

Article

Anthropological Theory
12(4) 427–447
© The Author(s) 2013
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1463499612471933
ant.sagepub.com



Ontology, materiality and spectral traces: Methodological thoughts on studying Lao Buddhist festivals for ghosts and ancestral spirits

Patrice Ladwig
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany

Abstract
The study of ghosts and spirits, and the ethnographic evidence associated with this, is a fertile area for developing methodologies. By employing theories of materiality and the anthropological study of ontologies, I argue that looking at the traces of spirits and ghosts in the material domain can reveal crucial insights into their nature, position and relationships with the living. Two ethnographic case studies from the Buddhist ethnic Lao are used to demonstrate how material traces can explain the 'ontic shifting' of certain ghosts. I will then explore how through the modernization and rationalization of Buddhist cosmology there have evolved competing ideas of the nature of ancestral spirits addressed in Buddhist rites. While in an older interpretation these spirits are accessible through objects and the exchanges between layperson, monk and spirit, 'modernist' Buddhist monks advocate that the dead cannot be reached through objects. Finally, I argue that the material traces of spirits and their different readings hint to important transformations regarding the conceptualization of ghosts and spirits through the socialist revolution and the rationalization of Buddhism.

Keywords
Buddhism, ghost, Laos, materiality, ontology, ritual, spirit, trace

Corresponding author:
Patrice Ladwig, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Advokatenweg 36, Halle (Saale), 06114 Germany.
Email: ladwig@eth.mpg.de

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

Introduction

The anthropological analysis of spirits and ghosts is situated in a field that poses basic methodological and theoretical challenges. Located in a realm that is often between visibility and invisibility, present and past, and between the material and immaterial, the oscillation between these poles constitutes the framework in which the agency of spirits unfolds. In much of the anthropological literature spirits and ghosts have often been conceptualized as representations or symptoms of something else. The most illuminating studies of spirits and ghosts have followed this trail in various forms. Aihwa Ong's (1987) study of the possession of female factory workers in Malaysia takes spirits to be a sign of resistance to industrial discipline. Janet Carsten's volume *Ghosts of Memory* (2007: 7) argues that spectral apparitions are often linked to loss and memory. She proposes that 'excesses of grief cause these ghosts to appear'. Heonik Kwon's *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (2008) sees ghosts and their haunting as expressions of traumatic events, violence and socially unprocessed deaths. Ghosts, on a larger comparative level, often stand for something that cannot be expressed otherwise; one could say that the 'ghost embodies the disruption and alienation of that other which resists assimilation' (Buse and Stott 1999: 137). Kwon (2008: 16) argues that apparitions also continue to play a role in the 'modern' world, but that 'their enduring existence is often unrecognized in modern societies because its domain of existence has changed from the natural to the symbolic'. This is also congruent with Bruno Latour's idea of purification, where modernity enforces a distinction of various ontological spheres (1993: 11f.). I think that this separation of spheres, this change to the symbolic in 'modern' perceptions, has indeed imported some problems that sometimes also haunt anthropologists' analysis of ghost and spirits.

I do not reject understandings of spirits and ghosts as being representations, symbols or symptoms of something else, but think that the first encounter with these beings also offers another perspective. *Before* we construct more abstracted representations and interpretations, it is worth keeping in mind that ghosts can be beings with desires, with taste, with biographies. They appear in specific ways at places at a certain time; they slip into objects, they live in them, they consume things, leave material traces and demand a certain treatment as social beings. On a theoretical level, Webb Keane (forthcoming: 18) understands the process of making spirits visible, material and sensible as 'semiotic transduction', which he describes as 'an act of transforming something across semiotic modalities in order to produce or otherwise have effects of power'. The analysis here focuses on movement, from invisible to visible, from immaterial to material or the reverse. A detailed and multifaceted interpretation or analysis of spirits' representative qualities, their symptomatic nature and their 'meaning' can only be carried out through taking into account these features of spirits that constitute a shift from one modality to another. This is also related to questions of ethnographic evidence, and how it is produced in anthropological practice in general (Engelke 2008).

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

By employing some recent theories related to the materiality of religion and ontological approaches in anthropology, I argue in this article that these approaches can contribute to the development of methodologies for studying such entities. I demonstrate this with regard to two ethnographic examples from Laos. Here, two festivals for spirits address different beings – on the one hand, hungry ghosts as hell beings, and on the other hand ancestors. Looking at their different ontological status and the material aspects surrounding their apparition and worship, I will point to the common and differentiating features of these entities. I would like to suggest that despite their invisibility, the 'traces' they leave in the material domain are important for understanding their ontological status. In the case of the ghosts from hell, I will explore the transformative agency of a specific kind of food offering, which contributes to an ontic shift of these beings. In relation to ancestors, I will discuss the different approaches to the ontology of these beings held by orthodox Buddhist monks and elderly laypeople. Here, some monks deny the transferability of objects, whereas laypeople understand the objects as actually reaching the dead.

Taking ontology and materiality 'seriously'

Most of us have encountered situations in the field in which certain 'things' are imbued with special qualities, in which objects in specific contexts and events become living beings or in which humans are transformed into non-humans. There are numerous examples of what could be called 'ontic shifts' – slipping from one form of being into another. In Amazonia, people are said to have 'unstable bodies' (Vilaça 2005) and can transform themselves into animals, among the Nuer birds are sometimes regarded as being human twins (Evans-Pritchard 1966), or certain gods in Nepal are invited and then 'live' in a statue (Ortner 1975). In the region I work in, Buddha statues made out of concrete are endowed with life in extremely elaborate consecration rituals and are regarded afterwards as living entities (Swearer 2004). Discussions on consustantiation and transsubstatiation surrounding the Eucharist evolve around similar problems.[1]

The anthropologists of different generations have usually followed one of the following ways for understanding these phenomena: Either there is a purpose connected to these transformations (functionalism), they show how the brain works (cognitivism), they have to be interpreted (interpretivism) or these transformations have a metaphorical nature (symbolism) (Carrithers et al. 2010: 183). Early anthropologists perceived these phenomena as a failure to distinguish properly between ontological domains, as a *mentalité primitive* (Lévy-Bruhl 1975), in which a sort of prelogical confusion is unable to delineate between dream and reality, between subject and object. Other accounts have described these cases for Melanesia as being founded in socio-cosmic principles, in which humans and non-humans share certain substances that are the basis of their transformations (Leenhardt 1979). More widely acknowledged and rehearsed has been the contribution of

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

Mauss (1990), whose ideas about exchange are based on a participation of a certain principle or substance related to persons *and* things.

