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Local comparisons. Buddhism and its others in upland Laos

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Abstract: Comparison is not only the foundation of anthropology, but may even be a human universal. It is a practice that emerges from the perception of cultural difference. Therefore, not only modern academics compare – comparison is always embedded in specific cultural relationships. This article shows how Rmeet uplanders in northern Laos and Jru' in the south employ comparison when they talk about ethnic and religious difference. In particular, they compare their own ritual system with translocal and national Buddhism. They thus practice comparison in the sense that comparison is part of transcultural relationships and the valorization of cultural representations. This occurs in a framework of distinctions between Buddhism and its manifold “animist” others, which provides two bases of comparison – the otherness inbuilt into Buddhism and the adaptability of animism. Uplanders thus find themselves cast in the position of Buddhism’s other and construct the relationships in terms of reversible hierarchies.

[Buddhism, animism, Laos, Rmeet, Loven]

The comparison of cultural configurations is one of the major endeavors of anthropology (e.g. Gingrich/Fox 2002, Schnegg 2014), but is neither restricted to social science nor to modern societies in general. As Dumont (2013: 310) has argued, relativism is never absolute but only exists in a relationship between specific societies. This means that comparison always implies a perspective – it references the locus of the person that is comparing, just as central perspective in European painting fixates the point occupied by the beholder. The notion that an “objective” or “distanced” point of view is necessary for comparison thus appears as illusory. Practicing the social as a precondition for knowledge (Bourdieu 1979) is thus also a condition for comparison. Comparison is embedded in and enacts particular transcultural relationships that the beholder constructs around herself.

Thus, anyone who is conceiving differences in the lifeways of different people joins the common enterprise of comparison, in the sense that comparison means the systematization of differences. However, while anthropology has been trying to be meticulous in making the parameters of comparison transparent and systematic, it tends to neglect comparison as a common practice among the people it studies. Regarding such local comparisons, however, will reveal comparison as embedded and practical. In this respect, anthropological comparison as an elaborate “discipline” of thought with its own

internal dynamics does not differ from the varied, conventional and often spontaneous comparisons that people make as part of their everyday lives.

Therefore, I do not just want to make comparative statements myself, but document how people in Laos who identify as ethnic minorities with a non-Buddhist background compare their own ritual systems with Buddhism, the dominant religion of the country. Comparison is part of a cultural practice that implicitly or explicitly situates ritual systems in relation to each other. The point of view it implies is an aspect of the relationship between these systems. Many forms of Buddhism, I argue, are structured in a way that demands this kind of comparison. Therefore, even non-Buddhists in a Buddhist environment contribute to a discourse intrinsic to Buddhism, that is about Buddhism and its others. Local comparisons are situated in a transcultural process of ethno-religious differentiation. My own comparison thus works on two levels. On one level, I compare various communities in Laos in respect to their comparisons between local animist ritual and translocal Buddhism. On a second level, I suggest a few general comparative characteristics of the relationship between Buddhism and its others.

I thus make three intersecting arguments. First, my theoretical argument holds that comparison is part of ongoing relationships between different cultural configurations. Second, I find certain continuities in the way Buddhism requires otherness, self-difference, as a constitutive part of itself, in contrast to the exclusivity associated with a modern-Western notion of religion. In Laos, this alterity manifests in various kinds of “animism”. Thirdly, this alterity relationship provides a code, a shared language that connects to the localism of animism in my field sites, thus producing a range of different possibilities to relate, that allows for their comparison.

This choice of comparisons betrays the embeddedness of my own comparative endeavor. On the one hand, I speak from the point of view of a secularist system of knowledge that is increasingly facing exclusivist notions of religion, in particular from Christianity and Islam. Although Buddhism shares with these other world religions the oscillation between fragmenting localization and seemingly unifying purification, a comparative perspective highlights its more inclusivist, self-different aspects. On the other hand, my fieldwork experience among non-Buddhists made me consider the hegemonic features of Buddhism as a state religion, in contrast to the multiplicity of local animism. These are the cultural conditions of my own practice of comparison in this article.

Buddhism and its others

In a passing remark, Melford Spiro (1967: 3) noted that Buddhism always operates alongside other cosmological concepts, be it Hinduist gods or local spirits, magic or divination. This implies that Buddhism describes its boundaries not always by the kind of exclusivism that is associated with the Religions of the Book, where a person or a

community are supposed to be, say, Christians and nothing else and, what is more, superior to other types of persons and communities. In contrast, the superiority that Buddhism does indeed teach is based on the notion of hierarchy between a person's or community's various practices. Decisively non-Buddhist ideas and practices exist besides Buddhist ones, but are of a subordinate character.

If Spiro or David Gellner (1997) are correct, the relationship between Buddhism and its others is constitutive for Buddhist communities¹ - even though attempts at purifying the teaching are not alien to it. In the literature, this often goes along with a separation between the transcendent, otherworldly orientation of Buddhism and immanent, this-worldly concerns of its other (e.g. Golomb 1985, Kirsch 1977). However, this assumed distribution of tasks idealizes Buddhism and negates the way it is employed for everyday matters (e.g. McDaniel 2011, Tannenbaum 1995). Also, it disregards the fact that many Buddhist states in Southeast Asia are historically defined by Buddhist centers and non-Buddhist peripheries (Turton 2000). I argue that this is another form of the same type of constitutive relationship between Buddhism and its other in larger "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991) that goes beyond the contingencies of everyday life.

