ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/8423/1/Dissertation_spirit_mediumship_2008.pdf.

Sangun, Suwanlert. 1976. “Phii Pob: Spirit Possession in Rural Thailand,” in William T. Lebra ed., *Culture-Bound Syndromes, Ethnopsychiatry, and Alternate Therapies*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. Pp. 68-87.

Spiro, Melford. 1967. *Burmese Supernaturalism: A Study in the Explanation and Reduction of Suffering*. Englewood Cliff: Prentice Hall.

Sprenger, Guido. 2006. *Die Männer, die den Geldbaum Fällten: Konzepte von Austausch und Gesellschaft bei den Rmeet von Takheung, Laos*. Berlin: LitVerlag.

——. 2008. “Do the Rmeet Have Clans?” in Michel Lorrillard and Yves Goudineau eds., *Recherches Nouvelles sur le Laos*. Paris: École Française de l’Extrême-Orient. Pp. 559-578.

——. 2016. “Dimensions of Animism in Southeast Asia,” in Guido Sprenger and Kaj Århem eds., *Animism in Southeast Asia*. London: Routledge. Pp. 31-51.

——. 2017a. “Communicated into Being: Systems Theory and the Shifting of Ontological Status,” *Anthropological Theory*, 17(1): 108-132.

——. 2017b. “Local Comparisons: Buddhism and its Others in Upland Laos,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 142(2): 245-264.

——. 2017c. “Goods and Ethnicity: Trade and Bazaars in Laos from a Gift Perspective,” *Heidelberg Ethnology Occasional Papers*, 6. http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/hdethn/article/view/420

Stolz, Rosalie. 2020. *Living Kinship, Fearing Spirits: Sociality among the Khmu of Northern Laos*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Stonington, Scott. 2020. “Karma Masters: The Ethical Wound, Hauntological Choreography and Complex Personhood in Thailand,” *American Anthropologist*, 122(4): 759-770.

Strenski, Ivan. 1983. “On Generalized Exchange and the Domestication of Buddhism,” *Man, New Series*, 18(3): 463-477.

Terwiel, Barend Jan. 2012. *Monks and Magic: Revisiting a Classic Study of Religious Ceremonies in Thailand*. Copenhagen: NIAS.

Visisya, Pinthongvijayakul. 2019. “Performing Alterity of Desire: Bodiliness and Sexuality in Spirit Mediumship in Northeast Thailand,” *American Anthropologist*, 121(1): 101-112. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13160.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 1998. “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, NS*, 4: 469-488.

——. (Transl. Theresa Mentrup). 2019. *Kannibalische Metaphysiken: Elemente Einer Post-Strukturalen Anthropologie*. Leipzig: Merve.

Wagner, Roy. 1991. “The Fractal Person,” in Maurice Godelier and Marilyn Strathern eds., *Big Men and Great Men: Personifications of Power in Melanesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 159-173.

WANG Ruijing. 2019. *Kinship, Cosmology and Support: Toward a Holistic Approach to Childcare in the Akha Community in South-Western China*. Berlin/Münster: LitVerlag.

References

Århem, Kaj. 2016. "Southeast Asian Animism: a Dialogue with Amerindian Perspectivism," in Kaj Århem and Guido Sprenger eds., *Animism in Southeast Asia*. London: Routledge. Pp. 279-301.

Atkinson, Jane Monnig. 1992. "Shamanisms Today," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21: 307-330.

Barraud, Cécile. 1990. "Wife-givers as Ancestors and Ultimate Values in the Kei Islands," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 146(2/3): 193-225.

Baumann, Benjamin. 2016. "The Khmer Witch Project: Demonizing the Khmer by Khmerizing a Demon," in Peter Bräunlein and Andrea Lauser eds., *Ghost Movies in Southeast Asia and Beyond. Narratives, Cultural Contexts, Audiences*. Leiden and Boston: Brill. Pp. 141-183.

——. 2020. "Same Same but Different: Eine Romantische Dekonstruktion des Paradoxografischen Trends in den Gegenwärtigen Thai-Studien," *Polylog: Zeitschrift für Interkulturelles Philosophieren*, 43: 101-130.

Brac de la Perrière, Bénédicte. 2011. "Being a Spirit Medium in Contemporary Burma," in Kirsten W. Endres and Andrea Lauser eds., *Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast-Asia*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books. Pp. 163-184.

Cassaniti, Julia. 2015. *Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press.

Condominas, Georges. 1976. "Quelques Aspects du Chamanisme et des Cultes de Possession en Asie du Sud-Est et Dans le Monde Insulindien," in Jean Poirier and F. Raveau eds., *L'autre et l'ailleurs: Mélanges offerts à Roger Bastide*. Paris : Berger-Levrault. Pp. 215-232.

Descola, Philippe. 2011. *Jenseits von Natur und Kultur*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Doré, Amphay. 1979a. "Profils Mediumniques Lao," *Cahiers de l'Asie du Sud-Est*, 5: 7-25.

——. 1979b. "De la Symbolique Hysterique Lao á Propos d'un cas de *Phi Pop*," *Ethnopsychiatrica*, 2(1): 69-77.

Endres, Kirsten W. 2011. *Performing the Divine: Mediums, Markets and Modernity in Urban Vietnam*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1988. *Hexerei, Orakel und Magie bei den Zande*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Formoso, Bernard. 1998. "Bad Death and Malevolent Spirits among the Tai Peoples," *Anthropos*, 93: 3-17.

Fox, James J. ed. 1980. *The Flow of Life: Essays on Eastern Indonesia*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Harris, Grace Gredys. 1989. "Concepts of Individual, Self, and Person in Description and Analysis," *American Anthropologist*, 91(3): 599-612.

Hours, Bernard. 1973. "Possession et Sorcellerie dans un Village de Sud-Laos," *Asie du Sudest et Monde Insulindien*, 4(1) : 133-146.

Johnson, Andrew Alan. 2014. *Ghosts of the New City: Spirits, Urbanity and the Ruins of Progress in Chiang Mai*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Kanya, Wattanagun. 2016. *The Ravenous Spirit (Phi Bob) Belief Tradition in Contemporary Thailand: Plural Practices versus Monolithic Representations*. PhD. Dissertation, Indiana University.