Focusing only on objects that are said to be infused with life and agency, the most widely accepted ideas about 'explaining' these phenomena are related to the concept of representation. These objects are primarily of interest because they 'materialize and express otherwise immaterial or abstract entities, organizing subjects' perpetual experiences and clarifying their cognitions. The very materiality of objects, their availability to the senses, is of interest primarily as the condition for the knowability of otherwise abstract or otherwise invisible structure' (Keane 2006: 198). According to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998), the conditions of knowability are also questions regarding epistemology and representation and he pleas for a change from epistemology to ontology in anthropological thinking in order to rehabilitate objects from their pacified and silent, uniform world of nature. Employing ontology as a concept is for him a way of preventing the reduction of the native's thinking to a fantasy, knowledge or representation (Viveiros de Castro 2003: 18).

In a recent discussion of the ontological turn at the anthropological roundtable in Manchester, some participants stated that the study of culture as practiced in many ways in anthropology is merely the study of meaning and interpretation of people's episteme, neglecting ontological questions. Quoting Tim Ingold (2000: 349), some participants argued that in this sense in anthropological studies, culture is 'conceived to hover over the material world, but not to permeate it'. Another contributor said that 'by contrast, ontology is an attempt to take others and their real difference seriously' (Carrithers et al. 2010: 175). At the same event, the claim was made that 'an ontological approach, *more than any other within anthropology*, takes things encountered in the field seriously' (2010: 154, my emphasis). Henare et al. (2007: 2), referring to the link between ontology and materiality, in the same vein argue for taking a fresh look at objects: 'The aim of this method is to take ''things'' encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent or stand for something else'. In my opinion this does not mean that indexical and iconic qualities of things are completely 'stripped off' the object in this form of analysis, but that processes of signification have different levels of abstraction.[2] How, then, can materiality in its connection to ontology be taken 'seriously' as a method? How can we understand objects and the way they present themselves without directly launching a project of symbolization and representation? And how can this illuminate the ways in which ghosts, spirits and other non-human entities subsumed under this rubric are studied?

Invisibility, traces and materiality: Lao ghosts and ancestors

The problem we very often have is that the encounters with beings subsumed under the category of spirits or ghosts are marked by non-visibility and non-materiality, at least for most people and anthropologists. Some of our informants might regularly see ghosts and spirits, smell them or get possessed by them, talk to them or even marry them.[3] Unfortunately, this hasn't happened to me yet. While working

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

for a research project at the University of Bristol entitled 'Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China', the main actors of our research were never present in the conventional sense. The deceased, ancestors, spirits of people who died a bad death were in some sense omnipresent because all the things we researched (rituals, narratives, offerings, prayers, etc.) happened because of them, but they were not to be seen. Here, the often invoked link between evidence and sight (Bloch 2008) does not work on an immediate level of observation. This paradox of presence and absence I encountered during the project marks every religion to a more or less intense degree:

> Humanity constantly returns to projects devoted to immateriality, whether as religion, philosophy [. . .]. But all of these rest upon the same paradox: that immateriality can only be expressed through materiality. [. . .] The more humanity reaches toward the conceptualisation of the immaterial, the more important the specific forms of materialization. (Miller 2005: 28)

One way to study immaterial beings and their apparitions would be to analyze under which circumstances they appear to which people. This would imply a focus on the multifaceted regimes of communicability that evolve between humans and spirits (Delaplace 2009).[4] Although I find this a valuable approach, my endeavor is more strictly linked to materiality. I would like to use the concept of the *trace*, which I also take as being part of a regime of communicability. Ghosts and spirits leave material traces in this world. Trace might indicate the places where they appear, the materiality of the ritual items to deal with them, or the offerings they receive. The trace is in that sense a track, a footprint or an imprint – a sign left in the material domain of something that in conventional ways is not graspable for most people not endowed with the special capacities to do so. In a Derridean sense, the trace is never a 'direct' reference to the being in question, and there is no tracking back possible leading to the origin of the spirit. It is only partial, never revealing the whole being, but nevertheless the trace itself can point to the immanence of a being through its material manifestations.[5] Historians like Carlo Ginzburg (1990, 2010) also employ the concept of the trace as giving clues for the historian. He refers to the history of art where an analysis of seemingly unimportant and small features such as the shape of an ear can deliver evidence which gives the researcher clues about the provenance of a whole piece. Paul Ricoeur also reflects on the trace from the historian's point of view, and alludes to the materiality of the trace as mark:

> People pass, their works remain. This 'thing-like' character is important for our investigation. It introduces a relationship of cause to effect between the marking thing and the marked thing. So the trace combines a relation of significance, best discerned in the idea of a vestige, and a relation of causality, included in the thing-likeness of the mark. The trace is a sign-effect. (Ricoeur 1990: 120)

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

Despite the fact that both Ginzburg and Ricoeur employ the trace in historical research, I think that the methodology employed by them as historians also works for (synchronic) anthropology. Especially Ricoeur's combination of the trace with the topic of materiality interests me. In the following I will look at the materiality surrounding the apparition of these ghosts that can give us clues about their presence and their immanence through material objects.

I researched two festivals for the deceased in which various forms of the dead (spirits, ghosts and ancestors) play an important role. The festivals are understood as one ritual complex and mark a period of two weeks (usually in September) in which an intensified communication between the living and the dead takes place. Food and other objects of exchange are constitutive of the communication between the living and the dead in these rituals. Due to my focus on theoretical and methodological questions, I will here only present the basic ethnography of the two festivals and briefly introduce the beings addressed,[6] and then again return to the question of trace, ontology and materiality in the discussions relating to each of the festivals.

