



Visitors from hell: transformative hospitality to ghosts in a Lao Buddhist festival

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In Lao Buddhism, each year during the ghost festival, disembodied and hideous spectres are believed to be released from hell and enter the world of the living. This crossing of an ontological boundary, and the subsequent interaction of humans and ghosts, can be understood as a process of establishing hospitality in which both guest and host are transformed. The hospitality encounter can here simultaneously trigger an ontological shift of the ghost's position in Buddhist cosmology, but also contribute to the ethical self-cultivation of humans as hosts. Ghosts as guests can escape hell, receive a new body, and re-enter the cycle of reincarnations, while humans can practise a Buddhist ethics of hospitality based on the confrontation with a horrifying and pitiful species of beings.

Those entering a Buddhist temple in Laos and looking at some of the murals there will often be reminded of the cruelty of certain scenes painted by Hieronymus Bosch. The sequence of hell panoramas adorning the walls usually starts with an image of Yama, the Lord of Hell. Surrounded by his henchmen in military attire, he judges each of the deceased according to the deeds committed in the last life. The book into which the deeds of the candidate are noted down represents in its bureaucratic accuracy the law of karma. Sent to a suitable level of hell, the deceased undergo creative techniques of torture geared towards the sins committed. In Lao and other local cosmologies of the Theravāda Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, these beings are believed to be ghosts that owing to their ethical failures and bad karma are stuck between rebirths and undergo constant torture. People who have died a bad or violent death away from home (Bloch & Parry 1982) sometimes have a similar fate. Unable to eat and drink and having mutilated and distorted appearances, they have lost their humanity and fallen into hell, suffering continuous hunger and thirst. In that sense, the Lao hell ghosts can be said to inhabit a generic dominion of the dead, which Michael Lambek suggests 'represents Difference itself, an "other" world against which the quotidian is set off' (1996: 239).

In the case of Lao Buddhism, ghosts do not inhabit a realm purely 'beyond' and inaccessible through a sort of metaphysical wall, but they are entities that can be ritually addressed. Avery Gordon argues that 'the ghost is not simply dead or a missing person, but a social figure' (2008: 8), and consequently, one's own karma is not always the last word and interactions with the living can establish new relationships with ghosts. The

latter are most clearly reflected in Buddhist rituals that aim at caring for ghosts and supporting their reintegration back into the cycle of rebirth, which are the subject of this text. The Lao festival of ‘rice packets decorating the earth’ (*boun khau padab din* – hereafter BKPD) aims at the reconstruction and perpetuation of a multitude of relations with different kinds of dead. The emphasis of the festival is on ghosts, however, which on the night of BKPD are believed to be freed from hell and enter the world of the living. This ritually regulated haunting by ghosts, as one may call it, is not specific to Theravāda or Lao Buddhism, but can be found in many Buddhist traditions, and especially the Chinese ghost festival *yulanpen* (Teiser 1988) bears strong resemblances with the one to be discussed here.¹

In most of the anthropological and buddhological literature dealing with this festival, or similar ones in other Southeast Asian societies marked by Theravāda Buddhism, the relationships with the dead and ghosts are often explained via the notion of the ‘transfer of merit’ (Keyes 1983).² In this case, I would suggest that a focus on hospitality and its transformative potentials is more appropriate for understanding the relationships between ghosts and the living. Ritual hospitality is a precondition for enabling ghosts to escape hell, form a new body, and re-enter the cycle of rebirth. I compare them to rescued asylum-seekers and, with reference to Simmel (1950 [1908]) and Pitt-Rivers (1968), will propose that ghosts can here be understood as strangers to the realm of the living who through the crossing of an ontological boundary intrude into a world to which they usually do not belong. By setting ritual practices and the textual backgrounds of the festival in local Lao and Pali sources in dialogue with each other, I want to explore how care for these initially anonymous ghosts is expressed through hospitality and the establishment of a kinship bond. Looking at the material aspects of hospitality (food) will allow for understanding how the radical alterity of ghosts is transformed into an integral part of the social world. Moreover, I propose that the confrontation with disfigured ghosts leads to an interpellation of the host, exemplifying a specific ethics of hospitality based in wider Hindu-Buddhist notions of ritual giving.