In the study of Southeast Asia, this other is often called animism.² This term has survived the end of the debate about Tylor's (1958 [1871]) theory as a residual, undertheorized label for the others of the world religions in Southeast Asian scholarship. While the relationship between local practices, localisations of world religions and their globalized or canonical forms remained a major issue in the study of Southeast Asian religion, the notion of animism itself was largely unspecified. Only recently, theoretical debate about it was brought back to this region (K. Århem/Sprenger 2016, Bovensiepen 2014, Descola 2013, Ingold 2006, Tsintjilonis 2004). I will therefore employ it here, in the sense of local cosmologies that include non-human powers ranging from impersonal potencies that can be manipulated by ritual to person-like, localized but usually invisible beings with whom people communicate in ritual (Rehbein/Sprenger 2016, Sprenger 2016, 2017a).

The relationship between Buddhism and animism in mainland Southeast Asia contains a particular difference. Buddhism, with its origin in India, its base in scriptural traditions and its claims for ritual standardization, represents translocality and generalization – even though, in practice, it fragments into numerous localizations. In contrast, localism is an inherent characteristic of animism in this region. First, spirits are usually local; be they ancestral or locality spirits, they have certain predilections and need to be addressed with specific rituals, and this differentiates the rituals and customs of the various communities that venerate them (e.g. N. Århem 2015, Hayashi 2003). Communities or ethnic groups are distinguished by their relationships with spirits that are in-

1 A possible exception is Tibet, where Buddhism has absorbed its others. I thank Nicolas Sihlé for this qualification.

2 Other terms being supernaturalism (Spiro 1967) and magic (Terwiel 2012).

dividually or categorically different from each other. In contrast to Buddhism and other transcultural religions, animism makes local cultural differences expectable. While the unity of its teaching tradition is at the core of Buddhism, animism fundamentally operates on fragmentation and variety. Instead of standardizing ritual, animism diversifies it as part of its rules of reproduction. O'Connor thus speaks of Southeast Asian spirit cults as "a lingua franca of localism" (O'Connor 2003: 282). For this reason, it is unnecessary to pluralize the word into "animisms". Animism is by itself plural.

Thus, the Buddhism/animism distinction allows non-Buddhists to situate themselves in relation to Buddhism. This identification as Buddhism's others already implies the adoption of Buddhist semantics and therefore the potential to slip into Buddhist practices as well. Central to this is a local practice of comparing Buddhist and non-Buddhist ritual systems and ideas.

Spirit religion in Laos

In Southeast Asia, colonialism and modernization certainly shaped current official discourses on animism and world religion. In Laos, "animism" is the usual English translation of the Lao word *satsana phi*, literally "religion of the spirits". *Satsana* (dispensation) originally denoted those practices and beliefs that distinguish Buddhists, but has become the common translation for "religion" in Thailand and Laos, thus making it possible to speak of *satsana islam* or *satsana khrit* (Christianity) (see Brac de la Perrière, 2017). But the otherness of *satsana phi* in Laos is quite specific. In contrast to Christianity or Islam, *satsana phi* is not officially considered a religion. In everyday conversation, however, the term is common.

Satsana phi is usually restricted to non-Buddhist minorities like most of the Mon-Khmer-speaking groups. In Laos, about 70 % of the population has registered as Buddhists in the national census of 2015. As I will show below, this also contains people who would, in everyday life, neither practice much Buddhism nor identify with it. The attraction of counting as Buddhists lies very much in the association of the religion with the state, education and generalized national culture. Historically, Laos was governed by Buddhist kings and even after the revolution of 1975, the socialist government acquired part of its legitimacy from its role of protector of Buddhism (Evans 1998, Ladwig 2009). This still leaves about a third of the population as non-Buddhists, most of them adhering to *satsana phi*.

Yet, the distinction between communities of Buddhism and those of "spirit religion" does not exhaust Buddhism's others. Even within Buddhist communities there is a distinction between ritual practices – not persons or households – oriented towards Buddhism or spirits. Various authors, including Tambiah (1970), Zago (1972) and Condominas (1975), have pointed out the complementary relationship between Buddhism and spirit cults in Laos and nearby areas. Holt (2009: 20) has even argued that,

in Laos and in contrast to Sri Lanka, Buddhism is perceived from and encompassed by animism.

Sometimes, this just marks the difference between what an observer or a Buddhist elite perceives as proper Buddhism and what locals practice under this label. But often enough, locals themselves distinguish between Buddhism and what they call “venerating spirits” (*thue phi*) in Buddhist communities. This includes major ritual complexes like possession or ancestor veneration, often in the context of healing. But none of my Buddhist interlocutors would identify “venerating spirits” as *satsana*. Thus, the distinction between Buddhism and animism articulates differently on the level of the person, the household or the community.