The first festival (*boun khau padap din* – hereafter BKPD) mainly addresses a category of deceased that consists of ghosts that have fallen into hell due to their lack of merit (Lao: *boun*, Pali: *puñña*) and are waiting for a better rebirth. They are victims of their bad or sudden death, or have simply violated basic Buddhist principles of ethical conduct. According to ethnic Lao local cosmology, they are on the day of the ritual released from hell and can receive food from the living. Interestingly, the Lao use the word *phed* (from Pali *peta*) to describe them, but one more often encounters the word *phiphed*. This is a compound word merging the Pali term with Tai-Kadai concepts of ghosts and spirits (*phi*) also found among non-Buddhist groups in this ethnolinguistic family.[7] Pottier (2007: 508) translates *phiphed* as 'phantom' and 'revenant', which describes well their coming from hell. 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, labeled *khau dom*, contain sweet rice and pieces of fruit wrapped in banana leaves. The following day, during the early morning of new moon in the ninth lunar month around 4 am, 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. 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 emphasized the needs of the *phiphed* and their hunger. The invitations spoken and the way the offerings are given may for some participants just be matters of etiquette and keeping up traditions. People may hold quite varying ideas about the 'presence' or 'existence' of these beings, but taken ritual practices as a starting point, and not necessarily

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

questions of 'inner belief', we can postulate that the efforts undertaken by Lao Buddhists to care for these spirits do indeed speak for their presence.[8]

The second festival (*boun khau salak* – hereafter BKS) closes this period of the dead and focuses on ancestors, which are labeled either generally as *phu day* (dead people) or as *phu dtaa* (ancestor), or in Buddhist terms as *vinyan* (Pali: *viññāna*). This category primarily refers to recently deceased relatives that are addressed in the ritual. BKS involves a ritual with labeled 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' the baskets to the dead. The monks keep the baskets and use the things contained in them. The baskets contain mostly food, with some of the items being chosen according to the taste of the deceased. Moreover, there are also items for everyday use: cigarettes, umbrellas, pencils, or a comb (the last object will be crucial for the analysis later).

Let me now first turn to the first ritual held for the ghosts and hell beings fed on the day of the festival.

Food is not just food: Offerings, material agency and ontic shifts

The Peta and phiphed addressed in the rites of BKPD are ghosts that are anomalous creatures, strange and shocking in appearance, even threatening. Congruently, Lao and Thai depictions show them as tormented hell-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 feces, etc. Because it is impossible to consume any food or drink in their realm, the *phed* are completely dependent on humans and their provisions. The encounter with these grotesque beings is also marked by uncannyness that – doctrinally speaking – is also an impetus for practicing generosity.[9] 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[10] in the world of humans so that they can escape from hell and be reborn in another realm. The abbot of the monastery where I observed the ritual summed this up as follows:

> 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.

After clarifying the ontological status of these beings, let me turn to the materiality of the offerings. The centrality of food offering becomes immediately visible

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

when examining the ritual. The whole day before the ritual food is prepared. In Lao Buddhism, as in most of the Buddhist traditions of mainland Southeast Asia, food plays a central role in establishing relations between laypeople and the *sangha* and between humans and non-human entities.[11] In Tai-Kadai conceptions of spirits, ghosts are ritually 'fed' or 'fostered' (*liang*), and are not receivers of Buddhist merit. As mentioned, *peta* and *phiphed* are primarily hungry ghosts that enter the world of the living as malnourished and tortured beings, hoping to escape hell. Crucial here is to mention that the *ho khau* offered to the *phiphed* is indeed more than simple food. Like the objects that are endowed with special qualities, the food that the *phiphed* receive also has to be seen in this light. Where do these liberating qualities of the food offerings stem from?

Historically speaking, the offering to *phiphed* derives from the Brahmanic ritual practice of *Śrāddha*, in which the ghost of every deceased person initially becomes a liminal being and is then transformed into an ancestor through food offerings.[12] These rites underscore the importance of maintaining patriarchal family lineage systems in an ongoing and unbroken line. Here, rice ball offerings (*pinda*) are performed daily for ten days after death and in annual rites. They are essential for creating a new body for the deceased and to lead his soul through the kingdom of Yama, the Lord of Hell. Only then can the transformation from *preta* to *pitr* (ancestor) be accomplished. Parry (1994: 196) states that the *pinds* offered to ancestors in Hinduism are to be understood as a substance for a new body:

> As we have seen, one meaning of pind is an 'embryo' or generally a 'body'. They are not only offerings to the departed and, as it were, debt-repayment instalments, but which also construct a new body for the deceased [. . .] More precisely, the ten *pinds* are both nourishment for the pret and the substance of a new body.

In the Lao vocabulary, I could find no etymological connection to *pinda* or a variant in Sanskrit or Pali. However, the historical connection between the Brahmanic concepts of *Śrāddha* and the offerings is clear, especially when we look at the same festival in the Cambodian context.[13] Despite the slight differences regarding ritual practice and terminology, Lao informants have at times referred to the 'image' or 'body' (*hub*, from Pali: *rūpa*) that the ghosts can obtain. Porée-Maspero (1950: 47), discussing the Khmer ritual, mentions that the food offerings are intended for the 'creation of a spiritual body'. According to the Pali-English dictionary, *pinda* in Pali also translates as 'conglomerate' and Ang Choulean sets this in relationship to the 'envelope' that has to be created for the ghost in the Khmer context:

> Every year at the same time the community of the living must help the straying deceased [the *peta*] with their reincarnation. In the most concrete sense it is here crucial to provide bodily envelopes for the deceased, which are formed from sticky rice. [. . .] Because of their consistency as a conglomerate the rice balls enable the souls to reincarnate. Putting it simply: they are bodily envelopes. (Choulean 2006: 238–239)

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

The escape option the *phiphed* have, namely being reborn on another realm outside of hell, could in this light be understood as a transformation of their condition through the offering of food; a new body through a transformative gift and an escape from hell through the overcoming of an in-between state.[14] We here encounter one of the *ontic shifts* that are often used, for example, in Amerindian ethnography to demonstrate the usefulness of an ontologically oriented anthropology.[15] Beings before classified as hell-beings, as wandering and hungry ghosts, are transformed into another form of being through an offering of food. In order to make this transformation function, food as an object is not just a bypass, not simply a crystallization or reflection of relationships, but it has the capacity to 'nurture' the *phiphed* and provide them with a new body. These ideas about food are also embedded in Lao Buddhist cosmologies and concepts of reproduction, in which children have to 'pay back the debt' of having been fostered (*liang*) by their parents (Kourilsky 2008).

Seeing the offering of food as a form of commensality, or as a representation of a social relationship that involves a certain care, is also relevant, but the transformative power of the gift can be explained with reference to the idea of the *pinda* actually *being* an embryo, or an envelope. A focus on the specific offerings that are given points to the connection between moral agents and the 'objects' used for establishing relationships. In Buddhist terms, the offering of food to the *phiphed* is an explicitly ethical commitment, but this commitment can only be realized through objects and their specific materiality.