Ghosts as revenants: Hell beings searching for food

BKPD takes place at new moon in the ninth lunar month (usually September) and marks the beginning of a special two-week period, the end of which is marked by a second festival, called *boun khau salak* (the festival of rice baskets drawn by lot). Tambiah, working on the Lao in northeast Thailand, states that during this period ‘the dead are allowed to visit the earth’ (1970: 156–7). In the first ritual that is the focus of this text, the ghosts making an apparition are primarily hungry and thirsty beings, and, as the name of the ritual already indicates, food and feeding play a crucial role here. Hence, the day before the ritual, special food packets are prepared by the families and almost the entire day is dedicated to the production of special offerings and decorations. Packets made from banana leaves, called *ho khau*, contain sticky rice and several fruits. Other packets, labelled *khau dom*, contain cooked sweet rice and pieces of fruit wrapped in banana leaves. Today, in the urban setting of Vientiane, it is also common to buy these offerings on the market. The following day the ritual starts around 4 a.m., when the temple bell is struck. Continuing for over an hour, this signifies the opening of the doors of hell and the coming of the *peta*, or *phiphed*, the hungry ghosts³ who fear light and can only appear on new moon. Laypeople flock to the temple and deposit the small packets on the temple grounds, make a short offering prayer, and light candles. These parcels ‘decorate the earth’ – hence the name of the ritual – and are eagerly looked

for by the hungry ghosts and consumed by absorbing the vapour (*aay*) of the food offerings. In some temples in Vientiane, the whole compound is converted into a huge table of food offerings. The word for receiving guests and hospitality (*dtoonhab*), or other words referring explicitly to hospitality, might occasionally be used by Lao to describe this reception of ghosts.

Before defining the category of ghosts addressed in the ritual more thoroughly, it must be mentioned that the ritual addresses a multitude of deities and different categories of deceased hard to distinguish, as their ontological status is marked by a high degree of fuzziness. Lambek mentions that we should ‘not expect spirits to follow a Linnean model of distinct “species”, notable for the discreteness of their identities’ (1996: 242), and reminds us that ‘multiple and sometimes competing constructions of spirits can coexist in the same society’ (1996: 246). The main focus of the ritual, however, is clearly on ghosts, and Lao ritual handbooks remark that the *ho khau* has to be given ‘to those who are caught in the rebirth cycle; those who are already dead but have not yet been reborn’ (Simphon 2007: 72). Philavong (1967: 68) and Viravong (1996: 33-4) mention the ghosts more explicitly and relate the festival to the textual background of the story of Bimbisara, to which I shall return.

Taking the second part of Lambek’s quote into account, it is also interesting to remark that the Lao use the word *phed* (from Pali *peta*) to describe the ghosts coming from hell, but one more often encounters the word *phiphed*. This is a compound word merging the Pali term with Tai-Kadai concepts of ghosts and spirits (*phi*) also found among non-Buddhist groups of this ethnolinguistic family.⁴ Pottier (2007: 508) translates *phiphed* as phantom and revenant, which describes their coming from hell very well. The word *peta* in Pali usually signifies hungry ghost, but its uses in early Theravāda Buddhism are far from clear. The term’s Hindu origins (from Sanskrit *pitṛ*) suggest a more general connotation, such as ancestor or, simply, deceased. Historically, the offering to *peta* derives from the Brahmanic ritual practice of *Śrāddha*, in which the ghost of every deceased person initially becomes a liminal being and is then transformed into an ancestor through food offerings. Taking a comparative perspective, I think that Stephen Teiser’s remark about Chinese ghosts as ‘a species in transition’ (1988: 220) is also applicable to the Lao case, as they are waiting for a chance of reintegration.

Peta and *phiphed* are ghosts that are anomalous creatures, strange and shocking in appearance, even threatening. Congruently, Lao and Thai depictions show them as tormented beings, whose appearance is dramatically altered by their continual suffering. In the *Petavatthu*⁵ – a classical treatise on the topic – they are exposed to tortures often related to the misdeeds in their lives: birds pick out flesh from their bodies, they vomit constantly, are forced to eat faeces, and so on. Their thirst and hunger is sometimes expressed in visual depictions in which they are shown to have huge bellies and needle-like necks, unable to ingest a sufficient quantity of food. Some of them are hybrid-beings between human and animal; perhaps an allusion to their loss of humanity.

