Ritual insecurity, liminality and identity. Differing migration trajectories and their impact on Buddhist rituals in a Lao migrant community in Berlin

Patrice Ladwig and Nicole Reichert

Abstract

This paper discusses ritual performances as negotiations of identity within the heterogeneous Lao migrant community in Berlin. Taking as an ethnographic focus point the official opening of a 'Lao Club Berlin' in summer 2011, we will explore how ritual performances aimed at constructing a specific Buddhist cultural space during the event with the purpose of reconciling different Lao migrant identities. The ritual here had to address a small and heterogeneous migrant community. The latter was comprised of people who were sent to then communist East Germany (GDR) for their studies by the Lao government, but also of families who had fled the very same regime in the late 1970 and had found asylum in West Germany. Moreover, ethnic Lao from Thailand—mainly women who had married Germans—also joined the group. We will discuss the role of certain material objects and Buddhist symbols deployed during the event and show that their performative invocation created a connection to the spatial and ritual origins in Laos. Despite the inherent fragility and diversity of the group, we argue that the successful creation of liminality contributed to a renewal of identity and belonging and a temporary alleviation of differences rooted in distinct experiences of migration. With reference to ritual theory as developed by Victor Turner, performance theory, and works that investigate the potential failure of ritual performances, we will also examine the strategies for overcoming what we label 'ritual insecurities.' The latter were mainly caused by a lack of religious resources and different memories and experiences of migration, but to a certain degree could be counterbalanced through ritual action.

1. Introduction

In July 2011 we attended the grand opening of the 'Lao Association Berlin for the promotion of Lao cultural heritage',[1] which officially marked a change from informal gatherings of people starting years ago to a legally registered organisation with an agenda. Berlin until then had no official Lao cultural association, and many of the par-

Acknowledgments: Ethnographic data for this paper were collected in Germany in a collaborative manner, but a large part of the elaboration of the argument is based on a draft paper originally written by Nicole Reichert. At a later stage, we rethought some of the arguments and developed this co-authored paper. We gratefully acknowledge funding from the Max-Planck-Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany. We thank all our Lao friends and collaborators, especially the people from the Lao community and association in Berlin. Thanks also to Kirsten Endres, Oliver Tappe, Günther Schlee, Soledad Jiménez Tovar, and Stephen Reyna at the MPI in Halle for their support and critical reading. Thanks also to the reviewers and editors of the Journal of Ritual Studies for their insightful comments and work on the article.

1. The German name is Lao Berlin e. V. 'Laotischer Verein für die Förderung der *Heimatpflege*'. Interesting is the use of the term *Heimat* by the Lao community and its association with 'care' (*Pflege*). Heimat can not be easily translated into Lao because translations usually refer to 'fatherland' (*pitu phum*) or 'village were one was born' (*ban keut*). Heimat is a very particular concept in German and is loaded with emotions, meanings and feelings such as identity, belonging and memory. Gunther Gebhard et. al. (2007: 9) understand Heimat as a "generator for associations" and not as a term that can be clearly defined. Furthermore Heimat is linked to a "longing for a specific, differentiated sheltering space" (Blickle 2002: 6). In my opinion these attributes of *Heimat* apply to the Lao community in Berlin. The translation into 'Lao cultural heritage' comes closest to this concept and the meaning it has for the Lao in the community.

ticipants pointed out that it was long overdue to found such an association. Just before the official celebration began, we entered the room in the back of the bigger hall at a socio-cultural centre where everything was already prepared for the Buddhist ceremony and the following parts of the celebration. In the middle of the smaller room, the food for the lunch following the Buddhist ritual was neatly arranged and displayed. Several people sat on chairs positioned along the walls, having coffee, chatting to each other and waiting for the celebration to begin. We both grabbed a coffee, and sat down. One woman responsible for the preparation of the food walked around the tables and chased away flies. Suddenly she uttered a sentence that did not seem to address anyone specific in the room: "Today we are here together, speak to each other, being Thai or Lao, we are all the same."

This statement, spoken simply into the air by a participant, is of particular relevance for the ethnic Lao[2] in Berlin, or even in Germany as a whole. The Lao in Berlin and in other places in Germany are a small and fragmented community with sometimes rather lose links due to their different migration histories. With a group composed by people who migrated to East Germany as educational migrants ('Bildungsmigranten') (1974–1989), to West Germany as refugees (1975–1995) and of (mostly female) ethnic Lao from north-eastern Thailand who are married in Germany, 'Lao identity' is far from naturally given. So how does one make sense of the statement by the woman in the light of this heterogeneity?

This paper discusses religious and cultural performances in the Berlin Lao migrant community and focuses on ritual and non-ritual strategies of identity building. Taking the Buddhist ritual in the context of the opening of the 'Lao Association Berlin' as an example, it will explore how the different actors ritually performed specific religious and cultural aspects of their 'traditions'. We start from the basic assumption that Lao migration identities demand certain ritual and non-ritual strategies in order to produce a more or less coherent narrative, and to construct and assert an otherwise fragile and fragmented idea of 'Laoness'.[3] These strategies are also essential for minimizing or overcoming migratory insecurity; they enable participants to create a space of a shared identity and belonging.

Theoretically we will draw on Victor Turner's (1969) concept of liminality[4] and on theories, which have modified Turner's concept in various fields.[5] Given the vast amount of literature already produced on this topic, we will only be able to dwell on some aspects of Turner's ritual theory, but will try and discuss some novel readings of some of his core notions.[6] Beyond this, we will also explore ritual insecurities that occurred during the ritual and the efforts to overcome these in order to successfully accomplish the opening rite. We argue that these points reveal important features of the fragmented nature of the Lao migrant community, but also show how these can be temporarily overcome in contexts such as the foundation of an association. After briefly introducing the various migration trajectories of the Lao in Germany, we will introduce a twofold approach to liminality and ritual insecurity. First, we will in part 3 refer to the role of certain material objects and Buddhist symbols deployed during the event. We argue that these, with the corresponding performance of social hierarchy, entail a creation of a Lao space, connecting the participants to spatial and ritual origins in Laos. Here, ritual and liminality enhance and reassure a renewal of identity and belonging, contributing to the temporary transcendence of disruptions caused by the experience of migration. Our second approach presented in part 4 also points to the strategies for dealing with moments of ritual insecurity during the event. These were mainly caused by the lack of important resources like, for example, the absence of Lao monks and Lao temples in Berlin, and the relatively small number of Lao people in Berlin that are originally from Laos. We argue that by including ethnic Lao from the northeast of Thai-

2. The term 'Lao' refers to the ethnic Lao, the largest and hegemonic ethnic group in Laos, mostly settling in lowland areas and river valleys, and adhering to Theravada Buddhism. Across the border in the Isan (North-East) region of Thailand, most of the Thais are ethnically Lao as well. I use the term 'Laotian' in reference to national citizens of the Lao PDR.

3. 'Lao-ness' is a construct which is based on essentializing culture by taking certain cultural features in order to describe and determine what Lao culture is. Such features are, for example, to eat sticky rice, being the traditional and real Buddhists, speaking Lao, or saving traditional values and customs (Evans 2002: 28–30). This construct reflects changes and shifts in different situations, contexts and socio-political fields.

4. Turner took this term from Arnold Van Gennep (1977) who, within his concept of *rites de passage,* differentiated between rites of separation ('preliminal'), rites of transition ('liminal'), and rites of incorporation ('postliminal') (Barnard & Spencer (2010: 737).

5. Such modifications and accounts on cultural performance are, for example, provided in the edited volume by Graham St. John et. al. (2008). See also the work by Thomasson (2009), who applies Turner's work liminality to new contexts such as revolutions and other situations of radical social change.