In case of some practices, as conversations with monks and former monks showed, the other of Buddhism in Buddhist communities is not always *thue phi*, but *satsana phaam*, “Brahmanism”. This includes many common rituals, among them the wrist-tying ceremony *baci sukhwan*, a blessing ritual that is a signifier of Lao national-cultural unity (Mayoury 1990). As one young monk explained to me, Buddhism is too difficult for common people to comprehend, and therefore, in order for them to have something to celebrate, Brahman rituals are allowed. This interpretation is presumably part of a trend to purify Buddhism of its non-doctrinal elements, and thus rather recent.³ However, the relationship between *satsana phaam* and *thue phi* has not been properly researched yet.

Thus, the distinction between Buddhism and its others runs through numerous contexts and relationships. The point I want to make is that this is a constitutive relationship appearing in some form on every level of society – on the level of person, household, community, and state. Buddhism is not simply a world religion different from other world religions, but a dualism that reproduces locally with varying content. It is a relationship between itself and its others, internally self-different. Numerous festivals and rituals in Laos are at once part of ritual systems structured by Buddhism and set apart at the same time.

This allowed even non-Buddhist groups in Laos to see themselves not as isolated from Buddhism, but rather in a contrastive, sometimes complementary relationship. This was certainly the case historically. The New Year Festivals (Pi Mai Lao) at the beginning of the rainy season saw the king performing a ritual in which he received the non-Buddhist Mon-Khmer speakers of the vicinity of Luang Prabang and sat them on his throne for a brief moment. Thereby, he recognized the non-Buddhists as the original owners of the land, which enabled him to secure fertility for the coming year (Aijmer 1979, Platenkamp 2010, Trankell 1999). Here, Buddhist king and non-Buddhist uplanders appeared in a complementary relationship, a reversible hierarchy in the sense of Louis Dumont (1980), in which the value of primordial relations with the spirits of the land briefly superseded the superiority of the Buddhist monarch.

3 I thank Vanina Bouté for pointing out this possibility.

The relationship between Buddhism and its others is thus a shared code for situating practices, contexts and identities within the Laotian national discourse. There are people who are Buddhists and those who are not, but all of them might practice Buddhist rituals or non-Buddhist ones contextually. Both in discourse and in practice, this involves local comparisons between Buddhism and animism. The cultural conditions for these comparisons are Buddhism with its inbuilt hierarchical relationship with animism and animism with its production of non-hierarchical differences, within a state that is predominantly Buddhist with significant animist minorities.

I want to detail examples from two Mon-Khmer speaking minorities in different field sites, rural and semi-urban Rmeet (Lamet) in northern Laos and animist as well as animist-Buddhist Jru' (Loven) in the south. In all sites, people compared *satsana phi* and Buddhism sometimes implicitly but also explicitly. Comparisons showed decisive similarities or developed from what seems to be a shared pattern. This pattern of variation, I argue, is based on a nation-wide dialogue between Buddhism and its others, framed by the logic of animist localism. In this dialogue, Buddhism claims a hegemonic position, but this is contextually reversible. My Jru' interlocutors appeared to accept this hegemony better than my Rmeet interlocutors who suggested that their ritual system is on par with Buddhism. In addition, as Buddhism is strongly associated with the lifestyle of the Lao, villagers adopted Buddhist practices alongside "Brahman" ones.

A place in the national language of difference: Rmeet in northern Laos

The Rmeet (Lamet) are Mon-Khmer speakers who do not identify as Buddhists and mostly live as swidden cultivators in the mountainous north of Laos. I present data from two different villages, Takheung and Hangdeun. In both places, people know Lao and Buddhist practices well, but semi-urban Hangdeun villagers are much more actively engaged with them. Takheung, in contrast, is a mountain village in Luang Nam Tha province surrounded entirely by other Rmeet villages. Still, it is not isolated, as villagers regularly travel to Lao-speaking communities or Thailand in order to seek work.

Despite not having adopted any Buddhist ritual, Rmeet often perform a ritual in which performers tie an invisible aspect of the person, a "soul", to the body of the recipient with cotton strings around her/his wrists. This ceremony, called *dondèii* in Rmeet, and *sukhwan* or *baci* in Lao, is central to the ethno-national identity of the Lao. However, no Rmeet I asked identified it as an adoption from the Lao or a Lao custom. Instead, in contrast to the Jru', people called it a shared ritual, and the Rmeet's first ethnographer, K.G. Izikowitz (1941) documented its importance in 1935. Wrist-tying is used as a transcultural communication device that is understood by numerous other ethnic groups, even though its interpretation may differ (Singh 2014, Sprenger 2015). In this respect, it bears certain similarities to Buddhism as it works to transgress

perceived cultural boundaries, in particular by integrating notions of otherness and difference.

The notion of sharing certain rituals instead of their diffusion or assimilation already implies that for my Rmeet interlocutors, the relation with Buddhism is one of comparison, not of integration. Rmeet tend to highlight its comparability with their own ritual system while at the same time maintaining the difference between the two.

One common point of comparison is between Buddhist *wat* and Rmeet ritual community house, *cuong*. *Cuong* are workshops outside of the control of house spirits. Each village has several privately owned *cuong* and one communal, “big” *cuong* for the rituals for the village spirit in the village center. These used to be significantly larger than family houses in the past and housed travelers, bachelors and men on the days before they went hunting (Izickowitz 1979: 65-81). Today, they have lost these functions and are smaller than any family dwelling. However, they are still used as communal workshops and for the sacrifices to the village spirit that is also called “the spirit of the *cuong*”.