One could argue that in my analysis I have fallen into the same representation trap that I have criticized before. The rice balls only 'stand for', 'represent' and 'symbolize' envelopes. However, as I have argued before, we can't escape the idea of representation completely – it depends on what kind of level of abstraction we choose. Representation has, etymologically speaking, an interesting double meaning. On the one hand, in an older meaning, it describes 'the efficacious presence of something', and on the other hand it is 'standing for something that is actually not present' (Chartier 1989: 1514; Williams 1983: 267).[16] I have tried to use representation in the first sense, leaving space for an active presence and agency of the object.

Ontologies in competition: The comb in the gift basket

I will now turn to another aspect of materiality and use this for exploring the topic of ontology. With reference to the second festival addressing the spirits of the ancestors, I will refer to differing and conflicting ideas about the ontological status of the dead. I shall describe a case in which the object provided for the deceased points to a potential conflict between 'modern' forms of the ontology of the dead advanced by orthodox monks and a more 'traditional' one proposed by elderly laypeople. This rift is related to the wider field of discussions about rationality, superstition and modernization in Laos.

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

As outlined before, BKS mainly addresses recently deceased relatives as ancestors. Despite Buddhism's idea of reincarnation, Lao Buddhists continue to feed their ancestors long after they have died. This is done especially with parents or deceased siblings, but can theoretically be extended to anyone. The day before the ritual each family prepares one or several baskets. They put a stick with a paper into the basket, which tells the name of the receiver (*khun hab*) and the sender (*khun song*). Many informants have compared this to sending a letter, or making a telephone call. Without correct address, the basket will not reach the receiver. Several monks told me that there is also an administration in the 'other world' where the ancestors are and therefore there must be an address attached to the basket. On the day of the festival, family members bring their baskets to the temple early in the morning. In an elaborate system of gift allotment, they are distributed to the monks: Each basket gets a number, which is made known to the owner of the basket. Then the monks draw lots from a pot with small paper slips, also containing the numbers of the basket. This practice gives the ritual its name (*salak* signifies lottery). Then, continuing for over an hour, each person is called to the front where the monks sit, and gives his or her basket to the monk who has drawn the number of this basket. After all the baskets have been distributed, they are assembled in front of the main Buddha statue and 'transferred' to the dead. After the ritual, the monks collect the baskets, empty them and use their contents.

This *transfer* to the spirits of the dead – an object passing from one ontological sphere (the world of the living) to another (the world of the ancestor spirits of the deceased) – is usually not an act of dispute among Lao Buddhists. Rituals are just performed, and few of the laypeople think about the 'reality-effect' of the acts. Moreover, discourse may say one thing, whereas in practice people might still perform these acts despite denying their reality. Like among Thai Buddhists in Chiang Mai, most Lao Buddhists in Vientiane generally believe that 'although the offerings are given to monks, they are thought to be *used* by the deceased as well' (Davis 1984: 193, my emphasis). However, more orthodox monks whom I interviewed about the festival often emphasized that this belief is only 'peasant Buddhism' (*phutasasana khong saona*) or 'false belief' (*khwamsuea pit*) and that the deceased obviously cannot receive gifts. The gifts were, in the best case, only 'symbols' (*sanyalak*), and the belief in a real transfer of the objects was denied. One of them told me: 'Pat, I mean, you are an educated man from Germany and you know that most Lao people are peasants that have not yet understood that the dead cannot receive things. It is their wishful thinking.' He advanced a Buddhist interpretation and said that the gifts are given to, and intended for, the monks, honoring their discipline during the three-month rain retreat. Giving this an additional Buddhist spin, he stated that the merit generated through this karmically skillful act is then transferred to the dead.[17]

So in this interpretation the objects stay in the realm of the living, and instead a kind of invisible moral quality is transferred. One could say that the orthodox monks have adapted a modern ontology that follows the clear distinction between subject and object, between the living and the dead, and the dead are ascribed a

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

different ontological status; they are not reachable with objects anymore. I mostly worked in large monasteries in Vientiane, and a majority of the monks I worked with were highly educated, either in Laos or at Buddhist universities in Thailand. The institutions in both countries have undergone thorough reforms resulting in a 'rationalization' of many Buddhist doctrines. Despite the continuing existence of all kinds of 'unorthodox' practices, some monasteries – like the ones where I did fieldwork in Vientiane – are propagating a reformed Buddhism, far removed from what has been described by researchers like Bizot for Cambodia or Thailand some decades ago.[18] In some sense this modernist approach to the communication with the dead is an effect of the 'rationalization' of beliefs propagated in the Buddhist education system since French colonial rule.[19] Moreover, I think that Lao socialist modernity has also left its mark on the interpretation of this transfer of objects. 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 secularized and rationalized explanation of the two festivals for the dead I am referring to here. References to ghosts and ancestors, which in conversations with laypeople and ritual practice were crucial elements, are not found in this rather ideological account. The solidarity of peasant culture is pointed out, and the 'feeding of oneself, family, friends and society' (Buakham 2001: 44) is described, but the dead are 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' (p. 44) might explain this conscious eradication of the traces of the dead even in rituals dedicated to them. One could say that from the perspective of this rational, modernist Buddhism, subjects have been cut off from the objects. The communication between the living and the dead has been abstracted into a pure mental concept (merit), but the material offerings circulate only in one ontological sphere, that of the living (between monks and laypeople).

From the perspective of many elderly laypeople (or indeed most old monks in the countryside), things looked very different. When doing interviews about the festival and the motivations for giving, some people mentioned that in their dreams one of their relatives appeared in situations in which something was lacking: they did not have an umbrella when it was raining, for example. Then, at *boun khau salak*, they made sure that they would put an umbrella into the gift basket that then would be sent to the deceased. Moreover, when preparing the food to be put into the basket, they took the needs and desires of their ancestors seriously. Some of the objects and kinds of food given to the spirits are standardized (such as sugarcane and a few other items), but people also take into account the food preferences of the deceased: What do my deceased relatives like to eat? What turned up in my dream and what does he or she need?