6. For further readings and an excellent overview of the field of ritual studies, see for example Catherine Bell's (1992) seminal study.

land, the participating monks and ritual leaders invoked a superordinate identity based on Buddhism and language. Moreover, the acting monks performatively created a transnational narrative through which they tried to link all participants, including themselves, to Laos as a point of origin. By exploring the success, but also potential risk of failure inherent in rituals, we finally want to discuss to what extend this specific event can be understood as a performative negotiation of multiple identities through ritual, temporarily transcending rather different migration experiences.

2. Revolution in Laos and migration from Isan: Three trajectories of migration

There are multiple trajectories of Lao migration to Germany between the 1960s and today. In order to describe the heterogeneous audience attending the rite, and the problems and ritual strategies that evolved during its performance, the following part will in some detail outline the historical circumstances and differences of these migration movements. Two major trajectories are connected to communist revolutions in Asia, the 'Vietnam War'[7], and the 'Secret War' of the USA in Laos, while the third one is mainly linked to the migration of ethnic Lao from the north-eastern part of Thailand.

Regarding the first two trajectories, a short historical excursus is needed: In the turmoil of war between the 1960s and 1970s, already thousands of people were displaced within Laos, and also fled across the border. These flows, dispersals and scatterings of the Laotian population already occurred before the communist revolution and the coming into power of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) on 2nd December of 1975[8]. Many people escaped from bombarded areas of Laos, mostly to the capital Vientiane. The number of displaced people in the country hit approximately 150,000 in 1970 (Evans 2002: 148). After December 1975, people started to leave the country in masses, predominantly by escaping over the Mekong River into neighbouring Thailand.[9] Due to colonial connections, a large proportion of the small wealthy, intellectual, or royal elite already left for France before 1975 (Evans 2002: 178). About 375,000 refugees entered Thailand (Robinson 1991: 215) in the following years. They where dispersed into the different refugee camps along the border set up by the Thai government, partly monitored by the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR).[10] The continuing flow of refugees up to the 1980s was not only triggered by immediate political persecution, but also had economic reasons. Crop failure and destruction of livelihood due to natural disasters such as draught and flooding, and the government's enforced and unsuccessful implementation of agricultural collectivisation, led to famines in the years following 1975. Moreover, many of the people who were sent to re-education camps left the country with their families after their release or escape. Many went to Thailand.[11] Estimations of the total number of refugees from Laos range from 300,000 (Souvannavong 1999: 100) or 360,000 (UNHCR 2000: 98) up to about a third of the whole population (Rehbein 2007: 43), which at that time counted around 3 million. From the Thai refugee camps, for most the final destinations were the USA, France, and Canada. Furthermore Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and finally West Germany agreed to host a contingent of Laotian refugees. According to the UNHCR (2000: 99) 1706 Laotians were resettled in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) between 1975 and 1995 as so called 'quota refugees'.[12]

7. The term 'Vietnam War' is actually misleading, as this war also involved the massive bombing of Laos, and later as well some regions of Cambodia.

8. Already, years before, large parts of the territory were under control of the communist movement, the Pathet Lao. With the support of the North Vietnamese army, the Lao revolutionaries fought against the U.S. and the Lao Royal Government in order to 'liberate' the country from imperialist powers.

9. A large part of these were ethnic Hmong, of whom many fought under the Hmong general Vang Pao for the U.S. Army. Many migrated to the US after Lao became a communist state. For more detailed accounts on Hmong history in Laos and migration through war, see, for example, Paul Hillmer (2009) and Vincent K. Her et. al. (2012).

10. Detailed descriptions of the Thai government's procedural methods, its treatment of the Laotian refugees and the situation in the different refugee camps is provided by Bernard J. Van-es-Beeck (1982).

11. Estimations of the number of people detained in education camps range from 10,000 to 40,000. Many were there only for several month, and due to effective propaganda of the LPRP initially often voluntarily. However, many were imprisoned for up to 15 years, died there or were executed (Evans 2002: 180–181), though this repression never reached the dimension of a genocide as in neighboring Cambodia. Nevertheless, the number of people who left Laos resulted in a veritable brain drain. See Joanna C. Scott (1989) for detailed narratives on the hardship and survival in Lao re-education camps and different strategies of escape.

12. Resettled Laotians in Germany could appeal at the 'Federal Office for Migration' within the regulation of 'The Family unification for refugees and migrants living in Germany' for the subsequent immigration of family members and relatives back in Thai refugee camps.

At the same time, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) already entered diplomatic relations with the Lao PDR, or rather with the *Pathet Lao*—the communist revolutionaries—before 1975.[13] Within this context of the development aid of the GDR, in 1974 the Pathet Lao sent the first 15 Laotian students for further education to East Germany. Between 1974 and 1998, about 2500 Laotians got further training as vocational trainees, students or PhD candidates in the GDR (Reichert 2017).[14] This partially continued after 1989 in the reunified Germany (Schneider 2000: 254; 262).[15] In some cases, Laotians who stayed in the former Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, or Bulgaria and Hungary, took the opportunity to flee from East Berlin into West Berlin during a visit of their fellow compatriots in the GDR.[16] An additional group is made up of those Laotian students who simply stayed after the reunification. In the aftermath of the latter, German government policies were in flux regarding foreign educational migrants and workers in the East of Germany. Within this political and organizational vacuum, some Laotians as well took the chance and applied for asylum, obtained residence permits due to their long stay, or stayed illegally in Germany.

As refugees or as educational migrants, in both cases the Lao were allocated to different towns all over the two countries. In the case of vocational trainees in the GDR, often small towns or villages in the countryside were chosen. The Laotians in East Germany stayed in average for about five years[17] in the country. We met many Laotians who prolonged their stay in the former GDR and later in the reunified Germany up to 12 years and more, or could make arrangements to go back to Germany on a regular basis.[18] In contrast, the refugees in the West did not arrive with the expectation of ever returning to their home country.

Given these rather different migration histories, and their connection to the communist revolution and regime change, one could assume that after the fall of the wall the relations between East and West German Lao are still marked by a certain level of mistrust or even animosity. Given the fact that most are by now already pensioners, it is hard to estimate to what extent their families are still influenced by the political and social alliances the regime changed created. Berlin is obviously a special case here, and according to our experience, initial inhibitions to befriend Lao 'from the other side' gradually dissolved over the years, also thanks to the political reforms happening in Laos.[19] Due to spatial dispersion, the Lao living in the provincial East or West Germany, however, established far fewer connections among each other. Many of the Lao in the West established strong links to ethnic Lao from Thailand, which in most cases have come to Germany for marriage. The latter group has reached Germany in the last 20 years through migration via marriage, whereby this pertains mainly to Laotian women who marry a German or a German Lao.[20]

Therefore the number of Laotian immigrants to the FRG in this time is probably higher. Until now, we could not find any other reliable written sources or statistical data on this. Estimations of several Lao interview partners we asked during our field research range from 3000 to 5000 Laotians in (former) West Germany.

13. Already in 1973, the GDR's first secretary, Erich Honecker, invited a delegation of the *Pathet Lao* for an official state visit to the GDR. The delegation was headed by Nouhak Phoumsavan, one of the *Pathet Laos*'s revolutionary leaders, as reported by the GDR newspaper *Neues Deutschland* in 1973. See AND (1973: 1).

14. The LPRP entered similar agreements with other communist or socialist governments like the former Soviet Union, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Vietnam and Cuba.

15. After reunification, the FRG continued to fulfill the last treaties and agreements between the GDR and the PDR Laos regarding the education and qualification of Laotians in Germany. But new contracts of this scale and form did not come into being.

16. Though at most only a comparatively small number of Laotians chose these paths.

17. We know of a few who stayed less than a year, because they were sent back due to underachievement or "intellektuellem Ungenügen" ('lack of intellectual capacities'). A file of the former GDR's secret police (Stasi) refers, for example, to the involuntary return of nine student military cadres (probably in 1983), (BStU, MfS, HA I, Nr. 13695, sheets 28–29; abbreviations explained at the end).

