專題論文

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Wealth, Social Stratification and the Ritual Economy: Large-scale Donations and Prosperity Buddhism in Laos

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Abstract

This article explores the effects of the recent economic transformations in Laos on Buddhism with regards to large-scale donation rites and the ritual temple economy. An ethnographic case study of a donation of a wealthy business woman from Vientiane for the renovation of a rural temple is discussed as an example of an emerging prosperity Buddhism that reflects increasing competition, rural-urban differences in wealth, and a conjuncture of market and religion. However, the Lao case also exposes some differences from prosperity cults in Thailand and Myanmar that have been researched. Although the donation rite involved advertisement and branding related to the business of the donor, I argue that traditional notions of collective merit-making and other aspects of the moral

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economy of rural Buddhism are still significant. By discussing the organizational aspects of the ritual, I show that the continuity of these moral economy aspects, such as the limited role of the main donor, and the emphasis on collectivity, are reinforced by a politics of religion still marked by remnants of socialist discourse. I finally argue that the donation rite created a temporary space where social differences between the diverse rural and urban participants were downplayed, but that this could not hide the increasing inequalities and stratifications that now mark much of Laos' social fabric.

Keywords: Buddhism, Ritual, Economy, Donation, Social Stratification

I. Introduction

Vientiane has become an utterly different city in recent years. Oversized billboards of Chinese companies, traffic jams with cheap motorbikes cramped between large SUVs, and the sheer endless building boom in town, despite spiraling land prices, are some of the most visible signs of this transformation. The stilt houses of "urban peasants", the rice fields and the water buffaloes I still encountered during my first fieldwork in the middle of the Lao capital in 2004 have all but vanished. Laos' economic liberalization—introduced in 1986 in parallel to Vietnam's economic *Đổi Mới* ('renovation) policy—has over the last twenty years gradually substituted the socialist economy of the past, and has now developed into an economic boom. The latter is mainly visible in urban areas, and primarily fueled by investments from China, Vietnam and Thailand that finance infrastructure projects often linked to mining, dam building and large-scale rubber plantations. However, economic growth rates of about 8-11% per year for the last decade (BTI 2018: 3) say little about the complex reshuffling of the social fabric in the sprawling capital with its approximately 800.00 inhabitants, and its ripple effects on more rural areas. Although agricultural labor and rice-farming still represent the overwhelming part of means of livelihood in Laos (UNPD 2018: 9), the market economy has enveloped most sectors of urban Lao society, and has led to a sharp increase in inequality, both in the city, and between urban and rural areas (UNDP 2018: 7).

During my fieldwork in 2019, I set out to trace some of the effects of the expanding economy on the Buddhist religious field. With more cash being available, ritual activity had increased significantly compared to a few years ago. The donations (P. *dāna*)[1] the monastic order (P. *saṅgha*) received during festivals of the yearly ritual cycle had grown substantially compared to a decade

[1] Central technical terms in relation to Buddhism are sometimes also listed with reference to their origin in Pāli (P.) or Sanskrit (Skt.). Terms in Lao and Thai are given in brackets with no special signifier, unless there is a marked difference between the languages.

ago. Moreover, lavish commemoration rituals for deceased relatives, the sponsoring of ordination rites or temple construction had also translated some of new wealth into the religious realm. With increasing inequality, however, it also became obvious that those with less money and more precarious existences could only moderately participate in this boom and therefore resorted to temples and monks specialized in rites that are more affordable and of direct practical use, such as the shedding of bad luck. Most of the prosperity-enhancing rites and larger donations I attended were by no means inventions spurred by the evolvement of a capitalist economy. They have a long history, but were flourishing because the increased competition of the market had partially been transposed to the religious domain. The higher acceleration of goods and capital was paralleled by an intensification of the ritual production of Buddhist merit, luck, and auspiciousness.

These developments reflect some of the major themes that have been discussed in a bourgeoning literature on the links between markets, religion and morality, both in comparative terms (Rudnyckyj & Osella 2017), as well as in relation to Buddhism (Brox & Williams-Oerberg 2020). The evolvement of prosperity cults, which as a topic of research initially emerged from studies of charismatic Christianity and its prosperity gospel (Bowler 2013, Coleman 2000), have also been observed in various forms of Buddhism, ranging from Japan (Borup 2018) to Theravāda Southeast Asia. Whereas in Thailand this has been a topic of research since the late 1990s, when the country's economy boomed and Buddhism and the religious landscape underwent major changes (Jackson 1999), similar developments have more recently been discussed with reference to Myanmar (Foxeus 2018), and Cambodia (Christensen 2020: 172). Despite the huge diversity of prosperity cults, and the large differences between Christianity and Buddhism, the literature on the phenomenon often seems to feature a bifurcation, as Simon Coleman (2017) has recently argued: First, neo-Weberian approaches discuss the convergence and synergies of religion and the economy, and the formation of various spirits of capitalism, in which cosmologies

and rituals reflect, embrace and even enhance the competition of the market. A second set of studies focuses on the "dark side" (Ortner 2016) of the competitive rat race of the capitalist economy, and discusses the formation of cults that arise out of exploitation and marginalization. When the hopes for prosperity among the marginalized remain unfulfilled, occult magical practices and even zombie-like figures are mobilized (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000).

My research to understand the changes in Vientiane's urban Buddhism and its connections to rural areas did not lead me to the exploited and marginal, the path of Sherry Ortner's dark anthropology. Instead, it just happened by chance that I followed the trace of money, and ended up doing fieldwork with a wealthier woman and her family. Her company had profited substantially from the economic boom, and she regularly supported the monastic order and temples by organizing donation rites. What interested me was if, how and why newly acquired wealth is channeled into Buddhist rituals. Are the larger donations performed by an emerging affluent Lao middle and upper class driven by a new competitive entrepreneurial ethos and an intensified quest for status and prestige? Do donations and their ritual performance actually reflect or even intensify inequalities? With the economic changes that have occurred in Vientiane, I also wondered to what extent the motivation for, and desired outcomes of giving, had changed. Do these donations hold on to traditional ideas such as the collective sharing of merit, and the sponsorship of Buddhism as a social good, that have been described as characteristic for Lao peasant Buddhism? Or do we witness a resignification of giving itself as a mere search for individual power and status, and the rise of a commercialized and commodified prosperity Buddhism like in neighboring Thailand (Kitiarsa 2012, Scott 2009), or Myanmar (Foxeus 2018).

