

BUDDHIST FUNERAL
CULTURES OF SOUTHEAST
ASIA AND CHINA

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107003880

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First published 2012

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Buddhist funeral cultures of Southeast Asia and China / edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-107-00388-0 (hardback)

1. Buddhist funeral rites and ceremonies – Southeast Asia. 2. Buddhist funeral rites and ceremonies – China. I. Williams, Paul, 1950– II. Ladwig, Patrice.

BQ5020.B83 2012

294.3'43880959–dc23

2012000080

ISBN 978-1-107-00388-0 Hardback

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CHAPTER 6

Feeding the dead: ghosts, materiality and merit in a Lao Buddhist festival for the deceased

Patrice Ladwig

INTRODUCTION: CARING FOR THE DEAD

In his classical study on the anthropology of death rituals, Robert Hertz (1960) pointed out that a movement of ritual integration follows the separation process that society has to accomplish in relation to the dead. It is also crucial to acknowledge that in many societies these post-mortem relationships are not only established once, but have to be continuously reproduced. The dead – as ancestors, divinities or ghosts, for example – are not located in a realm that is purely ‘beyond’ and inaccessible through a sort of metaphysical wall, but are social entities intrinsic to the workings of society. A comparative study on the anthropology of death (De Coppet *et al.* 1994: 112) states that these ‘boundaries are not insuperable barriers, but rather loci of relations of exchange, that is, of the transformations essential to the perpetuation of being’. The regeneration or perpetuation of life is an important part of many funeral cultures (Bloch and Parry 1982) and often implies the revitalisation of domains such as agriculture or human fertility.

Among the ethnic Lao, Buddhism plays a major role in the upkeep of these relationships through ritual exchanges with the dead.¹ The deceased are a focus of ritual attention ranging from everyday acts of food donation to monks to

The ethnographic data were collected in the urban setting of Vientiane and surrounding villages. I first observed the rituals between 2003 and 2005 during my first PhD fieldwork sponsored by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). A more detailed study was carried out in September 2007 in the context of the project ‘Death rituals of Southeast Asia and China’ at the University of Bristol, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). I would especially like to thank all Lao monks and laypeople that helped us in our project. Thanks also to Gregory Kourilsky (L’École Pratique des Hautes Études [EPHE] Paris) and Rita Langer (University of Bristol) for sharing the joys and troubles of ghostly haunting with me during fieldwork.

¹ I here focus on the Buddhism of the ethnic lowland Lao occupying the lowlands of the present-day nation state of Laos. Most ethnic Lao today live in the northeast of Thailand and sources relating to them will also be used. Comparative data on very similar rituals, especially on northern Thailand and Cambodia, will supplement my account. For an analysis of related rites among a Lao Buddhist ‘ethnic minority’ see Bouté’s contribution in this book (Chapter 5).

larger festivals dedicated to the dead that are part of the ritual cycle. The first kind of care for the dead came to my attention while going on alms rounds with fellow monks from the local monastery in Vientiane. Later interviews with the donors feeding me every morning dealt with the motivation of giving and elaborated on topics such as the cultivation of good thoughts, generosity and transfer of merit (*boun*) to the dead while giving to monks.² However, a quite significant proportion directly mentioned their deceased relatives and described the act of giving to the monks as a ‘feeding of the dead’ (*liang phu day*). Members of the saṅgha are therefore transmitters; a ‘conveyor belt’ for exchanges with the aim of transferring merit and feeding the dead.

More ritually elaborated forms of caring for the dead by transferring merit and feeding can be observed in the context of larger rituals, which are the subject of this chapter. Among the Lao, two festivals of the yearly ritual cycle (*hit sip song*) explicitly address the dead and demonstrate their continuing entanglement in society. The first ritual, ‘the festival of rice (packets) decorating the earth’ (*boun khau padab din* – hereafter BKPD) takes place at new moon of the ninth month (usually in September) and marks the beginning of a special two-week period, the end of which is marked by the second festival, called *boun khau salak* (‘the festival of rice baskets drawn by lot’ – hereafter BKS). Both festivals aim at the reconstruction and perpetuation of a multitude of relations with different kinds of deceased such as recently deceased relatives, ancestors and ghosts. At BKPD, for example, ghosts are popularly believed to be freed from hell and enter the world of the living. These ghosts have to be distinguished from the various protective and agricultural spirits that are also addressed during the ritual. Although both festivals are to be understood as one ritual complex, I shall focus only on BKPD as the main topics of this chapter – the care for the dead and ghosts, merit and feeding – are most clearly exemplified in this festival.

In most of the anthropological and buddhological literature dealing with Southeast Asian societies marked by Theravāda Buddhism, the relationships with the dead are often explained via the notion of the ‘transfer of merit’. In some accounts of doctrinal Buddhism, but also for some more orthodox Lao monks, this process of transferring merit is far from unproblematic.³ Although the existence of this transfer is clearly visible in Lao

² There is no standardised transcription system for Lao and I use my own transcriptions. Most words, however, should be easily identifiable.

³ White (1986: 206), for example, speaks of ‘the thorny problem of merit transfer’ and Agasse (1978: 312) proposes that ‘the existence of the practice of merit transfer [] constitutes a problem’. A few orthodox Lao monks I have met also have an individualistic stance on merit and karma and do not support the idea of a transfer. Karma, which depends on the amount of merit accumulated, is by them understood as a strictly individual quality that cannot be influenced by a transfer.