Moggallāna and the visitors from hell: asylum-seekers in the world of the living

Where does this image of *phiphed* as beings from hell derive from? And why are they allowed to enter the realm of the humans on the day of BKPD? I will now turn to the textual backgrounds of the festival and, starting from there, elaborate on hospitality and the stranger. The Buddhist narrative of Moggallāna (Eugene 1964), or sometimes in Thai and Lao contexts the one of Phra Malai (Brereton 1995), is frequently mentioned

by Lao informants and the texts dealing with BKPD. One could say that they function as textual blueprints and explanatory frameworks.

Both Maha Moggallāna and Phra Malai are described as monks who, owing to their extraordinary abilities, can travel through the cosmos. They travel to the different hells and also enter the realm of the *peta*. They question the *peta* about their fate and their deeds and report this in the world of the living. According to Louis Finot, these travels appear in Laos in localized forms in stories such as ‘Moggallāna visits hell’ or ‘Moggallāna interrogates the *peta*’ (1917: 54f.). In Lao versions of the story, we also find conversations between Moggallāna and Yama, the Lord of Hell. Yama tells Moggallāna that on the day of new moon in the ninth month he opens the gates so the *phiphed* can go out and search for food and drink.⁶ Moggallāna is then told that some of the creatures did not receive any offerings and had to return to hell (Simphon 2007: 17). In the Lao and Thai versions of these stories, the central theme is the feeding of ghosts, the soothing of their suffering, and their subsequent liberation from hell. The abbot of the monastery where I observed the festival stated:

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

When we examine the status of ghosts in relation to notions of belonging and hospitality, it becomes clear that *phiphed* actually do not belong to world of the living; they are just granted the right of entering this world by Lord Yama. Moreover, this sojourn takes place in a limited time-frame. The ghosts are strangers⁷ that invade a space that is actually not their home. Heonik Kwon coined the term ‘ontological refugees’ for the ghosts of war in Vietnam (2008: 16), which can also be applied to the Lao *phiphed*. Fleeing from hell and having lost their humanity owing to ethical failure or bad death, they search for food, recognition, and a chance to escape into the world of the living. They can also be compared to asylum-seekers,⁸ hoping to receive food and thereby be able to escape from hell and be reborn in another realm. It has been noted that the concept of the stranger is essential for the understanding of hospitality (Pitt-Rivers 1963: 20). The stranger, according to Georg Simmel (1950 [1908]), is marked by (an imaginary or real) mobility, by his or her simultaneous belonging and not-belonging. The fact that the *phiphed* are strangers to the world of the living is signified by the passage they make, from hell to this world. Lao texts and informants regularly mention the ‘door of hell’ that opens on the morning of BKPD. The figure of the door is an essential component of hospitality because ‘for there to be hospitality, there must be a door ... there must be a threshold’ (Derrida 2000: 14). Crossing the door marks the initial phase of hospitality, the coming. Concerning the spatial aspect of hospitality, Simmel (1994 [1909]) has proposed a difference between door and bridge in relation to their dividing capacities. The bridge connects different realms, but usually the directionality of one’s crossing is not relevant. The door, however, opens a space with an emphasis on the division or differentiation of spheres rather than their unity. Van Genneep also makes reference to the door in multiple contexts for rites of passage (2004 [1909]: 20ff.).

This spatial aspect of hospitality, and the fact that a stranger enters into a domain to which he or she usually does not belong, also relates to the aspect of the timing and manner of arrival. Here one could say that the appearance of the *phiphed* is located

between *visitation* and *invitation*. Derrida remarks about the difference between the two: 'We must distinguish between the invitation from what we would have to call the visitation. The visitor is not necessarily an invited guest. The visitor is someone who could come at any moment, without any horizon of expectation' (Derrida 2000: 17). In our case there is neither pure welcome (an invitation), nor solely a surprising visitation. The living know that the ghosts come and make them welcome in the ritual, but the incursion of the *phiphed* into the world of the living is also marked by uncanniness. It is a rather ambiguous welcome that reflects the crossing of ontological boundaries that are normally kept separate and a reception of a guest with a less than pleasant appearance. Kwon remarks for Vietnam that 'ghosts are an uninvited category' (2008: 22), and the intrusion of the *phiphed* in this sense also has features of a visitation, or a kind of regulated haunting. Following Julian Pitt-Rivers's understanding of hospitality and the stranger (1963: 20), one could say that BKPD contains a transformation from *phiphed* as a hostile stranger (*hostis*) into a guest (*hospes*). Here, the inherent ambivalence that Benveniste (1973: 72) has attested for hospitality, and which Derrida (2000) has aptly described with the term 'hostipitality', shines through. In the following section, I explore how this ambivalence is further softened through the integration of the ghost as stranger via a form of 'constructed' kinship bond.

