

INTRODUCTION

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Around the globe, the idea of restless ghosts that have suffered an untimely death is very common. In the Thai horror movie *Ladda Land*, malevolent ghosts of murdered people haunt a family who lives in an – at first – innocent-looking upmarket condominium. As in the case of many contemporary movies in Asian cinema – perhaps most notably the works of Thai director *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* – this box-office hit reflects the interrelations and tensions between ‘modern’ lifestyles and allegedly ‘traditional’ beliefs and representations. This tension only superficially appears as a struggle between reason and irrationality. The deeper situation is actually more complex and ambivalent.

Despite being a fictional, pop-cultural engagement with the supernatural, *Ladda Land* hints at the everyday interaction between humans and spiritual beings in contemporary Southeast Asia (see Bräunlein and Lauser 2016). Encounters and interactions with uncanny beings yield not only negative, but also often positive results: In exchange for rituals, donations, and prayers, spirits might bestow blessings and fortune (Ladwig 2014). Thus, non-human beings such as ghosts (or spirits, demons, deities, jinns, poltergeists, etc.) form part of the social fabric of many communities throughout the world. People venerate ancestor ghosts, perform rituals, or wear amulets to shield themselves from malevolent spirits, and try to communicate with spectral beings via diviners, mediums, and other ritual experts.

This special issue of *Voices from around the World* explores the social, economic, and political interactions between the human and the spiritual world. Be it in the countryside or in the urban centres of hypermodernity, ghosts either haunt the living or are assigned specific social roles, sometimes reflecting sociocultural disquiet and uncertainties concerning the past, pre-

sent, or future. Uncanny apparitions may also indicate the contradictions and broken promises of modernity, as Andrew Johnson observes in the dilapidated investment ruins in the city of Chiang Mai (in fact the real-life setting of the movie *Ladda Land*): “The buildings are cracking. Ghosts come in” (Johnson 2014: 6).

Are ghosts modern, then? Indeed, ‘Western’ spiritualism flourished under the influence of 19th-century modernization and early socialism. In the Global South today (but not only there; see Parish 2015), it is evident that modernization and spiritual practices and discourses do not contradict each other. Popular ‘animist’ beliefs and ghost rituals form part of people’s everyday life vis-à-vis a globalized economy (Endres and Lauser 2012). The unpredictable forces of ‘the market’ correspond with the elusive world of spectral entities. Facing economic risk, flexibility, and precarity, people approach spiritual forces for protection and good luck, resorting to ritual practices that sometimes contradict predominant religious orthodoxies.

The contributions in this issue engage with the interplay of human (alleged) rationality and unpredictable ghostly agency, with emerging modernities and (re-)emerging spiritualities. We consider the Eurocentric perspective of modernization theory (including binaries of science vs. religion, human vs. nature, and narratives of secularization and disenchantment) as not very helpful for an understanding of such entanglements. On the contrary, ‘worldly’ economic and spiritual spheres intersect, and ghost rituals are imbued with specific logics and calculations (whereas the finance system in the ‘Global North’ can also be marked by certain irrationalities).

When understood as concomitant to the expansion of global capitalism, ghosts arguably represent a countermovement in Max Weber’s sense. However, we witness not only resistance to, but also local appropriations of, the ‘invisible’ market forces through ritual practice. Thus, spir-

ity is reshaped, but not replaced, by ‘modernity’ and market economy (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Reconfigurations of ‘traditional’ spiritual systems provide a lens with which to study the practices and effects, as well as the localization and/or subversion of global capitalism. Besides the economic domain, addressing spiritual forces is also crucial for confronting the ghostly shadows and haunting aspects of violent experiences such as industrial warfare (see Kwon 2008 for the example of Vietnamese ‘Ghosts of War’).

Apparitions of uncanny beings may be symptoms of social problems or rapid transformations. In that case, they often play the role of moral instances (as ghost tales and movies demonstrate). Yet, as already mentioned, ghosts must be acknowledged as actual key agents within networks of sociocosmological relations that are essential for the reproduction of any society. Spiritual beings entertain varying relationships with humans and animals, sometimes dwelling in the respective material environment. If humans accept reciprocal obligations, mutually beneficial relations might result. However, if living humans ignore the needs of the dead, for example, ghosts may either disappear or harmfully haunt the ignorant living.