18. Educational migrants from Laos come to Germany still today, though not anymore in these large numbers and within organizational structures that the former GDR provided. Today students use the possibility to apply for diverse scholarships offered by German or international foundations, and often Laotians come within the networks of German development organizations for higher qualification and training to Germany.

19. In the context of general political reforms, and in face of the large number of Lao in exile (mainly in France and the US), the Lao government has considerably relaxed its laws concerning returnees. Obviously, the socialist government wants to attract investments from returnees, but also wants to contribute to reconciliation.

20. In fact a Lao interview partner told us that Lao men in Germany prefer to marry a Lao woman, even if they have to look for one in Laos. He said: "We have to search in Laos because there are no women in Germany." This account and practice mainly prevails among the first and second generation of migrants. The third generation of young people from the age of children up to the age of about 30,

However, the third and largest group of ethnic Lao in Germany is composed of female Thai migrants from the Isan region of Thailand.[21] Their status between ethnic group and national belonging is ambivalent. The relationship between this region and the Thai government is marked by numerous conflicts and resistance movements due to ethnic and political differences (Phatharathananunth 2006: 24).[22] From a historical perspective, one can argue that these people are ethnic Lao. Siam (as Thailand was then still called) invaded Laos in 1778 and forced the Lao rulers to send thousands of people across the Mekong River to a region on Siamese territory that is today known as Isan. For the rulers in Bangkok, these people were "Thai Lao" (Uhlig 1995: 135). However, during the transformation of Siam into a modern nation-state beginning approximately in 1890, this region of Siam formerly known as "country of the Lao" was changed into Isan aiming toward the integration of the Lao population. The means to impose a Thai nationalist identity on them were rather harsh. Today, almost 20 million Lao live in the Thai nation state, whereas in Laos we only have approx. 3 million ethnic Lao. In Isan, different forms of resistance, rebellion and oppositions occurred, bringing with it an identity shift from Lao to a more "ethnoregional identity" as *khon isan* (people of the northeast) in opposition to *khon thai*, mostly referring to central, Bangkok Thais (Keyes 1995: 157–162). The image of the *khon isan* in relationship to central Thai is marked by a strong hierarchy. Within Thai society, Isan people are marginalised and often work in badly paid jobs. Indeed, most taxi drivers, cleaning staff and sex workers in Bangkok are of Isan origin. In general, they are regarded as poor backward peasants and country bumpkins.[23] We will get back to this group when discussing the importance of group size and necessary resources at the event and in the context of creating a 'Pan-Buddhist' identity as a performative response to the lack of resources.

3. The creation of a shared ritual Lao space: Social hierarchies and liminality

Resulting from the remarks made above, the heterogeneous composition of the people attending the grand opening of the Lao association in Berlin was not a surprise. The 150 people participating were a rather eclectic mix of Lao people with diverse migration histories and paths we outlined above. So how did the ritual and the space it took place in deal with this heterogeneity? We will in this part explore the set-up of the ritual space, the employment of core symbols, and the arrangement of the audience and ritual actors. This is of great importance as these items and the spatial configuration were the basis for creating a Lao space in the first instance.

The grand opening was held in a big room of a communal socio-cultural centre in the urban quarter of Berlin Wedding.[24] The whole event lasted one day, starting with a Buddhist ritual in the morning followed by a shared lunch, cultural performances, dance and music in the afternoon, and a party in the evening opened by a speech of the association's president. In order to mark this official opening, the ambassador of the Lao PDR and his wife were invited.[25] The walls were decorated with hangings and objects depicting, for example, the *That Luang*, the golden grand *stūpa* in Vientiane, which is said to contain a relic of the Buddha.[26] Today, this is one of the most important national and Buddhist symbols of Laos, depicted on bank notes and many other images. According to Grant Evans (1998: 41), the *That Luang* "has be-

seems rather disconnected from the elders' discourse and practice of Lao 'culture', and is more oriented towards, and integrated into, a 'German cultural' environment.

21. It seems that most of them immigrated through marriage to a German. However, it is a widely common prejudice in Germany that Thai women migrants are either married to a German, or are prostitutes in the sex business. But reasons for their migration are manifold and comprise factors like enhancing education and knowledge, or searching for new economic opportunities outside a marriage with a German. For more detailed accounts see Supang Chantavanich et. al. (2001).

22. Somchai Phatharathananunth (2006) explores the recent political and social movements in Isan.

23. See as well Oliver Tappe (2009: 22) on Isan people and their ambivalent identity positioned between Lao, *khon isan* and Thai nationality.

24. The Lao community meets at this centre once a week in the evening. Wedding is a rather poor part of Berlin with a high quota of migrants. For the event the organizers booked the biggest room in the centre. It has the size of a small hall and is separated from the smaller room in the back by a portable wall, which the organizers opened later for the lunch.

25. In the Lao PDR nowadays representatives of the socialist party officiate at major Buddhist state rituals (Ladwig 2015; Evans 1998: 46). They have replaced the king as a sovereign ruler during such events. The presence of the Lao ambassador could be interpreted as a link to Laos in national and territorial terms, or as benevolence and legitimization on the part of the Lao government towards the foundation of the association.

26. In the Buddhist world, Pali *stūpa* or Lao *that* denotes a mound-like structure for housing relics of deceased people, saints or even the Buddha himself.

come the central symbol through which the nation remembers itself". Even under socialist rule, the rituals surrounding it—before carried out by the Buddhist King—were perpetuated by the leaders of Lao People's Revolutionary Party (Ladwig 2015).[27] This *stūpa* and other smaller ones in Laos "are objects of ritual worship, therefore representing and constituting social order and with that hierarchy and identity, but as well allowing modifications of those" (Ladwig 2000: 72). Because this *stūpa* has been at the centre of Lao kingdoms and states since the 16th century, it also functions as a steady reference point. So it does not come as a surprise that depictions of the *That Luang* also prominently feature in exile communities, and often are positioned in a central place. During her research among a Lao refugee community in Toronto, Penny Van Esterik (1992: 78) observed the use of a model of the *That Luang* made of yellow painted styrofoam put in the spatial center during events. In a refugee processing centre in the Philippines in the early 1980s, Lao refugees even built a small concrete version of the *That Luang* (Scott 1989: 214).[28]

Additionally, the room was filled with different traditional Lao music instruments and large posters that showed pictures with sports activities from the local sepak takraw (net football) group in Berlin. Other images showed the diverse cultural activities of the members such as performances of traditional Lao dance or the yearly celebration of the Buddhist New Year. The paintings of a Lao artist, showing different 'traditional scenes' in Laos, were depicted as well.[29] Moreover, a slide show displayed pictures of cultural celebrations in Berlin and several official receptions that the ambassador of the Lao PDR attended. This show was accompanied by Lao folk songs. The altar was positioned at the left side of the stage. The exhibited Buddha statue was a copy of the *Pha Keo* (Emerald Buddha). In spite of its absence[30] this statue, together with the *That Luang*, is the most important religious and national symbol in Laos.[31] Still today, endless stories and rumours about the authenticity of the statue and its travels through Southeast Asia continue to circulate among the Lao in various places.

For Victor Turner cultural experience is mediated through the employment of core symbols. They are "storage units" which carry basic ritual meaning (Turner 1968: 1–2). His symbolic anthropology is influenced by Emile Durkheim, and he is concerned with the ways in which symbols act as "operators in the social process" (Ortner 1983: 131). Furthermore, we understand symbols in this context "as vehicles of transformation and stabilization of the world" (Kokosalakis 2001: 15354) as the above described symbols had the power to transform this club room into a Lao space and at the same time carried a reassuring meaning for the participants. In that sense, the construction of a Lao space helped to affirm or create a common Lao and Buddhist identity and feelings of belonging. By creating this space and performing the corresponding ritual, the Lao in Berlin produced a self-representation based on common core symbols, in some sense known and shared by everyone. Moreover, what has to be considered as well is the fact that there was also a need to 'essentialize' Lao culture in order to represent an 'official image' and thereby achieve recognition for Lao identity and culture in Berlin.