Artificial kinship with strangers: Bimbisara and the remembering of ghosts through hospitality

I have suggested that the Lao *phiphed* share some characteristics with various anthropological accounts of the stranger as a general social category. I have then presented hospitality as one means of mediating a relationship between the ghost – a 'radical stranger' from a distinct ontological sphere – and the living. If we follow Julian Pitt-Rivers's account of hospitality and bear in mind that in many cases 'the stranger is incorporated only through a personal bond with an established member' (1963: 20), we might get another hint as to how *phiphed* are able to integrate into the world of the living in the context of hospitality. As stated before, the ghosts invading the world of the living and receiving a welcome here are anonymous creatures that have no *known* kinship link to this world. A look at the Petavatthu – the other textual basis of the Lao ghost festival – and specifically the story of King Bimbisara, exemplifies a further integration strategy of ghosts. The story is regularly cited by Lao informants and referred to in ritual manuals and contains an important hint as to the construction of what could be called a specific form of artificial kinship with ghosts.⁹

The story describes how a group of *peta* is informed by the monk Kassapa that in one Buddha aeon, during the time of the Buddha Śākyamuni, a king named Bimbisara will dedicate offerings to them. When the moment finally arrives, Bimbisara knows nothing of his responsibilities and gives to the Buddha without dedicating the gift to the *peta*. At night, the *peta* wail 'in utter and dreadful distress', and the king is 'filled with fear and trembling' (Kyaw & Masefield 1980: 25). In the morning the Buddha clarifies the situation and tells Bimbisara about his former relatives who have arisen in the *peta* realm and have been waiting for the gift for a whole aeon, unbeknownst to Bimbisara. The Buddha makes the *peta* visible for the king and they are described as 'extremely ugly, deformed and terrible to behold' (Kyaw & Masefield 1980: 25). Another almsgiving is organized, and through the dedication and mediation of the Buddha the *peta* receive abundant food, drink, and clothes.

Important here is that the *peta* are relatives of Bimbisara who have been forgotten, but are brought back to memory by the Buddha and thereby identified as kin. The miraculous intervention of the Buddha lays bare a kinship bond that extends beyond families and village units: from the Buddha's superior perspective, we actually all have kinship bonds stretching back to a very distant past. Buddhism thereby constructs an almost *infinite universe of kinship relations* of which the *peta* are one important segment. The moral cosmos and also that of ritual obligations could be described as what Jonathan Walters has called 'communal karma' or 'socio-karma' (2003: 14). This strategy of making kin out of others through a karmic community can be said to represent a transposition from family-centred ritual hospitality to ghosts in Hinduism (caring only for one's own *peta* relatives after death) to a universal, Buddhist one, in which every one of us has *peta* relatives. However, here the Buddhist ideal of an infinite relational universe and compassion towards all beings – hospitality and welcome as a universal ethics – has to be relativized. Although certain voices in doctrinal Buddhism seem to propagate this universal ethic, in practice people primarily think of, and make offerings to, their *peta* relatives – a more local and kin-related idea of hospitality. What bridges the inherent contradiction between the universal and family-centred modes of hospitality is that in Laos, Buddhists have rather unspecific ideas about the afterlife of their deceased relatives. Like among the Lao in northeast Thailand (Hayashi 2003: 148), several informants have stated that there is always an option that a recently deceased relative, or one who died generations ago, might have ended up as a *phiphed* being tortured in hell and waiting for liberation. It is the very vagueness of ancestral connections, and not a measurable number of guests hosted during the ritual, that supports a Buddhist ideology of universal relatedness and compassion.

Returning to the mentioned apparition of the *peta* in the Bimbisara narrative and the ritual, Janet Carsten argues that spectral apparitions are often linked to loss and memory. She proposes that often 'excesses of grief cause these ghosts to appear' (2007: 10). This is certainly valid for ghosts of a closer family and friendship circle, but as the *phiphed* are relatives without a fixed identity, here we instead encounter the apparition of ghosts as the return of those who have been forgotten and memory-wise lead a marginal existence. Stephan Feuchtwang states that ghosts 'are forgotten or neglected relationships, including whole categories of the forgotten' (2010: 169). Instead of grief being the leading motive, what is acted out here in the context of hospitality is a recognition of the previously forgotten dead. The intrusion of the stranger into the world of the living and their welcome through hospitality can therefore also be understood as a reminder of relationships that have been forgotten, as related by the story of Bimbisara, and indeed many Buddhist accounts of the imperfect human memory of ordinary people (Wayman 1992). Ghosts in that sense want to be recognized and be reminded that they were once humans as well, an expression of their longing to become human again.