——. 2018. "The Phenomenology of Supernatural Belief: The Ravenous Spirit (Phi Bob) Belief Tradition in Contemporary Northeast Thailand," *Asian Ethnology*, 77 : 79-97.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1969. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Moréchand, Guy. 1968. "Le Chamanisme des Hmong," *Bulletin de l'École Français d'Extrême Orient*, 54: 53-294.

Pattana, Kitiarsa. 2012. *Mediums, Monks and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm.

Ratapopn, Patamajorn. 2007. *Spirit Mediumship in Thailand: a Performance Theory Approach*. Doctoral Dissertation, Heidelberg University. http://archiv.

comes about by exchange, be it correct exchange leading to *klpu* or a botched one leading to *ngem ngao*, is internally self-different.

VII. Conclusion

The cases of possession and trance that I describe here may seem to be exceptional and rare occurrences in Rmeet everyday life, or in those of other people with similar concepts like *phii pob*. However, even if extreme, they are indicators of a concept of personhood that is general among Rmeet, and presumably in other local cosmologies in the region as well (for Akha, see WANG 2019: 54). Even *klpu*, the most basic aspect of personhood, diverges occasionally from its bearers. The very differentiation that makes *klpu* identifiable as an aspect of the person enables its agentive separation. Possession and trance thus highlight the very condition of personhood as folded – continuous and discontinuous at the same time.

The aspects of personhood that split partially from the visible, social person are doubles and analogues, perhaps in Descola's sense of analogism: a series of separate beings, different in their ontological setup, but still resembling each other enough so that their difference only comes about sporadically (Descola 2011). Descola stresses the separateness of these beings, while their similarity to others makes classification systems possible. Therefore, classification seems like an afterthought, a reaction on their ultimate differentiation. This does not seem to be the case here: the wayward aspects of personhood are sometimes identical to, and sometimes separate from, the visible identities of their bearers.

Eduardo Viveiros des Castro (2019: CH.6) suggests a more radical way of conceiving identity and difference in his appropriation of Deleuze and Guattari. He speaks of "multiplicities": beings that have no substance but are defined by their difference. In the Amerindian ontologies that he analyses, beings are

different from the perspective of different observers – what is beer to a jaguar is blood to a human. Viveiros de Castro argues that there is no substrate of identity. Neither is there one real way of seeing things while others are illusions, nor is there an abstract essence from which its various appearances derive. Instead, the being in question contains all its different appearances, and it is their difference that makes it what it is. A multiplicity, Viveiros de Castro argues, is less than one; subtracting "one" reveals the "many".

This approach may shed some light on the Southeast Asian examples of folded personhood. They are similarly relational, even though perspective is not the dominant code to express this relationality. Rather, exchange appears as a major ontological determinant for the split beings that are never fully split. Without difference there is no exchange; but exchange establishes bounded entities such as persons, polities or village communities. These entities work on the maintenance of their boundedness, while at the same time they are internally different.

This tension translates into concepts of folded persons. Folded persons are examples of a contextual oscillation between being part of an integrated whole and separate entities facing each other. They are thus identical and different, continuous and discontinuous, within the same being. This seeming paradox infuses and establishes the being of spirits in general in this region (see also Baumann 2020). Societies as different as the Buddhist, bilateral and state-building Lao, and the animist, village-oriented Rmeet, with its asymmetric marriage system, converge on these fundamental issues.

them, pulling their irresponsible and childish soul away from the dead. *Klpu* cannot be separated from a human body without the person falling apart, but it is also not merely identical with it. Here, any attempt to establish an identity that is not split in the first place is impossible.

Gorn mor and *ngem ngao* are one step further along this series of semi-independent quasi-persons. At once, they correspond to the person they belong to and at the same time are different. I thus suggest the term "folded person" to describe this type of relational personhood, drawing my metaphor from a folded piece of paper – continuous on one side and discontinuous, like separate pieces of paper touching each other, on the other. Another possible image is the Möbius strip – a circular strip that is twisted so that its opposite surfaces are connected, forming a continuous, single surface that is at the same time its own backside.

Folded personhood is thus a specific form of the dividual or fractal personhood that has been derived from Indian and Melanesian ethnography (Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991). This concept draws attention to the way persons are constituted by communication and relationships. It does not posit an essential substrate of personhood that is given before any social relationship, but considers persons as emergent from the interaction of humans and non-humans alike, through gift exchange, for instance. This concept thus focuses on the kind of internal self-difference that I also observe among Rmeet. However, the concept of folded personhood complements the generic self-difference of dividuals with the analysis of contexts in which continuity and difference are enacted or experienced.

This issue comes down to the very conditions of personhood, through the *klpu*-spirit duality. *Klpu* emerges from the convergence of patrilineal and affinal relationships in a house. The house spirits are married couples that protect the relationship between *klpu* and body of the house's inhabitants. *Klpu* itself emerges from wife-givers' graveyards. The difference between parents and

children, on the one hand, and wife-givers and wife-takers on the other, thus conditions the 'internality' of personhood in the first place.

If *klpu* depends on this difference, it is unsurprising that it is self-different by itself, taking on intentions that sometimes oppose its bearer. *Gorn mor* and *ngem ngao* amplify this difference into two different directions. The shaman's helping spirits fortify him against the attractions of a spirit world that seductively poses as the real home of the *klpu*. In contrast, witchcraft spirits destroy life by double possession. They possess their hosts, with whom they identify when being addressed; and they possess their victims, against whom the host bears asocial feelings.

Other fragmentations of personhood follow comparable lines. Spirits of the wilderness may slip in and out of human bodies and people reverse their relationship to a life-giving social environment by becoming *proong* with the turn of day and night. As Cécile Barraud (1990) has stressed, people in Southeast Asia are temporary bundles of relationships that are in danger of disassembling any time. But these aspects are not just heterogeneous. In being identical and different from each other, they implicate permanent instability.