Buddhist practice, I want to expound some problems of Theravāda doctrine in relation to merit transfer and focus on alternative perspectives with which the linkages between the living and the dead might be explored. An emphasis on the kind of exchanges taking place, their ‘materiality’ as food, and their concrete context shall supplement the often too general analysis of the transfer of merit and lead to a broader understanding of the construction of post-mortem relationships. I will start with an investigation of the ritual entanglements with the various dead and discuss their ontological status. I will then focus on the feeding of ghosts and the textual backgrounds of the festivals in local Lao and doctrinal sources.⁴ I want to conceptualise their apparition in the festival as a form of haunting in which care for the dead is expressed through establishing a kinship bond and their feeding. I will demonstrate that seeing food in its mediating materiality is crucial for a wider understanding of the festival, which a sole focus on merit could not accomplish. Finally, I argue that the ritual feeding of different kinds of deceased is constitutive for nurturing and protecting the well-being of a community, which comprises the living and various forms of the dead.

ONTOLOGICAL AND RITUAL FUZZINESS: FEEDING ANCESTORS, PROTECTIVE SPIRITS AND GHOSTS

Rituals provide a framework in which the living and the dead can interact in a more elaborate and effective manner than usual. The spheres of separation and the channels of communication take on a different quality in these periods, but this intensification also produces a certain kind of fuzziness regarding the ontological status and ritual addressing of the various deceased. Before describing the ritual practices and defining the category of ghosts and spirits addressed more thoroughly, it must be mentioned that the ritual addresses a multitude of deities and different categories of deceased hard to distinguish, as their ontological status is marked by a high degree of fuzziness. Lambek (1996: 242) mentions that we should ‘not expect spirits to follow a Linnean model of distinct “species”, notable for the discreteness of their identities’ and reminds us that ‘multiple and sometimes competing constructions of spirits can coexist in the same society’ (*ibid.*: 246).

⁴ I will try to distinguish the Lao and doctrinal conceptions of ghosts by referring to their differences. At the same time, however, there is also a substantial overlap between these concerning the textual references used, for example. This opens up the still ongoing discussion between practice and text, between great and little tradition, which cannot be dealt with here. See Rozenberg (2005) for an overview of these discussions.

Although BKPD and BKS are distinguished by their ritual practices, they overlap to a certain degree and are marked by rather blurred distinctions: elements found in one ritual may appear in the other, and they both address a multitude of beings which are not neatly distinguishable due to an ontological and ritual fuzziness. Older sources dealing with the festivals in Laos slot the rituals together and state their similarity (Nginn 1961: 32). Examining the rituals in the culturally very close context of northern Thailand, Premchit and Doré (1992: 283) report of two rituals for the dead. During the first ritual ‘people dedicate a part of the merit to the dead’, whereas they describe the second ritual (BKS) as a ‘pure’ Buddhist ceremony. The Cambodian Ghost Festival bears strong resemblances to the Lao one; it lasts for two weeks and is marked by an opening and closing ritual that could be said to correspond to the Lao BKPD and BKS.⁵ Concerning the recipients of the offerings and beings addressed in the ritual, most ethnographic accounts simply refer to the dead as a rather homogeneous category. The gifts of food ‘are destined for the late sister and brother, for the great uncles and the grandfathers who have passed away’ (Abhay and Kene 1958: 14–15). Tambiah (1970: 156–7) states that ‘the dead are allowed to visit the earth’ during the festivals, but is less specific about the different kinds of deceased. Zago (1972: 315–18) subsumes both rituals as being ‘for the favour of the dead’, but additionally links them with the worship of agricultural divinities; a point also found in Archaimbault’s (1973: 222–3) short account of the rites. Tambiah (1970: 156) also builds up a link to agricultural fertility and remarks that among the ethnic Lao of north-east Thailand the rituals take place ‘at the critical time when the rice grains are forming in the fields’.⁶

In Vientiane, where the two festivals were observed, they are distinguished by the ritual practice that gives them their names. BKPD is the opening ritual for the special period and BKS closes it.⁷ I want to focus my

⁵ In Cambodian Buddhism *kan pen* is understood as a 14- or 15-day period (Porée-Maspero 1950: 47–58). Gregory Kourilsky (personal communication) has suggested that there are strong parallels to the Lao festival, but due to a calendar shift the timing is different. Ang Choulean (2006: 238), however, argues that in neighbouring Buddhist countries there is no comparable ritual to the Khmer one. Despite the fact that some important details are actually different, the resemblances concerning textual background and ritual practice make this a disputable position.

⁶ Both rituals have an explicit agricultural character and are saturated with symbols deriving from rice culture. This would deserve an examination on its own and cannot be accomplished here. I will only refer to this form of the ‘regeneration of life’ with reference to the spirit of the rice field and the meaning of food offerings. For comparison, see Erik Davis’ contribution in this volume (Chapter 3).

⁷ BKS involves a ritual with labelled baskets with the names of the donor (sender) and deceased relatives (receiver). Through a lottery system that involves drawing sticks (*salak*) they are distributed among the monks who then transfer them to the dead. For the use of the *salākā* in various contexts, see Strong (1992: 141f.).

ethnography on the first ritual. The day before the ritual, special food packets are prepared by the families and almost the entire day is dedicated to the production of special offerings and decorations. Packets made from banana leaves, called *ho khau* ('rolled rice packet') contain sticky rice, several fruits and sometimes cigarettes. Other packets, labelled *khau dom*, contain sweet rice and pieces of fruit wrapped in banana leaves. Today, in the urban setting of Vientiane, it is also common to buy these offerings on the market. The following day, during the early morning of new moon in the ninth lunar month (usually September), at around 4am, the temple bell is struck. Continuing for over an hour, this signifies the opening of the doors of hell and the coming of the *peta*, or *phiphed*, hungry ghosts.⁸ Laypeople flock to the temple and deposit the small packets on the temple grounds to be consumed by hungry ghosts. These parcels 'decorate the earth' – hence the name of the ritual – and are eagerly looked for by the hungry ghosts. Many informants have mentioned the movement of searching (*ha sawaeng*) when I asked about the *phiphed* and the food offerings. They thereby emphasised the needs of the *phiphed* and their hunger. Offerings are also placed in front of the *stūpas* (*that khaduk*) containing the bones of deceased relatives. People light candles, kneel down and speak to the deceased relatives with invitations such as these excerpts I recorded during the ritual:

'All ancestors and deceased! Every one of you! Please come to take these offerings of food so that we can receive well-being. Sathu!'