This article focuses on a large-scale donation organized by a business woman and her family who own a mid-size company in Vientiane. Manivong[2]

[2] All names of persons in this essay have been changed in order to anonymize the identity of my collaborators. Concrete places, such as temples, have mostly been relabeled for the same reasons.

and her husband, both in their late 40s, run a business that regularly hosts and sponsors rites of various sorts, ranging from small blessings with a few monks on the company grounds, to the event discussed in this article in which ten-thousands of dollars were donated for the renovation and construction of a rural temple. The latter rite in particular is used to demonstrate how wealth among urban donors now also effects the ritual economy of more rural areas, giving a glimpse of the increasing links, but also disparities between the two. Although the ritual largely followed established patterns, and brought increased status for the donors and their recognition as pious Buddhists, I encountered something new: The ritual explicitly foregrounded Manivong's company, and involved quite a substantial amount of advertisement and branding. The ritual seemed to be part of a business strategy. The essay starts with a short overview that connects wealth and donations for temple-building with basic Buddhist notions such as karma and merit etc., and then briefly outlines the potential effects of this ritual and moral economy in terms of social stratification and redistribution. Next, I introduce Manivong and her business, and then give a detailed ethnographic account of the donation rite I attended. In part four, I situate the advertisement for the company during the ritual in a somewhat generalizing and broader comparative perspective with reference to various accounts of prosperity Buddhism in Thailand and Myanmar. I discuss to what extent the foregrounding of the company can be understood as a commodification of Buddhism, or at least an intrusion of the competitive market into the religious sphere. By looking in more detail at the effects of giving, I argue that despite increasing differences in wealth, the individualistic focus of Thai and Burmese Buddhist prosperity cults was not pronounced in the Lao case. Instead of the donor as a person, the company as a collective was foregrounded, and thereby represented as a "moral entity" equipped with positive Buddhist qualities. In the final section, I suggest that this reduction of the role of the main donor, and the emphasis on collectivist ritualism, can be understood as remnants of a moral economy of rural Lao peasant society which has been partially conserved by the socialist politics of

religion. I discuss the organizational set-up of ritual, and the influence of various actors linked to the Lao state and Buddhist institutions in larger donation rites.

In conclusion I argue that on the one hand, the economic boom in Vientiane supports the evolvement of various facets that have been taken as characteristic for prosperity Buddhism. The donation rite and the foregrounding of the company as a religious agent reveal a crossover of the liberalized economy and the religious field. On the other hand, I claim that the ritual advertisement for Manivong's company and her increase in prestige was only perceived as legitimate because of the "traditional" organization and set-up of the ritual itself. The collectivist agenda (such as the sharing of merit), partially deriving from rural village Buddhism, downplayed her status as a main donor during the rite. At the same time, this representation of an egalitarian ritual community during the rite cannot hide the increasing social stratification that has been fueled by economic transformations during recent years. The ideal world as depicted in ritual can only be of temporary nature, and quickly fragments when wealthy donors and villagers encounter each other.

II. Sponsoring Temple Construction: Karma, Status and Business

Western followers and adherents of "Buddhist modernism" (McMahan 2008) or "protestant Buddhism" (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988) often perceive its ideas and practices as egalitarian. By de-emphasizing the role of rituals and traditional cosmologies, and by foregrounding meditation and the possibilities of working on an ethical self, it promotes a rather modern view of social structure and hierarchy. Historically speaking, however, most variants of Buddhism actually promoted a more stratified social order. To put it very simply: Buddhist kings are in their position because of their karma and an adequate amount of merit accumulated in past lives. Merit can be acquired in various

ways such as moral discipline, keeping precepts, meditation, and by ordaining as a monk or novice. For most laypeople in Southeast Asian Theravāda Buddhism, however, performing *dāna* and giving to the monastic order is the most common way of improving one's position in this and future lives. The centrality of giving has been extensively documented in both textual (Heim 2004) and anthropological (Sihlé 2015) research. From a purely materialistic perspective, the monastic order as a kind of religious leisure class, and monasteries as religious institutions, has a parasitic relationship with society. Reiko Ohuma's (2005: 104) simple statement that "the very existence of Buddhism as such has been dependent on the gift" describes this fact very well. On a quantitative level, the amount of surplus invested for the upkeep of Buddhism is staggering. Studies on rural Southeast Asian Buddhism from the 1960s give us some numbers. Milford Spiro reports that "the typical Upper Burmese village is reported to spend from 30% to 40% of its net disposable cash income on *dāna* and related activities" (Spiro 1970: 458-459). Even higher numbers have been reported from Laos by Christian Taillard (1974), who in the early 1960s examined rural investment patterns in thirty-one villages in the Vientiane area. On average the temple consumed almost 60 percent of all mobilizable investments. These statistics derived from pre-capitalist rural peasant economies are hard to compare with the current urban situation. Nevertheless, they reveal a mode of surplus allocation in which the temple acted as a central communal institution of accumulation and redistribution, financed by a "voluntary taxation" through the gift economy[3]. In the interpretative framework of economic anthropologist Steve Gudeman (2001: 27-31), the temple could be described as a "base", and a form of commons, which exemplifies important collective values, expressed and maintained by a ritual economy.

[3] Georges Bataille's (1988: 104) remark that "on the whole, a society always produces more than is necessary for its survival; it has a surplus at its disposal. It is precisely the use it makes of this surplus that determines it" may seem a bit exaggerated, but fits the numbers we have for the case of pre-capitalist peasant economies in Buddhist Southeast Asia.

While the numbers above give us a good picture of the overall investments of village communities into *dāna*, larger projects such as building monasteries also needed, and indeed attracted, sustenance by wealthy donors. As Tambiah points out with reference to rural Thailand, temple building "is open only to the rich" (1968: 69). In early Buddhism, some of the most important patrons of the Buddha and his followers were wealthy businessmen, as reflected in popular narratives such as that of Anāthapiṇḍika, a merchant and banker who founded the Jetavana monastery where many episodes of the Buddha's life take place[4]. This dependency on larger gifts shows that karma and merit have hierarchical implications. With reference to Southeast Asia, this impact of Buddhism on the social fabric has been discussed in Edmund Leach's (1954: 197-212) classical formulation of oscillating types of egalitarian (*gumlao*) and stratified (*gumsa*) forms of social organization among the Kachin in highland Burma, as well as in James Scott's (2009: 10, 19) more recent proposal that many "egalitarian" upland minorities fled the "civilized" and stratified Buddhist states of the Southeast Asian plains. What are the general features of this stratification? Being well-off gives a person more opportunities and time to invest in the ritual economy to enhance his or her status. As merit can be accumulated, this also influences the potential to do so in the future. Congruently, the production and distribution of merit has often been described as an economy of merit, or, alternatively, as an "economics of salvation" (Walsh 2007). F.K. Lehmann also understands Buddhist merit as analogous to the economy in the modern sense: "Just as in a market economy, it takes money to make money, so it takes merit to make merit" (Lehman 1996: 25). Moreover, he remarks that "merit making is a very competitive game, the object of which is sheer one-upmanship," and supports the claim that doctrinal Theravāda Buddhism "is profoundly concerned with ranked statuses"

[4] Anāthapiṇḍika became a follower of the Buddha, donated a monastery and invited the monks to spend the rain retreat there (see Lewis 2014: 30). Religious metaphors about travelling to shores beyond rebirth were also suggestive for merchants and long-distance traders, which in Pali and Sanskrit sources describe the Buddha as a "caravan leader" who protects merchants (LIU 1997: 114).

(ibid: 26). From this perspective, merit could be understood to have certain affinities with a modern market economy, in which participants can have rather different amounts of investment capital due to its unequal distribution.