Both *gorn mor* and *ngem ngao* emerge from a sociocosmic code of marriage. The relation with the shamanic spirits is established through a bridewealth-like transfer, while witchcraft spirits are born from wrong marriages. Marriage thus appears as a cosmological code of folding identity into difference. The link between marriage and these spirits is the fact that marriage is an exchange, just like the relations between monks and laypeople in the lowlands. Exchange maintains difference in its minimal form of the distinction between givers and takers and at the same time suggests the unity of this difference, its necessary complementation that constitutes its two sides as what they are. Exchange thus constitutes an ontology in which identity only comes about by difference, and therefore must include difference. Any entity that

disgusting pranks, like hurling animal feces. Their nighttime prowling, which hides their visual shape and identity, also moves *proong* closer to the spirits, whose most prominent quality is invisibility.

Socially speaking, *proong* propose a paradox. Accusations of being *proong* are strongly discouraged. If not substantialized, the accused may demand compensation amounting to those for murder, with "character assassination" being the issue. Yet, if a *proong* is successfully disclosed – i.e. with the shared conviction of villagers – the entire family is forced to leave the village, just like *ngem ngao*. People in my host village mentioned a single case of expulsion sometime in the late 1970s. But while some would say this family were *proong*, others – including the *mor* involved in the case (see above) – identified them as *ngem ngao*. Thus, despite their ontological difference, *proong* and *ngem ngao* hosts share the same social fate, and this blurs their distinction in many people's minds.

VI. Folding the Person

Shamanism and witchcraft highlight a general feature of Rmeet personhood that is not restricted to these comparatively exceptional phenomena. *Ngem ngao* spirits demonstrate this particularly well. They cannot simply be considered as separate from their hosts – they are different, and they are the same. Something similar – again, the same and not the same – can be said about the spirit familiars. While no Rmeet, I guess, would equate the dangerous *ngem ngao* and the protective *gorn mor*, both 'walk with the *klpu*', as Rmeet said separately at one or another occasion. The meaning of this phrase differed in both cases. The *gorn mor* protect the *klpu* of the shaman when he talks to spirits that are otherwise dangerous. For any normal person, talking to spirits elicits the spirit-like side of his/her *klpu*, prefiguring death. As *klpu* and spirits are relational, behaving like a fellow villager of the dead could mean that someone will join their village soon. The life-asserting relationship with the *gorn mor* adds a

relationship to the shaman that keeps his *klpu* away from the spirits in a manner that is ontologically similar – soul-fortification in the same terms as soul-loss. While seeing spirits creates a dangerous proximity to them, being seen by the *gorn mor* ties the shaman to them.

The *ngem ngao* reverse this situation. They are harmful like spirits of the wilderness, and instead of protecting life, they destroy it. Still, they emerge from village society – they bear the name of their hosts and do not abduct *klpu* to the forest. *Ngem ngao* and *gorn mor* relate to the central life-giving relationship of affinity in opposed ways. While the shaman's relationship with the *gorn mor* is modelled upon the correct transfer of bride wealth, the *ngem ngao* emerge from a reversal of correct marriage.

Both the *ngem ngao* and the *gorn mor* belong to a series of types of internal splits. When Rmeet separately say of both that they "walk with *klpu*", they are revealing the concurrence of the spirit with a proper aspect of the person. However, not even *klpu* necessarily represents the true intentions or personality – the social, visible identity of a villager. There are cases in which even *klpu* diverges from its human being's position.

In 2016, I saw a gourd bottle with a figure painted in chalk below the stairs of a house. A shaman had hung it up there in order to get the *klpu* of the house's mother back in line. Her small child had been crying constantly, and the shaman had found that it was the woman's *klpu* that had been frightening the child because it did not like it. This did not imply that the woman 'unconsciously' dislike her child or any such psychoanalytical projection. Rather, even *klpu* harbors the potential of separate agency.

Similarly, the inclination of *klpu* to visit the spirits indicates its distinction from its bearer. *Klpu* likes to play in graves, as Rmeet told me, as they cut little hooks from forked tree branches after a funeral. When leaving the graveyard they gestured with the hook as if they were dragging something invisible behind

V. Witches and Shapeshifters

There is another type of decentered person that needs mentioning here, as it is sometimes confused with *ngem ngao*. These are people called *proong*. While *sewui* are etiologically related to *ngem ngao*, but sociologically different, the reverse is true with *proong*. Like *phii pob* hosts, *proong* are normal villagers with a destructive aspect to them. *Proong* are in the habit of turning into a kind of blood-and-feces-eating beings after consuming a particular ginger-like root. They walk around at night, with glowing eyes and protruding mouths that turn into snouts by which *proong* suck out the life of the weak, the newborn and the sick. They also eat human corpses.

Sometimes, people speak of *phi proong* – *proong* spirits that inhabit normal people. This idea, however, seems to be modelled upon the *ngem ngao*, as the majority of people denies that *proong* are spirits. Apart from the consumption of the *proong* root there are no specific origin stories about them. I only chanced upon them in a single version of the common origin myth of the Rmeet. In this story, all the people of the world emerge from a giant gourd born to an incestuous brother-sister couple after a flood. In some versions, each kind of people, usually defined by ethnicity, acquires its specific features just after leaving the gourd, and in one of them, the *proong* came out at night.

With respect to *proong*, I restrict myself to those features that associate them with *ngem ngao*, in two ways. First, both represent what one could call a perversion of desire. The *ngem ngao* turn a grudge that a host holds against someone else into revenge, thus turning destructive (internal) feelings into destructive (external) effects[4]. The *proong* are equally driven by antisocial

[4] This distinction between internal antisocial desires and their control as external affect is an important value in lowland Buddhist societies (e.g. Cassaniti 2015: chapter 2), but much less so among Rmeet. Still, the expression of anger or envy is not encouraged. Visisya (2019) argues that possession in northern Thailand offers opportunities to enact desires beyond standard gender roles.

desires to consume the life of the weak, the bodies of the dead or – in less harmful cases – rotten meat and feces. They thus blur the distinction between human consumers and non-human food sources (also problematized in the symmetric asymmetries of predatory forest spirits). They also treat as food what has already left the cycle of the production of life[5]. As mentioned above, normative objections against marriage with strangers are rationalized with fear of *proong* and *ngem ngao*.

Second, revelations of both lead to their exclusion from village life. Expulsion is probably what links them most strongly in people's memory. In 2018, one of my informants pointed out to me a small, shabby house at the edge of a neighboring village, separated by a river, and explained that a *proong* man lived there who would kill people on a regular basis. *Proong* status usually encompasses entire families, as they all would consume the *proong* root together, sometimes unknowingly driven into their fate by their affected family members.