'My family and relatives. Come to take the gifts and eat. May you be reborn in better circumstances and in prosperous conditions because of these gifts.'

'These rice packets are for the four of you [his deceased relatives]. Please come and get them.'

If the temple has a shrine for the first abbot of the monastery (*phi cau khun vat*) rice packets will also be presented there. Later that day the spirit of the rice field (*phi dta haek*) will receive rice packets from the head of the family at the small shrine located at the edge of the field.⁹ The Lao words used in this context also entail references to the movement of the offerings: *hai* (give to), *hab* (to receive) and *song* (to send). Whereas in this part the monks have no direct ritual role, the second part of the ritual – the temple service at 7am – involves the monks

⁸ Some monks told me that this is also a kind of 'warning' that the *phiphed* are coming. For more details on the ontological status of *peta* and *phiphed* see the following section.

⁹ The shrines of the spirit of the first abbot of the monastery have often disappeared in urban temples due to their ambivalent status after the purification efforts under socialism following the revolution in 1975. I could not witness this ritual in the temple. The *phi dta haek* has often been a victim of modernisation – only a few families still have rice fields where his shrine is usually located. I was able to see this very short ritual in the countryside, however.

receiving offerings from the laypeople. Here a standardised almsgiving to the monks is performed. The merit gained through the offerings is then ‘transferred’, or better ‘dedicated’ to the ‘souls’ (*vinyan*, Pāli: *viññāna*) of the deceased.

Focusing on BKPD, it becomes obvious that among the Lao the deceased are not a homogenous category as the aforementioned accounts present them. The result is a rather complex ontology of the dead comprising a multitude of beings with different characteristics.¹⁰ However, dissecting these entities into neatly arranged categories also poses problems as this ontology is based on a certain fuzziness. During the first part of the BKPD ritual I was able to distinguish at least three kinds of beings that were addressed. The first category is constituted by ancestors, which are generally labelled either as *phu day* (dead people), or as *puutaa*, which can be translated as ‘ancestor’. This category also includes the dead whose names have been forgotten, and also recently deceased relatives that are specifically addressed at their bone *stūpas*.¹¹ The second category of deceased consists of ghosts that have fallen into hell due to their lack of merit and are waiting for a better rebirth, but are according to Lao local cosmology on the day of BKPD released from hell and can receive food from the living. Interestingly, the Lao use the word *phed* (from Pāli *peta*) to describe them, but one more often encounters the word *phiphed*. This is a compound word merging the Pāli term with Tai-Kadai concepts of ghosts and spirits (*phi*) also found among non-Buddhist groups in this ethnolinguistic family.¹² Pottier (2007: 508) translates *phiphed* as ‘phantom’ and ‘revenant’, which describes well their coming from hell. Finally, the third category contains protective spirits that are sometimes identifiable persons that have passed away (like the *phi cau khun vat*) or the *phi dta haek*, whose shrine in the rice field is usually not associated with a person.

Ritual handbooks and books on Lao culture in Lao (which can be bought on every market in Vientiane and give short information on each rite of the yearly cycle) designate various recipients of the offerings prepared the day before the ritual. Duangmala (2003: 74) simply says that the dead, one’s living relatives and the monks receive the *ho khau*. Simphon (2007: 72) is

¹⁰ Here ontology is understood 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.

¹¹ These *stūpas* contain the bones of the cremated dead and are in Laos often to be found in the temple, and therefore at the centre of Lao social space (Ladwig 2002).

¹² The word *phi* encompasses a multitude of spirits, also among non-Buddhist Tai-Kadai groups. This can include protective spirits of a certain place, but also malicious spirits such as the *phi phob* that feeds on people’s organs and leads to illness or even death. For an overview of the Lao concepts of *phi* see Condominas (1975) and for a detailed classification of various *phi* see Pottier (2007: 15–42).

more specific and states that BKPD has two goals, the first being to honour the protective spirit of the rice field and the earth goddess, Nang Tholanee, 'who both care for the rice fields and are the lords of the land'.¹³ The second goal is to give the *ho khau* to 'the souls of the ancestors, mothers, fathers and the deceased, and to those who are caught in the rebirth cycle – those who are already dead but have not yet been reborn. They come to receive the food and drink which their offspring has prepared and transfer to them' (*ibid.*). With the latter Simphon probably means the *phiphed*, which Philavong (1967: 67) and Viravong (1996: 33–4) mention more explicitly because they relate the festival to the textual background to the story of Bimbisāra.¹⁴ Philavong (1967: 68) explains: 'the relatives of King Bimbisāra died and were born as *phed* [] they fell into hell for ninety-one aeons. The *phed* who are relatives can also receive merit deriving from the offerings.' He explains the popularity of the festivals by the fact 'the Lao people really like this ritual because they take it as a day of commemoration' (*ibid.*). Lao socialist modernity has also left its mark on the interpretation of the ritual. 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 find a secularised and rationalised explanation of the festival. References to ghosts, which in conversations and ritual practice are perceived as crucial elements of BKPD, 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 completely absent in this account. The shallow remark 'that in the old [political] system there were many things that were not practiced according to the truth' (*ibid.*) might explain this conscious eradication of the traces of the dead even in rituals dedicated to them.¹⁵

Taking into account that the presentation of offerings to the *phed*, or *phiphed*, in the morning of the ritual has given the latter its name and is the central act of BKPD, I now want to focus on ghosts as a form of the

¹³ Nang Tholanee has a substantial functional overlap with the *phi dta haek* (spirit of the ricefield) and the cult of the mother of rice (*mae phosop*). For the latter and the link to agriculture see Rajadhon (1955).

¹⁴ More information on the textual background of the festivals follows.

