orthodox Buddhist ideas about those objects and the ones that many lay people advance. In the case of the basket in the festival in Vientiane, we have a denial of the transferability of the object of some modernist monks; while regarding the house we have an open answer that involves doubt and a reference to different understandings of older and younger people. One could say that at one end of the spectrum responses, the more orthodox monks and lay people following a more rationalized approach have adapted a modern ontology that postulates a clear distinction between subject and object, between the living and the dead. The dead are ascribed a different ontological status; they are not reachable with objects anymore.

Where do these differing views derive from? Obviously, people always have divergent views about how rituals work and a certain attitude of doubt towards certain practices is nothing unusual. Nevertheless, I think that there are some identifiable factors that have influenced the different discourses on the ontological status of the dead and communication with them via objects. I mostly carried out fieldwork in big monasteries in Vientiane, and most of the monks I worked with were highly educated, having studied either in Laos or at Buddhist universities in Thailand. The institutions in both countries have undergone thorough reforms resulting in a “rationalization” of many Buddhist doctrines.¹⁴ While it is evident that many monks actually come from poor rural areas, and that the Buddhism practiced in these might not construct such an opposition, the training they receive in urban institutions of higher Buddhist education, especially since the communist revolution of 1975, in some cases seems to alter ideas regarding these subjects. Despite the continuing existence of all kinds of “unorthodox” practices, some monasteries—like the ones I worked with in Vientiane—are propagating a reformed Buddhism that is compatible with the “scientific rationalism” that modernist Buddhists have been advocating (McMahan 2008: 63f.). The notion of “protestant Buddhism,” whose main feature has been the blurring of the monk/laity distinction in reaction to Christian missionary activity in Sri Lanka, has also been described as having a more this-worldly orientation with a de-emphasis on ritual (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). The conclusions that could be drawn from these developments for the efficacy of Buddhist rituals for the deceased in Laos, and the position of objects in them, cannot be discussed here in detail. How-

ever, I think that the rather heterodox Buddhist practices described, for example, by Françoise Bizot (1981) in Cambodia and Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s have been largely suppressed in Laos.¹⁵ I do not want to paint an image of disenchantment and overall rationalization for the case of Buddhism in Laos, but in comparison to Thailand's flourishing postmodern Buddhist scene (Jackson 1999), with its "commercialized Buddhism" (*Buddha phanit*) (Kitiarsa 2008), things in Laos look different. The emergence of Buddhist charisma and magic monks has been successfully blocked by the one-party state (Ladwig 2007), and indeed the Lao monastic order (*Sangha*) remains under the strict control of the Department of Religious Affairs of the Lao National Front for Reconstruction (Ladwig 2008). On the one hand, then, Lao Buddhism has remained fairly "traditional" due to its isolation until the mid 1990s. On the other hand, the developments outlined above have—at least in urban areas and among high-ranking monks—led to changes that might also be linked to the understanding of the rituals discussed here.

In some sense this modernist approach to communication with the dead is an effect of the "rationalization" of beliefs propagated in the Buddhist education system and among lay people in the propaganda against superstitions. I think that Lao (socialist) modernity has here left its mark on the interpretation of this transfer of objects. Many monks who are in leading positions today received their education after the revolution, at a time when Buddhist doctrines and practices that were considered "irrational" were under attack. Local traditions that showed a strong intertwining of Buddhism and spirit-cults were harassed in particular (Stuart-Fox and Bucknell 1982). The *Sangha* was thoroughly restructured and ideologically cleansed after 1975. Whereas lay people often stuck to more traditional interpretations of rituals, the *Sangha* itself was exposed to higher ideological pressure and was easier to target due to its institutional structure. For the early period of Lao socialism, Lafont states, "It is interesting to note that whereas most lay followers have remained faithful to the traditional beliefs of their parents and ancestors, and do not want any change in their religion, the monks have been more prepared to accept changes imposed by the new regime in their monastic rules, sacred texts or religious practices" (Lafont 1982: 157). In a book written by one of the leading monks of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization—the official association of all Lao Buddhist monks founded after the communist revolution—we still find traces of this politics of religion. Here, a secularized and rationalized explanation of the festivals for the dead such as *boun khau salak* is given. References to spirits of the deceased and ancestors, which according to lay people as well as in ritual practice are crucial elements, are not found in this rather ideological account. The solidarity of peasant culture is pointed out, and the "feeding of oneself, family, friends and society" (Buakham 2001: 44) is described, but the dead are actually completely absent. The shallow remark, "that in the old [political] system there were many things that were not practiced according to the truth" (*ibid.*: 44) might explain this conscious eradication of the traces of the dead, even in rituals dedi-

cated to them. Books written before the revolution discuss these festivals in a very different manner and explicitly mention spirits (e.g., Philavong 1967: 68).