So when we again try to take ontology and the role of objects seriously, how can we understand these differing attitudes towards the object? Arjun Appadurai (1986: 5) has proposed that instead of only looking at human actors and their intentionality, another point of view taken from the 'object's' perspective is also

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

valid: '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'. When the objects 'speak', when the objects are the vocabulary in which the living and the spirits of the dead communicate with each other, I think that there is indeed a large difference between the more orthodox Buddhist idea about the object and the one that many laypeople advance. This became most apparent when one monk insisted that even laypeople choose gifts according to the needs of the monk and not to those of the dead. He said that this kind of superstition only survives in the countryside, but not in Vientiane (representing his 'culture' to a foreigner). I told him about the umbrellas in the baskets. He directly replied that monks also need umbrellas. Then I remembered the comb a friend of mine had found in one of the baskets. I argued that monks shave their hair and do not need combs. The monk looked at me annoyed and brushed off my remark. The conversation had come to its end. Usually discussions like that do not occur and I have indeed encountered them very rarely in my fieldsite.[20]

The biography of the object, or what I have before labeled the *trace of the object*, indicates the final receiver of the gift. The comb, this rather insignificant object made out of plastic, reveals the difference of the role of objects in two differing ideas about the ontological status of the dead. Recalling my short presentation of Ricoeur's idea of trace and vestige in the opening pages of this essay, the thing-like character of the comb and its status as a 'marked thing' alluded to two different systems of representing the dead. In one system, in that of my orthodox monk, the dead are beyond reachability, whereas in the other – that of many elderly laypeople – they can be accessed through objects. The comb here serves as an 'object of evidence' that produces a certain kind of truth that is, however, contested. For laypeople following the 'older' interpretation of the ritual, the ancestors exist somewhere where they can receive things, the comb can be used by them and their act of giving this to them is seen as a moral action, as a care for the dead that takes into account their needs. The comb as an object of dispute, in this sense, is not only the 'symbol' or 'representation' of a wish of laypeople to establish a contact with the dead and care for them. Rather, the comb is primarily for these laypeople just what it is – an object to be put to use for the dead:

> Rather than accepting that meanings are fundamentally separate from their material manifestations (signifier vs. signified, word vs. referent etc.) the aim is to explore the consequences of an apparently counter-intuitive possibility: *that things might be treated as* sui generis *meanings*. (Henare et al. 2007: 3, emphasis in original)

Small incidences like this are rare and were in this case provoked by the external intervention and presence of the anthropologist. Nevertheless, I think that they reveal a certain rupture. Webb Keane has observed something similar in Eastern Indonesian Christianity, where the confrontation with Calvinism was supposed to

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

'purify' Sumbanese culture and even small incidences could reveal the ontological insecurity caused by Calvinist missionary activity among the 'fetishists':

> It is for reasons like this that battles over apparently minor matters such as the use of a prayer book can be taken so seriously by combatants. They involve basic assumptions about what kinds of beings inhabit the world, what counts as a possible agent, and thus what are the preconditions for and the consequences of moral action. (Keane 2007: 20)

The reduction to a concept of merit transfer has further implications and I think that the difference goes even deeper when we take a closer look at the objects themselves (the kind of food offered, what is chosen, why) and their sensual qualities (taste and smell, for example). Laypeople sometimes choose specific kinds of food to be put into the baskets. Life histories, memories of people, and emotions of care for the dead might be 'materialized' in food. In order to understand the 'emotional investment' of people in the ritual, the sensuous qualities such as smell and taste might be relevant for understanding the object as a 'container' for memories of the deceased, for example,[21] or as a trace they have left in the memory of the living. In opposition to that, the simple reference to 'merit' (transferring the positive karma to the ancestors) as understood by more orthodox monks is less tangible and not corporeal. I believe that the efficacy of rituals such as the Lao ancestor festival is more often achieved through metaphors of the body and nurturing, for example, than through abstract concepts such as merit. My orthodox monk and his modern ontology of the dead could be said to have something in common with many earlier studies of Buddhism and Hinduism. There has been a tendency to 'abstract away from the sensuous materiality of objects' (Manning and Menely 2008: 289–90) in studies of religion, and the focus has often been too heavily on human agency, neglecting the material aspects of religion.[22]

Recent changes in the gift economy, however, seem to indicate a trend that our rational monk would surely consider appropriate. In recent years, pre-packed plastic buckets with gifts intended for monks are becoming more and more popular in Vientiane and other urban centers, especially with younger people. Combs and other strange items are not anymore to be found in these buckets. Despite the fact that some items in the bucket might be chosen according to the taste of the spirit of the dead, the pre-packaged object is less open for emotional investment than the traditional, hand-made baskets with its individual food selection.[23] Latourian purification has arrived in the temples of Vientiane in the form of mass-produced gift plastic buckets.

Conclusion

I have started off with an effort to try and take ontology and materiality 'seriously' and apply these insights to the study of spirits and ghosts. I introduced the idea of trace in order to explore ghosts and spirits through the fragments of their presence

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

left in the material world. The idea of the immaterial must somehow find expression in the material domain. These traces in the material domain, I suggested, enable us to understand the ontological status of these beings and reveal certain features that can be attributed to them. The trace here at the same time refers to an indexical presence of a being, but also its absence. Despite the traces left and the features we can attribute to them, specters and ghosts are not necessarily graspable as a whole. I have tried to show that the traces left by specters can also be understood as a form of evidence that has to be seen 'both as an epistemological and a methodological concern' (Engelke 2008: s2) in anthropology.

In the first example I chose I presented the food offered to the ghosts returning from hell as actually being an envelope or an embryo in local Lao ontology, which facilitates the transformation of the ghost into another being. I argued that the ontic shift (from ghost as a hell being to another being) happening here can only be conceptualized when the gift of food is actually taken for what it is. The rice-packets offered to the *phiphed* were identified as 'object agents'. In this sense, I have tried to take Lao ontology seriously and also explored another meaning of representation ('to make present anew') that can account for the agency of objects. I also remarked that this method does not exclude ideas of representation or symbolization, but suggested that before we embark on such a project, we can indeed follow the call of Henare et al. (2007) for taking things as they present themselves in the field, and not immediately reduce them to a 'meaning'. An ontological approach is this sense is 'one that does not privilege epistemology or the study of other people's representations of what we know to be the real world, rather acknowledging the existence of multiple worlds' (Carrithers et al. 2010: 153).