¹⁵ Adorno's and Horkheimer's (1997: 215) interesting thoughts in a text concerning this kind of modernity, 'On the theory of ghosts', fits very well here: '[] the disturbed relationship with the dead – forgotten and embalmed – is one of the symptoms of the sickness of experience today'. They think that in these systems of thought the deceased's 'trace is hated as irrational, superfluous, and "overtaken" in the literal sense of the word'. The seemingly rational socialist ideology in regard to the kind of Buddhism promoted by the Lao government by and among some leading monks just seems to confirm this sceptical stance towards modernity. See also Bouté's contribution on ritual change on the influence of Lao socialist politics in this volume (Chapter 5).

deceased. First, it is crucial to elaborate on the concept of *phiphed* in Lao culture and its link to various concepts of *peta* in Pāli Buddhism. The word *peta* in Pāli usually signifies 'hungry ghost', but its uses in early Theravāda Buddhism are far from clear. The term can denote ancestor (from Sanskrit *pitr*), but also hungry ghost. Further discussions of this will exemplify that this double meaning is also on some level alive in the Lao expression. Historically speaking the offering to *peta* is linked to the Brahmanic ritual practice of *śrāddha*, in which the ghost as a liminal being is transformed into an ancestor. In Sri Lankan Buddhism this transformation process is ritually still fairly tangible (Langer 2007: 188).¹⁶

However, one must take into account that Buddhism also redefined this ancestral role and *peta* are referred to as a specific rebirth category (Holt 1981). In many sources of Theravāda Buddhism the *peta* realm is understood as one of the five (or six) realms (*gati*) in which one can be reborn. Moreover, the difference between the *peta* and the *phiphed* in popular Lao and other Southeast Asian accounts is based mainly on their location in the Buddhist cosmology. In Laos the *phiphed* are understood as hell beings that can wander the earth as revenants. The *peta* of the canonical sources and the *phiphed* also have many things in common. *Peta* and *phiphed* are ghosts that are anomalous creatures, strange and shocking in appearance, even threatening. Congruently, Lao and Thai depictions show them as tormented beings that suffer constant hunger and thirst. In the narratives and commentaries of the *Petavatthu* they are exposed to tortures often related to the misdeeds in their lives: birds pick out flesh from their bodies, they vomit constantly, are forced to eat faeces etc.¹⁷ Because it is impossible to consume any food or drinks in their realm, the *phed* are completely dependent on humans and their provisions. Their thirst and hunger is sometimes expressed in visual depictions in which they are shown to have huge bellies and needle-like necks. The living are supposed to pity them and show charity towards them, either by directly feeding them through food offerings or by presenting gifts to the monks who then send the merit produced to them.¹⁸

¹⁶ For *śrāddha* and death rituals in Hinduism see Parry's (1994: 195–6) seminal study. The genealogy of Hindu and Buddhist rituals for the dead and ghosts is a complex one and cannot be discussed here in detail.

¹⁷ The *Petavatthu* is a collection of stories in the Khuddaka Nikaya that describe the effects of negative deeds as a rebirth of the *peta* realm. See Kyaw and Masefield (1980) for a translation. The story of King Bimbisāra (to be discussed later) is also part of this collection. Whereas in early Buddhist studies these stories were dismissed as a lower type of Buddhism, recently Jeff Shirkey (2008) has developed a more thorough reading of the stories beyond the simplicity of moral tales showing the workings of karma. My text is very much indebted to his reading of the material.

¹⁸ The question of whether the monks are actually necessary intermediaries is an important one discussed later in the chapter.

THE *PHIPHED* AS VISITORS FROM HELL: TEXTUAL
BACKGROUNDS OF THE FESTIVAL

From where does this image of *phiphed* as beings from hell derive? And why are they allowed to enter the realm of the humans on the day of BKPD? Let us turn to the textual backgrounds of the festival. Two narratives are mentioned frequently by Lao informants and the Lao texts dealing with the ritual. The first relates to the story of the monk Mahā Moggallāna. This story is often equated, or even mixed with, the figure of Māleyyadevatthera, which in Laos and Thailand is widely known by the local adaptation in the form of Phra Malai. The second, the story of King Bimbisāra and his encounters with the *peta*, is also crucial and will be discussed later. Let us first turn to Mahā Moggallāna and Māleyyadevatthera and consider their inclusion in the local Lao cosmology and their roles as explanatory narrative frameworks for the ritual.

Touring hell: Moggallāna and Māleyyadevatthera

Mahā Moggallāna is described as one of the chief disciples of the Buddha with extraordinary abilities acquired through meditation.¹⁹ He uses his supernatural powers to travel through the cosmos. He surveys each location, travels to the different hells and also enters the *peta* realms. He questions the *peta* about their fate and their deeds and reports this in the world of the living. According to Louis Finot (1917: 54f.) these travels appear in Laos in localised forms in stories and manuscripts such as ‘Moggallāna visits hell’ or ‘Moggallāna interrogates the *peta*’. In a short Lao version printed in a popular book (Simphon 2007: 73), a slightly modified story establishes a link with BKPD: Moggallāna travels to hell in order to see the creatures there, but when he arrives there are none. He asks the Chief of Hell (Yamarāja) where all the hell creatures are. Yamarāja tells Moggallāna that on the day of new moon in the ninth month he, the Lord of Hell, opens the gates so the creatures can go out and search for food and drink.²⁰ Moggallāna is told that some of the creatures did not receive any offerings and had to return to hell, while others received offerings and were liberated. When Moggallāna hears this, he returns to the world of humans and

¹⁹ I cannot give a full account of Moggallāna here. His travels and life are described in various canonical sources and their local adaptations. See the paragraph on comparative potential below.

²⁰ Viravong (1996: 34) mentions Yama’s act could be seen as analogous to ‘the liberation of convicts’. Hell is here equated with a jail and Yama with a king who gives the order of a general pardon.

converses with the Buddha about this. The Buddha then reminds the believers that they have to worship the three gems, care for older people and the deceased by thinking of them and giving food to them on the day of BKPD.