At the same time, however, the individual quest for status outlined by Lehmann, and the stratifying effects discussed by Scott and Leach, are only one side of the coin. Other mechanisms of the ritual economy reinforce material redistribution and the sharing of merit, features that are often taken to be characteristic for a moral economy. The latter notion has been subject to controversial discussions in recent years due to its wide and fuzzy use of "moral", and certain romanticizing tendencies[5]. Staying somewhat closer to the discussions of the topic related to Southeast Asian peasantry (Scott 1977; Popkin 1979), I think one can indeed argue that rural Lao villages expose such features. Georges Condominas (1968: 114-118), who did fieldwork in villages around Vientiane before the revolution in 1975, proposed that the ritual economy that links laypeople, monks, and monasteries has redistributive features that even out differences in wealth, and offers opportunities for making merit for poorer members of a community. Therefore, he concluded, their social structure was hierarchical in the sense of ranking and prestige, but egalitarian in terms of distribution of wealth.

Although the business connections of early Indian Buddhism, the individualistic stance on merit-making and its emphasis on status and rank are subject to huge variation when operating in different regions and economic systems, I suggest that one can still make out a certain affinity between business men as wealthy donors, temple construction and Buddhism in the current era. Constructing, enlarging or renovating monasteries was in the past (Tambiah 1968), and is still today (Hornig 2019: 175), considered to be among the most

[5] I will only employ a rather cursory approach here focused on Southeast Asia and Buddhism. See Hann (2018) and Fassin (2009) for the wider picture that has emerged out of recent discussions in the anthropology of ethics, and economic anthropology.

meritorious deeds one can perform in Theravāda Buddhist Southeast Asia. Sponsoring temple-building, so to speak, materializes a specific Buddhist idea of the social good, which is valued higher than any other gift.

III. Manivong's Business and the Donation of the Lao Plastic Company

With a more affluent middle and upper class emerging in Laos, a veritable monastic building boom has been triggered in Vientiane. Since around 2010, most monasteries have at least temporarily become building sites, and most temples in the city center are now almost as shiny (and sometimes as ugly) as in neighboring Thailand. Although the *dāna* investments reported for Burma and Laos in the 1960s are hard to imagine today, the temple building and renovation boom in Vientiane shows that substantial amounts of money and surplus continue to be invested. The ethnography provided in this part can be understood as a contemporary version of the relationship between Buddhism and wealthy merchants I outlined above. It reveals some of the classical traits of patronage, but also exposes features that are very characteristic of the current market and economic boom in Laos.

The search for wealthy sponsors of Buddhism in Vientiane was at first easy because their names circulate widely. However, getting in touch with them and being able to work with them at times turned out to be rather difficult. Wealthy businessmen and members of the elite have little time, and some of them were for reasons of discreteness not very keen on working with a foreign researcher. After some days, however, the abbot of a central Vientiane monastery put me in touch with Manivong, the owner of a mid-sized company and factory that specializes in the production and marketing of plastic parts. Her family business, which she runs together with her husband, is located in the outskirts of Vientiane in an industrial estate zone. Since its founding ten years ago, the company has

grown tremendously, and now employs about one hundred workers. The market for the plastic parts the company produces is huge in Laos, and the rising demand will probably stay high for years to come. Arriving at her company, I was immediately struck by the contrast between the largely empty surrounding industrial wasteland, and the compound of the company: a well-kept garden with roofed sitting places encircled the office spaces of the company. Entering the compound, I immediately spotted two large shrines for the spirits of the place (*cau ti*), which most Lao houses have. Manivong's shrines were—relative to the size of the company—pretty large, and the daily feeding of the protective spirits was visible through fresh bananas and flowers, and some opened soft-drink bottles.

Having a cup of tea outside, she started talking about the history of the company, and how she became a businesswoman. Originating from a mid-sized town 200km north of Vientiane, she mentioned that her father was a rice-farmer and trader. Being a little bit better off than neighboring families and having good grades at school, she was able to get a higher education. In the early 1990s, she moved to Vientiane to study to be a school teacher at Dong Dok university, the only institution of higher education in the whole country at that time. After graduating, she worked in various office jobs. But the private sector was at this time very small, as the socialist economy was only slowly opening up for private businesses. She worked a lot during these years, and her private life suffered a bit. By Lao standards she married rather late in life, meeting her current husband at age thirty. Things worked out, and they had two kids. With her husband, who had some experience in technical things and production, she opened the business in 2009. "You know how things were back then in Laos" , she said, and then continued: "The new economic mechanism the government already implemented in 1986 didn't change much for twenty years, and it was really difficult to found a private business. No credit, no legal framework and no security. But at the end of the 2000s things really changed, and we dared to do it". Indeed, Manivong's experiences reflect very clearly the economic take-off in Laos, which was rather

slow in comparison to Vietnam, for example. The level of industrialization and urbanization for a long time remained very low, and its effects on various regions and provinces have been very uneven (see Phimphanthavong 2021). Recent infrastructure projects such as railways and roads, however, have contributed substantially to connecting regions, and have also led to new entanglements (and disparities) between urban and rural areas in Laos (UN Habitat 2020).

Turning the conversation to Buddhism, she directly remarked that overcoming all the difficulties her business encountered during the first years would have been impossible without her faith. Having established relationships to monasteries and monks helped her a lot. Talking about her practices and beliefs, it came out that her Buddhism represented an interesting mixture of modern themes and traditional beliefs. Her interest in textual Buddhism and meditation (both of which she had no time for) was paired with pronounced notions of fate and luck based on merit and karma, the worship of protective spirits of the place, and the conviction that one's course of life can be substantially changed through ritual action. Her husband, whom I got to know some days later, supported her religious engagement, but left many of these issues to her.

A Dream, and Temple Construction

During our numerous conversations, Manivong repeatedly emphasized that supporting monks and monasteries through donations is a way to ensure the upkeep of Buddhism itself, and its teachings, the *dhamma*. The monastic order and the world of lay-people were, in her account, not separated, but had relationships beyond reciprocity that constituted a more encompassing notion of Buddhism (cf. Jonuthyte 2021; Mills 2021). Her traditional understanding of giving as sustaining Buddhism can be theorized with reference to Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1989: 25), who proposed that capital and goods gained in

the short-term cycle (her business) are transposed to a morally positive long-term cycle, which is concerned with the reproduction of the social and cosmic order (Buddhism and its *dhamma*). However, the intensity of this engagement can also change through the course of one's life, and she pointed out that with increased means, ideally a higher level of responsibility should be taken. This increased engagement materialized in a sponsoring rite that was going to be held in a few weeks. The money gathered for this rite was going to be used for the upkeep and enlargement of the temple close to her native village, 200km north of Vientiane[6]. As most temples in the city center have already been renovated in recent years, the support of rural temples has now become widespread. As I shall outline, this implies an interesting urban-rural dynamic with regard to the guests and heterogeneous audiences of such donation rites. Organizing and carrying out a large donation rite that sponsors temple construction or renovation is a complex process. The size of the ritual and the amount of different people involved, the sums of money handled, and the bureaucracy differentiate it from smaller donations. For Manivong, the process started with a dream, which she vividly described to me when we met a few weeks before the rite:

> "My mother died already two years ago. Back in the early 1990s, she donated a plot of land to the monastic order in my home village. Over the years, the village community and other believers financed the construction of smaller buildings such as the main hall with the Buddha statue, the monk's living-quarters and a wall encircling the monastery. It today houses two monks and several novices, but the temple is not complete yet. Then, during several nights last year, my mother suddenly appeared in my dreams. She complained that although she had donated the land, and the temple had developed, the

[6] Although I attended this rite, the preparation work involved can here only be reconstructed because it took place months before my fieldwork. I collected numerous images and written documents for this event, which I obtained when visiting the temple afterwards, and interviewed monks and laypeople who were involved in it.

monastery would still lack some things. She then asked me if it would be possible for me to further sponsor the temple, so that the efforts of our family and the monastery could come to completion".