Besides the invocation of (Buddhist) core symbols, the spatial allocation of the ritual actors and the audience can also be regarded as constituting a sense of community. According to our ethnography, and in contrast with what we have observed in Laos, the spatial ordering of the participants reflected pretty much the social hierarchies characteristic of the ethnic Lao. While the diverse

27. The *That Luang* is at the centre of the most important Buddhist festival in Laos taking place in November. For most Lao, it signifies the coming of Buddhism to Laos and "is the center of power" (Evans 1998: 47).

28. This replica was even so big and exact that one could enter the courtyard surrounding the actual *stūpa*. This courtyard is very important during the ritual, as laypeople go around it clockwise three times.

29. Penny Van Esterik (1992: 70) made similar observations during a Buddhist New Year celebration among Lao refugees in Toronto. There handmade household craft items, ornamental weavings and posters of certain places like the Royal Palace in Luang Prabang, as well as the *That Luang*, were depicted.

30. The *Pha Keo* statue or Emerald Buddha is believed to be 2065 years old. After its crafting it was hosted in different places in South East Asia. The story goes that the king of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, King Xayasetthathirat, took the statue with him to Luang Prabang (today Laos), when he took the throne there in 1550. Due to wars between different kingdoms in the region, he brought the Emerald Buddha to Vientiane in 1560. There it stayed for 219 years in a temple. Finally in 1779 King Taksin of Thailand took advantage of the civil wars between various kingdoms in Laos and entered Laos with his army in order to destroy the three kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champasak. Eventually Vientiane was burned down and the Emerald Buddha was brought to Bangkok, where it remains until today (Luangphasy 2007: 2–13). Most Lao today claim that the rightful place of the Emerald Buddha is in Vientiane.

31. See Patrice Ladwig (2015) on the political significance of these two symbols in Lao history, and their role in current discourses of political legitimacy and state rituals in a one-party state under reformed socialism.

symbols used in creating a Lao space were important, it is also the arrangement and localization of people in the room which revealed something about the composition of the group. Social relationships among Lao are marked by a hierarchical pattern, reflected in space and language. Structurally speaking, Lao social space is configured by a pattern that uses dichotomies such as head and feet, old and young, pure and impure, high and low (Formoso 1990: 76) to place individuals in space. These classifications stratify people according to the various intersecting criteria we have listed. The group of the laypeople comprised of different origins and statuses were also mirrored in this spatial order. At the front on a stage sat three monks who always sit in a higher position than the laypeople and are addressed in a special language.[32] In front of them, mostly women gathered on mats on the ground whereby the oldest and regular worshippers filled the first ranks. This section occupied most of the room's space. Further in the back on the left side where more chairs occupied by 10 to 15 German men, mostly married to Lao or Thai women. Most of them preferred not to be ritually involved and were seemingly bored spectators. On the right side, 'honorary' men sat on big comfortable armchairs. Among these men was the ambassador, while his wife mingled with the other laypeople on mats in front of the monks. According to traditional custom, men stand or sit higher than women. The ambassador had an exceptional position within the Buddhist ritual as he was named and honoured several times during the speeches and sermons of the leading monk. The ambassador was also the one who, guided by a *sala-wat* (a layperson assisting the monks), opened the central ritual act, the gift giving to monks (*tak bat*). During the gift giving ceremony, the alms bowls of the monks were placed on a long table, overlooked by the statue of the *Pha Keo*, and the image of the *That Luang* hanging above. The laypeople queued in front of these in order to donate their cooked rice and other food to the monks. A longer sequence of various Pali chants followed, signifying the acceptance of the gifts. The laypeople concluded the rite by pouring water (*yad nam*) into small containers, symbolizing the flow of merit (*boun*) to them caused by their generosity towards the monks. The order of who offers what and when to a monk in Lao and Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism is always indicative of social hierarchies.[33]

What was interesting for us about the spatial arrangement of the room and the ritual actors was the degree to which social hierarchies and the movements in space were part and parcel of the performance of Lao identity in the course of the ritual. Hierarchies were not neutralized during the ritual; they were even reinforced. A loosening of hierarchies wasn't even visible during the 'liminal phase', which Victor Turner saw at the core of ritual processes. According to him, in this phase individuals have "no status, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows" (Turner 1967:98).[34] In contrast to Turner and in reference to the migratory experience, we argue that the performance of social hierarchy in ritual was actually a crucial part of the invocation of a common Lao and Buddhist identity. To know one's position in space, to intuitively understand where one belongs in space during the ritual, and how one addresses the other participants, became an important part of establishing identity. Here, the saying of the woman quoted at the beginning of this paper ("We are all the same") acquires an interesting meaning. Although social hierarchy differentiates people according to specific values (age, status etc.), embedding people in such a system can on a larger level also increase group cohesion. Knowing one's place in the hierarchy is also a way of establishing a feeling of communality, or even a feeling of home. Here one critique of a dichotomy Turner coined in his theoretical thinking—structure, or daily life versus antistructure, or ritual process—applies:

32. For example, laypeople use specific personal pronouns when talking to a monk in order to express their subordination. In Lao language, there are several words for the word 'I' or 'me'. When talking to a monk, a lay person addresses himself as *kha noy* (little slave). The direct Lao translation of 'I' (*kheuy*) is not so often used. Rather people use kinship terms like 'older brother' or 'aunt' or titles like 'teacher' to indicate status and age and to position themselves within the hierarchy.

33. This is regarded as one of the most important ritual acts, as feeding monks is an honor for laypeople, and is a way of making merit (*boun*), which in turn works on one's karma. It is also considered to increase one's fortune and enable ethical self-cultivation.

34. Some approaches to liminality have transferred this state to the situation of migrants as a whole. In this understanding, the social situation of migrants is "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967: 93); they are caught in an extended process of not belonging. They have left their society and are not yet members of another society (Seweryn 2007: 24). Therefore, they can even experience their whole life as liminal. Also this is a fruitful way of thinking about migration on a larger level, we think the transposition from (Turner's) ritual theory to a general state of being is by no means unproblematic. In our opinion we here deal with very different levels and scales of analysis. If such a comparison is made, one has to be very clear about the different scopes of the two experiences, one context dealing with a specific frame limited in time and space, and the other one being an enduring condition that can last for a whole life.

> "Turner's preoccupation with antistructure caused him to downplay the structural and regulatory force of ritual events [. . .] there is always an interplay between replication and adaptation or improvisation. Any reenactment is always partly a re-creation as well as a reproduction." (Lewis 2008: 42)

Turner saw these structural and regulatory forces only in the course of daily life whereby innovation and social change happened during the ritual process. But for Lewis, rituals as a form of special event can be "intensifications of some of the tendencies inherent in any ordinary activity" (Lewis 2008: 43) as well. This includes normative processes as well as innovative ones. Many special events include regulatory forces and continuities (Lewis 2008: 43). Indeed, we argue that in the case described the structural and regulatory forces of the ritual event were an important part of establishing a common identity among the participants. No matter whether they were Lao from East or West Germany, or ethnic Lao from Thailand, the hierarchies performed in space constituted a common point of reference. By reinforcing social hierarchies, and by repeating cultural and religious practices, continuity was produced, which in turn entailed the reassurance and security of identity, even in a group, which is so diverse. However, the critique by Lewis mentioned above might also overlook the fact that Turner developed an increasingly complex notion of liminality beyond his ethnographic material from the Ndembu, a small-scale society in Zambia in which he undertook fieldwork in the 1950s.[35] In this light. recent work by Bjørn Thomasson has skillfully re-actualized the potentials of liminality and other elements of Turner's theories for the study of modernity.[36]