The *proong* thus represent a different version of the duplicated self of the *ngem ngao*. Although *proong* are not evil doubles like the *ngem ngao* are to their hosts, they are still divergences of identity. While *ngem ngao* hosts split up when the destructive version of their selves invades a different body, the *proong* diverge into a daylight identity and a nighttime one. While the split in *ngem ngao* is marked by the body-*klpu* difference and thus belongs to the code of spirits, *proong* experience transformations of their body and its desires. In this sense, they are indeed not spirits. What associates them with spirits, however, are their anti-social eating habits, at their apex the desire to eat humans. Even the *mor*'s benevolent spirit familiars – who never eat humans – are distinguished by their taste for waste like pipe tar. Therefore, the word *proong* is also, sometimes jokingly, used for people who behave in an abject manner or perform

[5] Comparable associations of decentered personhood and feces are present in other spirit forms, like the *phi krasue* in northeastern Thailand (Baumann 2016). A comparison of this idea requires more complexity than the present article allows.

The Rmeet invoke the dangers of *sewui* and *ngem ngao* in two different ways regarding the ideal of MBD-FZD marriage. Close marriage of the latter type is highly valued, but close marriages with any other cousin is restrained by the risk of *sewui* and *ngem ngao*. As mentioned above, the term for potential marriage partners may be used for remote relatives and even for strangers. This expansive potential, however, is again checked by the same issues. Rmeet explain their preference for marriage with relatives in terms of the very splits of personhood that I have described. With your close relatives, you know that they do not have *ngem ngao* and are not *proong* either. These destructive instances of folded personhood signify the dangers of remote marriages, just as *ngem ngao* represent the dangers of wrong marriages that are too close.

A brief comparison with Tai-speaking lowland societies suggests that the respective concepts are transformations of each other. This is not the place for comparing Rmeet and lowlanders in more detail, but even a sketchy account helps to highlight some general ideas about witchcraft in this region. The *ngem ngao* are quite similar to spirits known in lowland Laos and Lao-speaking northeastern Thailand as *phii pob* (Doré 1979b; Hours 1973; Wattanagun 2016, 2018). Even the Rmeet themselves acknowledge this as the correct translation (*phi ka* being an alternative).

However, the origin of these spirits is significantly different. According to Kanya (2016), *phii pob* in Northeastern Thailand emerge from the disturbance of a flow of cosmic power that is most properly handled by Buddhist monks. This relates to the central exchange relationship that defines a Buddhist village. Villagers provide monks with food and shelter while the monks provide the opportunity to make merit (Strenski 1988). This exchange serves to channel cosmic power properly, but danger lies in laypeople's attempts to appropriate this power for selfish purposes, in the form of magic. When this goes wrong, especially when the precepts against eating or doing certain things are broken,

the unfortunate sorcerer becomes host to a *phii pob* (Hours 1973: 135-6; Sangun 1976: 69; Kanya 2016: 163).

Behind the surface difference between monk-laypeople relations in the lowland and wife-giver-wife-taker relations in the uplands lies a more profound comparability. In both cases, human sociality, in contrast to the forest, is defined by an important exchange relationship that generates life by channeling cosmic power. The relationship is asymmetric and hierarchical, and it addresses personhood. However, when this relationship is disturbed, it seems to open a fissure in the person of the perpetrator, creating a being that is intrinsically bound to a living human and at the same times moves around like a spirit.

The association with human reproduction, featured prominently in the Rmeet marriage system, occurs similarly among the Lao and northeastern Thai. A common form of the potentially dangerous use of cosmic power among the latter is love magic. Lao and Northeastern Thai kinship systems are bilateral and discourage marriage with close relatives, kings and high nobility being the historical exception. Compared to the Rmeet, the idea of irregular marriage as a danger to the flow of life is thus much less prevalent. However, Lao love magic that goes awry may cause damage to personhood in two directions: if too strong, the addressee (usually a woman) will lose her mind; if not done correctly, the sorcerer will become the host of a *phii pob* (Terwiel 2012: 131-140; Wattanagun 2016). *Phii pob* and *ngem ngao* thus both result from the misdirected manipulation of the cosmological aspects of sexual relationships.

Both Buddhist lowlanders and Rmeet recognize the disturbance of a central life-giving exchange relationship that defines village life. The result is comparable – a spirit that uses its host as a guide and springboard to attack other persons. These spirits are thus partly identical with and partly different from their hosts. They represent an incomplete split of the person, emerging from the very forces that create and stabilize human personhood in the first place.

(classificatory incest), and even marriage with members of other ethnic groups – the latter probably seen as least problematic today.

According to different interlocutors, the first "wrong" marriage either has no consequences or produces *sewui* – spirits imagined and depicted as dogs or pigs that "bite" their victims and make them ill. These illnesses do not differ much from attacks by earth or sky spirits and involve no stigma. Also, the *sewui* never speak through the mouth of their victims or show the double possession of host and victim. *Ngem ngao* only appear after three generations of wrong marriages, although opinions differ as to how this succession is counted.

The principles behind this become clearer when *ngem ngao* are placed in a broader field of generically invisible spirits that intrude into human bodies to make them ill. Rmeet consider spirit illness as a kind of replacement. The *klpu* of the victim moves out of his or her body, and the attacking spirit moves in. The healing rituals effectuate a reversal of this process. This exchange is of beings that are intrinsically similar. As mentioned above, in dreams, *klpu* sees the world from the perspective of spirits, and it turns into a spirit after death. Thus, *klpu* is that aspect of human personhood that enables communication with the spirit world. For the same reason, it may switch places with spirits.

The relationships with these dangerous spirits are graded according to their origin. Most common are illnesses caused by the spirits from the domain of the forest and the sky. The same goes for spirits of people who have died of a violent or sudden death whose burial in unmarked graves outside of graveyards associates them with the forest. None of these spirits speak through their victims. It is the shaman only who, shielded by his *gorn mor*, dares to talk to them. The spirits of the forest, from people's point of view, behave like predators when "biting" them. In turn, they see their human victims as prey animals – the attribution of a non-village order of humans to spirits is mutual. As in the perspectivism in Amerindian hunting – which Viveiros de Castro (1998) used

for analyzing human-non human relationships in a number of societies – the others always appear as forest animals, in a gaze that is symmetrical in its asymmetries (see also Århem 2016).