Objects, Emotions and Plastic Buckets

From the perspective of this rational, protestant Buddhism, subjects have been cut off from objects. The communication between the living and the dead has been abstracted into a pure mental concept (merit), and the material offerings circulate only in one ontological sphere, that of the living (between monks and lay people). I think that we here witness what Latour has called purification: “Purification creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of non-humans on the other” (Latour 1993: 10). Although communication is still possible, it is now just a transfer of something invisible that poses less of a problem for modern ontology than the actual transfer of an object.

The reduction to a transfer of merit only, and the non-reachability of the dead has further implications. I think that the difference between the different ontologies goes even deeper when we take a closer look at the objects themselves and their sensual qualities. Many elderly lay people sometimes choose specific kinds of food to be put into the baskets at *boun khau salak* or into the *huean pa*. Life histories, memories of people, and emotions of care for the dead might be “materialized” in food or objects, for example. In order to understand the “emotional investment” of people in the rituals, the sensuous qualities such as smell and taste might be relevant for understanding the object as a “container” for memories of the deceased, for example,¹⁶ or as a trace they have left in the memory of the living. In opposition to that, the simple reference to merit as understood by more orthodox monks is less tangible and not corporeal. I believe that the efficacy of rituals is also achieved through metaphors of the body and personalized objects, for example, rather than through abstract and mental concepts such as merit.¹⁷ The care of the living for the dead (or, to put it in theoretical terms, the agency of the living on the spirits of the deceased) is often expressed through the transfer of objects. Laurent Thevenot remarks: “the autonomous intentional individual is usually regarded as a prerequisite for moral agency. But it achieves such moral agency only with the support of other elements: the functional agency of objects” (Thevenot 2002: 59). The views that I have presented as those of orthodox monks, and their modern ontology of the dead, could be said to have something in common with many earlier studies of Buddhism and Hinduism. There has been a tendency to “abstract away from the sensuous materiality of objects” (Manning and Menely 2008: 289f.) in studies of religion and the focus has often been too heavily on human agency, neglecting the material aspects of religion. Earlier scholars working on renouncer religions have often had an ambivalent relationship to materiality and sensuality. Gregory Schopen’s analysis of “protestant presuppositions” in the archaeology of early Buddhism (Schopen 1991) might also apply

here: scholars have often looked at sources that confirmed a certain philosophical image of Buddhism as a world-renouncing religion, but neglected the polyvocality of the textual and material sources. In the accounts of some researchers—and in the religious profiling of modernist propagators of these religions—the sensuous quality of offerings and the question of transferability plays, if at all, only a peripheral role or is denied.

The biography of the object, or what I have before labeled its trace, indicates the final receiver of the gift. The comb and the shirts in the *huan pa*, rather insignificant objects, reveal different roles for objects in two differing ideas about the ontological status of the dead. In one system, that of the orthodox monk, the dead are beyond reachability, whereas in the other—that of many elderly lay people—they can be accessed through objects. For lay people following the “older” interpretation of the rituals, the spirits of the ancestors exist somewhere where they can receive things; they can use the comb and the items in the house. Their act of giving them to the deceased is seen as a moral action: care for the dead that takes into account their needs. The comb and the shirt, in this sense, are not only symbols or representations of lay people’s wish to establish contact with the dead and care for them. Rather, they are primarily for these lay people just what they are—objects to be put to use for the dead. Objects in this perspective have to be understood as *sui generis* meanings: “Rather than accepting that meanings are fundamentally separate from their material manifestations (signifier vs. signified, word vs. referent etc.) the aim is to explore the consequences of an apparently counter-intuitive possibility: *that things might be treated as sui generis meanings*” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 3).

Disputes like the one I described regarding the comb in the basket are rather rare, and were probably provoked by the external intervention and presence of myself as an anthropologist.¹⁸ Nevertheless, I think that they reveal a certain rupture. Webb Keane has observed something similar in Eastern Indonesian Christianity, where exposure to Calvinist missionary activity was supposed to “purify” Sumbanese culture. Here, discourses on religious objects could reveal the ontological insecurity caused by missionary activity among the “fetishists” who believed in the agency of bibles as objects beyond the words contained in them: “It is for reasons like this that battles over apparently minor matters such as the use of a prayer book can be taken so serious by combatants. They involve basic assumptions about what kinds of beings inhabit the world, what counts as a possible agent, and thus what are the preconditions for and the consequences of moral action” (Keane 2007: 20ff.).