The two narratives I referred to and the related ritual practices socialize the *phiphed* in different ways. On the one hand, the story of Moggallāna explains why ghosts should be seen as ontological refugees coming from hell who deserve to be welcomed in this world with hospitality. The story of Bimbisara, on the other, describes how ghosts are further socialized through a kinship bond that extends over a whole Buddhist aeon. In this later case, hospitality is also an act of remembering. So in summary, the *phiphed* are beings that have the qualities of (frightening) strangers, but get socialized through hospitality, kinship, and the offering of food – transforming others into integral members of the social universe. In the following section, I suggest why this act

of offering food constitutes the key to understand that transformative potential of hospitality.

Transformative hospitality: creating new bodies and the interpellation of the host

Because it involves the crossing of boundaries, and the negotiation of rights, duties, and ethics, hospitality is often ambivalent. Owing to these dynamics, the encounter can leave a lasting imprint on both guest and host – a dual transformative process. First, this ritual welcoming can occasionally reintegrate the *phiphed* into the cycle of rebirth. For while the provision of food may be regarded as a first universal gesture of hospitality, here it has wider implications: the creation of a new body of the ghost is dependent on the received offerings. Secondly, the host and the giver are – from an ideal Buddhist perspective – supposed to be ethically transformed. Here, the confrontation with the ghost, an ugly and mutilated creature, is understood to create a shock, which is seen as a basis for developing an ethics of generosity and ritual hospitality as already elaborated in Vedic thought and early Indian Buddhism, and still visible in the contemporary Lao ritual.

Food and the creation of ‘envelopes’

In Lao Buddhism, as in most of the Buddhist traditions of mainland Southeast Asia, food plays a central role in establishing relations between laypeople and the *sangha* (order of monks) and between humans and non-human entities. In Tai-Kadai conceptions of spirits, ghosts are ritually fed or fostered (*liang*), and are not recipients of Buddhist merit. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, *peta* and *phiphed* are primarily hungry ghosts that enter the world of the living as malnourished and tortured beings, hoping to escape hell. How can we imagine this mechanism, and what does it tell us about the material and transformative aspects of hospitality?

Instead of following doctrinal ideas about transferring merit, it is crucial to look at the materiality of food offerings and their roles in the ritual. Buddhist practices of offering food for the dead have often been set in relationship with Vedic and later Indian rites for the dead such as *Śrāddha*. The latter underscore the importance of maintaining patriarchal family lineage systems in an ongoing and unbroken line. Here, rice ball offerings (*piṇḍa*) are performed daily for ten days after death and in annual rites. They are essential for creating a new body for the deceased and to lead his or her soul through the kingdom of Yama, the Lord of Hell. Only then can the transformation from *preta* (here an intermediate being slightly different from the Lao *phiphed*) to *pitṛ* (ancestor) be accomplished. Regarding the *piṇḍa*, Parry states: ‘[O]ne meaning of pind is an “embryo” or generally a “body”. [They] also construct a new body for the deceased ... [T]he ten pinds are both nourishment for the pret and the substance of a new body’ (1994: 196). In the Lao vocabulary, I could find no etymological connection to *piṇḍa* or a variant in Sanskrit or Pali. However, the historical connection between the Brahmanic concepts of *Śrāddha* and the offerings is pretty clear, especially when we look at the same festival in the Cambodian context.

Despite the slight differences regarding ritual practice and terminology, Lao informants have at times referred to the body, or form (*hub*, from Pali: *rūpa*), which the ghosts can obtain. Porée-Maspero, discussing the Khmer ritual, mentions that the food offerings are intended for the ‘creation of a spiritual body’ (1950: 47). *Piṇḍa* in Pali also translates as conglomerate (Rhys Davids & Stede 1992 [1921-5]: 458) and Ang Choulean sets this in relationship to the ‘envelope’ that has to be created for the ghost in the Khmer context:

Every year at the same time the community of the living must help the straying deceased [the *peta*] with their reincarnation. In the most concrete sense it is here crucial to provide bodily envelopes for the deceased, which are formed from sticky rice ... Because of their consistency as a conglomerate the rice balls enable the souls to reincarnate. Putting it simply: they are bodily envelopes (Choulean 2007: 238-9).