According to Julie Gifford (2003: 72), Moggallāna's travels are 'intended to guide others by providing a cosmological and karmic map of saṃsāra' and he derives his popularity from his extraordinary abilities and his sainthood. What Gifford misses out on, however, is the fact that the liberation from hell associated with the Lao and Thai versions of these stories gives people the chance to feed *petas* as potential relatives, soothe their suffering and even liberate them from their existence in hell.²¹ The abbot of the monastery where I observed the festival stated in an interview:

Today the spirits are released from hell. They wander around and search for food. They come here to receive food and merit from their relatives. If there is an opportunity some of them may be reborn as humans. If there is no opportunity like this, they might be reincarnated as deities. If the relatives do not feed them, they might have to return to hell again.

I think it is important to mention that the various narratives of Moggallāna contain a comparative potential that has yet to be researched. Although the Lao and Thai versions of *Phra Malai* – a text also recited at funerals – are based on the figure of Māleyyadevatthera, they seem to have merged to a certain degree with the figure of Moggallāna due to their similar themes. The accounts of *Phra Malai* are more widely known than those of Moggallāna, but I think they should be discussed together and seen as a unit.²² Both are quite popular in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the parallels with the Chinese version of Moggallāna, Mulien and the practice of filial piety, are one example. The Chinese and Vietnamese Ghost Festivals bear strong resemblances to the Lao one. Despite difference concerning ritual practice and kind of offerings – the Lao have no ghost money and don't burn offerings for them, for example – the textual references partially overlap. A Lao story (Genau and Thammamone 2000) about children who are able to liberate their parents from hell through

²¹ See the next part for an explication of the status of *peta* as potential relatives that are integrated through a remembrance of kinship.

²² Denis (1964: 66) concludes that 'It seems most likely that the descents of *Phra Malai* into the hells are born out of a local adaptation of the descents of Moggallāna into the hells, as encountered in Laos and Siam' and Bonnie Brereton (1995: 123f.) in her excellent study of *Phra Malai* comes to a similar conclusion. However, Denis (1964: 40) also acknowledges that the development of the different versions is rather complex and the transitions from South Asia to Southeast Asia are hard to trace. For further discussions see also Steven Collins' (1993) discussion of Eugene Denis' work and Anatole Peltier's (1982) study on the visual representations of *Phra Malai*.

donating to the monks, indeed shows Chinese characteristics and therefore could be used to work out a more comparative framework.²³

Coming back to the Lao case, the image of *phiphed* is that of 'strange' creatures. Their physical appearance marked by mutilated bodies and their inability to consume food due to their thin mouths make them objects of pity. If we examine the status of ghosts in relation to notions of belonging, it becomes clear that *phiphed* actually do not belong to the world of the living; they are just granted the right to enter this world by Lord Yama. Moreover, this sojourn takes place in a limited time-frame. In some sense they are strangers that invade a space that is actually not their home, but then get socialised. Heonik Kwon (2008: 16) coined a term for the ghosts of war in Vietnam, 'ontological refugees', which I think can also be applied to the Lao *phiphed*: fleeing from hell, they search for food, recognition and a chance to escape into the world of the living. They are 'asylum seekers' and strangers, hoping to receive food through hospitality in the world of humans so that they can escape from hell and be reborn in another realm.²⁴

But are there other strategies to socialise the *phiphed*? How is a bond with them established? The other textual basis of the BKPD might help us to understand how *peta* and *phiphed* are ritually incorporated.

Kinship with strangers: Bimbisāra

Many Lao informants relate BKPD to the narrative of King Bimbisāra (Lao: *phimbisan*), also told in the *Petavatthu*.²⁵ Several monks also assured me that in the past – when people had more time to attend temple services – the story was told during the festival. However this might have changed, we encounter with Bimbisāra a narrative that socialises the *phiphed* as strangers in another way. In this story a group of *peta* is told by the monk Kassapa that in one Buddha-aeon, during the time of the Buddha Śākyamuni, a king

²³ I am very much indebted to Gregory Kourilsky for the lengthy discussions we had on this topic in Laos. See his analysis of filial piety and the role of Moggallāna in Lao Buddhism and beyond (Kourilsky 2012). Moggallāna also plays an important role in Mahāyāna Buddhism: the Japanese Ghost Festival is inspired by the Ullambana Sutra describing the actions of Moggallāna. For the Chinese Ghost Festival see the seminal study by Stephen Teiser (1988) and his description of Mulien as a 'shaman' (*ibid.*: 140) saving his mother from hell. For a Tibetan version see the highly interesting account of Kapstein (2007). See also Ingmar Heise's piece in this volume (Chapter 10).

²⁴ The notion of hospitality, I think, is also very useful to understand the interaction of the *phiphed* and the living. See Ladwig (forthcoming) for an analysis of BKPD with a central focus on hospitality and ghosts as strangers.

²⁵ There are various adaptations of the *Petavatthu* in Lao which I have not read. The section used here, however, was told to me orally many times and does not deviate much from the ones in the canonical sources and the translation by Kyaw and Masefield (1980: 23ff.).

named Bimbisāra will dedicate offerings to them. When the moment finally arrives, Bimbisāra knows nothing of his responsibilities and gives to the Buddha without dedicating the gift to the *petas*. At night, the *petas* 'wailed in utter and dreadful distress', and the king was 'filled with fear and trembling' (Kyaw and Masefield 1980: 25). In the morning the Buddha clarifies the situation and tells Bimbisāra about his former relatives who have arisen in the *peta* realm and have been waiting for the gift for so long. Bimbisāra simply did not know about them. The Buddha makes the *petas* visible for the king and they are described as 'extremely ugly, deformed and terrible to behold' (*ibid.*). Another alms-giving is organised and through the dedication the *petas* receive abundant food, drink and clothes.