I suggest that one can understand the abstraction of communication between the living and the dead as a mental concept (merit), and the mere “symbolic” role of objects in this understanding, as a form of purification, a distinction of two ontological spheres between which objects cannot circulate. Latour understands this process—together with translation—as one of the central, self-contradictory

themes of the project of modernity. Current changes in the Lao Buddhist gift economy could intensify this trend, and after socialism's purifications we now witness the impact of capitalism's mass production. In recent years there has emerged a trend in Vientiane and other urban regions of Laos that more orthodox monks would certainly consider appropriate. Pre-packed plastic buckets containing gifts intended for monks are becoming more and more popular at Buddhist festivals, especially with younger people. Combs, shirts and other strange items are no longer to be found in these buckets. Despite the fact that some items in the bucket might be chosen according to the taste, need, or desire of the spirit of the dead, the pre-packaged object is less open to emotional investment than the traditional, hand-made basket with its individual food selection. The trace the spirits of the deceased leave in this world is therefore substantially modified. A good friend of mine, inspired by Buddhism as a social teaching, stated when asked about this:

I have seen that all the baskets and even most of the food is thrown away after the ritual; the monks burn them. They can't use some of the items given to them. I went to Vat Ongtoe [a large temple in Vientiane] and presented a plastic bucket to the monks during the ancestor festival. The monks were delighted, and said that they really prefer to get the plastic buckets.

Here, questions regarding the utility of the gift seamlessly merge with that of rationality. Finally, purification has arrived in the temples of Vientiane in form of mass-produced plastic gift buckets.

Conclusion

I began with an effort to try and take ontology and materiality "seriously" and apply them to the study of rituals dealing with Lao spirits of the deceased. I introduced the idea of trace in order to explore spirits through the fragments of their presence left in the material world. The idea of the immaterial must somehow find expression in the material domain. These traces in the material domain and the discourses surrounding them, I suggested, enable us to understand the ontological status of these beings and reveal certain features that can be attributed to them. I briefly explored critiques of the notion of representation that quickly fix meanings to objects, but also remarked that this method does not exclude ideas of representation or symbolization. My methodological suggestion was that before we embark on such a project, we could indeed follow the call of Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell (2007) to take things as they present themselves in the field, and not immediately reduce them to a "meaning." An ontological approach in this sense is "one that does not privilege epistemology or the study of other people's representations of what we know to be the real world, rather acknowledging the existence of multiple worlds" (GDAT 2010: 153).

I have contrasted the views of orthodox monks about the ontology of the dead with that of older lay people. Here, I explored the different understanding of ontology in my field sites in Vientiane and Luang Prabang and looked at differing ontological models as the basis of these diverging views. Again by looking at the trace and the biography of the objects, I showed how the circulation of things can reveal which beings are addressed in the ritual. On the one hand, orthodox monks argue that the offerings are intended for monks, and only merit is transferred to the dead. On the other hand, elderly lay people actually understood the objects such as the basket and the house as reaching the deceased. I remarked that usually no disputes arise because the objects can satisfy both proposed recipients (the monks and the dead). Objects have the capacity to take on multiple roles, and can mediate between various systems of interpretation.¹⁹ In certain rare cases, however, these uncertainties and struggles reveal themselves. In the case of *boun khau salak*, I identified one object (the comb) that can only have been addressed to the spirits of the ancestors and not the monks. With regard to the *huean pa*, I referred to the shirts and other objects that could not be used by monks. I presented these differing views as an outcome of various modernization processes (rationalization through Buddhist education, socialism's impact on Buddhism). Whereas elderly lay people use, for example, the sensuous qualities of the object for reactivating memories of the dead, investing emotions, and expressing care through the transferred objects, modernist monks and lay people prefer an abstraction into a Buddhist concept of merit. The latter is unproblematic for the modernist ontology because the transfer of an invisible substance (merit as positive karma) is easier to legitimize than the actual transfer of an object. I proposed that this shift can be understood, following Latour (1993), as a process of purification: establishing an ontological divide between humans and spirits as non-humans. Communication between the realm of the dead and the living is still possible, but objects cannot circulate between the two spheres. The traces that the spirits of the deceased leave in the material domain actually become "thinner" the less reachable they are through objects.