Rmeet often likened the *cuong* to the *wat*, apparently as they assumed familiarity with Lao customs on my part. Significantly, this comparison did not extend to the respective ritual experts. The village priest (*taa samaan*) who performs the annual sacrifices for the village spirit, but is otherwise a normal family head, is not likened to a monk, but rather to a king. This corresponds to the fact that the village priest used to be the central authority of the village in the past (Izickowitz 1979: 112-116). However, he has lost this position to the village headman (Lao: *nai baan*) who has developed, in the course of the 20th century, from a representative of the village in relation to the – in past times remote – state administration to its central authority.

The headman, in contrast, is likened to a president (Lao: *pathaan pathet*), not just because of the historical succession of the king by a socialist president in 1975, but more so because the office of the village priest is supposed to be hereditary, while the headman is assigned to his position by popular vote.⁴ The descent/vote distinction is crucial for situating Rmeet sociality in a metaphorical relationship with the dominant ethnic group and its religion, the state and its historical transformations. Two points are significant. First, my interlocutors compare their *cuong* with the Buddhist *wat*, not with the shrine for the village spirit commonly situated just outside Lao villages or the village pillar in their centre (*lak baan*, see Condominas 1975) – even though all of these are sites for addressing the village spirits. Rather, the Rmeet identified the two sites on the base of their importance and centrality. Comparing Lao village shrines and Rmeet *cuong* would suggest the superiority of Buddhism, as Lao spirit cults are subordinate to Buddhism and the lack of anything like a Buddhist temple in a Rmeet village would indicate the inferiority of their way of life – a conclusion that many Buddhist Laotians would probably agree with but which my interlocutors subtly subverted. Second, this comparison of institutions conflates the state (king/president) with Buddhism (*wat*),

⁴ In fact, the only succession to office of a village priest I observed did not follow the hereditary principle, while village headmen are often the sons or relatives of their predecessors.

thus contrasting Rmeet society not with Buddhism, but with the Lao, who are in turn also identified with the state. Thereby, comparison in this dimension is a way of situating oneself within the larger, multiethnic Laotian nation state. This nation state portrays itself in terms of ethnic pluralism, thus using a form of discontinuity related to the modern concept of monadic “cultures” within a single Lao “nation” (see Lao Front for National Construction 2008, Michaud 2009, Petit 2013). However, by metaphorically comparing styles of state leadership Rmeet stress the difference between ethnic Lao and state on the one hand, and themselves on the other, but they do so in terms of shared concepts.

When further comparing Buddhism and their own ritual system, the Rmeet tend to argue from a decisively animist perspective. Ritual, for them, is mainly about social relationships among the living, between various aspects of personhood and with spirits. One common comparison, also found among Jru', says that Rmeet have the spirits of their ancestors in their houses and are therefore obliged to care for and feed them. Buddhists, in contrast, venerate their ancestors in the *wat*, where the monks will take care of them. The notions of rebirth, *kamma* or *boun* (merit) which are central to Buddhism – the latter being particularly prominent in Laos – are not part of the comparison that Rmeet employ.

Animists among Buddhists

This animist perspective also permeates the cultural conditions of Rmeet comparison – in this respect they fill the position of conceptual others to Buddhism's translocalism. When Rmeet suggest, that Buddhism and animism are separate entities to be compared on the same level, what they actually compare are types of localities. From the perspective of localism, a comparison of animism and Buddhism implies a comparison of animist and Buddhist *places*. In places of various scales – household, village, state, etc. – there is usually one ritual system that is dominant and possibly encompasses others.

Immigrants in villages usually take up the ritual system predominant in the community they have moved into. This is especially true for single immigrants or immigrant families, but the rule needs to be qualified under two conditions: there is a larger group of immigrants of the same origin, or immigrants are Buddhist. In these cases, they maintain their original ritual system, but often only on the household level.

This is not a contradiction. If animism implies the acknowledgment of specific relationships with non-humans, larger groups of immigrants bring their own sets of such relationships with them as a function of their relationships among each other (see Jons-son 2005: 79-82). Therefore, they turn into sub-communities, but usually participate in the public and village-oriented rituals of their new villages. Also, in the Laotian case, Buddhists have relationships with a country-wide system of monks, temples, schools

and opportunities for well-being (like making merit) that are highly valorized and thus are being maintained. Thereby, Buddhist immigrants claim membership in a ritual community that is larger than the village they live in – although they also participate in the village-wide rituals. Thus, they conform to animist localism and Buddhist trans-localism equally.

From an external perspective, this valorization of the local may look like conversion. One Rmeet, a middle-aged father who had been living in a Buddhist village for decades, told me that he does not sacrifice animals for his ancestral (house) spirits any more. On Buddhist festival days, he would put some flowers on a dish, raising it for his ancestral spirits and tell them, that he would go to the *wat* now. As he lives among Buddhists, he does as Buddhists do. Thereby he follows an essentially animist logic that determines ritual practice as a specificity of places, not as a matter of belief.