Dreaming of deceased relatives is considered by many Lao as containing important messages that give hints to the afterlife, and the potential needs of the dead. Dreaming of a deceased parent who stands unsheltered in the pouring rain, for example, lead a layperson in my monastery to visit a monk living in the room beside my monastic cell. She donated an umbrella and food to him, which was then ritually transferred to the deceased. Although the interpretative frameworks for dreams vary widely, Manivong took her dream and the message of her mother seriously. A few days later, she visited the monastery and talked to the abbot and the village headman. Both explained to her that a proper road leading to the temple, a new entrance gate and several Buddha statues were needed. Extensive preparations followed. Papers had to be prepared for the provincial branch of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO), and the Section of Religion of the Lao National Front for Reconstruction (*Neo Lao Sang Sat* - NLSS), a mass organization and subbranch of the Lao Communist Party. The papers had to outline the construction project itself, the budget, schedule and the involvement of donors, monks and local officials. A committee for the supervision of the funds had to be created. I shall discuss more details and the effects of these procedures in a later part of the essay.

With the help of some influential monks from Vientiane, Manivong was able to speed up the paper work, and permission for the project and holding the rite was given after two months, which is indeed very fast. Then, weeks of preparation for the event itself followed. She mobilized many of her friends and invited them to participate in various ways and to add smaller donations for the project. She visited the temple several times and discussed organizational details with the monks, the temple's laypeople committee and the local branch of the NLSS. These larger rites held in the temple usually extend over two to three

days, and the provision of food and drinks, as well as entertainment (music, bands, stalls, and other funfair attractions) for the numerous guests have to be organized. Here the local village community was willing to invest some time, and Manivong provided them with an additional budget. Once all had settled on a date, the invitation cards sent out to the numerous participants outlined the construction project itself and a detailed ritual schedule of the event. The company's social media pages were also used to spread the message.

The Great Donation

In late February 2019 everything was set for the big weekend. For Manivong and her family, the action started on the compound of her company in Vientiane, where friends assembled the paraphernalia that were given to the attending monks, such as monastic robes, sandals umbrellas, alms-bowls and so forth. Friends and family also prepared their own donations, which were given individually during several stages of the rite. Most of the hundred employees of the company helped with practicalities, but also participated in the rites to follow. Bank notes were folded into plastic flower arrangements, and envelopes with the names and money of people who could not attend in person were collected. Then about 15 cars, pick-ups with numerous people, a truck loaded with large banners of the company and a mobile soft-drink stall all took off. This drive to the temple was explicitly described as a procession (*hae*), which I joined on my motorbike. After arriving at the temple, they set up a drink stall and several large banners were unrolled and hung up at different places on the temple grounds. All banners featured the name of the company and its icons, also used in other forms of advertisement. The text on one of them read: "Faith. Donation of the *Lao Plastic Company*". Faith (*sattha*) here denotes faith and trust into the triple gem: the Buddha, the monastic order, and Buddhist teachings. Manivong put on an apron and served soft drinks to the numerous guests most of the day.

To external guests who had just arrived and had no direct connection to her family, the company or the village, she probably just looked like a normal person who had volunteered to serve drinks—a short woman with glasses, wearing a house-wife's apron, with a large poster declaring the faith and generosity of the *Lao Plastic Company* behind her. The monastery grounds were packed during the day. In the evening, the party continued just outside the monastery. Noisy live bands, karaoke, barbecue stalls, and drunken village teenagers took over for the rest of the night. Manivong and most of her friends were already sleeping, exhausted from a long day.

On Saturday morning the main rite took place, involving the handing over of the main and minor donations, long chanting, and the feeding of monks. Manivong and members of her family were seated in the first row, just in front of the approximately 30 monks, most of whom were from the surrounding villages. Many Buddhist rites in Laos start with receiving the five precepts in order to purify the donor for the time of the rite. Accordingly, she and her family were dressed in white cloth while all attendees received the precepts from the monks. Then the abbot of the monastery held a sermon for approximately 10 minutes. In Laos and Thailand, there exists a whole genre of texts that outline the merits and beneficial outcomes of a huge variety of donations, ranging from donating flowers to daily food, and from sponsoring Buddha statues to whole temple buildings. These sermons, in Lao called *anisong* (from Pali *ānisaṃsa*), can be in poetic language filled with Pali vocabulary, partially not easy to understand for a lay audience (Jaengsawang 2020). They praise the generosity of the donor and outline the amount of merit and blessings obtained. They are very specific (there is an *anisong* for building toilets in a temple, for example); hence, the sermon at this event was called "sermon on the benefits of temple road and gate construction". Interestingly, the name of Manivong and her family was rarely mentioned, but the name of the company was foregrounded either as "employees, families, and friends of the *Lao Plastic Company*", or just with a

reference to the company as the main sponsor (*cauphab*). The villagers, who also donated smaller sums and helped with the festival, also received a lot of explicit praise. The monk then elaborated on the need for "solidarity" and cooperation in society and among people of different social standing, employing the Lao word numerous times. Solidarity (*khwamsamakhi*) has some socialist connotations, and is still today used a lot in written and spoken language, both in propagandistic contexts, but also in everyday conversations.

After the sermon, people prepared the offerings they had brought with them (food, money, flowers). As women are not allowed to hand over something to monks, the envelope with the main donation was handed over by Manivong's husband to the officiating monk. It contained the paper copy of a bank transfer to the temple fund. The monk read out that altogether 45,000 US dollars had been donated by the *Lao Plastic Company* and the laypeople of the village for the construction of the road, the entrance gate, and the Buddha statues. Manivong later told me that 40,000 dollars were from her own pocket, and the other 5,000 had been given by her friends, the employees and the villagers before the ritual. With 250 US dollars being the average monthly salary in Vientiane, this was indeed a substantial amount. Then, a long sequence of chants followed, during which the participants seated on the floor lit candles and filled a small container with water, signifying the flow and sharing of merit. Others rose up and started queuing up in front of long tables that had been set up along the walls of the temple hall. Approximately 30 alms-bowls of the attending monks were placed on them, and people dropped food, money and other small objects into them. The chanting continued and bestowed blessings (*phoon*) and auspiciousness (*mangkhala*) on all participants. When the chant ended, Manivong's family and other guests crawled on the floor towards the elevated position of the monks, and moved small rattan tables in front of them. They lifted the plastic covers from the bowls, arranged them neatly, and the monks started eating. Only after the monks had finished eating did the attending

laypeople start to eat together. Seated on the ground inside the temple around a rattan table set with small bowls of food, I was struck while we were eating by the non-hierarchical seating arrangements. The villagers and workers of the company, obviously much poorer than Manivong and her rather classy friends, treated her with great respect. But while eating, all groups were mixed and conversed with each other in a relaxed manner.