Finally I mentioned that through the mass production of gift buckets for monks, the sensuous quality of the object is partially lost. I wonder about the future impact of this "purification" of the Buddhist gift economy. Many researchers including myself think that Laos, since the decline of the socialist master narrative, is going through a phase of Re-buddhification. State rituals have become more pompous, temples are being renovated, and festivals for the spirits of the deceased proliferate. Congruent with this, social scientists now proclaim the "return of religion" and the continuity, or even intensification, of ritual practices relating to spirits. But perhaps this revitalization is only possible in the context of a modern ontology. Despite the continuity and the intensification of the worship of spirits of the deceased, the way they are addressed and understood might be of a quite different nature now.

Notes

1. Initial research on which this chapter is based was carried out in Vientiane and several provinces of Laos from 2003 to 2005. I gratefully acknowledge funding by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the University of Cambridge. A second field trip in 2007 was part of an AHRC-sponsored project, “Buddhist funeral cultures of Southeast Asia and China,” hosted by the University of Bristol. Thanks to my colleagues Paul Williams and Rita Langer at the University of Bristol, and Oliver Tappe, Giovanni Da Col, and Chris Hann at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology for comments and inspiration. Special thanks to Andrea Lauser and Paul Christensen for inviting me to the workshop on “Spirited Modernities” held at the Lichtenberg-Kolleg in Göttingen in September 2010. I also profited from the comments of the other participants at this workshop, especially Annette Hornbacher and Pattana Kitiarsa.
2. There is no standardized transcription system for Lao. I will use a simplified one. This is also valid for terms in Pali and Sanskrit, which appear here without diacritics.
3. The problem, as often, is that the term ontology in many of these discussions is rarely defined. I understand ontology as dealing with questions concerning what entities exist, and how these can be classified according to similarities, differences, and positions in a hierarchy of beings. Although this is a very narrow definition of ontology—which in some of its uses can be close to that of discussions of cosmology or animism in anthropology—I hope that in the course of reading the concept will become sharpened. For recent anthropological discussions of ontology, see Rio (2007), Scott (2007), and Wardle et al. (2009).
4. Despite his evolutionary tendencies, Lévy-Bruhl could be accredited with pointing out that Western ideas about rationality, and some of the oppositions mentioned above, are far from universal. Something similar is valid for Maurice Leenhardt’s Melanesian anthropology, in which the socio-cosmic principles animating the body are an essential part of the concept of the person. This ontology makes it possible to transform the body and actually become another being. To my knowledge, the relationship of these older accounts to current studies of materiality and ontology have not yet been systematically explored.
5. I use this term very loosely here. In many recent writings of Latour (2005) and some of his followers in anthropology (Candea 2010), Durkheim is criticized for his very influential account of representation, while Gabriel Tarde, his largely forgotten contemporary, has found new favor.
6. This was one of the main themes of a recent conference held in Cambridge in December 2009 entitled “Figuring the Invisible: An Anthropology of Uncanny Encounters.” See also Delaplace (2009) and Delaplace and Empson (2007). Looking at how apparitions are understood and described is in my opinion another way of taking ontology seriously. This idea has also been transferred to spirit apparitions in Western societies. A recent German exhibition looked at how apparitions are inscribed into the real through haunted media of TV, radio, and computers (Arns and De Ruyter 2009).
7. I borrow the term loosely from Jacques Derrida, who has made it one of the main concepts of deconstruction. In his philosophy, his anti-metaphysics of non-presence, there are no stable meanings or origins: “The trace is not only the disappearance of origin ... it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin” (Derrida 1976: 61). Spivak further elaborates on this rather difficult concept in her introduction to Derrida’s text (Spivak 1976: 15-20). Interestingly, more than twenty years after this work, Derrida came back to the trace, but then chose the “specter” as a figure that demonstrates the eternal slippages of meaning, of that which is not graspable and beyond dualities (Derrida 1994). See also Jameson (1999) for an interpretation of the trope of the specter in Derrida.