Whereas in classical Indian rituals one makes offerings to one's immediate ancestors and thereby provides envelopes for them, in Buddhism this care is extended through the aforementioned karmic network. Jeff Shirkey has argued that the *Petavatthu* 'implicitly, if not explicitly, demonstrates that reintegration of *peta*-s back into an ideal Buddhist order is the soteriological goal of these ritual exchanges' (2008: 327). The escape option the *phiphed* have, namely being reborn on another realm outside of hell, thus could be understood as a transformation of their condition through the offering of food; a new body through a transformative gift and an escape from hell through the overcoming of an in-between state. In order to make this transformation function, food as an object is not just a detour, not simply a crystallization or reflection of relationships, but it has the capacity to nurture the *phiphed* and provide them with a new body. Moreover, rice – as a basic ingredient of the *piṇḍa* – is surrounded by a complex set of rituals aiming at bringing soul substance (*khwan*) into it (Rajadhon 1955). Humans, a few animals, and plants also have *khwan*. Interestingly, the word for feeding (*liang*) also has strong connotations of 'fostering' when, for example, talking about bringing up a child or raising an animal. All sorts of different *phi* in Laos and Thailand are also fed and fostered in order to please and tame them.

Understanding the connection between moral agents and the 'functional agency of objects' (Thévenot 2002: 59) used for establishing hospitality relationships is critical here. The provision of a specific kind of food is therefore more than an elementary gesture of welcoming the ghost as a guest in this world; it provides him or her with a new body. The *phiphed* can be said to have 'unstable bodies' (Vilaça 2005: 457) that are ontologically transformed through hospitality.

The interpellation of the host and the ethics of ritual hospitality

We have now discussed the transformation that happens to the ghost as guest in the world of the living. However, this transformation is not single-sided, and I want to suggest that the ritual encounter with the *phiphed* in the context of hospitality also enables the host to develop a certain ethics.

Often, special capacities are attributed to the stranger. For example, the idea of the stranger king exemplifies how the inclusion of the stranger can be a source of vitality, sovereignty, and fertility (Dumézil 1988; Sahlins 2008). In this case, I think an observation of Pitt-Rivers on this external stimulation through the arrival of the guest follows a similar line: 'The stranger belongs to the "extra-ordinary" world, and the mystery surrounding him allies him to the sacred and makes him a suitable vehicle for the apparition of the God, the revelation of mystery' (1963: 20). While the *phiphed* are not a source of fertility in the sense of the stranger king, or embody an apparition of God, they nevertheless play an important role for the cultivation of Buddhist ethics and virtues such as compassion (*karuna*), loving kindness (*metta*), and generosity (*dana*). The latter is particularly embedded within an understanding of the ritual of acts of giving in Indian and Buddhist thought, which is ultimately based on a concept of ritual hospitality.

At the start of this paper, I suggested that the *peta* and the Lao *phiphed* with their mutilated and deformed appearances are rather ghostly creatures. Considering the

scriptural background of the festival, the shock initiated by ghosts' appearances is also understood by many Buddhists as a sort of educational device, or as an instance of what Pitt-Rivers suggested could also be called the revelatory character of the stranger. In the Petavatthu, the term *samvega* is used to describe the meeting of *peta* and humans, and Dhammapala's commentary states that 'this teaching, namely the Petavatthu ... necessarily produces *samvega* in beings' (cited in Shirkey 2008: 294). According to Shirkey, *samvega* is the agitation, the aesthetic shock that a person experiences when confronted particularly with sickness and death (2008: 281-2). The agitation left by the guest through that horrible appearance can be said to create an ethicization of the guest-host relationship and a call for hospitality: one should show compassion and loving kindness for the *phiphed*, but especially generosity by presenting offerings. The encounter of humans with ghosts can in this sense have interpellating qualities: the host is interpellated by the guest through feelings of disgust and shock, which, however, are supposed to be the impetus for developing positive ethical values. Viveiros de Castro (2012) has shown for human-ghost encounters in Amerindian cosmologies that there can be a 'lethal interpellation of the subject by the spirit'. Here, the meeting and conversation with a ghost involve the danger of a human crossing into the ontological sphere of the spirit. To my knowledge, in the Lao case of the *phiphed* there is no danger of the host crossing an ontological boundary, but there is an ethical interpellation through the production of the specific affective state of *samvega*.¹⁰