After a short midday break, more guests started to arrive, reflecting the mixture of urban and rural guests. Inside the main hall, monks continued to receive donation envelopes, mostly from villagers coming from places nearby. The envelopes had been produced for this specific event and featured the name of the company and its logo. They were an invitation to attend the rite outlining time and place. Two blank lines had been inserted, leaving space to write down one's name and the amount donated. Seated in a line, the monks practiced a division of labor. One monk received the envelope, the donors folded their hands, and the monk chanted a short Pali sequence recognizing the gift. He then passed the envelope to a second monk who counted the money inside. A third monk was seated together with a lay member of the temple committee and wrote down the name of the donor and the amount received. The queue of donors on that day did not seem to stop, and the notebook filled up quickly with numbers. Seated beside the monks, I guessed that on average, one envelope contained two to five US dollars—a donation deemed appropriate for a villager who lives on rice-farming. These notebooks are very common in temple rituals and primarily serve two purposes. First, they are a form of book-keeping done together by monks and members of the laypeople committee. Secondly, they are often used for reading out the names of donors and the amount given, or the content of the list is typed up and put into a display case in the temple. The gift is thereby recognized, publicly declared and made visible. On this occasion, several A4 pages with donor-names and sums of money were glued on a board inside the

main temple hall a few days later, meticulously listing every name and sum, no matter how small.

Manivong and her family were busy hosting more arriving guests and making small-talk. Among them were business people from Vientiane who arrived with their big SUVs, but also some of the workers of the company with their friends, and people from nearby villages. In the afternoon, the party was in full swing again, and beer started to be served outside the temple. Here the sociality was very different compared to the rite inside the temple in the morning. The stark contrast between the wealthier guests and the workers and villagers was not only visible due to their different looks and clothing styles. It was, moreover, clearly reflected in the seating arrangements. Each group had its own seating area, and I could observe that guests were circulating between tables and making small-talk only inside their particular zone. The urban business middle and upper class from Vientiane stayed on one side, while the workers of the company and the villagers mixed on the other side of the temple ground and drank beer together. The donation fostered an urban-rural connection, but at the same time revealed the stark disparities between them.

IV. Effects of Giving: Prosperity Buddhism, Advertisement and the Company as a Moral Entity

With the multiplicity of actors involved in the ritual, the motivations to participate in the large-scale donation I have described above certainly vary widely, as do the effects on the donors. The participants who came from the temple's or neighboring villages, Manivong's company and its employees as a main donors, and the wealthy business friends coming from Vientiane all had very different levels of involvement, both in terms of roles and investment. However, despite all these differences, the outcomes and effects of this ritual engagement are by people broadly subsumed under one notion—merit—in Lao

called *boun* (from Pali *puñña*). Any ritual event conducted in temples is first and foremost labeled *boun*, which besides religious merit then refers to the event itself, also in the sense of a collective party. But beyond this collective vocabulary, what other effects of giving are to be considered? Rites of giving and their outcomes are marked by overlapping semantic fields (see Keyes & Daniel 1983). The above-mentioned genre of *anisong*—the text that is read out during rites of giving and elaborates the merits obtained by the act—already indicates this polyvalency of giving. Besides merit, giving also produces *bounkhuson*, which is a combination of Pāli *puñña* (merit) and *kusala* (wholesome or skillful). The production of merit through giving has, at first sight, and on a more doctrinal level, what could be called a supramundane effect. This effect works on one's rebirth, but at the same time influences what is called *khamwen* (fate, destiny) and *sook* (luck), both of which also have direct consequences in this life. Beyond karma, rites of giving in Lao temples always contain a "begging" for blessings by laypeople when transferring the gift. When monks respond to the gift and thereby recognize it, it is not only merit whose production and flow is made explicit in the chants, but also the bestowing of prosperity (*khwamchaloen*), health (*khwamsuk*) and auspiciousness (*mangkhala*). These various effects are not clearly delineated in the ritual itself or by the donors. The overwhelming majority of Lao rituals that produce merit share it among the participants, and also transfer it to the deceased[7]. Although prestige and rank obtained are considered to be proportional to the contribution of the giver, this redistributive mechanism enables people who can give less to gain better access to merit.

In the ethnography I provided above I already mentioned that the focus on Manivong as a main donor was largely downplayed, and that the company was foregrounded. When I talked to Manivong (and later to some of her employees) about the effects of the donation, she created an interesting argument about the

[7] In most events of the Lao Buddhist ritual cycle, the dead are singled out as one of the main recipients of merit. They are, so to speak, fed with merit, and thereby cared for (Ladwig 2012).

effects of giving. She elaborated that she believes the merit produced by the donation works on the karma of all participants, but also stated that her company will receive benefits from this act in two ways. First, the company as a whole (including people, but also its buildings and machines) will be protected (*phokphon*) from misfortune through blessings (*phon*) and luck (*sook*), and will prosper (*chaloen*). Secondly, the reputation and standing (*sue siang*) of the company will be elevated, and thereby attract new customers. While listening to her, I got the impression the company had become a living entity that had received a shot of vitality through these various positive Buddhist qualities. Actually, Manivong regularly hosted other protection rites, and I attended two events that took place a few weeks later on the grounds of her company. Both invoked a similar impression to me, namely that the company was represented and understood as an entity that is not only composed of people and objects, but which through ritual action can be transformed into an agent that can receive moral qualities[8].

From the perspective of a modern public relations manager, the event was a "concerted advertisement campaign". The large posters that were hung up on the temple ground, and the soft-drink stall where she served drinks on the first day, were all branded with the name of her company. Moreover, on the social media page that informed people about the donation, and afterwards featured numerous images of the event, the name of the company and its symbols (various sorts of products, smiling workers with protective helmets etc.) featured prominently. Indeed, every image was underlaid with a watermark of the company. In my perception, this was a new phenomenon I had never seen before in collective donation rites. Merit-making groups are usually referred to by their place of origin (village unit XYZ), but not as businesses or companies. Interestingly, when I talked about this case with some of my Lao friends, none of them found this

[8] Several monks were invited, and the ritual here explicitly addressed the spirits of the place (*cau ti cau taan*). The two large spirit shrines that house them always looked proper when I visited the company. At another occasion, a master of ceremonies (*mo phoon* – a Brahmin) blessed the company for Lao new year, and sprinkled purifying water not only on the attendants, but also on production machinery, vehicles and buildings.

surprising or astonishing. They thought it is completely legitimate to perform a kind of 'branding' of the ritual by a business, and only mentioned that this could be perceived as problematic if the company became involved in some sort of scandal that would throw a dubious light on the donation. However, the "animation" of the company through the ritual in my view allows for a different perspective beyond that of advertisement and business strategy. The banners and logos of the company here referred to an entity that was not only composed of people and objects, but acquired an identity of its own beyond its parts. Therefore, the effects of the donation Manivong described and the ritual revealed can be interpreted as a mixture of traditional notions of prosperity (protection against misfortune of humans and objects through blessings and spirits), and an economic prosperity embedded in market relations (advertisement banners, the enhanced reputation of the company resulting in more customers).