Taking this more complex and diverse notion of liminality into account, one could argue that on another level the elimination of difference—according to Turner a crucial feature of certain rituals and liminality—was also a constitutive part of the ritual. As we have explained before, the distinction between Laotian refugees in West Germany and (educational) migrants in East Germany raises further questions about a possible partition of the group concerning political motivations, identity claims or different feelings of belongings. But in the case of the described event, processes of self-ascription and ascription by others regarding political, socially and emotionally loaded issues of conflict were almost absent, and mutual consent was predominant. Given the fact that in this room refugees who fled Lao communism and people that were sponsored by the same government were together performing a ritual, Turner's idea of the elimination of difference during the course of a ritual takes on an important significance. These divisions were subordinated to the larger goal of social integration and the effort to make the opening of the Association successful in order to have a future platform for meetings and collective activities. Things could also have taken a rather different trajectory: Many Lao in exile in France, for example, continue to use symbols such as the old (pre-communist) national flag of Laos (a three-headed elephant), and images that depict the last king of Laos, Savang Vatthana, who ruled from 1959 to 1975. Vatthana was sent to a re-education camp and died there after a few years. Any talk and visual depiction of him is completely tabooed in Laos, and would for sure have caused a scandal at the opening rite. Moreover, one of the core symbols of the ritual—the *That Luang* relic shrine—was invoked in such a way that it was devoid of political content. In the past, its worship was linked to the Buddhist king, whereas today communist cadres act as ritual leaders. Due to the neutral depiction of the relic shrine at the opening rite, it could bridge the gap between the East and West Lao present, and its symbolism absorbed some of the discontinuities caused by revolution in Laos.

However, one should not limit these identity building capacities to ritual performances alone. Other parts of the event were equally important in regard to accomplishing a common Lao identity and a space of belonging. The performance of traditional music and dance by different groups, collective lunch, and a speech of the association's president, followed by a big dance party in the evening, might at first sight seem less crucial, but they also represent important features of the event. The association and its agenda were supposed to provide a more solid basis for the regular reassurance of a common identity and belonging. For example, the *sepak takraw* (net-football) players and the dance performers consisted of different groups of people. Whereas the *sepak takraw* sporting ac-

35. Developing a "comparative symbology" (Turner 1974a), he made a conscious effort to define liminality much more broadly, but also in more differentiated ways in order to make it applicable to modern societies. Our case described here is obviously very different from an initiation rite described by Turner for the Ndembu (1967: 95f.), and employed for extending van Gennep's (1977) classical approach to ritual. According to Thomasson (2009: 14), Turner was already in his earlier works on the topic "sensing that what he argued for the Ndembu had relevance far beyond the specific ethnographic context."

36. Thomasson (2014) indeed develops a whole social theory out of Turner's theoretical apparatus. He applies the notion, for example, to revolutions and situations of radical social change (Thomasson 2012).

tivities were more often frequented by Lao people, the performers in the dance group were mostly Thai-Isan women and their children. Both groups were brought into the service of the association in order to create a Lao identity, as well as the identity of the association.[37]

In this part we have described the efforts in creating a Lao ritual space by invoking Lao core symbols, and by placing people in space according to principles of social hierarchy. This space was a precondition for the entering the liminal phase during the ritual, in which it was possible to invoke a common Lao identity that then could be connected to the official opening of the Lao association. What we here observed was a reinforcement of social hierarchies, and simultaneously the transcending of cultural and political differences in order to create a broader common identity, and a space of belonging. The whole event, as well as the future work of the association, was therefore a contribution to minimize different migratory experiences, and the uncertainties and risks these could potentially cause.

In the following part we would also like to go beyond the idea of stabilization through ritual, and discuss the effects of the lack of crucial cultural, symbolic and economic resources on the performance of the rite. The fact that there were no monks from Laos present, that there was no Lao temple available in which the rites could be held, and that there were rather few people in Berlin with an origin in Laos, made the achievement of liminality and the resolution of potential conflicts by no means easier. The participants had to deal with moments of ritual insecurity, which constituted a potential threat regarding the success of the whole event, and the liminal phase during the Buddhist ritual.

4. Ritual insecurity: Lack of resources and performativity

The foundation of the Lao association Berlin was of immense value for the Lao people as it represented for them an official platform to practice, promote and preserve their understandings of Lao culture and identity. The Buddhist ceremony on that day stood for all these representations, wishes and hopes. However, due to the lack of resources it also contained moments of ritual insecurity. Whereas on the side of the invoked symbolism (the *That Luang*, the *Pha Keo* etc.) we have discussed before, everything was done successfully to create a Lao (national) space and an atmosphere of 'Laon-ess', there was on the other side a sense of insecurity among people, and an awareness of the differences between participants. Having a homogenous group of Lao (say, for example, only Lao refugees from West Germany) would have made it much easier to define Lao identity and the aims of the association. However, the heterogeneous nature of the participants and their diverse migration histories on some level created a risk of failure.

Let us first briefly define what we mean with insecurity or failure. According to the recent work of Ute Hüsken et. al. (2007) on ritual failure, there are basically two ways of understanding the phenomenon. In the first sense, ritual failure might be understood as "a matter of mistakes, procedural errors, and incorrect performance" (Schieffelin 2007: 5). In the second sense, which we apply to our case study, ritual failure "is primarily conceptualised in terms of the *failure of the ritual to produce expected results*" (Ibid. 2007: 4, our emphasis). Regarding the latter, Ute Hüsken (2007: ix) asks: "What if rituals, invented to create a communal identity, fail to convince the audience?" This question hung unspoken in the air at the morning of the event in Berlin. The Lao from East Germany and the ambassador, for example, could connect back to an actually existing homeland, whereas some of the elderly West German Lao had lost this home, and had partially gone through a traumatizing refugee experience. We therefore sometimes sensed a certain nervousness among people, probably caused by the negative implication such a bad start could have for the association's activity. Beyond the question of politics and migration, there are in general strong beliefs surrounding the 'auspiciousness' (*mangkala*) of opening rites that largely determine the following course of things.[38] Perhaps because of the awareness that people with very different relationships to Laos as a homecountry were present on that day, there was a special emphasis and effort to create a setting with which all participants could identify themselves, and therefore with the rite, the association and its future agenda.

According to many Lao participants, one of the main

37. In the articles of the association under §2 'purpose of the association' the *sepak takraw* sport is explicitly listed. Though the dance group is not clearly named in this paragraph they are linked to the point 'preservation and maintenance of Lao Culture and traditions'.

38. This is widely observable in Lao rites, for example, at a blessing of a new house (*boun huean mai*). Fortune and luck (*sook*) and auspiciousness (*mangkala*) are regularly invoked at opening events and are primarily produced through the ritual performance at a proper time and place (determined by a monk or lay astrologer), the chanting of monks (e.g. the *mangkala sutta*) and the proper veneration of monks by laypeople through merit-making. Failure to perform correctly is often overplayed in ritual, but still considered as a failure that has to be compensated, but in the worst case can ruin a new undertaking. Lao and Thai monks chant in Pali, unintelligible for most

reasons for the ritual insecurity and the potential failure hovering above the opening ceremony was rooted in the fact that there was no Lao temple in Berlin, and no one of the invited monks was originally from Laos. Moreover, the ethnic Lao stemming from Thailand played an important role at the event as they constituted about 30% to 40% of the whole group. Although they are considered ethnically Lao, the people with origin in Laos still perceived a difference between themselves and the ones from Isan. The fragmented nature of the community we have outlined in part 2 here almost became a threat and was endangering the success of the rite. This view was also expressed in a longer conversation by Saysomboun[39]—the president of the Lao association—before the beginning of the Buddhist ritual. His main point of worry was the fact that he had failed to find a monk from Laos. "There is no Lao temple and no monk from Laos in Berlin", he complained. Then he mentioned that there were approximately 100 Lao people registered in Berlin, who either have German or Laotian citizenship. He further explained that most likely there were many more Lao here, including the ones who entered Germany clandestinely and had an illegal status. This figure he compared with the size of the Lao community in the Frankfurt-Mannheim region where approximately 700 Lao live. There the community achieved the construction of the only Lao temple in Germany with a monk from Laos in residence.[40] In order to stem the project financially the people in Frankfurt collectively took out a loan of 1,2 Mio. Euro. According to the president of the Lao association, the community in Berlin is too weak to approach a similar project for their region, though the wish to achieve likewise is rather strong.