However, the spirits of bad marriage are of a different type. Marriage produces the village sociality proper, and the violation of its laws brings a disturbance that resembles the disorder of the forest domain without being identical to it. *Sewui* spirits do not resemble predators, but rather omnivorous domestic animals, predominantly dogs. Pigs are sometimes mentioned as well. The spirits of bad marriage thus belong to the village, but they eat humans for meat, just like the forest spirits do.

The perturbation caused by bad marriage is, however, sometimes enhanced through repetition. This produces dangerous beings that are unlike animal members of households but just a small step away from human beings. *Ngem ngao* are like violent doubles of their hosts, identifying with their names when asked and acting along with their desire and envy, amplifying them to destruction. As it is human to restrain your desires, this prevents *ngem ngao* from being human (but not their hosts). The three types of spirit attack can thus be summarized as in the table below.

	Domain: forest – village		
Event	Exchange with capricious powers of forest beyond village	Single disturbance of life-producing exchange among humans within village	Repeated disturbance of life-producing exchange among humans within village
Spirit type	Spirits who behave like predators (forest/bad death spirits)	Spirits resembling domestic animals (*sewui*)	Spirits speaking like and resembling human persons (*ngem ngao*)

away. Then TaaAad falls ill. He loses consciousness. People ask him: 'Who are you'? – 'I am Guido' [he responds]". Another example concerned amorous approaches: If a girl liked to flirt with a boy but he rejected her, her *ngem ngao* may attack him.

Therefore, the Rmeet explained, the *ngem ngao* "walks with the *klpu*". It follows a person's intentions or feelings without actually being under his or her conscious control. The wording serves to mark a split between what properly makes the public, visible person and the sociopathic additional spirit.

These hypothetical examples were supported by actual, albeit not very recent events. In one case, a man from a neighboring village had moved to my research village in 1976. He had been expelled after being revealed as a witch, but this was unknown in my research village at the time. Together with his family, he stayed there for two years. During that time, a number of children became ill and died for unknown reasons. Finally, one of his victims was asked for the *ngem ngao*'s identity. One of the *mor* of the village identified an ancient and apparently rather special skirt as the bearer of the spirit and asked its owner to sell it off. The owner refused, and thus, the entire family was expelled again. In earlier times, the shaman asserted, these people would have been killed, but things had changed.

For a better understanding of how *ngem ngao* come into being, a brief summary of Rmeet kinship is in order. Rmeet society is structured by the idea that families (called *ña*, houses) are constituted by the intersection of two lines of the transmission of life. The first is a patrilineal succession of fathers and sons who inherit the family house and membership in agnatic groups. The latter make sacrifice together to their house spirits and bury their dead in the same section of the graveyard. The men in these graveyard groups, as I call them, together with their wives, turn into protective house spirits after death. These spirits stabilize the relationships between bodies and *klpu* in the house of their

descendants. House spirits thus do in everyday prophylaxis what shamans do in moments of illness and crisis.

The patrilines are crossed by lines of origins of wives. In many respects, Rmeet kinship terminology and rules follow a pattern of asymmetric alliance, in which men should normatively marry their mother's brother's daughter (MBD) and women their father's sister's son (FZD) (Lévi-Strauss 1969; Sprenger 2008). These kin positions only represent the genealogically closest representatives of extensive classes for whom a single kin term is used — *hääm*, a symmetric term for both men and women. This denotes any person of similar age in an agnatic group to whom previous marriage relationships can be traced.

Marriages should ideally maintain a pattern in which women move in one direction from their natal house to their husband's house. This movement establishes cross-generational relationships between households who call each other *taa* (the wife's side) and *pesao* (the husband's side). The optimal, albeit rare, way to marry is thus the aforementioned MBD-FZS pattern, as it renews the relationship established in the parents' generation in that of their offspring. A marriage between mother's brother's son and father's sister's daughter, however, would reverse the movement and is thus forbidden, as are sexual relations among people who share the same patrilineal origin.

These marriage relations are not only important for the way people procreate, but also for what James Fox (1980) has called the "flow of life". The wife's relatives figure prominently in any context in which the production of life is at issue: birth, house warming, sowing, harvesting, and so on. They are a constant source of fertility for people and fields, and therefore treated as hierarchically superior to the husband's house (Sprenger 2006).

The violation of the direction of marriage, then, produces dangerous effects, *ngem ngao* among them. Varieties of these violations are reverse marriage (wife-givers becoming wife-takers), marriage between agnates

indication of his destiny as a shaman. The future healer then has to learn the appropriate ritual verses from an established shaman and go through an initiation. After that, he houses his invisible spirit familiars on a shelf under the roof above his sleeping place. Several times a year he has to perform a sacrifice of a chicken and some liquor for them. Some people with this vocation, however, refuse to become active shamans but nevertheless establish a shrine and perform the proper sacrifice once a year.

The second avenue to becoming a shaman is by deliberate decision. The procedure of learning is the same, but at its end, the teacher will share his *gorn mor* with his apprentice. In both cases, learning proceeds in an abandoned field hut, to keep curious villagers away. After the end of the teaching, a pig or buffalo sacrifice to the novice shaman's house spirit introduces his *gorn mor* to his own household.

In many respects, *gorn mor* and the shaman are separate persons. They hail from a remote mountain area called Singjuk Sinlääng where they have their own villages and they bear individual names like human beings. Usually, a shaman lives with nine spirit familiars who never operate separately – in this respect, the distinctions suggested by their names merge into a single agency. In other respects, *gorn mor* are aspects of the person of the shaman. Crucially, a shaman's life depends upon the presence of these spirits. They constantly watch him from above, and if they turned their eyes away, he would die. The spirit familiars thus occupy an ambiguous position. In so far as they are necessary for the shaman's life, they resemble aspects of personhood like *klpu*, but their origin in a remote place and their individual names signify the difference from him – facing him, as it were, in a fold.