Important here is that the *peta* are relatives of Bimbisāra who have been forgotten, but are brought back to memory, identified as kin and socialised through food. The miraculous intervention of the Buddha lays bare a kinship bond that extends beyond families and village units: from the Buddha's superior perspective we actually all have kinship bonds stretching back to a very distant past. Buddhism thereby constructs an almost *infinite universe of kinship relations* of which the *peta* are one vital segment. The moral cosmos and also that of ritual obligations could be described as what Jonathan Walters (2003: 14) has called 'communal karma' or 'socio-karma'. This strategy of making kin out of others through a karmic community can be said to represent a transposition from family-centred ritual hospitality to ghosts in Hinduism (caring only for one's own *peta* relatives after death) to a universal, Buddhist one, in which every one of us has *peta* relatives.²⁶ This is by no means limited to the textual accounts used here, but is also visible in ritual practice. Hayashi (2003: 148), for example, points out that for the Lao living in northeast Thailand rituals in which the dead are addressed are based on rather fuzzy ideas about their afterlife as the living cannot know the post-mortem fate of their relatives, but nevertheless offer food at various rituals for them.

Coming back to the ritual practices of BKPD, we might say that the *phiphed* take on the appearance and position of strangers and liminal beings that do not belong to the world of humans. However, both stories of

²⁶ This construction of a kinship bond between the living and the *peta* is also elaborated in the Buddha's discourse given to Bimbisāra (Kyaw and Masefield 1980: 28–9), in which the duty of relatives is mentioned in various forms. Here it again has to be pointed out that Bimbisāra does not know about these relatives, but the Buddha states that they must not be forgotten. Also in the *Petavatthu* (Kyaw and Masefield 1980: 30) we find a further hint to this that relates to unknown kinship bonds. Here the Buddha is asked if the *śrāddha* rites of Brahmins are efficacious even when one does not have a *peta*-relative. The Buddha replies that it is impossible. Among the mass of kin, everyone *must* have relatives among the *peta*, even if they do not realise it.

Moggallāna and Bimbisāra point out that they have relatives. In the case of Moggallāna and Phra Malai the living are informed about their relatives' fate in hell and, in Lao understandings, receive a chance to help them on the day of BKPD. The *peta* are here then not real strangers, but already have a vague connection to the world of the living through Moggallāna's tours in hell. In the case of Bimbisāra this connection is made through a kinship bond that extends over a whole Buddhist aeon. The intrusion of the stranger into the world of the living and their welcome through offering food can therefore also be understood as a reminder of relationships that have been forgotten. Ghosts in that sense want to be recognised and be reminded that they were once humans as well, an expression of their longing for escaping their miserable state. This integration into the social fabric could in anthropological terms be labelled 'artificial kinship'. This kinship bond is in ritual practice primarily expressed through the offering of food.

MERIT, MATERIALITY AND FOOD

Most Buddhist rituals that expose features of care for the dead need members of the saṅgha to act as ritual intermediaries. As we have seen, however, the ritual performed at BKPD in the morning happens without the mediation of monks; the *phiphed* are fed directly. The second part of the ritual – involving a transfer of merit – requires the monks' participation. How can we then imagine this feeding of the *phiphed* and the *petas*? And given the importance of food offerings and nourishment, how is the interplay of food and merit to be understood according to textual sources and ritual practice? The literature on the transfer of merit is vast and I do not want to tackle the problem as a whole here, but I think it worth pointing out that as the prime way of communicating with the dead it might be worth reconsidering at least some aspects of the complex development of the doctrine and relating them to the ritual practice as observed in BKPD.²⁷

First looking at the canonical sources, one recognises that the *Petavatthu* and its commentary contain stories in which direct giving to the *peta* without a monk fails. As we have seen, Bimbisāra forgets to dedicate the gift to his *peta* kin and the transaction only becomes successful with the help of the Buddha. In the Nanda *peta* story a husband wants to give something to the *peti* of his deceased wife directly, but this and many other stories, such as that of Culasetthi (Kyaw and Masefield 1980: 113), follow the

²⁷ In a very useful analysis Schmitthausen (1986: 212) traces some of these complex developments up to the *Petavatthu*. See also Bechert (1992) and Hayashi (1999) for further discussions of merit.

same line: direct gifts to *petas* are doomed to fail.²⁸ Given to the *peta* directly, the food offered turns to filth and the cloth into stinking rags (cf. White 1986: 201–2). However, not all sources and ritual practices are so clear on that point. Many *Petavatthu* stories seem to suggest the possibility of a direct giving of food, while the post-canonical commentaries (*Petavatthu-aṭṭhakathā*) lean more towards a transfer of merit. Langer points out that early sources expose a lack of ‘unambiguous passages’ in relation to the materiality of the gifts transferred, or their abstraction into a concept of merit (Langer 2007: 168). She argues that there are three possibilities when discussing the transfer of food and/or merit to the *peta* of the deceased: (1) direct giving; (2) giving to monks who act as intermediaries in a process similar to the *śrāddha* rite; and (3) merit is generated by way of offering food to monks, the fruits (*phala*) of this act to benefit the *peta* (Langer 2007: 170). Some sources of the Theravāda tradition also suggest there is a direct transfer of food, and not of merit, towards the *petas* (Gombrich 1971: 203).

In the first part of BKPD, there are only direct offerings of food by laypeople. The offering cannot therefore be understood as a kind of *dakkhiṇā*, a donation given to a holy person with reference to unhappy beings in the *peta* realm (Agasse 1978: 313), as the monks play no role here. Another interpretation found in the *Petavatthu* is based on the assumption that ‘it is not the food and clothing offered by the donor that the *peta* enjoys but food and clothing that have been *miraculously transformed* through the template of the merit field so as to be effective in another level of existence’ (White 1986: 209; original emphasis). The gifts to the *petas* materialise themselves in a wholly other place than the original place of offering, but in this account they are still linked to the notion of merit. Masefield, however, rejects the idea of a transfer of merit and simply states that ‘this practice, wrongly referred to as transfer of merit, involves no transfer of merit whatsoever; rather, the *peta* is simply assigned the divine counterpart of the alms offered to the *saṅgha* on the *peta*’s behalf’ (Masefield 2004: 310).