In the second part, I have played out my orthodox monk's idea of the ontology of the dead against that of some laypeople. Here, I explored the different understanding of ontology in my fieldsite in Vientiane and looked at the competition of ontological models. Again, by looking at the trace and the biography of the objects, I showed how the circulation of things reveals which beings are addressed in the ritual. I remarked that usually no disputes arise because the objects can satisfy both proposed receivers (the monks and the dead). Objects have the capacity to take on multiple roles, and can mediate between various systems. Webb Keane states that 'part of the power of material objects in society consists of their openness to "external" events and their resulting potential for mediating the introduction of "contingency"' (Keane 2006: 416). This contingency rests on the fact that 'both the value and the possible meanings of objects are underdetermined. They call for speech, interpretative practices, and political strategies. This means that they are necessarily caught up in the uncertainties of social action' (Keane 2001: 70). In certain rare cases, these uncertainties and struggles reveal themselves. I identified one object – the comb – that can only be addressing the spirits of the ancestors and not the monks. The comb is in this sense an object of evidence of two models of connecting the living and the spirits of the deceased. I presented this ontological competition as an outcome of various modernization processes (rationalization through Buddhist education, socialism's impact on Buddhism). Whereas elderly

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

laypeople use the sensuous qualities of the object for reactivating memories of the dead and investing emotions, modernist monks prefer an abstraction into a Buddhist concept of merit. The latter is unproblematic for the modernist ontology because the transfer of an invisible substance (positive karma) is easier to legitimize than the actual transfer of an object. Finally, I mentioned that through the mass production of gift buckets for monks this sensuous quality of the object is lost. I wonder about the future impact of this 'purification' of the Buddhist gift economy in the sense of Latour. Now many social scientists proclaim the return of religion and the continuity, or even intensification, of ritual practices relating to spirits, but perhaps this revitalization is only possible in the context of a modern ontology: despite the continuity of ghosts and spirits, the way they are addressed and understood is of a quite different nature now.

Acknowledgements

Initial research on which this text is based was carried out in Vientiane and several provinces of Laos from 2003–2005. I gratefully acknowledge funding by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the University of Cambridge. A second fieldtrip in 2008 was part of the AHRC-sponsored project 'Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China' at the University of Bristol. Thanks to Paul Williams and Rita Langer (Bristol), Oliver Tappe, Giovanni da Col, Viorel Anastasoaie and Chris Hann (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology) for comments and inspiration. Special thanks to Andrea Lauser and all participants of the workshop 'Spirited Modernities' held at the Lichtenberg Kolleg in Goettingen in August 2010, where a first draft of this text was presented

Notes

1. Discussions surrounding the Eucharist were important points of controversy in the development of Christian theologies. Proponents of consubstantiation – often arguing in the context of the reformation – advocate that during the sacrament the substance of the body and blood of Christ are present alongside bread and wine, which remain present through their taste, smell, etc. Transubstantiation postulates that, through consecration by the priest, one set of substances (bread and wine) is substituted (or exchanged) for the body and blood of Christ. There are numerous positions on this in a variety of churches. See Wandel (2005) for a historical study of the controversies since the age of reformation.
2. Approaching an object as 'it represents itself', including its indexical and iconic features, is something different from stating that 'it represents xyz'. Here we deal with two processes of signification of a different scale. The context 'embedding' of an object should be part of this analysis, but without directly making claims that it 'stands' for something. So on the first level we deal with significations that are more directly 'attached' to the object, whereas in the second case we have a considerable extension of the object's features into an interpretation.
3. I thank William Sax (Heidelberg) for pointing out that for certain people spirits have a strong sensual quality that can also be researched.

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

4. Gregory Delaplace has developed this idea in relation to spirits in Mongolia and has proposed the notion of regimes of communicability. This was one of the main themes of a recent conference held in Cambridge in December 2009 entitled 'Figuring the Invisible: An Anthropology of Uncanny Encounters'. Delaplace (2009) states that 'even though they are characterised as "invisible", these things are sometimes visible, as certain people do claim to see them occasionally. Therefore, rather than being "invisible", ghosts, souls and other spirits can be said to share a similar regime of visibility – or rather a certain *regime of communicability*. For these things are not only seen, but also smelt and heard'. Looking at how apparitions are understood can reveal a lot about questions of rationality and modernity, especially when taking into account how photography and other media have been used to explore this. I think this is one way of giving ontology an appropriate place in analysis.
5. In Jacques Derrida's understanding of trace (having a central position anti-metaphysics of non-presence), the trace indeed postulates a gap between immanence and transcendence, as there are no stable meanings or origins in his version of deconstruction: 'The trace is not only the disappearance of origin [. . .] it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin' (Derrida 1976: 61). See also Spivak (1976: xv–xx) and her elaboration of Derrida's concept. However, one here has to differentiate between the being itself and its trace. It is my understanding that the being might not be immanent but might gain immanence for humans through its trace. See the idea of Ricoeur on the 'thing-likeness of the mark' on the following page. Interestingly for the topic of this essay, more than 20 years after this work, Derrida came back to the trace, but then chose the *specter* as a figure that demonstrates the eternal slippages of meaning, of that which is not graspable and beyond dualities (Derrida 1994). See also Jameson (1999) for an interpretation of the trope of the specter in Derrida.
6. For a more elaborate ethnographic account of the two rites see Ladwig (2012a).
7. 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).
8. We deal here with the old question of the potential gap between inner belief and practice, which cannot be elaborated here in detail. I think that a reference made by Louis Althusser (1971: 168) to Blaise Pascal demonstrates the point very well: 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer and you will believe'. Ideology, or belief, is in that sense to be found in material practices; it resides in bodies and rituals. Keane (forthcoming: 6), however, also refers to Sumbanese cases where the presence of spirits during the reading of entrails is not taken for granted but is a matter of uncertainty: 'Their [the entrails] very character as signs embodies the ontological problem to which they are posed, for at the start of the ritual it is never certain whether the spirits are present'. I have never encountered this kind of insecurity about the presence of spirits in the two rites I discuss here. However, for example in Lao spirit-mediumship, one actively looks for signs when the spirits arrive in the body of the female medium.
9. In an analysis of this rite focused on hospitality (Ladwig 2012b), I refer to the term *samvega* that is used in the Petavatthu to describe the encounter with these pitiful beings. According to Shirkey (2008: 281–2), *samvega* is the agitation, the aesthetic shock that a

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

person experiences when confronted particularly with sickness and death. The agitation felt by humans through the horrible appearance of ghosts can be said to create an ethicization of the guest-host relationship and a call for hospitality: one should show compassion and loving kindness for the *phiphed*, but especially generosity by presenting offerings.