An important part of this nexus of difference-within-identity is the manner in which the shaman initiates his relationship with the spirit familiars. The exchange that brings the relationship about has obvious and sometimes explicit

similarities with marriage. A typical gift from the apprentice to his teacher is half a buffalo (by shared ownership) and eight silver piasters (colonial-era money). Buffaloes and piasters constitute the major elements of bride wealth for a woman's parents, and both the latter and the gift for the senior shaman are called *ngooi*. While this is the common Lao word for "price", it is not used for any other ritual prestation, not even for the bride wealth apart from the parents' share. The acquisition of spirit familiars thus follows the rules of a correct marriage. Also, in both cases, the new members of a household, be it a bride or the spirit familiars, are announced to the house spirit by a sacrifice. In this sense, the relationship between the shaman and his spirits is in line with the relationships of kinship and reproduction. Just as the relationship between body and *klpu* is established and possibly disturbed by the relationship between wife-givers and wife-takers, the relationship between shaman and spirit familiars stabilizes the body-*klpu* unity when patterned upon marriage. The other kind of possessing spirits, the *ngem ngao*, however, emerge from a perturbation of correct marriage.

IV. Casualties of Bad Marriage

Hosts of *ngem ngao* witch spirits diverge from most other people due to the hostile agency that is part of themselves and different at the same time. *Ngem ngao* make their victims ill or even kill them. However, their hosts are not their victims, nor are they necessarily intent to do what their *ngem nao* do. On the contrary, their hosts may be fairly innocent people – mostly men, as far as I can tell – who happen to contain an aggressive spirit that strikes out against anyone who dissatisfies its host.

Several examples were related to me. "Say, me and you host *ngem ngao*", Khamjan, one of my main informants told me, "and we go to visit TaaAad. TaaAad does not slaughter a chicken. We are hungry, we get angry. We walk

Mor, however, concur to a large extent with the common image of the shaman (e.g. Atkinson 1992). *Mor* specialize in curing diseases caused by spirits. This does not exclude some knowledge of *khru* techniques, but does not necessitate it either. The shamanic cure does not forbid patients to seek other kinds of treatment, like biomedicine. Diseases caused by spirits are usually described as soul loss. The *klpu* of a living human being leaves his or her body and is abducted by spirits. At the same time – or maybe, from a different perspective – the spirit enters the body of the person and "bites" (*kheak*) it.

The shaman effectuates his or her cure with the help of spirit familiars, the *gorn mor* (children/extensions of the *mor*). They enable him to go into trance and visit the various spirits suspected to have caused the illness. By talking to them, he figures out who has abducted the *klpu* and then negotiates its return, usually through a sacrifice.

Trance sessions are not the most common type of curing ritual that the shaman employs. Often, a diagnosis involving spoken verse and reading the yolk of an egg will reveal the identity of the spirit and the proper kind of sacrifice. In these cases, the *gorn mor* make the illness visible to the shaman, for instance, by signs in the egg. However, if trance sessions are deemed appropriate – and the ill person is willing to organize this larger ritual – they last for hours, sometimes the larger part of a night, and can draw a considerable audience.

During these sessions, the shaman uses a variety of ritual paraphernalia, most prominently a sword and a fan. The sword serves to make the spirits afraid and demand their respect, while the healer presents small offerings of liquor or tobacco to the spirits on the fan. He also uses it to hurl uncooked rice into the audience, thereby calling the spirits. Shortly after that, the shaman goes into trance. He sits on a small stool, closes his eyes and falls backwards into the arms of two people sitting behind him. Fits of trance occur several times during the sessions.

At this point, two things may happen. Either the shaman returns to his normal self after a short time or his spirit familiars start acting through him. In the latter case, the shaman exhibits strange, somewhat outlandish behavior. This was particularly expressive in one shaman I knew, now deceased, called TaaLää. When possessed by his helper spirits, the expression of his face changed, his eyes widened, his movements became lively and somewhat edgy, and he started to speak a different language. Some shamans say that the spirits speak Lao, so this is what they do when possessed. Most, however, speak an incomprehensible "spirit language". At other times, the shaman would start whistling, a speciality of the spirit familiars and the reason why my own occasional whistling met with some irritation.

One famous shaman of the recent past was known for lifting heavy clay jars with his teeth alone when in trance and hurling them up in the air. TaaLää, an elderly and somewhat frail man, still managed to lift a jar from the ground by his teeth. Another indicator of TaaLää's possession was his predilection for mixing tar from pipe cleaners into his liquor and then drinking it, as spirit familiars like to do.

In contrast to possession in lowland societies, the audience did not attempt to interact with the spirits in the shaman's body, indicating that possession is of subordinate interest in Rmeet ritual healing compared to the shamanic journey. However, audience members sometimes did intervene when the possessed shaman indulged in somewhat dangerous practices.

Due to their life-giving relationship with their spirit familiars, the personhood of shamans diverges from that of most Rmeet. Shamans acquire spirit familiars in two different ways, which distinguishes their major types. "Born shamans" (*mor geud*) are chosen by the spirit familiars themselves. This usually manifests in types of illness that come with fits or dropping unconscious. When a young boy once started whistling, I was told, this was seen as an

addition, terms for emotional states like anger or happiness and character traits like fearlessness or patience are combinations with the word *pääm*.

Klpu, in contrast, is more bounded and localised. The spirit of the dead (called either *klpu ii yoom* or *phi ii yoom*, soul or spirit of the dead), when appearing to the living in dreams, looks and talks like the deceased person. *Klpu* thus represents much of the identity of the living person and is the aspect of the person that is of most concern in rituals. This is because it is constantly attracted to the spirit world. When dreaming, people see the world through the eyes of their *klpu*, which equals the point of view of the spirits. *Klpu* originates either ex nihilo or is sent by the dead ancestors of a woman during her pregnancy. There is no notion of rebirth.