What one finds in the complex development of the idea of the ‘transfer of merit’ is a multi-vocal discourse about the possibilities of transferring material objects directly, or as the fruits (*phala*) of a meritorious act. In practice, very often all three forms mentioned by Langer are mixed up and complement each other. Although most of the Lao I know pay little attention to these more doctrinally inspired discussions, it might be worth following up on this as the objects or substances that are transferred (and/or transformed) might help us to understand the modes in which people relate

²⁸ I take this point from Jeff Shirkey’s (2008: 216–17) reading of the *Petavatthu*.

to the dead in a more profound way.²⁹ It might be crucial to look at the materiality of food offerings and their roles in the ritual. Food as an offering might contain more hints to the understanding of the ritual than merit, or rather the combination of merit and food might reveal something about the nature of the relationships cultivated in the ritual.

As was discussed, we have two processes at work in BKPD. In the morning the laypeople directly present food to the *phiphed*, the ancestors, the protective spirit of the temple and later to the spirit of the rice field. At 7am a transfer of merit with the help of monks is addressing the *vinyan* ('soul') of the deceased. In the dedication prayer words such as *uthid* (dedicated to) are used; a vocabulary not employed during the ritual in the early morning.³⁰ If we see these transactions, as has been done in some of the previous ethnographic literature, only as a transfer of merit to a rather homogenous group of 'the dead', we would miss an essential point: some of the beings that are addressed in the ritual offering at 5am cannot actually receive merit, but have to be 'fed' directly. The Lao spirits deriving from a pre-Buddhist conception (the *phi*) are usually fed (*liang*), and to my knowledge are never receivers of merit. Whereas the *vinyan* of the deceased can receive merit, the *phiphed*, the *phi dia haek* and the *phi cau vat* are fed directly, without the intermediary role of the monks. The feeding of the ancestors taking place at the bone *stūpas* of deceased relatives can also be seen as a feeding of a *phi* residing in the *stūpa*.³¹ The Lao term *liang* is used for people, animals and spirits, but it also has clear connotations of 'fostering'.³² So we actually have only one case in which we can speak of a transfer of merit, whereas the other beings addressed in the ritual are all fed. Although these acts doubtlessly produce merit for the giver, to speak of a transfer of merit here would neglect several important aspects and could lead to an over-generalised view.

One could speculate that the focus on merit of so many previous studies is rooted in the disregard of the significance of materiality in the study of

²⁹ Most informants just see it as Davis (1984: 193) has described it for the two festivals among Thai-Lao of northern Thailand: 'Although the offerings are given to monks, they are thought to be used by the deceased as well.'

³⁰ The Lao term *uthid* derives from Pāli *uddisati* and *ādisati*, words often used for merit transfer in the *Petavatthu* and other sources relating 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).

³¹ See Keyes and Anusaranasasanakiarti (1980: 17) for the idea that a bone *stūpa* actually is an ancestor shrine. Several Lao informants have also stated that it contains the spirit (*phi*) of the deceased.

³² This is also obvious in the English etymology: 'The identification of feeding and fostering is buried in our own language: Old English 'foster' means 'food' (Young 1971: 41). The Lao term *liang* also has strong connotations of 'care' and 'bringing up someone'.

world-renouncing religions. Why, one could ask, have the relationships between the living and the dead so often been exclusively framed in the discourse of the transfer of merit? Studies of the materiality of religion have only recently become popular. In religious studies in general, and even more so in studies on world-renouncing religions, materiality has been quite neglected. There has been a tendency to ‘abstract away from the sensuous materiality of objects’ (Manning and Menely 2008: 289–90) in studies of religion and the focus has often been too heavily on human agency and intentionality. Gregory Schopen’s (1991) analysis of ‘protestant presuppositions’ in the archaeology of early Buddhism might also apply here: scholars have often looked at sources that confirmed a certain philosophical image of world-renouncing religions, but neglected the polyvocality of the textual and material sources available. Looking at the ritual practice of BKPD, the ‘material evidence’ is readily available. Indeed, the production and significance of food in the ritual, and the link to the agricultural cycle are, even in the urban environment of Vientiane, still visible. In Lao Buddhism, as in most of the Buddhist traditions of mainland Southeast Asia, food plays a central role in establishing relations between people, between laypeople and the *saṅgha*.³³ Andaya (2002: 11) points out: ‘The remark that contemporary monasteries in northern Thailand seem “preoccupied” with food should equally be considered in light of a cultural heritage where communal feasting was a significant component in village life.’ John Strong (1992: 51) has labelled this a ‘commensal community’ involving a hierarchical chain of beings not only involving humans, but also other entities like *peta*. In my opinion this relatedness constructed via food offerings among the living is therefore also valid for the relationships between the living and the *phiphed*.