This cross-over of magic, religion and the market shows some similarities to phenomena that have been associated with prosperity cults. The effects of these rites are often geared towards this-worldly needs and, like in the Indian case described by Osella, are often intended "to shore up chances of success in an increasingly competitive economy and expanding culture of aggressive entrepreneurship" (Cited in Osella & Rudnycki 2017: 3). Prosperity cults are also associated with an increase in success in a competitive market. Although a comparative approach to Buddhist prosperity cults that uses material from neighboring countries might involve a larger level of generalization, the parallels (but also differences) that can be made out are striking[9]. In the context of

[9] This comparison necessarily implies a certain level of generalization while at the same time allowing us to see these developments in a larger perspective beyond the purely local. The question of to what extent economic transformations produce similar "patterns" (increased competitiveness, market mechanisms entering the religious sphere etc.) and forms of Buddhist modernism in different places and contexts cannot be fully answered in this essay. However, I think that a focus on the similarities and differences that I will describe in relation to Thailand and Myanmar can reveal insights that would get lost by only focusing on the local. For a theoretical elaboration of this comparative stance towards the anthropology of Buddhism, see Sihlé & Ladwig (2017).

Thailand, this has been described as commodified Buddhism (*phutta phanit*). Pathana Kitiarsa defines the link between merit-making and the modern economy as a phenomenon "engined by the large-scale merit making-industry" and argues that "the prosperity cult of *phuttha phanit* represents a religio-cultural space where popular Buddhism has converged with market economy" (Kitiarsa 2008: 212). Indeed, the donation exposed a conversion of market and religion. Undoubtedly, Manivong's donation was also intended to increase the company's chances in a competitive market through the spiritual protection it received by being foregrounded as an entity equipped with positive Buddhist qualities.

However, some important differences between the large-scale donation I have described and other forms of prosperity Buddhism come into view. The latter often has a focus on charismatic monks, and actors from the periphery or outside the monastic order, such as spirit mediums, fortune tellers and so forth. An intense mediatization of monks and objects as carriers of charisma, such amulets and other religiously loaded objects have been identified as the most common signs of commodification in Thai prosperity Buddhism (Tambiah 1984, Kitiarsa 2008). In contrast, the donation I described took place in the context of organized state Buddhism, and involved no religious actors that could be described as charismatic. The absence of a publicly visible and mediatized cult of charismatic and magic monks in Laos is grounded in the socialist politics of religion, which since 1975 has opposed such cults (see Ladwig 2013a). Moreover, the rite did not feed into a commercialized industry that markets objects such as amulets. The market for Buddhist amulets—as sedimentations of charismatic power—is still rather small in Laos, and currently does not constitute an important aspect of the commodification of Buddhism[10].

[10] The sheer absence of amulets in Vientiane ten years ago was really striking, especially when one crossed into Thailand, where almost all taxi and motor-riksha drivers were wearing huge amulets. As the influence of Thai Buddhism on Laos remains crucial, these developments are very much in flux. In recent years, a market for such paraphernalia has developed in Vientiane, and will probably become more important in the future.

Manivong's donation is also different from the prosperity cults that Nicolas Foexus has described for contemporary Burma, where we find "a variety of novel, *individualistic, and non-institutionalized cults* of prosperity Buddhism" (Foxeus 2018: 1108, my emphasis). Astrologers and other specialists obviously exist in Laos and are also consulted for economic questions, and female mediums (*nang tiam*) and fortune tellers are currently in greater demand in Vientiane than in the past, but do currently not openly advertise their services like in Thailand. Their presence is much more elusive, and they are often kept separate from organized state Buddhism. Organizing a large donation rite could, for example, not involve possessed mediums in a temple, as described by Foxeus (ibid.). Numerous actors linked to the state and involved in religious affairs continue to oppose such hybrid cults, which in Thailand have been understood as being part of Buddhism's post-modernization (Jackson 1999, Kitiarsa 2012), and have recently also evolved in Burma. I want to add another point, which Foxeus alluded to, namely the individualistic focus of some prosperity cults. It is here important to recall that Manivong and her family were recognized as main donors, but that the company was very much foregrounded as a collective entity. This also represents an interesting difference from the large merit-making industry of Thai prosperity Buddhism. Speaking from a very general perspective, the cults that have been described for Thailand seem to have a stronger emphasis on the individual quest for prosperity. Many *phuttha phanit* rites, and new Buddhist movements such as Dhammakaya (Scott 2009), reinforce the ritual access to various forms of power and effects we encountered in the donation rite; merit, blessing, auspiciousness etc., were all present. However, there is a more frequent use of the term *barami* ("perfections" from P. *pāramitā*) in many Thai prosperity rites. Although this is a basic concept of power in Lao Buddhism as well, and, for example, describes the mastering of virtues and striving for perfection of the Buddha himself in the course of his numerous rebirths, it often remains reserved for persons who are more advanced on their path such as monks or very pious and high-ranking members of society.

Edoardo Siani confirms this previous use of the term as well, but states that in "contemporary Thai society, however, the term has come to designate a kind of power that anyone may accumulate through moral behavior" (Siani 2019: 269). *Barami* is strongly associated with success, power and prosperity, and seems to have gained huge popularity in recent decades during Thailand's economic boom. In the case of the donation I described, none of the documents dealing with the rite (invitations, letters etc.) which I read, nor the participants, used the term. This in my opinion reveals a marked difference between many Thai and Lao prosperity rites, their conceptions of power and the role of the individual[11].

To summarize this section, the donation rite clearly exposed features of a prosperity Buddhism. The focus on the company reveals that market competition, and branding and advertisement, have entered certain Buddhist rituals and temples in Vientiane, and now also extend through donation networks to more rural areas. However, as I tried to show, the branding of the company was not simply a hijacking of ritual practices by an entrepreneurial and capitalist spirit. A dream of Manivong was the starting point for the donation, and the rite did not aggressively promote her as a main donor. Although there was a marked absence of magical, charismatic features often implied in prosperity cults, traditional notions of protection were still invoked. They transcended the individual participants and turned the *Lao Plastic Company* into an agent that received blessings and protection, and therefore magical protection. In comparison to other accounts of prosperity Buddhism, the more individualistic

[11] I have no data on the frequency of the use of the word, but in Thailand it seems to be very present and almost as central as merit. In the past, it was in Laos used, for example, with reference to the Vessantara-Jātaka, which describes the perfection of generosity by a prince who in his next rebirth will become the Buddha (see Ladwig 2016a). See Siani (2019: 269-271) and Jory (2012) for further historical explanations of why *barami* has become so central to popular Thai Buddhism. As Buddhism in Laos is heavily influenced by Thailand, the term will probably be more widely used in Laos in the future. Other conceptions of power are also at play here, and, like in Thai prosperity cults, the term *Saksit*, deriving from Skt. *shakti* (strength, source of empowerment) and *sitthi* (supernatural powers), is also used in this context. However, the term is often still used in the sense of "holy" for denoting qualities of relics or statues, for example.

aspects were rather underplayed in this context of institutional state Buddhism. Collective ritual action and the sharing of merit were emphasized; the company in fact became a merit collective that united an audience of diverse social backgrounds. The religious leaders of the rite praised the virtuousness of the main donor, but largely foregrounded the company, and also the attending rural villagers and their contributions. Although the different standing of the rural villagers and business friends of the family were obvious, during the rite these were at least temporarily softened in the space of the temple.