10. The notion of hospitality, I think, is also very useful to understand the interaction of the *phiphed* and the living. See Ladwig (2012b) for analysis of BKPD with a central focus on hospitality and ghosts as strangers. Feuchtwang (2010: 176) has also conceptualized the relationships of ghosts and the living in China as a relation based in hospitality.
11. See Wijeyewardene (1986: 36) and Andaya (2002: 11) on the dominant role of food exchanges and its various symbolisms in Thai Buddhism, also applicable to the Lao case.
12. In Sri Lankan Buddhist funeral culture this transformation process is ritually still clearly visible (Langer 2007: 188), but through a different concept of ancestor in Tai-Kadai cosmology, this process has been blurred. However, the provision of a new body for the ghost is still visible.
13. Etymologies are not necessarily proofs of the relationship of Hindu ideas and current Lao Buddhist practice, but it is interesting to note that this connection is in language and practice much more visible in Khmer, where there was a stronger and more pronounced influence of Hinduism than in many parts of Laos. In the name of Khmer festival (*phchum ben* = 'collecting the *ben*') the term *ben* actually derives from the Sanskrit *pinda* (Porée-Maspero 1950: 47). Ang Choulean (2007: 240) states that the Khmer festival has its origins only in Brahmanism, not Buddhism. See Kourilsky (2012) for a critique of this.
14. Jeff Shirkey (2008: 327) has argued that the textual reference of this festival, 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'. If and where the *phiphed* reincarnate is unknown, the liberation from continuous torture is imagined as a reintegration into one of the realms of the Buddhist cosmos, populated either by humans, *devatas* or other beings.
15. Viveiros de Castro (2007: 348) has shown for human-ghost encounters in Amerindian cosmologies that there can be a 'lethal interpellation of the subject by the spirit'. Here, the meeting and especially the conversation with a ghost involve the danger of a human crossing into the ontological sphere of the spirit. To my knowledge, in the Lao case of the *phiphed* there is no danger for the host to cross an ontological boundary. Other spirits than the *phiphed* are known to harm people, but they are not capable of pulling a human being into another realm.
16. This can perhaps be attributed to the Jewish-Christian vision of icons as Carlo Ginzburg (1991: 1226f) has argued. In a previous publication I have applied this to other 'living' objects (such as relics) in Lao Buddhism (Ladwig 2000).
17. This is also congruent with the interpretation of many laypeople, but they expect both things to happen: transfer of the object and the transfer of merit generated through the act of giving. Note that a transfer of something invisible poses less of a problem for modernized ontology than the actual transfer of an object.
18. Francois Bizot's work on Khmer and Thai Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s tries to uncover the heterodox and esoteric practices of the non-reformed strains of Southeast Asian Buddhism heavily influenced by *yogacara* practices. See for example Bizot (1981).

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

19. The Lao monastic education system was reformed by the French colonial regime, putting an emphasis on philology and Pali Buddhism (Kourilsky 2008). For the Lao communist stance on issues of so-called magical practices and rationalization see Stuart-Fox (1992: 97) and Ladwig (2009: 193), who describe some of the more drastic measures during and just after the revolution in 1975. On a larger level, this development has to be seen in the context of what has been labeled 'Buddhist modernism' (McMahan 2008) and the confrontation with Western scientific knowledge in the context of hegemonic colonial encounters. See the excellent study by Blackburn (2010) for the case of Sri Lanka and Schober's (2011: 46–61) study of Buddhism in Burma. To locate the spread and distribution of a 'modern ontology' is by no means easy, but according to my experience the divides follow the lines one would expect: urban, well-educated Buddhist laypeople and monks are more likely to reject such beliefs as superstition. Moreover, among high-ranking monks, the regular ideological trainings given to them by the state might ensure a trickling down of this modern Buddhism into the broader population.
20. When this occurred, the topic has often been in relation to reality of spirits. The issue of spirits was a subject of discussion at several funerals I attended. At one occasion some monks from my rather 'modernist' monastery in Vientiane ridiculed some laypeople because they used the term spirit (*phi*) while talking about the deceased. The monks said that there is no such thing, but there is only reincarnation, which for them is a process involving another entity, or better a Buddhist concept, namely consciousness (Pali: *viññāna*).
21. Sutton (2001: 46–47), for example, skillfully elaborates on the role of food in rituals linked to death, remembrance and care for the dead in Greek culture: 'Even the ephemeral and perishable medium of food, then, can be extended into the future through memory of the act of giving. Indeed, food may be a particularly powerful medium exactly because it internalizes the debt to the other [...] Furthermore, in carefully preparing food one is once again projecting the self, in this case the caring, nurturant self, into an external object – the food – which is meant to inscribe a memorable impression on the receiver.' This care can be expressed simply through the giving of food, but can also be intensified with a supplement deriving from the sensuality of food and the choice of food according to the taste of a deceased relative.
22. Earlier scholars working on Buddhism and renunciation tradition have often had an ambivalent relationship to materiality and sensuality. 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. In the accounts of some researchers – and in the religious profiling of modernist propagators of these religions – the sensuous quality of offerings very often plays, if at all, a peripheral role.
23. A good friend of mine, inspired by Buddhist belief as a social teaching, stated when asked about this: 'I have seen that all the baskets and even most of the food is thrown away after the ritual; the monks burn it. They can't use some of the items given to them. I went to Vat Ongtoe [a large temple in Vientiane] and presented a plastic bucket to the monks during the ancestor festival. The monks were delighted and said that they prefer to get the plastic buckets.' Here, questions of the utility of the gift merge seamlessly with that of Buddhist modernism and rationality.

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

References

Althusser L (1971) Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In: Althusser L (ed.) *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Andaya BW (2002) Localising the universal: Women, motherhood and the appeal of early Theravāda Buddhism. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33(1): 1–30.

Appadurai A (1986) Introduction: Commodities and the politics of value. In: Appadurai A (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bizot F (1981) *Le Don de soi-même: Recherches sur le Bouddhisme Khmer III*. Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient.

Blackburn AM (2010) *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bloch M (2008) Truth and sight: Generalizing without universalizing. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14(s1): s22–s32.

Buakham SM (2001) *Preachings of 108 Anisong*. Vientiane [in Lao].

Buse P and Stott A (eds) (1999) *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Carrithers M, et al. (2010) Ontology is just another word for culture. Motion tabled at the 2008 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, University of Manchester. Participants: Michael Carrithers, Matei Candea, Karen Sykes, Martin Holbraad and Soumhya Venkatesan. *Critique of Anthropology* 30(2): 152–200.

Carsten J (2007) Introduction. In: Carston J (ed.) *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 1–35.

Chartier R (1989) Le monde comme représentation. *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 44: 1505–1520.