Living human persons consist of internal relationships between these three aspects that need to be stabilized by proper external relationships with living relatives and with spirits. In particular, the relationship between body and *klpu* is a constant concern of ritual activity. Lack of respect for the family of origin of a wife may cause her house members' *klpu* to leave for their house, causing illness. Also, the *klpu* may be attracted to its lineal forebears in the graveyard. In addition, it may be abducted or 'bitten' by spirits of the forests. There are thus many occasions for tugging the *klpu* away from its body, through force, obligation or seduction. The integration of body and *klpu*, however, is protected by benevolent spirits, predominantly the house spirit – a conglomerate of lineal ancestors – and the village spirit, often seen as a conglomerate of house spirits. Disrespecting these spirits or failing to keep the dangerous forces from outside the village at bay leads to a disintegration of body and *klpu*. People then will fall ill or die unless these relationships are reinforced, often with the help of shamans.

The word for body, *to*, is a Lao loanword that in both languages also means animal. Apart from sale, domestic animals are destined for sacrifice to the spirits. Often, illness or another threat for the body-*klpu* bond is the occasion

for sacrifice. Then, the animals (*to*) are given to the spirits – who exist in a way similar to *klpu* – in order to strengthen the relationship between human bodies and their *klpu*. Human rituals thus create exchange relations involving animals and spirits, representative, as it were, of body and *klpu*, in order to maintain human personhood. These are the conditions for a variety of body-*klpu*-spirit relationships of which I will present several prominent examples.

III. Trance and the Shaman's Possession

The first instance of possession-like phenomena I want to address occurs in the sessions of the main ritual healers, called *mor*. Here, the folding of personhood is apparent in the relationship between shamans and their spirit familiars, which are at once separate beings and part of his person, as he cannot live without them. Shamans can be men or women, but women *mor* are rare, and I never saw a woman perform a healing ritual[3]. I prefer to call them shamans here, for the following reasons. *Mor* is a Lao loanword that covers a great variety of ritual specialists and healers, including biomedical doctors (Condominas 1976: 217). In Lao, each type of *mor* is specified by an additional word (e.g. *mor tham* for spirit specialists), but often, if the context is clear, only *mor* is used. Therefore, to use the common Lao (and Thai) word may be confusing in the Rmeet context.

The term "ritual healer", however, is also not entirely satisfactory, as *mor* are not the only type of healer that employs ritual techniques among Rmeet. *Khru*, for instance, master the art of bone-setting, some types of divination, the use of medical (e.g. herbal) substances, and ritual verse that are applied together with substances and bone-setting. Neither spirits nor *klpu* are involved in this type of healing.

[3] The only woman shaman I met had retired due to her age – she was said to be 100 years old – and due to her deafness I was unable to interview her. I have heard that a younger woman recently initiated into the craft but have not met her yet.

being is different from any other, but never entirely unlike some other beings as well. The analogist world consists of beings separated by minute, yet unsurmountable differences. Descola suggests that analogism is not so much explicated by its practitioners in these terms, but rather emerges from their practice of classification. Analogist ontologies require that the array of beings be arranged into complex classes and sequences that connect various domains of the world with each other. Thus, cardinal directions, body humors, stars and animals can be associated with and influence each other. Analogism thus identifies and differentiates beings at the same time. This implies a specific sequence of the intellectual development of such systems: Initially, people perceive other beings as always slightly different and therefore start ordering them into classes. Descola's description of analogism concludes from the observation of the second phenomenon, a claim of identity for beings within a system of classes, to the first.

This distinction between implicit, passive cognition and explicit, active ordering, however, seems somewhat artificial. The material presented in this article suggests a different, but equally coherent account of such identities-in-difference. With its focus on possession and decentered personhood, my data show all indications of an analogist ontology[2]. Yet, I propose that the notion of folding in the present case better accounts for the oscillation between the fine-grained differentiation of beings and their identification as members of a class. Folding encompasses the difference between continuity and discontinuity.

[2] In a lecture, Descola has identified Rmeet cosmology as a hybrid of animism and analogism. I myself use animism in a wider sense than he does (Sprenger 2016), in order to accommodate what to me appears as fairly coherent systems. I appreciate Descola's scheme for the discussions and comparisons it enables. See Philippe Descola: Les composition des collectives: forms d'hybridation. Course taught at the Collége de France. Session March 21, 2018. Video recording available at https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/philippe-descola/course-2018-03-21-14h00.htm.

II. The Rmeet Concept of the Person

Studies of mainland Southeast Asian concepts of personhood often highlight the multiplicity of soul-like aspects of the person, such as the 36 "life souls" (*kwan*) of the Lao (Condominas 1976; Formoso 1998). Across ethnicities, but sometimes even within them, the numbers given for "souls" and their specifications vary significantly (Moréchand 1968: 85; Stolz 2020: 248). This suggests that such designations depend on the communicative context in which they are evoked, stressing the relational character of aspects of personhood.

The Rmeet are in a number of ways typical for this region. They currently number around 21,000 persons, mostly living in upland or rural villages in northern Laos. They speak a Mon-Khmer language and have no history of political units beyond the village level. They are seen and consider themselves as the earliest settlers of their land. In contrast to the Buddhist majority of the country, they address their major rituals to a multitude of spirits. Village economy, in the villages I studied, is based on dry rice grown on swiddens. In addition, Rmeet have a century-long history of labor migration and trade with domestic animals, forest produce and a varying range of cash crops. This way, they are part of a highly differentiated cultural landscape in which neighbors adopt cultural representations from each other while modifying them to their own conceptual systems.

This includes concepts of personhood. Rmeet consider the living human person in terms of three aspects of rather different qualities: *to* is the body; *pääm* can be translated as life, character or mood; and *klpu* is what leaves the body during dreaming, or when ill, and later turns into the spirit of the dead. *Pääm* is not so much an essence but rather a category of qualities. It shows in breath, regular living movement and growth, and is shared by humans, animals and plants. In this meaning, *pääm* disappears after death and is not subject to ritual care. The occurrence of *pääm* in clocks or motors is somewhat debated. In

However, the Rmeet, a non-Buddhist, village-based society in northern Laos, defy any easy distinction between these two categories. While lowland societies in their vicinity have a well-defined role of spirit mediums (Brac de la Perrière 2011; Doré 1979a; Hours 1973; Johnson 2014; chapter 3; Morris 2000; Ratapopn 2007; Pattana 2012; Visisya 2019), among Rmeet a number of phenomena may qualify as possession, but none of them neatly so. Also, Rmeet make different kinds of distinctions between these phenomena. The two phenomena that may qualify most clearly as possession are from virtually oppositional categories, while each of them is closely associated with other phenomena that are, analytically speaking, quite unlike possession.