V. Remnants of Socialism: The Ritual Limits of Individualism

The downplaying of Manivong and her family as main donors is, however, not only a free choice which she determined herself. The marked absence of the individual quest for prosperity and power that have been described as essential for prosperity Buddhism in Thailand and Burma demands a second explanation. Although the company can be understood as an extension of her as a person, the focus on it as a donor, and the involvement of numerous people that were not linked to it (such as the villagers) also hint to other features that do not conform to an individualistic, neo-liberal market logic transferred into the religious sphere. I will in this final section of the essay argue that these absences are grounded in a rather traditional understanding of a moral economy of giving that was (and to a certain extend still is) characteristic for peasant villages. Some of its features have been maintained and artificially conserved by the socialist politics of religion. Despite the demise of socialism and the emergence of a free market in Laos, the organization of large donation rites involving temple building and construction are still today tied to notions of sharing and re-distribution, and a specific kind of egalitarian ideology that prevents donors from appropriating such rites on an individual plain. This is not the case in other

rites, such as ordinations, where wealth and status can be more easily individualized due to the different logistics, and a much less pronounced role of state officials.

In order to understand the origins of these politics of religion in relation to the sponsoring of temple building, a short excursus is needed here. In section two, I briefly referred to the support of Buddhism and temple building by wealthy merchants and businessmen. Under socialism, this patronage obviously became problematic. The idea that giving in Buddhism can be linked to a waste of resources, and even exploitation, was widely spread under various socialist regimes. This "pathology of giving", as Benavides (2005: 89) labels some of the more excessive cases in Buddhist history, were criticized because what was given as *dāna* had been taken from others. Indeed, there are cases in Asian Buddhist history where building temples was not simply supported by the wealthy, but involved considerable levels of exploitation[12].

When the *Pathet Lao*, the Lao communist movement came into power in 1975, the monks who sided with it had already identified large-scale donations for building and renovating temples as one of the features that would have to be changed in order to make Buddhism compatible with Lao socialism. Maha Khamthan Thepbuali, the leading monk and chief ideologue of Lao Buddhism after the revolution, outlined in his work that the "feudalists request the people to perform meritorious deeds and donate their work-force in order to build temples, but in reality this is only a betrayal that masks the exploitation of people" (Thepbuali 1976: 18; see also Ladwig & Rathie 2020). Phoumi Vongvichit, Minister of Religion in Laos after the revolution, argued that the new Lao Buddhism that was supposed to emerge under socialism should promote

[12] Jacques Gernet (1995) has shown for Buddhism's development in China between the fifth and the tenth century that corvée labor was used to build extravagant temples, and that the peasants recruited for this lived under miserable conditions (see also Lopez 2009 and Silk 1999). Similar developments have been documented for the building of Angkor Vat in Cambodia, and during different historical periods monasteries in both Burma (Aung-Thwin 1979) and Sri Lanka (Evers 1969) became large and wealthy landholders.

solidarity, and that donations should be performed by egalitarian groups (Vongvichit 1995). Hence, one of the first measures that the communist government undertook in its politics of religion was linked to the regulation of donations. This reinterpretation of Buddhism reflects the fact that "the socialist habitus in Laos has mainly developed out of a peasant culture, as reflected in its particular interpretation of solidarity and equality" (Rehbein 2017: 136). After a few years, however, this reorganization of smaller donations was quickly abandoned, and by the 1980s ordination rites, for example, had already quickly reemerged as occasions to show off the wealth of a family. However, what have been kept in place to this day are the mechanisms that regulate donations, which are considered to be most virtuous—those used for temple building and renovation.

In many accounts of *dāna*, the focus is often on a layperson or the laity as giver, and the *saṅgha* as receiver. But the trajectory of giving can also be regulated by other actors. Appadurai's (1986: 13) statement—that it is necessary to focus "on the total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption" when we analyze the social life and circulation of things in exchanges—describes this widened approach to donations very well. The whole trajectory of the company donation, and the downplaying of the individual achievements of Manivong as a main donor, can only be grasped when we take into account the state bureaucracy that surrounds large-scale donations in Laos today. I have partially outlined the paperwork Manivong had to complete to hold the rite. In fact, this comes close to submitting an "application" that circulates in a variety of state bureaucracies and offices[13]. The committee that was formed for the rite, and the subsequent building works, was composed of several state

[13] First, the papers were evaluated by the village headman, the abbot of the monastery and the local representative for religious affairs, linked to the Lao Communist Party. In a second step, the papers were forwarded to the Section of Religion of the Lao National Front for Reconstruction (NLSS), which reviewed the papers and the budget together with monks from the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO), and then issued a document which listed the necessary requirements for forming a committee that included monks, the laypeople's temple committee (*salavat*) and the local official of the NLSS. This composition was also reflected on the invitation card of the rite that I received.

officials and was listed on the invitation card[14]. When I visited the temple a few days after the ritual, I talked to the members of the temple's lay-people committee about the procedures. First, they pointed out that building works, due to their size and complexity, have to be reviewed like any other secular construction project.

What was more interesting for my case, however, was the way one of the men explained to me how invitations to attend such a ritual are handled. It is not only the host of the rite who determines who is invited. The organizing committee makes sure that the villagers from the surrounding area are invited as well: "When large donation rites like the one last week take place, it is crucial that the common people are also given the chance to participate in the rites. The merit made is shared with all people who attend the rite". I have observed a similar emphasis on mixing in Buddhist temples attended by different ethnic groups in southern Laos (Ladwig 2016). Probably because I was recording our conversation, he then launched into a sort of short propaganda speech mainly dealing with "solidarity" between people of different social standing, employing the same word the officiating monk had used during the rite. Later that day, I met the representative of the local branch of the NLLS who was responsible for religious affairs and was involved in the logistics of the construction project. Asking about the diverse audience for the donation, he mentioned that in the context of such great events people are encouraged to form merit-groups, ideally composed of "common people" (*phasason*), thereby highlighting the temple as a collective beyond the main donor. He pointed to the long print-outs of the donation list on the temple wall, underlining the contributions made by the villagers on the day of the rite. When I asked him about the *Lao Plastic Company* as a sponsor, he gave me an answer that surprised me due to its consequential logic and simplicity: "The company is a merit-group composed of people of

[14] Besides date, schedule, and the announcement of the rite, including company logo, it listed two groups responsible for the finances of the project: one composed of monks (some being local representatives of the LBFO), and another one of laypeople including the official of the NLSS, the village headman and members of the laypeople committee of the temple.

different social standing. It included the owners, office staff, but also the workers, cleaners, drivers and so forth". Suddenly, I realized that Manivong had accepted this collectivist agenda, but that by pulling herself back and reducing her own role, was able to foreground the company, and share her donation project with her staff and many other people[15].