Choulean A (2007) Vom Brahmanismus zum Buddhismus. Betrachtungen zum Totenfest in Kambodscha. In: Lobo W (ed.) *Angkor. Göttliches Erbe Kambodschas*. Priestel Verlag.

Condominas G (1975) Phiban cults in rural Laos. In: Skinner W and Kirsch T (eds) *Change and Persistence in Thai Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 252–273.

Davis R (1984) *Muang Metaphysics: A study of Northern Thai Myth and Ritual*. Bangkok: Silkworm Press.

Delaplace G (2009) Invisible things, hiphop and photography in contemporary Mongolia. Available at: http://www.gregorydelaplace.com/ (accessed 12 September 2010)

Derrida J (1976) *Of Grammatology*, trans. Spivak GC. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Derrida J (1994) *Specters of Marx, the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. London: Routledge.

Engelke M (2008) The objects of evidence. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14(s1): s1–s21.

Evans-Pritchard E (1966) Twins, birds and vegetables. *Man* 1(3): 398–399.

Feuchtwang S (2010) *The Anthropology of Religion, Charisma and Ghosts: Chinese Lessons for an Adequate Theory*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.

Ginzburg C (1990) Clues: Roots of an evidential paradigm. In: Ginzburg C (ed.) *Myths, Emblems, Clues*. London: Radius, pp. 96–127.

Ginzburg C (1991) Représentation. Le mot, l'idée, la chose. *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 46: 1219–1234.

Ginzburg C (2010) *Le fil et les traces. Vrai faux fictive*. Paris: Editions Verdier.

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

Henare A, Holbraad M and Wastell S (eds) (2007) *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*. London: Routledge.
Ingold T (2000) *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
Jameson F (1999) Marx's purloined letter. In: Sprinkler M (ed.) *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*. London and New York: Verso.
Keane W (2001) Money is no object: Materiality, desire, and modernity in an Indonesian society. In: Myers F (ed.) *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, pp. 65–90.
Keane W (2006) Signs are not the garb of meaning: On the social analysis of material things. In: Miller D (ed.) *Materiality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Keane W (2007) *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Keane W (2008) The evidence of the senses and the materiality of religion. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14(s1): s110–s127.
Keane W (forthcoming) On spirit writing: Materialities of language and the religious work of transduction. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*.
Kourilsky G (2008) Note sur la piété filiale en Asie du Sud-Est theravādin: La notion de guna. *Aséanie: Sciences Humaines en Asie du Sud-Est* 20: 27–54.
Kourilsky G (2013) *Parents et ancêtres en milieu bouddhiste lao. Étude de textes choisis et de leurs applications rituelles*. PhD thesis, Paris, EPHE.
Kwon H (2008) *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Ladwig P (2000) Relics, 'representation' and power. Some remarks on stupas containing relics of the Buddha in Laos. *Tai Culture: International Review on Tai Cultural Studies* 5(1): 70–84.
Ladwig P (2009) Between cultural preservation and this-worldly commitment: Modernization, social activism and the Lao Buddhist sangha. In: Goudineau Y and Lorillard M (eds) *Nouvelles recherches sur le Laos*. Paris/Vientiane: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, pp. 465–490.
Ladwig P (2012a) Feeding the dead: Ghosts, materiality and merit in a Lao Buddhist festival. In: Ladwig P and Williams P (eds) *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 119–142.
Ladwig P (2012b) Visitors from hell: Hospitality to ghosts in a Lao Buddhist festival. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18(s1): s90–s102.
Langer R (2007) *Buddhist Rituals of Death and Rebirth: Contemporary Sri Lankan Practice and its Origins*. New York: Routledge.
Latour B (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Leenhardt M (1979) *Do Kamo: Person and Myth in the Melanesian World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Lévy-Bruhl L (1975) *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Manning P and Meneley A (2008) Material objects in cosmological worlds: An introduction. *Ethnos* 73(3): 285–302.
Mauss M (1990) *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: Norton.
McMahan DL (2008) *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Miller D (2005) *Materiality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015

Ong A (1987) *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
Ortner S (1975) God's bodies, God's food. A symbolic analysis of a Sherpa ritual. In: Willis R (ed.) *The Interpretation of Symbols*. New York: Wiley.
Parry J (1994) *Death in Benares*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Porée-Maspero E (1950) *Cérémonies des douze mois. Fetes annuelles Cambodgiennes*. Phnom Penh: Institute Bouddhique.
Pottier R (2007) *Yû dî mî hèng, Etre bien, avoir de la force. Essai sur les pratiques thérapeutiques Lao*. Paris: EFEO.
Ricoeur P (1990) Archives, documents, traces. In: *Time and Narrative III*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 116–126.
Schober J (2011) *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies and Civil Society*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
Schopen G (1991) Archaeology and Protestant presuppositions in the study of Indian Buddhism. *History of Religions* 31(1): 1–23.
Shirkey JC (2008) *The moral economy of the Petavatthu. Hungry ghosts and Theravāda Buddhist cosmology*. PhD thesis, University of Chicago.
Spivak GC (1976) Translator's preface. In: Derrida J (ed.) *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Stuart-Fox M (1992) *Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State: The Making of Modern Laos*. Bangkok: White Lotus Co.
Sutton D (2001) *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. New York: Berg.
Swearer DK (2004) *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Vilaça A (2005) Chronically unstable bodies: Reflections on Amazonian corporealities. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11: 445–464.
Viveiros de Castro E (1998) Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4(3): 469–488.
Vivieros de Castro E (2003) Anthropology and science. *Manchester Papers in Social Anthropology*. Available at: http://nansi.abaetenet.net/abaetextos/anthropology-and-science-e-viveiros-de-castro (accessed December 2012).
Viveiros de Castro E (2007) Immanence and fear. Keynote speech for the 'Fear' conference, Canadian Anthropological Society, Toronto, 11 May.
Wandel LP (2005) *The Eucharist in the Reformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Wijeyewardene G (1986) *Place and Emotion in Northern Thai Ritual Behaviour*. Bangkok: Pandora.
Williams R (1983) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana.

Patrice Ladwig is Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle. He works on the anthropology of Theravada Buddhism, death and funeral cultures, religion and communist movements, colonialism and the anthropology of the state, with a regional focus on Laos and Thailand. He is editor (with Paul Williams) of *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and has published articles on the historical and contemporary dimensions of religion in Laos and Thailand.

Downloaded from ant.sagepub.com at Bobst Library, New York University on May 6, 2015