This pattern of valorized contrasts between Buddhism and animism, household and village accounts for numerous variations. The village of Hangdeun provides some particularly telling examples. This village, situated on a densely populated road outside of Ban Hueisay, the provincial capital of Bokeo, is home of Rmeet families that escaped the second indochinese war in the second half of the 1960s and had been integrated into a nearby Lao village afterwards. It was only around 1990 when they decided to form their own sub-village within the Lao village, which is now administratively acknowledged and represented by a sub-village headman. Hangdeun village was established as a Rmeet ritual entity, with an annual sacrifice for the village spirit in the “big” *cuong*. Here, immigrants of an ethnicity other than Lao ultimately claimed their own identity as a village. Lao who currently live on the territory of Hangdeun practice Buddhism at home and in the encompassing village entity, but have to contribute money to the annual sacrifice to the Rmeet village spirit – thus, on Hangdeun’s territory, the Rmeet ritual system is superior to Buddhism, but the hierarchy between them is reversible overall.

In contrast, Rmeet who had remained in the Lao part of the village increasingly adopted Buddhist or Lao ritual practices. One household in particular will illustrate this. The son of the house father – a family father in his own right – has established a Buddhist shrine, a *thevada hūan*, in the house. There are no rituals for the Rmeet house spirit. However, although the house father endorses this practice, and the entire family joins Buddhist festivals in the local *wat*, the house father exclusively performs Rmeet rituals when he stays in a separate house situated near his fish pond in Hangdeun.

There is a further variety, which I found in Hangdeun village as well as among Rmeet immigrants in Thailand. In these cases, a mixed marriage led to a dual identification of the household. This pertains to one couple in Hangdeun, both state officials. The husband, a Rmeet in his forties, practiced Rmeet rituals, including those for the house spirit. His wife, an ethnic Yuan (Northern Thai), a Buddhist minority in Laos, worshipped at a *thevada hūan* in the house. As they told me, the husband will once be buried in a coffin in Rmeet fashion, while his wife will be cremated. Although the community itself is Rmeet, there was a slight tendency toward hierarchization: While

the *thevada hüan* was situated in the main building of the house, the Rmeet house spirit was located in the kitchen, i.e. in the periphery of the house. This was a rather common practice also among all-Rmeet households in Hangdeun, as it weakened the ritual prohibitions that the house spirit demanded (Sprenger 2013). But in this case, it appeared as a way to sideline Rmeet ritual in relation to the more centrally located Buddhist shrine.

The only instance of a Buddhist ritual performed in an all-Rmeet household in Hangdeun that I witnessed concerned an emergency situation. A young man had hanged himself in his house and had been quickly buried. By suicide, the soul (*klpu*) of a person turns into a dangerous spirit, and all aspects of the dead need to be removed from house and village at all cost. Therefore, in addition to the Rmeet expulsion ritual performed on such occasions, family members also asked a monk from the *wat* of a neighboring Lao village to perform a purification ritual in the house on a different day. Employing Buddhism here thus did not so much indicate belief in Buddhist cosmology but the need to activate any ritual that might prove to be efficient. The fact that the family chose a monk – and not a ritual expert from other ethnicities, which would have been available as well – speaks of the high status assigned to Buddhism in Laos, even among non-Buddhists. This again is part of the relationship between Buddhism and animism in Laos.

Rmeet thus conceive a clear contrast between their ritual system and Buddhism, but one that is non-exclusive. Certain points are highlighted when they compare the two systems – in particular the status of ritual leadership, but also the responsibility for ancestral spirits. They also compared *thevada hüan* and house spirit sites, as well as burial rituals. However, elements of one system can coexist with the other, as not only the case of the multiethnic household shows, but also the relation of Rmeet families to Buddhist communities and Buddhist families to Rmeet communities. This is enabled by the reversible hierarchy of Buddhism as well as the localism of animism that inform both verbal comparison and enacted relationships.

Becoming Buddhists without saying so

My second example concerns people who call themselves Jru' (Lao: Loven) and live on the Boloven Plateau in southern Laos. Living in much more accessible surroundings than the upland Rmeet, they have been well connected to lowland Lao for at least 150 years. These contacts have increased, first through the war, in which a number of villages on the plateau had been resettled, and second through a successful change from subsistence agriculture to cash cropping, predominantly of coffee. Today, the Boloven Plateau has comparatively good infrastructure and its inhabitants are in general wealthier than many rural farmers in Laos, including Lao focusing on rice production. At the same time, they have intensified their relationship with Buddhism.

In one village I have studied, Lak Sip Ha, people primarily practice their local ritual system and call themselves animists (*satsana phi*), but increasingly adopt Buddhist rituals and even identify as Buddhists in select contexts. In the second village, Hueisan, Buddhism is well-established since decades, there is a Buddhist temple (*wat*), and people claim to be both Buddhists and animists at the same time. Jru' animism is the domain of experts called *griang* who are present at all such rituals and advice performers or perform themselves, including rituals for the village spirit.

Lak Sip Ha, the subject of this section, was identified to me as following the “old customs” (L: *hidgong kao*) of the Jru', when I started research there in 2012. I was thus surprised when the village headman told me early in 2016 that the majority of villagers had registered as Buddhists in the state census one year before – a statement that was debated by some villagers, confirmed by others, but which I ultimately could not verify.

