

BOMBS AND BUSINESS: INTERACTIONS WITH SPIRITS IN LAOS.

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When the old Lao lady stole an anxious glance at the overgrown bomb craters on the ancient temple grounds, I asked her about the ghosts. "They are here", she whispered, "I am scared." Then she lit some candles and incense sticks at some derelict stone stairs – ruins of the old Buddhist temple in Muang Souy (Xieng Khouang Province, Lao PDR) that was destroyed by US American bombs in the late 1960s during the Second Indochina War (known as the 'Vietnam War' in the US, and the 'American War' in Southeast Asia). A young monk dressed in bright orange stood nearby impassively, smoking a cigarette. To him, born long after the war, old people paying homage to the dead was just an everyday routine (fig. 1-2).

My research assistant brought me there in 2010 to make a stopover with his family on the way to our research site, the province Houaphan far up in the mountains of northeastern Laos. He grew up in the cratered landscape of Xieng Khouang province where the US forces had dropped tons of cluster bombs and other kinds of ordnance for nine years until the ceasefire of 1973 (fig. 3). Like many other Lao country-kids in the late 1970s, he and his brother liked to play with unexploded 'bombies', the countless small bomblets filling the cluster bombs that littered the Plain of Jars (an estimated 80 million in Laos, one third of them not detonated; fig. 4). They tried to make them explode by throwing stones at them, and sometimes they even picked up the bombies to throw them into craters or ravines to detonate. One day a bombie detonated in his brother's hands, killing him.

Almost thirty years later, my friend assisted a Swiss photographer in Xieng Khouang – the province in the meantime cleared of a lot of unexploded ordnance, at least along main roads and buildings. When they left the provincial capital, Phonsavan, on National Road No 7 towards the Vietnamese border, a forgotten bomb detonated next to the road just after they had passed the site. The car jolted only a little due to the blast, yet all the dark memories of

post-war Laos resurged in my friend's mind. In the following night, he suddenly woke up, feeling a strange pressure on his chest. In the dark doorway he spotted a human shape, motionless for some moments, which then disappeared into the dark. "After a while I realized that this was my brother", he told me, recollecting that very night. "I felt reassured and knew that nothing can happen to me traveling the roads. My brother protects me."

That was one of my first encounters with ghostly apparitions in Laos, and many were to follow. I have learned about the different kinds of spirits (Lao: *phi*) dwelling in fields and forests, about the ancestor ghosts that expect to receive food and other offerings, about the famous Prince Phetsarat who allegedly could transform into animals and whose images nowadays protect bus drivers, about the malevolent *phi pob* who can kill people, and about Buddhist monks inviting the ghosts of ancient kings into their new monuments (as in the case of the statues of Fa Ngum and Anuvong). Such spiritual beings seem to be everywhere, powerful agents within the social world of the different ethnic groups in Laos, Buddhist and non-Buddhist societies alike (see the contributions in this issue by Estévez, Johnson, Vue, and Kleinod).

In 2014, I met my friend again in Vientiane after returning from another research trip to Houaphan. He had become a successful businessman by then, no any longer driving *falang* around. Proudly placing his three expensive mobile phones on the table where we had some sticky rice, spicy papaya salad, and the indispensable bottle of Beerlao, he told me about the recent developments in the Lao capital's real estate sector. "A lot of money!", he exclaimed. However, he had only recently gone through a time of crisis: being cheated, troubles with the police, losing money. In sum, bad luck. Thus, he had sought the advice of a spirit medium. The spirit medium, an old lady, sang herself into a trance until possessed by 'her' ghost. Through the harsh voice of the ghost, she explained that my friend's house was built on the site of an old palace ground. The spirit of the prince who once lived there was angry, feeling disrespect-

ed. "What can I do?" my friend asked the medium. "Build a new palace!"

Later, my friend showed me the new 'palace' in his lush garden: A particularly elaborate spirit house (Lao: *ho phi*), much larger than the ordinary ones that are usually placed in front of a house to honour the spirit of the place (fig. 5-6). He had put the obligatory glass of rice liquor, incense, fruit, and flowers in front of the entrance. In addition, two toy cars constituted a special element in this ritual constellation, emblemizing prosperity and fortune related to business. And indeed my friend's luck had changed shortly after he had installed the *ho phi*: Apparently, the spirit of the ancient prince had reciprocated this token of respect with blessing. A few days later my friend invited me to a ceremony in his house, a so-called *basi* to recompensate the service of the spirit medium and especially her ghost (fig. 7). Otherwise this ghost might get angry as well.

As these brief observations suggest, spiritual beings are part and parcel of the social fabric of Laos, while at the same time reflecting past trauma and present anxiety. Spirits entertain manifold relationships with human beings, and sometimes the ontological boundaries between the two worlds become blurred. People may feel the physicality of spirits, or develop spectral qualities themselves. From the anonymous dead soldiers of the Indochina Wars to present-day labour migrants with their years-long absences from their villages: Humans may have an elusive character that indicates various layers of spectrality instead of a clear-cut human/spirit dichotomy. As other contributions in this special issue illustrate, the question at stake is perhaps not about modern or non-modern/traditional, but about the ontological intersections in a rapidly changing world.



Bomb crater at the old temple grounds.



Appeasing the spirits of the dead



Remnants of war.



"Bombies"



Ho phi (standard version)



Ho phi (luxury version; note the toy cars flanking the 'palace' entrance)



Basi ceremony for the diviner's spirit.