Saysomboun then went on talking about the excellent reputation of the Lao monk from Frankfurt, that his services are very popular, and that his origins are in fact in Laos. For the Lao community in Berlin, he would therefore have been the most legitimate monk to carry out the Buddhist ceremony at the day of the opening of the association. They tried to invite him for this occasion, but due to obligations in another town on that day he could not come to Berlin. Being the only Lao monk residing in Germany, he was in demand from many Lao communities all over Germany, and his schedule was always tight. Saysomboun repeatedly mentioned that his services were booked out one year in advance; it almost sounded to us like an excuse. In another conversation after the ritual, another Lao participant stressed again that the community really tried to invite the Lao monk, but failed.

This shows that the strong wish to secure a Lao space for the event is not limited to a category like 'ethnic Lao', but is combined with a discourse on Laoness in the sense of stemming from Laotian national territory. By so strongly arguing for a monk from Laos, Saysomboun on some level excluded the Lao from Isan. Moreover, his narrative revealed that at least people from Laos in this particular context view their Buddhist traditions and practices differently from the ones of the people from Isan.[41] In Berlin, we attended several Buddhist rituals in a Thai temple. The few attending people from Laos mostly were part of the network around the above mentioned dance group, that regularly performs at bigger and important Buddhist and cultural festivals.[42] The fact that Isan people are still today discriminated by Thais from the central region as marginal, backwards and poor country-bumpkins might as well play an important role in creating these differences. Thus, a certain disparity between symbols and actors became obvious.[43]

Thus, the fact that no monk from Laos was present at the ritual led to an interesting performative[44] strategy.

people. Such chants "are meant to be heard but paradoxically they are not understood by the majority of the congregation (nor by some of the monks themselves)" (Tambiah 1970: 195). However, Lao and Thai Buddhists are "emphatic that through listening to the chants the congregation gains merit, blessings, and protection" (ibid. 195).

39. All names are fictional and have been altered.

40. The Lao temple Wat Sibounheuang is located in Altlußheim, a small town nearby Mannheim. It was built in 2003. The monk in residence at that time, Ajan Outhai Dhammiko, was originally from Champasak province in the south of Laos. He had been in Germany since 1997.

41. In the Wikipedia link of Wat Sibounheuang it is stated that it is the only temple in Germany run by Laotian immigrants and propagating Theravada Buddhism in 'Lao tradition'. (http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wat_Sibounheuang) (retrieved: 19/04/12).

42. I made similar observations in a Lao community in Hamburg. Very few Lao visit to the Thai temple there.

43. Duncan McCargo and Krisadawan Hongladarom (2004: 231–232) discovered during their research on ambiguities and politicization within discourses on Isan identity also processes of inclusion and exclusion towards Lao people in Laos by Isan people. These are often based on perceiving them as underdeveloped and inferior. Some Isan people even argue that Lao from the Lao PDR actually originated from Thailand.

44. There are obviously numerous definitions of performance. Performance theory in general postulates that action and practice are not simply constituted by acting out ideas, but that in the very act of performing, something new is created. I understand 'performance'

The Lao community invited three monks to carry out the Buddhist ceremony on that day. Two were from Thailand and resided in one of the four Thai temples in Berlin. At least one of them stemmed from the Isan region in Thailand. The third monk was French and came from a Dharma centre in Berlin. At the beginning of the ceremony the leading monk introduced the two other monks and himself and pointed out that he and his Thai fellow already had been to Luang Prabang, the old king's city in the north of Laos, and that they had stayed there for several weeks. Then he introduced the French monk with the remark that despite him being French, he "speaks Lao with Vientiane accent".[45] Continuing his introduction speech, the leading monk talked in detail about his stay in Luang Prabang, narrating little stories about the different ancient and popular temples, the devoted laypeople there, and how earnestly they practiced Buddhism. He indeed accentuated a difference between being Thai and being Lao at first. But then he combined this statement with the remark that despite these differences, they were all Buddhists with a similar cultural background. He as well tried to exclusively speak Lao, using Lao terms and pronunciation instead of Thai when possible.[46] There was a great playfulness in his words that made the laypeople throw in little jokes here and there, too. According to J. Lowell Lewis (2008: 51) play or playfulness is often used in rituals and can be used to establish or deconstruct socio-cultural patterns within a ritual, when questions of legitimacy, authority and so on erupt. The playing and joking during the event in Berlin were, in my opinion, used to establish the legitimacy of the three monks as performers of the ritual. In participating in the performative play of linguistic and cultural difference, a basis for the later invocation of a common identity and belonging was set.

The invocation of a common identity of all participants was then also an important part of the longer sermon the monk later on delivered.[47] This was another excellent performance with strategic value. The content of the sermon pertained explicitly to the opening of the association. The leading monk inaugurated the association and announced his delight about its genesis. He organised his sermon around four basic values: dedication, patience, dharma ('Buddhist teachings'), and mutual help. He interlinked each of these aspects with the association and with ideas of commitment (*samkhum*). Later he applied these four values with regard to society in general and family issues. He lectured about socialisation, social behaviour and cooperation and the meaning of these values for an association like this one. At this stage he as well explicitly referred to the ambassador of the Lao PDR and the organizers of the grand opening.

During the alms giving to the monks, all laypeople gave money donations as well, which were collected in a bowl. After the Buddhist ritual and the following lunch for the monks, one person called up for donations again and collected these in a basket. As usual the donations first were handed over to the monks who normally finance the temple activities and their living costs with the money. But this time the leading monk with a ceremonial gesture handed the donations over to the association. Then several people sat down in order to count the money in public and announced the sum of approximately 500 Euros as a contribution to the association. With this final symbolic act the monk again expressed his approval and support of the newly inaugurated association and invoked feelings of belonging to a common identity among the laypeople.

To summarize: The monk integrated several means to overcome ritual insecurity during the ceremony in his performance. His ritual work of bridging the gap between the different laypeople included the invocation of ties to Laos, the appellation of a quasi- Pan-Buddhist identity and the invocation of a common cultural origin as being Lao. Like in Stanley Tambiah's (1985: 138) performative approach to ritual, it was of utmost importance that the ritual performances achieved "interpersonal orchestration" and "social integration and continuity". Through these integrative moments, he inverted the apparent disadvantage caused by ritual insecurity due to the lack of resources and the heterogeneity of the audience. Initial sentiments of difference were rhetorically turned into an advantage: identity was created with reference to a larger group; a part of some greater whole united under the um-

here as "metaphorically to explain social action as a complex system of symbolic and meaningful behavior which produces an ordered understanding of the world" (Geertz 1973, cited in Hughes-Freeland 2001: 11232).

45. In a conversation earlier that day, the French monk also mentioned his close contacts to the Lao community in Paris.

46. Lao and Thai are similar languages. A large amount of the vocabulary is the same, but there can also be large differences in pronunciation and tone. Most Lao understand Thai due to watching Thai television, but this is not true vice versa. Indeed, speaking proper Lao with a person from Bangkok who only knows standard Thai is rather confusing.