8. In the few ethnographies available on these festivals among the Lao, they are usually treated as one ritual, which, in my opinion, does not do justice to the rather different ritual practices observed in both rites. For a more detailed ethnographic account of the first festival and its textual backgrounds in Buddhism, see Ladwig (forthcoming b). Tambiah states that among the Lao of northeast Thailand, “the dead are allowed to visit the earth” during the period between the festivals (Tambiah 1970: 156f.). Zago refers to both rituals as being “for the favour of the dead”, but additionally links them with the worship of agricultural divinities (Zago 1972: 315–18), a claim also found in Archaimbault’s short account of the rites (Archaimbault 1973: 222–23). Tambiah also builds up a link to agricultural fertility and remarks that among the ethnic Lao of northeast Thailand the rituals take place “at the critical time when the rice grains are forming in the fields” (Tambiah 1970: 156). Although the link to agricultural fertility is an important feature, I cannot discuss this point here; for this, see Bouté’s account of *boun khau salak* among the Phu Neuy, a Buddhist ethnic minority in Laos (Bouté 2005: 399–414). Kourilsky (2008) discusses the notion of filial piety and ideas about the reproduction of bodies in relation to ancestors.
9. Lao cosmology and understandings of life after death are based on a complex mixture of Buddhist and Tai-Kadai conceptions of the person. See Pottier (2007) for what is in my opinion the best study of Lao cosmology, and Platenkamp (2007) for a comparative examination of Lao spirits in a wider Southeast Asian context.
10. I have observed a very similar rite in a village north of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, however. The northern regions of Laos and Thailand have long-standing cultural connections.
11. Pouring water after giving a gift to a monk is a standardized ritual action in Laos and Thailand that, one could say, approves receipt of the gift and symbolizes the flow of merit generated through the positive act of giving. The giver in this context also receives a share of the merit through his cultivation of generosity (Pali: *dana*; Lao: *thaan*). See Keyes (1983) for the Thai case.
12. The Lao term *uthid* derives from Pali *uddisati* and *ādisati*, words often used for merit transfer in the *Petavatthu*, and other Buddhist Pali sources relate to this practice. They can be translated as to make over, to transfer, to ascribe the merit or virtue of a gift to someone (Gehman 1923: 421). The important question if this is only a transfer of an invisible “positive karmic substance” and/or of the gift itself will be discussed below. See also Ladwig (forthcoming a) for more doctrinal and historical details on the interplay of merit and offerings.
13. The separation of these spheres could be understood as the application of an ethnocentric concept of this- and other-worldly. In the case of Lao cosmology, these ontological spheres are pretty porous and the boundary between them is at times permeable, as in the case of the festival described. In Lao one makes reference to “this world” (*look ni*) and the other world. In the context of death the latter is either described as paradise (*sawan*) or hell (*narok*), just to mention the most simplistic conceptions beyond the subtleties of Buddhist cosmology.
14. The Lao monastic education system was reformed by the French colonial regime, putting an emphasis on philology and Pali Buddhism (Kourilsky 2006). The Thai *Sangha* also underwent several reforms with a heavy emphasis on developing doctrinal Buddhism based on certain texts and a struggle against local traditions.
15. Francoise Bizot’s work on Khmer and Thai Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s (Bizot 1981) tries to uncover the heterodox and esoteric practices of the non-reformed strains of Southeast Asian Buddhism heavily influenced by Tantric practices. Although he at times overstates the contrast between reformed and non-reformed Buddhism, I think that many researchers have taken reformed Buddhism to be the natural state of affairs.

16. Sutton, for example, skillfully elaborates on the role of food in rituals linked to death, remembrance, and care for the dead in Greek culture: “Even the ephemeral and perishable medium of food, then, can be extended into the future through memory of the act of giving. Indeed, food may be a particularly powerful medium exactly because it internalizes the debt to the other ... Furthermore, in carefully preparing food one is once again projecting the self, in this case the caring, nurturant self, into an external object—the food—which is meant to inscribe a memorable impression on the receiver” (Sutton 2001: 46f.). This care can be expressed simply through the giving of food, but can also be intensified with a supplement deriving from the sensuality of food and the choice of food according to the taste of a deceased relative.
17. Latour therefore asks: “Why must society work through them [artifacts] to inscribe itself in something else? Why not inscribe itself directly, since the artifacts count for nothing?” (Latour 1999: 197). He thinks that the function of objects “is not to mirror, congeal, crystallize, or hide social relations, but to remake these very relations through fresh and unexpected sources of action” (ibid.: 197). Objects are needed to re-establish relationships and regenerate them.
18. When discussions about these topics occurred, it was in relation to the reality of spirits. The issue of spirits was a subject of discussion at several funerals I attended. On one occasion some monks from a rather “modernist” monastery in Vientiane ridiculed some lay people because they used the term spirit (*phi*) while talking about the deceased. The monks said that there is no such thing, there is only reincarnation, which for them is a process involving another entity based on a Buddhist concept, namely consciousness (Pali: *vinnaṇa*).
19. Webb Keane states that “part of the power of material objects in society consists of their openness to ‘external’ events and their resulting potential for mediating the introduction of ‘contingency’” (Keane 2005: 416). This contingency rests on the fact that: “both the value and the possible meanings of objects are underdetermined. They call for speech, interpretative practices, and political strategies. This means that they are necessarily caught up in the uncertainties of social action” (Keane 2001: 70).

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