This contradiction points at the tensions between the Jru' ritual system and Buddhism in general. In principle, Buddhism provides a slot for its others and animism operates on the premise that different beings and occasions demand different rituals. Therefore, their integration seems unproblematic, and numerous Jru' increase the set of relationships available to them by joining in or performing lowland Buddhist ritual. However, in the Jru' case, this goes along with an ethnicization of the two sets of rituals that is much less pronounced in the Rmeet case. For Jru', the question is not so much if to adopt Buddhism but Lao ritual. An example is the wrist-tying ritual. While Rmeet consider it as part of their own customs, shared with Lao, Jru' identify it as Lao and alien to themselves. However, it does belong to the set of rituals that they have been increasingly taking up from the Lao.

Another example are weddings, which today are a mixture of Jru' and Lao rites – although the latter are not specifically Buddhist. More important is the shift, within the last ten years in Lak Sip Ha, from burial to the cremation of the dead. Before, the dead were buried in coffins above ground inside – often elaborate – houses on the graveyard, some of the most impressive non-Buddhist mortuary monuments in Laos. Allegedly, the last person was buried this way in 2012. Nevertheless, this has not (yet?) affected the ritual relations with the dead in dwellings that are consecrated as “ritual houses” (*nuem riid*). The majority of dwellings in Lak Sip Ha are such “ritual houses”, which accommodate the souls (*pual*) of their inhabitants and allow ritual communication with the spirits.

In addition, a few households have performed the *sia kho*, a Buddhist ritual performed to remove misfortune from a house. Both *sia kho* and cremations involve monks who chant *soot* (*suttha*) and are feasted afterwards. In case of Lak Sip Ha, the monks come from a neighboring Lao village or from the district capital Paksong. Monks performed *sia kho* for the first time in Lak Sip Ha in about 2011. As I have argued elsewhere (Sprenger 2017c), such rituals provide a way to demonstrate wealth and status in a form that is acknowledged even beyond the confines of Jru' ethnicity. Performing Buddhist rituals and giving generous gifts to the monks places a Jru' household within a national code of the demonstration of status – although, as Rehbein (2004: 47) argues, this status placement is not necessarily seen as competitive.

This is made quite explicit when Jru' compare their own ritual system with the Lao. Comparison here is part of selectively taking up Lao rituals – it generalizes and makes explicit the reasoning behind the decisions if to perform a ritual according to Jru' or Lao rules. My interlocutors called Lao ritual *hitgong gaang*, “general/common tradition”, while they saw Jru' ritual (*hitgong Jru'*) as entirely localised. This contrast between local and general appears in several contexts. Buddhism is known to originate in India. Also, Buddhism in Laos consists of a network of temples and schools that goes even beyond the country's borders. Lao Buddhist monks occasionally travel to Thailand, and one monk of the *wat* of the neighboring Lao village actually spends most of his time in the United States.

Thus, Buddhism connects to the national and even international level, while local *satsana phi* references relationships with ancestors, kin, and the land. For this reason, the monkhood is recognized as an avenue to education in Lak Sip Ha. Two boys have recently been initiated as novices in the aforementioned Lao village, both, however, not for entirely religious reasons. The father of the first, a twelve-year old, hoped that a sojourn in a *wat* would improve the boy's bad health. When this did not substantiate, the boy returned home after some months. The other boy, about 17, hoped to learn English by becoming a novice. The monkhood provides free schooling for novices, including higher education in boarding schools away from the village. Especially for poorer villagers, this is an attractive opportunity.

All of this is despite a rather commonly felt distance to the monkhood. As I observed, very few Jru' ever become monks. While some of their villages have *wat* (see below), these are almost entirely staffed with monks from the outside, mostly Lao. People, including Lao, repeatedly stated that villagers value diligence and do not like to feed the monks. However, one informant from Lak Sip Ha, a village policeman, offered a decidedly practical perspective on monks. The monkhood is good, he argued, for men too lazy to work – being monks keeps them from roaming around, drinking and chasing women. Apparently, Jru' customs do not offer a similarly handy institution.

In contrast, some Jru' stress not only the comparability of Buddhism and Jru' rituals, but also argue for the primordality of the latter. According to them, Jru' customs go back to seven original *griang*, each teaching the Jru' a different aspect of their way of life. As one Lak Sip Ha *griang* told me, this was the same knowledge as that of Buddhism, and if the Lao had known Jru' customs they would have had no need to adopt Buddhism. Here, the difference between local and translocal knowledge is not one of quality but of scale. This statement, while apparently stressing the primordality of Jru' customs – in accordance with the widespread notion in the region, that Mon Khmer speakers are the first owners of the land (for southern Laos, see Lukas 2012) – also legitimizes the transfer of elements of Buddhism to the Jru'.

Thus, my Jru' interlocutors in Lak Sip Ha consider their own ritual system as different, but non-exclusive in relation to Buddhism. Buddhism, in particular, provides access to a network of translocal relationships, including education opportunities and status placements. The two ritual systems appear as different modes of relating to dif-

ferent socio-cosmic fields. However, in respect to scale, Buddhism is more widespread and, in terms of place, encompassing. Here, I found a different comparative relationship between local ritual and Buddhism, both verbally and in practice. While “spirit religion” appears as necessary, Buddhism is superior in social value and geographical spread. Due to the aforementioned ethnicization of the two systems, many Jru’ consider Buddhism not just as an alternative option for relating to both humans and non-humans, but actually cause of the decrease of Jru’ ways of life (Sprenger 2017c).