Coming back to the differences between descriptions of prosperity cults in other Theravāda Buddhist countries and my specific Lao case, I think the emphasis on the individual's increase of merit and status that has been documented in neighboring countries was less pronounced in Manivong's donation because of these mechanisms. Crucial here are the conditions for the development of prosperity cults. A booming economy alone is not sufficient to trigger a prosperity Buddhism; but a "retreat of the state" from the religious sphere is essential, as Jackson (1999: 286) mentions. Whereas in Thailand a "rapid decline in Thai politicians' and bureaucrats' interest in controlling Buddhism" (ibid.) in the late 1990s created favorable conditions for prosperity cults, the Lao state has since 1975 established an institutional network that carefully orchestrates the revival of Buddhism, and has to a certain extent blocked a stratification and heterogenization of Buddhism (Ladwig 2017: 298f.).

The committee set up for the festival and the building works ensured that the audience of the rite was mixed, which became obvious when the merit of the donation was shared after giving, and when the lay-people ate together in the temple hall. The stark differences between Manivong's urban business friends and the workers and villagers were momentarily effaced, and the ritual here temporarily downplayed significant differences. From a classical perspective of ritual theory, a kind of liminal stage (Turner 1969) emerged, and ritual here opened a space in which the social world is imagined to be in its ideal form. But

[15] However, there are also limits to this collectivism of the gift and its recognition. Temples in Laos can be veritable 'donation maps', and numerous objects and built elements feature donor names. It was her family's name that was finally inscribed into the new gate of the temple, and not that of a merit group or the company.

then, as I described in the section on ethnography, this ideal world must also fall apart. Once the rite was over and the temple hall was empty, social stratification and differences became utterly visible in the seating arrangements outside. The urban business class and the economically less successful attendants—some workers and some rural peasants—quickly separated. The temporary space of collectivity and sociality quickly evaporated, revealing the artificiality of these measures. The ritual facade that socialism here had conserved in a kind of romantic image of an egalitarian rural past was deconstructed by the reality of new social stratifications that have come with the economic boom in recent years. The case here reminded me of the comparative study carried out by Chris Hann and Steve Gudeman (2015: 19), who propose that many rituals in contexts marked by the demise of socialism "can also be a facade or mystification of sociality that does not exist...they frequently mystify community identity and cohesion, sometimes with barely concealed nostalgia". Given the highly visible differences between the guests in terms of style and clothing, the reinforcement of a temporary mixing of people as a temple collectivity, and its subsequent and instantaneous evaporation, was not only nostalgic, but in my eyes also had something paradoxical, because this actually revealed the increasing inequalities that have evolved in recent years.

Collective ritual action, the sharing of merit, and the absorption and redistribution of surplus—which evens out differences in wealth but allows for status differentiation—are all elements that have been described by researchers who worked in rural Laos decades ago (Condominas 1968: 114-118; Zago 1972: 372; Taillard 1977: 78). They are now vanishing quickly, and not only in urban areas[16]. Perhaps many Lao who, like me, got to know Vientiane as a communist

[16] Some of the villages in Khammouan province where I did fieldwork in 2005 had little labor migration. All households were involved in rice-farming, displaying rather minimal differences in wealth. Some years later, labor migration to Thailand had changed this. This change was clearly visible with regards to houses, vehicles and the absence of young people, most of whom had left the village and sent remittances home from their wage-labor in Vientiane or Thailand.

capital mainly inhabited by urban peasants, are getting nostalgic, and have started to see temples as one of the few remaining places where a certain ideal of the rural religious life can at least temporarily be reenacted in ritual.

VI. Conclusion

Large amounts of wealth acquired in Laos' expanding economy continue to be invested into the upkeep of temples and their construction, and one can observe an evolving donation network that connects urban areas such as Vientiane with more rural settings. Manivong's large donation was in that sense presented as a traditional religious practice that aims at sustaining Buddhism and the *dhamma*. The basic parameters of the economy of merit—marked by hierarchy, and greater chances given by increased wealth—for her also implied greater responsibility. With more wealth being available, more of this surplus was to be invested into the ritual economy. I argued that her donation reflects themes that were described by previous researchers, and can be linked to larger discussions on the moral economy. On the one hand, the economy of merit and its associated cosmology supports increased social stratification, especially with regards to larger projects such as temple building, as I outlined in the second part of this essay. However, this can only be achieved through redistributive mechanisms and a channeling of wealth into the monastic order, which evens out differences in wealth on a material level. This, at first sight somewhat paradoxical dynamic, has been very well captured by Edmund Leach's (1954: 197-212) classical formulation of oscillating types of egalitarian (*gumlao*) and stratified (*gumsa*) forms of social organization among the Kachin in highland Burma.

At the same time, I conceptualized Manivong's gift as related to a relatively new phenomenon, in which businesses sponsor rites and use these as a means to advertise their company, and thereby improve their reputations. I related this branding mechanism to other phenomena which in the anthropology of religion

have been described under the larger heading of prosperity cults (Coleman 2000), and which have also been documented for Buddhism in general (Borup 2018), and Theravāda Southeast Asia (Jackson 1999; Foxeus 2018). From this perspective, the rite seemed to operate along the border of private religious engagement and business strategy—reflecting convergences and synergies of religion and the economy—in which cosmologies and rituals embrace and even enhance the competition of the market (Coleman 2017). However, Manivong's entrepreneurial religious ethos was not only a quest for status in an increasingly competitive economy, and a simple formation of a new Buddhist spirit of capitalism. It harnessed much older conceptions of protection and blessing that can be obtained through donations and ritual action, but were transposed to the market economy in a manner that did not only promote her as an individual business woman with the human agency of a *homo economicus*. Manivong stepped back from her role as a main donor, and thereby allowed her company to take center stage. The company, including not only its staff but also its machinery and buildings, was ritually equipped with positive qualities derived from the donation, such as protection and blessings, reaching beyond a pure economic rationality that might be associated with commercialized forms of Buddhism. Therefore, despite the novelty of her branding and advertisement strategies, the effects of the donation were not purely rationalized by a this-worldly economic approach, but embedded in traditional ideas of ritual efficacy and spiritual protection.

I then presented her reduced role as a main donor from another angle and argued that large donations such as her company's are subject to complex bureaucratic procedures that also impose certain logistics on the ritual. As a still active remnant of a socialist politics of religion, large donations are carried out as collective ritual acts which are supposed to integrate diverse audiences. The urban middle and upper class from Vientiane, and the rural villagers shared the ritual space of the temple for some time, and thereby enhanced the efficacy of

the rite by sharing the merit of the donation. The donation rite thus acted as a kind of performance of how the ideal world is imagined. However, I concluded that this reinforced collectivity quickly crumbled, reflecting increasing inequalities between rural and urban people and also the general social fabric that has been transformed by a liberalized market and economic boom. Given the rapid economic developments in recent years, I wonder how long this liminal ritual 'façade' of equality can be upheld in the face of the quickly changing realities of increasing social stratification and the growing divide between urban and rural life-worlds.

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