Both these phenomena accord with a definition of possession that focuses on the direct communication of a spirit through a human body. In the first, spirit familiars (*gorn mor*) occupy the body of a ritual healer or shaman (*mor*) during trance sessions and cause strange behavior. In the second, a type of illness-inducing witchcraft spirit (*ngem ngao*) speaks through the mouth of his victim. These two types of spirit presence, however, are entirely separate, one being voluntary and desired, the other a sign of serious danger. In fact, the healers battle the latter spirits, and witches can never be shamans.

In addition, these phenomena are not isolated, but linked to other forms of decentering personhood that are phenomenologically different. When spirits act through the shaman's body, his *klpu* (soul) and consciousness are absent and travel in the spirit world. This type of possession is dependent on trance and the shamanic quest – its opposite, in Condominas' classification.

In contrast, the spirits speaking through the mouth of their victims are associated with two kinds of deviations. First, they do not originate in their victims, but in their hosts who are, in Evans-Pritchard's terms, witches – people who involuntarily accommodate a dangerous force (Evans-Pritchard 1988). Rmeet associate witches with two other types of persons who are more or less

in control of their dangerous powers – sorcerers and dangerous shapeshifters called *proong* (see below). All three share the fate of expulsion from their villages when their identity is disclosed. The second type of deviation connected with the *ngem ngao* is their origin in a break of marriage regulations.

The type of possession found in most Theravada Buddhist societies[1] in Southeast Asia is thus absent among Rmeet. However, related phenomena suggest a comparable concept of personhood underlying both lowland Buddhist and upland animist cosmology – a kind of personhood in which each expression of coherence, each aspect of a person is at the same time similar and different from the others. The deviations from healthy or standard personhood are equally comparable.

Even aspects that are fundamental for establishing personhood in the first place tend to express their own agency and distinction. These are identified with the visible, social person in some contexts, while they are separate, even opposed to it in others – like a folded piece of paper that is continuous on one side while separate and merely touching on the other. I propose the term 'folded person' to address this specific type of fragmented and decentered personhood. The term indicates that, among these people, the standard definition of person implies an internal split. This concept of personhood therefore bears similarities to what Wagner (1991) has called "fractal person" and Strathern (1988, 2018) "dividual" or "partible person" – anthropological terms that offer alternatives to the presumably integrated, autonomous and closed personhood of Western-modern individualism.

In addition, possession and trance are indicators of a kind of ontology that Philippe Descola (2011, CH.9) has called analogism. In this ontology, each

[1] I am making this specification as Vietnam with its Mahayana Buddhist orientation may differ from the pattern of possession cults in the rest of mainland Southeast Asia. While certain features appear to be similar, the question of comparability needs to remain open at this moment (see Endres 2011).

專題論文

台灣東南亞學刊，16 卷 2 期，2021 年，頁 49-78

Folded Persons: Shamans, Witchcraft and Wayward Souls among the Rmeet in Laos[*]

Guido Sprenger

Professor Dr., Institute of Anthropology, Heidelberg University, Germany.

Abstract

Religious phenomena in Laos contain numerous examples of decentered and relational concepts of personhood, manifest in shamanic trance, wandering witchcraft spirits and soul loss. Possession in particular represents a connection between non-Buddhist uplands and Buddhist lowlands. The Rmeet, Mon-Khmer-speaking uplanders, provide examples of folded personhood – persons whose various aspects sometimes represent a coherent whole and sometimes split off, forming separate person-like entities. Folded persons can be positively valued, like in shamans' relationships with their helping spirits, or negatively, as in witchcraft spirits. Both forms are associated with other phenomena, like soul journeys and dangerous shapeshifters. These forms all relate to the manipulation of processes that recreate life, particularly marriage. This also links them to lowland Theravada Buddhist forms of witchcraft, that equally derive from an abusive form of a central exchange relationship.

Keywords: Personhood, Magic, Sorcery, *Zomia*

[*] I have conducted about twenty months of fieldwork among Rmeet from 2000 to 2018, funded by various grants by the German Research Council, the Frobenius Institute, the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica (Taipei), and Heidelberg University. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the workshop "Relocating Mainland Southeast Asia in Spirit Possession Studies", Centre Asie du Sud-Est, Paris, on November 29th, 2019. I thank Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, Peter Jackson, Oscar Salemink and Benjamin Baumann for their comments, as well as the two anonymous reviewers of TJSEAS.
Email: sprenger@eth.uni-heidelberg.de

I. Introduction

Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the study of religion in Laos has thrived upon the tension between concepts of scriptural, doctrinal and unifying "world religions" – commonly identified as Theravada Buddhism – and a residual category often called "animism" (e.g. Holt 2009). This tension operates both in the lowlands, where Buddhist institutions and non-doctrinal practices intersect, and between lowlands and uplands, where animist cosmologies and ontologies are dominant. This article addresses two issues of religion – or rather, cosmology and ontology – in Laos. It analyses a particular theme of upland cosmology and ritual, but it also argues the comparability of this aspect for uplands and lowlands. It thus suggests more general processes for cosmological variations within and beyond Laos.

The theme that crosses Laos' uplands and lowlands is the idea that persons are unstable and permeable. Living humans appear as temporary relationships between various corporeal and incorporeal aspects of personhood that are strung together at birth, dissolve after death and remain volatile during lifetime (e.g. Baumann 2020; Stonington 2020). Non-human or non-living beings commonly called spirits are also persons, in the sense that they are able to communicate, express intentions and recognize mutual obligations (Harris 1989). Spirits may enter into desired or unwanted relationships with living humans, sometimes by penetrating their bodies. Thus, the personhood of living humans in Southeast Asia demands constant attention and practical maintenance, as it is subject to the danger of decentering. "Possession" and "shamanism" suggest two separate modes of decentering personhood (Condominas 1976). The possessed person or a medium becomes, sometimes involuntarily, the vehicle of an invading spirit, while the shaman detaches his or her "soul" from his or her body in order to travel into the world of spirits. The movement is reversed, and the two modes seem sufficiently distinct for analysis.