This goes some way to explain why the headman stated that the majority of villagers registered as Buddhists in the census. When I asked one of the *griang* of the village about the village’s religion, he said: “We do a lot of *satsana phi* and only a little Buddhism.” So why, I asked, did you and other households register as Buddhists? “Because that was the census”, he replied, “that was for the government.”

The people of two religions: the Jru’ of Hueisan

The second site in Southern Laos is Hueisan, about twenty kilometres away from Lak Sip Ha, but in many respects markedly different. While the Jru’ villages around Lak Sip Ha all identified predominantly as non-Buddhist and did not have a *wat*, Hueisan villagers stated that they had both Buddhism and *satsana phi*. The *wat* in this village and its neighbors all are at least twenty years old. It is unclear when the older *wat* have been founded or when the first villagers became novices, but I met a man who joined the order in the 1960s. Noticeably, this man is a *griang* today. This was not seen as contradictory.

Hueisan’s *wat* was staffed with a single Lao monk and a changing, but small number of novices, most of them not Jru’. At the same time, numerous household-focused rituals were performed in the manner of *satsana phi*, in particular healing rituals. While Hueisan villagers diverted misfortune by *sia kho* rituals, they also performed so-called “buffalo-eating” rituals (*ja kabeu*) for curing spirit-induced illness. These rituals had not been held in Lak Sip Ha for decades, due to their high cost. But in Hueisan they had been reformed by replacing the sacrificial buffalo with piglets (Sprenger 2017b).

However, some prominent features of the ritual system of Lak Sip Ha – for example, the consecration of houses that establishes relationships with the dead – were entirely lacking in Hueisan, but I am not sure if this is due to regional variation or Buddhification. The dualism of a *wat* for Buddhism and a village spirit shrine that characterizes Lao villages (Condominas 1975) was also present in Hueisan.

Thus, there was a clear reduction of Jru’ rituals in comparison to Lak Sip Ha, even though Hueisan had also kept rituals not present in Lak Sip Ha. At the same time, the relationship between Buddhism and *satsana phi* became more complicated. Like the Rmeet, Jru’ comparisons of Buddhism and animism referenced the distinction between house and village. As one Hueisan *griang* explained, before the arrival of Buddhism,

“mother and father” – that is, the ancestral spirits – lived in the house, and people became ill quite often; ancestors can be demanding and articulate their demands for sacrifices through illness. These frequent sacrifices drove people into poverty. However, nowadays the ancestors go to the *wat* to eat, and the monks care for them. This way, the *griang* related local relationships with spirits to Buddhism – however, he did so in terms of animism, and not at all in terms of Buddhist merit (*boun*) or Buddhist spirituality. In this sense, he portrayed Buddhism as a better kind of animism.

This hierarchy was particularly visible in the mortuary rituals, which were performed according to both Buddhist and animist rules. In a way, these rituals were comparison in practice. The dead were cremated, but a small house was erected on the cremation site for some graves, replacing the large houses of the earlier ritual. Before cremation, the *griang* performed a cycle of sacrifices for the dead, avoiding times when monks were present. However, the Buddhist and animist ritual cycles are incompatible in terms of their duration – the Jru’ sequence demands a week of lying in state before the burial, while the Buddhist one only allows a few days for laypeople. In this context, the animist cycle was subordinated to the Buddhist one, and the *griang* had to find ways to shorten their rituals. However, the fact that both cycles were performed acknowledged both sets of relationships, one with a Buddhist cosmos involving monks from several *wat*, and one with a Jru’ cosmos of ancestral spirits.

This partially led to a diversity of statements about the fate of the soul (the Lao Buddhist term *vinyan* was used) that developed from comparison. Some people said it resides in the little house on the graveyard (a Jru’ ritual), at its cremation site, while others claimed that it stays in little houses inside the *wat* (a Lao ritual). Still others opined that it usually resides on the graveyard but moves into the houses in the *wat* on festive occasions. Others argued that it is either in Heaven (*savan*) or Hell (*nalok*), transcendent places beyond the visible realm in Buddhist cosmology. Finally, some people identified the houses on the graveyard with Heaven. Thus, the tension between the ritual systems also produces a variety of statements about the locality of the soul. Once again, locality appears as an important feature of the animist side of the local set of relationships.

While such discourses and practices themselves may be seen as enacted comparison, my interlocutors also forwarded some more explicit comparative points – like those that locate *satsana phi* in the household and Buddhism in the village. A number of people made clear statements in favor of Buddhism. However, similar to the Rmeet who conflated the Laotian state and Buddhism in their comparisons, their arguments mirrored government rhetoric aimed against non-Buddhist ritual more than any theological or cosmological reasoning. Animal sacrifices, they held, were wasteful and too expensive, compared to donations to the *wat*. Also, Jru’ funerals, with their coffins above ground, were unhygienic and graveyards (*pa sa*, “sacred forest”) took too much village land. Cremations were much cleaner and did not demand permanent graveyard sites. In these conversations, relationships with spirits did not occupy a significant role.