47. These sermons (*thesana*) are usually didactic, and are rooted in common Buddhist principles of morality. They are often organized according to Buddhist key values, and in the eyes of Buddhist laypeople are a 'gift of the dhamma' to which one should listen carefully (Ladwig 2009: 141–43).

brella of the association. By giving the people from Isan the feeling that the association and its agenda also addresses them, and by establishing a link to Laotian territory and the nation state of Laos, the monk giving the sermon managed to appeal to the Lao from Isan and the ones from Laos at the same time. This is congruent with the argumentation of Fredrik Barth who pointed out that it is "the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (Barth 1969: 15). Borders are to be understood as socially and contextually constructed (ibid.). Despite sharing similar 'cultural stuff', Lao people from both countries switch between identities along the above-described borders, and in this part of the event the boundary was transformed from a narrow one to a larger, more inclusive one.

Furthermore, what here came into play in a twofold way was the importance of the size of the group. First, the more people at a Buddhist ritual, the more *saksit* (holiness) or *boun* (positive karmic substance) can be 'released' and channelled for a specific purpose—in this case the successful opening of the association, and a good start for further activities carried out under its auspices. Second, the opting for a wider identity as Pan-Buddhist in order to include all participants—and its acceptance by all attendants—results ideally in important benefits such as an increase in human and social resources. The latter are necessary to approach new, regular and more complex projects, say implementing a 'Sunday school' where children of Lao migrants can learn the Lao language. However, it remained open as to whether or not all participants of the grand opening stuck to this wider identity as Pan-Buddhist and if this had a real impact on planned future projects and the sharing of their benefits.[48] Identity shifts along national, regional or political borders that emphasize or construct differences might have evolved in other, non-ritual situations, later on.

Finally, we briefly want to refer to the leading role of the monk and his virtuosity during the whole performance. According to Günther Schlee (2004: 137) there are always certain actors in a group who "are virtuosi in identity manipulation, who succeed in the widening or narrowing of group memberships or inter-group alliances intentionally." The monk did this not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the association. Due to his excellent rhetorical capacities, the monk succeeded in turning a potential failure into an advantage. By improvising he made a virtue out of necessity, and during the ritual something new and innovative was created. Despite the critique of Turner's concept of liminality that we mentioned before (the missing out on the structural and regulatory forces of rituals), his view of the liminal phase as a "realm of pure possibility" (Turner 1967: 97) fits well in this context. The monk temporarily opened up a new space in which the future of the association looked promising and full of potential achievements.

5. Conclusion

We have shown that in the case of the opening of a Lao association in Berlin, the initial Buddhist ceremony, and the use of common symbols created a ritual space in which migratory differences and insecurity were minimized or even overcome. The participants succeeded in creating a space of a shared identity and belonging. Despite the different migratory trajectories and origins of people, and the lack of important resources, the performance managed to establish a Lao space. We identified the employment of Buddhist core symbols (e.g. the *That Luang* and the *Pha Keo*) as a major point of importance here, and thereby conceptualized these symbols as "a set of evocative devices for rousing, channeling, and domesticating powerful emotions" (Turner 1969: 43). But also, the spatial arrangement of ritual actors and the placing according to hierarchical principles created a common point of reference. These lead to the incorporation of the three groups of Lao that I introduced in part 2. The ritual was able to at least temporarily eradicate the differences between the Lao that came to West Germany as refugees, the Lao that lived in East Germany as educational migrants, and the Thai Isan people.

In this sense, we used Turner's ritual theory in the classical fashion of the 'Manchester School', where Max Gluckman and others focused on social problems, their processes of articulation and the stabilization of society and its inherent conflicts through rituals (Werbner 1984). However, unlike in Gluckman's (1963: 110) theory of rites of rebellion, we conceptualized ritual as a kind of pre-emptive strike that overplays and hides differences and potential conflicts.[49]

Liminality during this ritual process was understood in two ways: First, as a ritual phase where it becomes possible not only to reassure and renew identity and belong-

48. See as well Günther Schlee (2004: 136–138) on the importance of politics and economics of group size regarding processes of social inclusion and exclusion.

49. Turner was heavily influenced by Gluckman's understanding of ritual. Gluckman (1963: 110f.), for example, advanced the idea that rituals of rebellion that involve ritualized forms of hostility actually have stabilizing effects on society when performed properly.

ing, but where people with quite different backgrounds can be united through the sharing of a subordinate identity of being Lao (in the widest sense) and being Buddhist. This contributed to a transcending of the differences caused by particular migratory experience under the umbrella of the association. Second, we explored moments of ritual insecurity caused by a lack of important resources such as local Lao monks. Here, liminality involved moments where the success of the whole event was at stake due to the heterogeneity of the group, and the missing of a monk as a ritual leader from Laos. We presented the leading role of the monk and his strategic sermon-making as crucial for appealing to all participants. Due to his authority and strategy, he managed to performatively invoke an encompassing identity for the newly founded association. Ritualization, as "a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations" (Bell 1992: 197), was here largely successful. A Pan-Buddhist identity and a Lao identity linked to Laotian territory were ritually combined, and presented the association as a single entity, not divided by different migration trajectories, but under the temporary ritual leadership of a monk.

Regarding the general idea in the work of Turner and others that ritual entails transformative processes, we think that the event in Berlin certainly led to a 'ritual reshaping' of the participants, resulting in feelings of belonging to one bigger project in order to promote Lao culture. As Graham St. John (2008: 4) points out, Turner also uses the term 'social drama' to describe the actions during rituals and festivals. As rites enable participants to experiment with social relations or to invent new ones, these performances themselves carry great potential to activate new social dramas. However, once the liminal space and time frame of ritual is left, and the quotidian takes over, the crucial question is: When the group performing is already very heterogeneous, as in the case we described, how durable then are the relations fostered during rituals? The 'activation energy' had been ritually generated, but what in quotidian working contexts within the association happened, is another story we cannot tell at this time.

Bibliography

Allgemeiner Nachrichtendienst (ADN). 1973. "Solidarisch mit dem Volk von Laos. Erich Honecker empfing Delegation des Zentralkomitees der Patriotischen Front." In *Neues Deutschland* (newspaper), 08.05.1973.

Barnard, Alan and Jonathan Spencer. 2000. "Rites of Passage." In *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, edited by Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer, 737–738. London: Routledge.

Barth, Fredrik. 1969. "Introduction." *In Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, edited by Frederik Barth, 9–38. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Bell, Catherine. 1992. *Ritual Theory. Ritual Practice.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Blickle, Peter. 2002. *Heimat. A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland.* Rochester: Camden House.

Chantavanich, Supang; Nittayananta, Suteera, Ratanaolan-Mix, Prapairat; Ruenkaew, Pataya. 2001. *The Migration of Thai Women to Germany. Causes, Living Conditions and Impacts for Thailand and Germany.* Bangkok: Asian Research Center for Migration (ARCM), Chulalongkorn University.

Evans, Grant. 1998. *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance. Laos Since 1975.* Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press.

Evans, Grant. 1999. "Introduction. What is Lao Culture and Society?" In *Laos. Culture and Society*, edited by Grant Evans, 1–34. Chiang Mai: Silkworm

Evans, Grant. 2002. A Short History of *Laos. The Land in Between*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm.

Formoso, Bernard. 1990. "From the Human Body to the Humanized Space. The System of Reference and Representation of Space in Two Villages of Northeast Thailand." *The Journal of the Siam Society* 78 (1): 67–83.

Gebhard, Gunther; Geisler, Oliver and Steffen Schröter. 2007. "Heimatdenken: Konjunkturen und Konturen. Statt einer Einleitung." In *Heimat. Konturen und Konjunkturen eines umstrittenen Konzepts*, edited by Gunther Gebhard and Oliver Geisler, 9–56. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture. Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books Publishers.

Gluckman, Max. 1963. *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa: Collected Essays with an Autobiographical Note*. London: Routledge.

Her, Vincent K.; Buley-Meissner and Mary Louise (eds.). 2012. *Hmong and American. From Refugees to Citizens*. Minnesota: Historical Society Press.