One could here follow the discussion and speculate on the ethical value of disgust, shock, and repellent ghosts as an experience that beyond pure (anti-)aesthetics has a value for the formation of the ethical subject. The *phiphed* can be said to inhabit a space of abjection. They are astray, misplaced, and inhabit an ambiguous, filthy space in hell. Abjection continuously challenges order and identity and must be continuously jettisoned. However, there are also cases where the abject becomes integrated (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 6), and in ours it can even be said to be of ethical value beyond rejection.¹¹ This ethical value is in Thai Buddhism, for example, exemplified in *asubha-kammattāna* (meditation on the impurities of rotting corpses) in order to realize perishability (*anicca*) (Klima 2002). Then, disgust produced through this encounter can be said to lead to an affective state that enables the cultivation of an ethics of hospitality. Maria Heim has very eloquently argued that in many Buddhist narratives involving gift-giving, the production of affective states plays an important role for the transmission of ethics. She argues that there is 'an effect of external gesture on internal virtue, where the actions of hospitality and worship, including the prescribed horripilation, are the "means" that "transform" the giver ... Here the ritual etiquette of hospitality involves a transformation of the giver' (Heim 2004: 95). In discussions with monks and knowledgeable laypeople on BKPD, it was often suggested that the ritual is an occasion for the development of exemplary feelings as propagated by Buddhist ethics.

These exemplary feelings catalysed through the presentation of offering to ghosts are what Lao Buddhists refer to as *sattha*. *Sattha* is usually translated as faith or confidence, but has an intimate link to the idea of hospitality. In Vedic and early Buddhist thought, where the equivalent Sanskrit term *Śraddhā*, is found, this link is made explicit. Stephanie Jamison states that '*Śraddhā* seems to express obligations in the realms both of hospitality and of ritual ... It often expresses the trust a worshipper has in the gods and in the efficacy of ritual'. In relation to gift-giving and presenting offerings, the term 'expresses the trust or agreement to the host's obligation to provide for his guest's needs and desires' (1996: 177-8). We can see here that the concept of a ritual offering in

Hinduism and Buddhism is already linked to the idea of hospitality. Sherry Ortner has described similar processes among the Buddhist Sherpa (1975: 146f.). The faith of contemporary Lao Buddhists who participate in BKPD is therefore also to be understood as a faith that implicitly already contains references to the widespread Hindu-Buddhist idea of ritual hospitality which in the context of BKPD is acted out with reference to ghosts.

Conclusion

I have presented the *phiphed* as social figures that have lost their humanity owing to ethical failure or bad death. They have gone through a decrease on the Buddhist evolutionary scale of karma and fallen into hell. They are forgotten and no longer recognized by their kin, on whom they are dependent. Not belonging to the world of the living, on the day of BKPD they cross an ontological boundary. Concerning their ontological status, I have compared them to invading strangers and asylum-seekers. However, through hospitality and the construction of anonymous, artificial kinship bonds they are welcomed in the world of humans. Local adaptations of well-known Buddhist stories (Bimbisara and Moggallāna) in this context remind the living of their duties towards these pitiful beings. The hospitality acted out in the ritual is primarily marked by the first gesture of welcome – the provision of food. The soteriological goal of liberating the liminal ghosts by providing them with a new body nourished by the food offerings was explained with reference to the concrete materiality that hospitality takes on. This socialization through hospitality, if accomplished, gives the *phiphed* a chance to re-enter the cycle of reincarnations. This demand of hospitality, the welcome they are supposed to receive, is driven by what I have called a Buddhist ethics of hospitality. Here, ideally, both guest and host are transformed through the encounter that takes place within the context of hospitality. The ghost as a guest receives a new body through the offering and the consumption of *piṇḍa*. For the host, the confrontation with the horrible appearance of the guest is a chance to cultivate exemplary Buddhist values. Disgust, as a signifier of affect, produces a state of shock in which the host and donor experiences an agitation (*samvega*), which can be understood as a call for hospitality and ethical cultivation. The ghost as stranger is here associated with revelatory capacities that transform the host. This ethical transformation through ritual hospitality was, then, linked with ideas about giving and hospitality in early Buddhist and Vedic thought, which is based on an understanding of ritual embedded in the notion of hospitality.