Finally, modern technologies certainly change such relationships across ontological divides. Instead of disenchanting and rationalizing the world, new technologies may even enhance the communication with ghosts – from the recordings of ghost voices in early-20th-century Europe to present-day smartphone calls.

Contributions

Numerous examples presented in this issue illustrate the “social vitality” (Kwon 2008) of spiritual entities in the Global South, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia. Rapid socioeconomic and environmental transformations in emerging economies such as Vietnam or Thailand arguably trigger shifts in the cosmological domain as well, and often lead to intensified interactions across ontological boundaries. Ghosts remain part of our world, even under conditions of ‘modernity’, but may change with

regard to their power, desires, and agency. In the first contribution, [Paul Christensen](#) introduces the *neak ta*, spirits from Cambodia, addressed by people from all backgrounds to receive advice, healing, or power. He provides informative examples of “spirited politics” (Willford and George 2004) – of how interactions with spirits contain a political dimension, as in the case of a ritual at the Preah Vihear temple, a contested heritage site between Cambodia and Thailand.

Ghosts appear to haunt, to transgress, to intervene in the human world, thus calling into question ontological certainties. In particular under conditions of socioeconomic crises, state violence, and feeling of insecurity, ghosts seem to proliferate (cf. Mueggler 2001). As [Andrew Johnson](#) illustrates with two ethnographic vignettes of interactions with uncanny beings in Thailand, attempts to maintain an ontological divide between humans and spirits can even be dangerous. The problem of the physical/spiritual divide is also addressed by [Karan Singh](#) who – in her discussion of spirit exorcism in North India – suggests that ghosts actually form part of living beings.

Considering the modernity paradigm, [Edoardo Siani](#) discusses the dark side and broken promises of modernity in urban Thailand. Ghostly appearances may be even more critical here than in allegedly ‘traditional’ society, actually challenging mainstream discourses of modernization and hinting instead at the lingering anxieties and precariousness that haunt present-day ‘modern’ lifeworlds. [Kirsten Endres](#) hints at the demand for new spiritualities in emerging economies such as Vietnam. Existing sacred sites are appropriated and reinvented by private developers capitalizing on the recreational and spiritual needs of a new class of affluent, rich Vietnamese. Reinterpretations of animistic ritual practices among ethnic minorities in upland Vietnam – until recently condemned as ‘superstition’ by communist state authorities – are the topic of [Tran Hoai’s](#) account.

[Patrick Keilbart](#) discusses perturbations of social reciprocity within the relationship

between humans and spirits. Ignorance of the needs of local spirits might cause accidents for construction workers. In his case study on Muslim Indonesia, Keilbart also highlights the tension between orthodox religions and popular belief systems. This religious tension is an aspect of [Jean Langford's](#) contribution, too. She explores how Christianized Kmhmu (an ethnic minority from Laos and Vietnam that forms a small diaspora community in the USA) deal with ideas of sociocosmological reciprocity – in particular with the ambiguities of exchanges between the living and the dead that actually imply a primordial debt to the dead. Langford invites us to reflect upon the economic dimension of interactions with spiritual beings. [Joseba Estevez'](#) documentation of a shamanistic healing ritual among the Lanten (North Laos) also refers to the idea of the 'gift of life' given by ancestors and deities. Discussing cosmological aspects of Christianized uplanders from Southeast Asia, [Tam Ngo](#) illustrates the field of tension between old ancestor rituals and evangelical Christianity in a Hmong community in Vietnam.

Indeed, ghosts of the dead constitute a considerable concern of human societies around the globe. [Erik Mueggler's](#) fascinating contribution – including an audio file of ritual songs from SW-China last performed in 1949 – explores the question of how a dead soul might be matched to a particular form, in this case an ancestral effigy. Singing such songs, the living engage in an intimate relationship with their dead kin. In a similar vein, [Nicholas Herriman](#) emphasizes the social intimacy of ghostly encounters and witchcraft. In parts of Indonesia, witchcraft takes place at the very sites of everyday social exchange, and thus social reciprocity is the nexus where fears of sorcery emerge. While some authors of the 'modernity of witchcraft' paradigm (cf. Geschiere 1997) insist on the link between witchcraft and global capitalism, here the local ties seem to be more decisive.