Thus, discourses in Hueisan articulated relations between Buddhism and animism as hierarchical. In one conversation with one of the temple helpers – a former monk and Lao – he brought up the similarity between Buddhism and Christianity: both have ordained priests and temples. I countered that Christianity has no concept of rebirth, and that I felt that Buddhism and animism are closer to each other. No way, he replied, Buddhism forbids killing while animism needs bloody sacrifices. As I have shown elsewhere (Sprenger 2013), bloody sacrifices occupy a firm but subordinate place in the evaluation of rituals among Lao – and this evaluation is received and sometimes shared with non-Buddhist minorities. This interlocutor, however, drew a sharp line between Buddhism and the Lao's non-Buddhist rituals.

The example of this village shows how two ritual systems run parallel to each other, influencing each other without exactly becoming a single system. Elements are exchanged and shifted, especially on the household level, and the system is in permanent flux – I witnessed highly contingent practices and even reductions of ritual within the few years of my research. Once again, a minority, here with a somewhat shaky Buddhist identity, identified itself on a map of Buddhism-other relationships – in this case, even in terms of the official term for “religion” (*satsana*). What is unthinkable for most Buddhist Lao – that is, calling their supplementary spirit practices “religion” – is the base of Hueisan identification within a general code of Buddhism-other relations.

Conclusion

Comparison implies sameness and difference at the same time – difference among the phenomena to be compared, sameness either as an underlying reality unifying the phenomena or at least as a shared set of analytical terms that can be applied to all of them. The result of comparison is a systematization of difference.

In the present article, I operated with both sameness and difference. However, the sameness itself is a difference – in this case, the self-different nature of Buddhism as a relationship with its others. As I have written elsewhere (Rehbein/Sprenger 2016), Buddhism is by itself an Other – people in Laos are aware that it originated in faraway India. Thus, even when identifying as Buddhists, people are acknowledging the inherent Buddhism-other relationship their cosmology is endowed with. In so far they perceive Buddhism as central for order and cosmology, they implicitly identify their own localities as others, as derivative of a remote origin of order. This is true in respect to the spread of Buddhism in the past; but the importance of this internal split in Buddhist communities is maintained in various relations to spirits outside of Buddhism, in particular the village spirit.

This is even more pronounced for people who do not or not fully identify as Buddhists, but still integrate themselves into a national order dominated by Buddhism, like the Rmeet and Jru'. Their relationship with Buddhism provides a variety of differences

that demand comparison. Comparison is an integral and important aspect of this very relationship, and I suggest that anthropologists, when engaging in comparison, have not spent sufficient attention to such local comparisons.

The way non-Buddhists describe their own cosmology and compare it with Buddhism places them on the side of Buddhism's other. In particular Jru' tend to use Buddhism as the frame of the overall national community they situate themselves in – the “general tradition”, just like the Rmeet use king and president as metaphors for their own sociality. Once again, Buddhism represents translocality, while animism represents local variation, even the very principle of locality. If Buddhism is indeed a dualism, it accommodates this difference as inherent to itself – but in reverse, animism does the same. While Buddhism appears as a dual relationship that can be applied anywhere, for animism Buddhism is another means of localization or rather, trans-localization. Both are self-different in contrasting ways.

In the sense that Buddhism always implies its own other, even in seemingly all-Buddhist contexts, it also implies comparison. This comparison might be seen as a recursive effect of the stabilization of Buddhism as a set of beliefs and practices differentiated from its other. By constituting itself through comparison with its other, Buddhism comes into being as itself-and-different. In particular, the current identification of certain rituals as Brahman in Buddhist ritual systems stresses the recursive constitution of Buddhism as a unity that is self-different. Somehow, these rituals are Buddhist and not Buddhist at the same time. This provides the baseline of a dialogue with animism, productive of numerous systematic variations.

Anthropological attempts at comparison have been criticized for ignoring the specificity of local lifeworlds and creating discursive hegemony through taking up a god's eye point of view. The examples in this article subvert this critique. On the one hand, they demonstrate that local ways of comparing culture and society do exist. This involves a sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit local anthropology, in the sense of a “knowledge about humans”. This states that people are dependent on their relationships with humans and non-humans as part of households, villages and states. Thus, when moving from one community to another, one should orientate oneself not towards one's personal attitudes and beliefs but rather towards practices pertinent in the community (see also Tooker 1992). There is thus a local form of cultural relativism and relationalism inherent to these comparisons.

On the other hand, and for the same reasons, this kind of comparison does not take a god's eye point of view. Rather, comparison is a practice that juxtaposes two sets of relationships, both with a certain coherence or at least a distinctive label, like Buddhism and spirit religion or Lao and upland tradition, in which the speakers are involved. In the Rmeet case, Buddhism appeared as an other associated with lowland Lao (and Thai) society, with which Rmeet traditions partially overlap. In the Jru' case, the integration of Lao and Buddhist elements into the lives of households and communities is an ongoing process. Buddhist identities are taken up, sometimes permanently,

sometimes momentarily. But even when one's identity is not Buddhist, animism allows for performing select Buddhist practices contextually.

These examples from mainland Southeast Asia demonstrate that comparison involves a mapping of potential cultural relationships that are contextually activated or not. Each act of comparison betrays a particular agenda and a particular self-other relationship. I suggest that anthropological comparison operates under the same conditions.

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