It might seem that I am suggesting dividing notions of merit and food, but the interplay of merit and food could, for example, be analysed here through the notion of container or vehicle. Merit needs a container, a vehicle on which it can jump and be expressed in its materiality. O’Flaherty (1980: 10) mentions that already in the Vedas food is a ‘vehicle’ for merit. Hayashi (2003: 125) interestingly remarks that among the Lao in northeast Thailand merit is understood as a kind of food: ‘Merit is like food. Merit nurtures oneself and others.’ Food as a material object can shift between different contexts and be used for feeding several entities. Webb Keane (2006: 416) speaks of a form of ‘bundling’ or ‘contingency’ in relation to objects, because ‘[] part of the power of material objects in society consists of their openness to “external” events and their resulting potential for mediating

³³ See also Wijeyewardene (1986: 36) on the role of food and emotions in Thai Buddhist culture.

the introduction of “contingency”. They can shift across contexts and circulate in different orders of value and regimes of communication. All recipients addressed in the first ritual get the same object – the *ho khau* – but it circulates in different orders of consumption and is received by entities that, at first sight, seem to belong to the same ontological sphere (the dead), but which is made up of a multitude of beings with different needs. Some of the latter have different ways of consumption and have to be fed in particular ways. In order to make communication function, objects introduce a sort of mediation that is crucial for the upkeep of relationships. A detour in relationship building via the object as a ‘floating signifier’ with its openness – what Keane calls contingency – is not simply a crystallisation or reflection of relationships, but food has the capacity to ‘nurture’ relationships in the real sense of the term. Food as an object is needed to reinscribe the relationship into the social – a capacity that the transfer of merit alone would hardly accomplish.³⁴ A focus on the offerings that are given, their ways of circulation and their directionality, reveals more than the general reference to the transfer of merit.³⁵ I think that seeing the connection between moral agents and the ‘objects’ they use for establishing relationships is crucial here. Thevenot (2002: 59) remarks that ‘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.’

Part of this functional agency is also the sensuality of the object. Life histories, memories of people and emotions of care for the dead might be ‘materialised’ in food as an object. Food can act as a ‘carrier object’ and ‘container’, whereas merit on its own is less tangible and not corporeal. Here food allows for expressions of commensality and relates to Lao notions of feeding and fosterage. I believe that the efficacy of rituals such as BKPD is more often achieved through metaphors of the body and nurturing, for example, than through abstract concepts. Sutton (2001: 46–7) skilfully elaborates on the role of food in rituals linked to death, remembrance and

³⁴ Bruno Latour (1999: 197) therefore asks: ‘Why must society work through them [artefacts] to inscribe itself in something else? Why not inscribe itself directly, since the artefacts count for nothing?’ He thinks that the function of objects ‘is not to mirror, congeal, crystallise, or hide social relations, but to remake these very relations through fresh and unexpected sources of action’; objects are therefore needed to reestablish relationships and regenerate them.

³⁵ This is also a question of methodology of research, as Appadurai’s (1986: 5) idea to focus on the ‘biography of things’ extrapolates. Instead of looking at actors and intentionality, he proposes another point of view: ‘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’ (*ibid.*).

care for the dead in an exchange system that spans generations and includes the dead:

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.

What we end up with is an image of a ritual economy of food and merit that includes various kinds of the dead and aims at caring for them. In return, and following the law of reciprocity, the living receive blessings and well-being from the deceased, as exemplified by the offering prayers mentioned previously. With reference to the spirit of the rice field and the spirit of the first abbot of the monastery, the living understand these as protective spirits of places which have to be cared for as well. Specifically in relation to the *phiphed* and the narratives attached to them, we find even a higher telos of the ritual – the liberation from continuous torture and their reintegration into other realms of the Buddhist cosmos. Jeff Shirkey (2008: 327) has argued that the *Petavatthu* ‘implicitly, if not explicitly, demonstrates that reintegration of *peta-s* back into an ideal Buddhist order is the soteriological goal of these ritual exchanges’. Shirkey sees a ritual economy at work here that he rightly understands as a moral economy with distributive principles aiming at the well-being of Buddhist communities. McWilliam, following Steven Gudeman’s (2001: 27) analysis of markets and societies, speaks of ‘spiritual commons’ and defines them as the ‘varieties of symbolic and religious behaviour designed to nurture and protect the well-being of a community’ (McWilliam 2009: 164). I would like to suggest that the various forms of deceased and spirits addressed in the rituals I have discussed are an active part of this community and that the care for them is also a form of care of the community.

CONCLUSION

Among the ethnic Lao, the relationship with various kinds of deceased is marked by ritual exchanges in which an intensified ‘care for the dead’ is to be observed. Whereas most accounts frame the (re)construction of these relationships in Buddhist concepts subsumed under the notion of the ‘transfer of merit’, a close examination has revealed that an analysis based on concepts related to materiality and food might be more appropriate to

understand this particular ritual. I have focused in my discussion largely on the *phiphed* addressed in the ritual, but have also shown that a multitude of other beings are integrated through the offering of food, mostly without the mediating role of Buddhist monks. I have argued that merit and food should be understood as a synthesis of container and contained, but I have also shown that a single focus on merit is insufficient as certain beings – all those slotted into the category of *phi* – cannot be receivers of merit, but have to be fed. Feeding (*liang*) was identified among the Lao as being linked to ideas of care and fosterage. In particular, the relationships with ghosts show that the welcome of these refugees from hell, the act of feeding and their socialisation are essential parts of the rite. Avery Gordon (2008: 8) argues that ‘the ghost is not simply dead or a missing person, but a social figure’. I have tried to understand the *phiphed* as social figures as part of a larger ontology that extends beyond death. I have described them as invading strangers who are socialised to the world of the living during the rite through feeding and the reactualisation of a kinship bond.

Coming back to the statement in the introduction to this chapter about the boundary between the living and the dead as a locus of transformation and the perpetuation of being, we can now see how the interactions of the living and a heterogeneous category of the deceased are embedded into a larger ritual economy. Local adaptations of well-known Buddhist stories and characters (Bimbisāra, Moggallāna and Phra Malai) in this context remind the living of their duties towards the deceased. When they are aware of these and present offerings, the living receive protection from the deceased. As ancestors and spirits of the place they protect places and families, and as agricultural divinities, they also regenerate fertility. Moreover, a fulfilling of the responsibility towards the *phiphed* – and the investment into the ritual economy – has the soteriological goal of liberating liminal ghosts from their misery in hell. The ritual exchanges of BKPD thereby contribute to the construction of a moral universe, in which protection, fertility and compassion are intimately linked and contribute to the well-being of a community that has been understood as being fundamentally constituted by the living and the dead.

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