Ghosts operate as social agents across ontological boundaries, often forming an uncanny, non-mediated presence. Haunting the living, they might also emblemize past tragedy and trauma: A forceful and permanent *Vergegenwärtigung* of – more or less recent, more or

less suppressed – violence and death that happened before and which still disrupts present sociocosmological configurations. Rather than abstract symbols of the past, spectral forces – again – intervene and interact. [Marcelo Moura Mello](#) provides an informative case study from Guyana where the ghosts of former colonizers are often blamed for the present violent antagonism between people of Indian and African descent. For example, malevolent 'Dutch' spirits of the first colonizers instill fear and suspicion in present-day Guyanese society.

Like Mello, [Oliver Tappe](#) stresses the specific sociality in which spirits participate and constitute an efficacious power. In Laos, appeasing unspecified, roaming ghost of war victims, feeding ancestor spirits, or addressing other powerful spirits for business success are everyday practices that indicate certain ontological ambiguity and fluidity. [Michael Kleinod](#) gives another example of ghost encounters in Laos, and argues that the relationship between humans and spirits is less a question of belief than of fear. Thus, transformations of modernity might both reduce fear – e.g. through greater control of natural forces – and increase anxieties and uncertainties with regard to unsettling 'modern' social, economic, and cultural changes. Both tendencies certainly affect the relations between humans and ghosts.

[Christophe Robert](#), in his detailed discussion of a Vietnamese short story, relates the lingering memory of wartime violence to the agency of uncanny beings. His example of an ill-fated hunter illustrates the precarious balance between humans and animals as well as between the living and the dead. As the trailer for [Barbara Meier's](#) documentary suggests, ghosts as a potentially violent force may even participate in actual military conflicts. In Uganda, apparently, "spirits fight spirits". Consequently, they also play a crucial role in attempts at social reconciliation.

Other contributions deal with the effects of modern technologies on the relationship between humans and the domain of the ghosts. As [Peter](#)

Bräunlein points out in his discussion of Southeast Asian ghost movies, uncanny beings utilize information and communication technologies to intrude and threaten. As already mentioned, fear and modernity seem to interact. Even ghosts may suffer from trauma and emotional distress (cf. Bubandt 2012) which explains violent outbreaks and aggressive hauntings of the living world. However, human beings can deal with these forces, by ritual means as well as with help of new technologies. Not unlike ghost recordings in the early 20th century, the smartphone now plays a role in dealing with spiritual beings. As Pao Vue demonstrates, smartphones can be used to trap evil ghosts. Thus, some Hmong claim to be less afraid of ghosts thanks to the help of modern technologies.

The virtual world adds a new dimension to human-spirit interaction. In the case of Vietnamese online cemeteries, Anthony Heathcote describes how the spirits of aborted fetuses can be appeased by uploading diverse items into a virtual children's bedroom – not unlike the practice of burning votive paper offerings (from banknotes to cardboard-box motorbikes) during funeral rites. Given all these cases, Leif Jonsson's fake press release about a laboratory to detect ghostly voices in the wooden walls of old houses from 17th-century Massachusetts, does not seem too far-fetched. Rather, his intervention constitutes an eye-opening experiment to raise awareness of how ghosts of human sacrifice also haunt 'Western' societies. Finally, Anja Dreschke and Martin Zillinger present spirit possession and trance rituals of a Moroccan Sufi brotherhood – with a particular focus on the impact of modern audio-visual media on performance and transmission.

As a tentative conclusion, we would just like to emphasize that ghosts matter. Violence occurring in the name of reason, the return of the repressed, and sometimes unmediated spectral transgression: Wherever in the world ghosts reveal their uncanny agency, they may act as a social and moral corrective. Maybe ghosts have never been modern – much like us, as Bruno Latour might add.

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