Finally, I want to end on a less lofty note. Avery Gordon postulates that ‘haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import’ (2008: 7). While discussing the ‘reality’ of spirits and the ethical basis of the ghost festival, my Lao friend countered excursions into secular arguments with the following statement:

You never know what your karma or your next life is going to be like. You might end up as a *phiphed* one day, always hungry and suffering. If you are really *phiphed*, or if this is just a metaphor for something else, is not that important. What matters is that people don’t forget you, soothe your suffering and help you.

Hospitality is therefore also to be understood as an act of remembering and caring for those who have been less fortunate in their destiny. And if we do not care about them,

they will come to haunt us in one way or the other way as visitors from one of the hells we can all potentially inhabit in the future.

NOTES

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¹ The Vietnamese *tết trung nguyên* and the Japanese *urabon* festival are further examples. See Teiser (2004) for a comparative overview.

² Merit here functions as a sort of positive karma that in local conceptions has qualities of a transferable substance. Usually a gift to a monk or the order of monks (*sangha*) produces merit, which is then transferred to the deceased or a ghost via the monk. The latter beings are always in need of merit owing to their ambivalent, incomplete status.

³ Monks told me this is also a kind of warning that the *phiphed* are coming and can be taken as a reference to their uncanniness.

⁴ The word *phi* encompasses a multitude of spirits among various Tai-Kadai groups living in Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, and South Yunnan. This can include protective spirits of a certain place, but also malicious spirits. For an overview of the Lao concepts of *phi*, see Condominas (1975) and Pottier (2007: 15-42).

⁵ The *Petavatthu* ('ghost stories') is a collection of fifty-one narratives that describe the effects of negative deeds as a rebirth in the *petā* realm. It also exists in Lao vernacular language and is regularly mentioned by monks and laypeople with reference to the festival.

⁶ Viravong mentions that Yama's act could be seen as analogous to the liberation of convicts (1996: 34). To my knowledge, neither in Pali nor in Lao sources is the reason for this opening of the door of hell mentioned.

⁷ The stranger as a social type, however, might be too wide a notion if applied generally. The ontological status of the *phiphed* is known and they are otherworldly ghosts, hence not completely unknown. A more radical version of the stranger is, for example, exemplified by Viveiros de Castro (1998), reinterpreting a famous passage from Lévi-Strauss (1961: 79-80). Here, the conquistadores were radical strangers for the Amerindians. The latter were even unsure if the white men had bodies. To test this, they drowned them and then waited for putrefaction. There is a critical difference between this kind of radical stranger and the foreigner or the migrant. We are dealing here with different ontologies of the concept of stranger.

⁸ Rosello (2001) critically evaluates the multiple implications when using hospitality (as a metaphor) in relation to immigrants and asylum-seekers. Here, in this process of scaling hospitality to a national level, quickly the limits, pitfalls, and power games inherent in hospitality discourses become obvious. For our case here, it might be valid to apply the metaphor to ghosts, as they, as temporary asylum-seekers, do not claim unemployment or housing benefits.

⁹ The use of the 'artificial' here deviates from its use in kinship terminology. Regarding the latter, see, for example, Bloch on the moral implications of artificial kinship when related to work power (1973: 78-9).

¹⁰ In Lao practice the term *samvega* is to my knowledge not used, but the ways in which the *phiphed* are depicted and imagined leaves no doubt that the idea has left its imprint.

¹¹ See also my discussion elsewhere of the ethical value of transgressive excess and irritation/bewilderment in relation to Lao Buddhist narratives of giving (Ladwig 2009).

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Des visiteurs infernaux : hospitalité transformative envers les fantômes lors d'une fête bouddhiste au Laos

Résumé

Les bouddhistes laos croient que chaque année, lors de la fête des fantômes, de hideux spectres désincarnés s'échappent des enfers pour passer dans le monde des vivants. Ce franchissement d'une frontière ontologique et l'interaction entre humains et fantômes qui lui fait suite peuvent être envisagés comme un processus d'hospitalité qui transforme aussi bien l'invité que l'hôte. La rencontre hospitalière peut déclencher un changement ontologique de la position du spectre dans la cosmologie bouddhiste, tout en contribuant à l'éducation éthique des vivants qui s'en font les hôtes. Les fantômes accueillis peuvent échapper à l'enfer, recevoir un nouveau corps et revenir dans le cycle des réincarnations, tandis que les vivants peuvent pratiquer une éthique bouddhiste de l'hospitalité par la confrontation avec des êtres aussi pitoyables qu'horrifiants.

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