Hillmer, Paul. 2009. *A People's History of the Hmong.* Minnesota: Historical Society Press.

Hüsken, Ute. 2007. "Preface." In *When Rituals go Wrong: Mistakes, Failure, and the Dynamics of Ritual*, edited by Ute Hüsken, ix–xi. Leiden: Brill.

Hughes-Freeland, Felicia. 2001. "Performance: Anthropological Aspects." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, edited by Neil Smelser and Paul Baltes, 11231–11236, New York: Elsevier.

Keyes, Charles F. 1995. "Hegemony and Resistance in Northeastern Thailand." In *Regions and National Integration in Thailand 1892–1992*, edited by Volker Grabowsky, 154–182, Wiesbaden: Harassowitz.

Kokosalakis, Nikos. 2001. "Symbolism (Religious) and Icon." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, edited by Neil Smelser and Paul Baltes, 15354–15357. New York: Elsevier.

Ladwig, Patrice. 2000. "Relics, 'Representation' And Power. Some Remarks on Stūpas Containing Relics of the Buddha in Laos." *Tai Culture* 5 (1): 70–84.

Ladwig, Patrice 2009. "Narrative ethics: The Excess of Giving and Moral Ambiguity in the Lao Vessantara-Jataka." In: Heintz, Monika (ed): *The Anthropology of Moralities*, edited by Monoka Heintz, 136–160, Oxford/New York: Berghahn.

Ladwig, Patrice 2015. "Worshipping relics and animating statues. Transformations of Buddhist statecraft in contemporary Laos." *Modern Asian Studies* 49 (6): 1875–1902.

Lewis, J. Lowell. 2008. "Toward a Unified Theory of Cultural Performance: A Reconstructive Introduction to Victor Turner." In *Victor Turner And Contemporary Cultural Performance*, edited by Graham St. John, 41–58. New York & Oxford: Berghahn.

Luangphasy, Duangxay. 2007. *The Story of the Emerald Buddha Phrakeomorakot* (5th edition). Vientiane.

McCargo, Duncan and Krisadawan Hongladarom. 2004. "Contesting Isan-ness. Discourses of Politics and Identity in Northeast Thailand." *Asian Ethnicity* 5 (2): 219–234.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1984. "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1): 126–166.

Phatharathananunth, Somchai. 2006. *Civil Society And Democratization. Social Movements in Northeast Thailand*. Copenhagen: NIAS.

Reichert, Nicole. 2017. "Socialist Pathways of Education. The Lao in East Germany." In *Contemporary Laos. Society, Politics and Culture in a Postsocialist State*, edited by Vatthana Pholsena & Vanina Bouté, 135–163. Singapore: University Press.

Rehbein, Boike. 2007. *Globalization, Culture and Society in Laos*. New York/London: Routledge.

Robinson, W. Courtland. 1991. "Laotian Refugees in Thailand: The Thai and US Response, 1975 to 1988." In *Laos: Beyond the Revolution*, edited by Joseph Zasloff and Leonard Unger, 215–240. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Schieffelin, Edward (2007). "Introduction." In *When Rituals go Wrong: Mistakes, Failure, and the Dynamics of Ritual*, edited by Ute Hüsken, 1–20. Leiden: Brill.

Schlee, Günther. 2004. "Taking Sides And Constructing Identities: Reflections On Conflict Theory." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10 (2): 135–156.

Schneider, Andreas. 2000. *Laos: Geschichte, Bildungswesen und Humankapitalentwicklung im 20. Jahrhundert. Untersuchungen zur personellen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit am Beispiel der Reintegration laotischer Absolventen deutscher Bildungseinrichtungen*. Frankfurt am Main & Berlin: Peter Lang.

Scott, Joanna Catherine. 1989. *Indochina's refugees. Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam*. Jefferson: Mc Farland.

Seweryn, Olga. 2007. "Identity Change as a Consequence of the Migration Experience." In *Imagining Frontiers, Contesting Identities*, edited by Steven Ellis and Lud'a Klusáková, 21–41. Pisa: Edizioni Plus Pisa University Press.

Souvannavong, Sisombat. 1999. "Elites in Exile. The Emergence of a Transnational Lao Culture." In *Laos. Culture and Society*, edited by Grant Evans, 100–124, Chiang Mai: Silkworm.

St. John, Graham. (ed.) 2008. *Victor Turner And Contemporary Cultural Performance*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn.

Tambiah, Stanley. 1970. *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tambiah, Stanley. 1985. "A Performative Approach to Ritual." In *Culture, Thought, and Social Action. An Anthropological Perspective*, edited by Stanley Tambiah, 126–166. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tappe, Oliver. 2009. "Nachbarschaftsstreit am Mekong: König Anuvong und die Geschichte der prekären Lao-Thai-Beziehung." *Austrian Journal* of South-East Asian Studies 2 (1): 6–29.

Thomassen, Bjørn. 2009. "The Uses and Meanings of Liminality." *International Political Anthropology* 2 (1): 5–27.

Thomasson, Bjørn. 2012. "Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (3): 679–706.

Thomassen, Bjørn. 2014. *Liminality and the Modern. Living Through the In-Between*. Burlington: Ashgate.

Turner, Victor. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Turner, Victor. 1968. *The Drums of Affliction. A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press and International African Institute.

Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Turner, Victor. 1974. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Turner, Victor. 1974a. "Liminal to Liminoid." in *Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology*, edited by Victor Turner. Rice Institute Pamphlet—Rice University Studies No. 60/3.

Uhlig, Harald. 1995. "The 'Problem-Region' Northeastern Thailand." In *Regions and National Integration in Thailand 1892–1992*, edited by Volker Grabowsky, 130–144. Wiesbaden: Harassowitz.

UNHCR. 2000. *The State of the World's Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*. Oxford.

Van-es-Beeck, Bernard J. 1982. "Refugees from Laos, 1975–1979." In C*ontemporary Laos. Studies in the Politics and Society of the Lao People's Democratic Republic*, edited by Martin Stuart-Fox, 324–334. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Van Esterik, Penny. 1992. T*aking Refuge. Lao Buddhism in North America*. Arizona State University: Program for Southeast Asian Studies.

van Gennep, Arnold. 1977. *The Rites of Passage.* London: Routledge.

Werbner, Richard P. 1984. "The Manchester School In South-Central Africa." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 13 (1): 157–85.

Times Reporters. 2012. "Deputy PM meets people of Lao origin in Thailand." *Vientiane Times* (newspaper).

Abbreviations of the BStU and the GDR's Ministry of Secret Police:

BStU: Bundesbeauftragter für die Staatssicherheitsunterlagen (Federal Commissioner for the Stasi-Files)

MfS: Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry of Secret Police)

HA I: Hauptabteilung I: NVA und Grenztruppen (Main Department or Head Department I: National People's Army and border patrols of the GDR)—This department dealt with the "security" of the Ministry for National Defence and its subordinated leading sections, troops, and institutions

Short Bios

Patrice Ladwig studied Social Anthropology and Sociology, and obtained his PhD from the University of Cambridge. His work focuses on the anthropology of Buddhism (Laos and Thailand), the anthropology of politics, death and funeral cultures, the history of colonialism and the Cold War, and general social theory. He is currently senior research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (Göttingen, Germany) and carries out research on economic modernization, religion and ethics in the context of the Max Planck-Cambridge Centre for the Study of Ethics, Human Economy and Social Change.

Nicole Reichert studied Educational Science (M.A., University of Dortmund), and after some years of working with refugees in Germany, obtained an additional degree in Intercultural Education from Cologne Univer-

sity. After living and working in Laos for two years, she became a PhD candidate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle, Germany). Her historical and anthropological research here focused on the diverging migration experiences of the ethnic Lao in the former GDR, and in East and West Germany.