

THE IMMEASURABLE DEBT TO THE DEAD: INSIGHTS FROM KMHMU SPIRIT ECONOMIES

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In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss wrote that the dead “are the true owners of the things and possessions of this world” (1990, 16). One way to imagine such ownership is through a recognition that the living receive their very lives from the dead through ancestral bloodlines. In this understanding, which underlies material reciprocity with the dead in many parts of Southeast Asia, life itself is a condition of indebtedness to the dead. As Christian converts, however, most of the Kmhmu¹⁵ emigrants I met in a U.S city in the late 1990s dissociated themselves from direct reciprocity with the dead. “We don’t pray to ghosts”, one man, John, assured me. “We pray for the person to get into heaven. We take the things to the church. During the mass the priest names the things that people are offering. The diocese allows us to do that.” Despite the disclaimer, the very practices described by John take on a certain hybridity in other accounts. “We know what kind of food our ancestor likes”, Julie said, “so we buy that kind of food and offer it to him. If someone offers that and eats that, then the ancestor will receive it.” Julie explained that because she was born with a unique vulnerability to contact with the dead, she had abstained for most of her life from eating any food consecrated to the dead.

“I could never eat that. I don’t know if I was afraid or if my mom said I couldn’t eat it or what. But since I’ve started coming to this church, I eat it. Because the catechists say, ‘Oh here’s some food. Eat it.’ And then later they tell me, ‘You know where that was from?’ And I say,

¹⁵ The Kmhmu are an ethnic group from the Mon-Khmer language family. After the communist takeover in Laos and Vietnam (1975), many Kmhmu – in particular Christianized communities – sought refuge abroad. This article is largely composed of excerpts from my 2013 book *Consoling Ghosts: Stories of Medicine and Mourning from Southeast Asians in Exiles* (University of Minnesota Press). Fieldwork was supported by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the Swedish Foundation, the Kaiser Foundation, the Cross-Cultural Health Care Program, and the University of Minnesota. Writing was supported by the School of Advanced Research, the Salus Mundi Foundation, and the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Minnesota.

‘Where?’ And they say, ‘That was from the offertory.’ And I say, ‘Oh my God.’”

Material reciprocity still haunts this Christian offertory, the food retaining physical traces of its connection with the dead.

Cheuang, a Kmhmu healer, whose conversion to Christianity did not prevent his pursuit of pre-Christian rites, described the importance of material gifts in preparing his mother’s body after her death.

We said: “Here’s some money. Whatever you want, you take, and leave us what you don’t want.” We wrapped the coins in black and white cloth and put them in her hand. In one hand we put sticky rice, and in the other meat. We put other coins in her mouth for her to buy her way to *miang róoy* [the spirit town]. If we put them in a pocket we’d worry that somebody would steal them. In her mouth we know they’re safe.

His story again signals the concreteness of the gift, as well as the return of part of the gift to the giver, and the care taken to avoid any interference in the exchange with the dead. Reflecting on these practices another woman, Kampheang, mused, “Some people put the money in the mouth. And if you ask why do you do that, [it’s] because he needs to have that money to go buy a new place for himself. That’s how we translate it out.” Safe passage or spiritual real estate, the gift of money slides from a visible capitalist economy into a shadow economy of the dead, one currency translated into another.

This material reciprocity is referenced in a Kmhmu folk tale told by Kam Raw about two brothers whose mother was seriously ill (Lindell, Swahn, and Tayanin 1977-1995, Vol. 3: 83-84). The younger son cared attentively for his mother, but the older son did not. When the mother died, and the youngest son asked his brother to help with the burial, he excused himself, insisting that he had too much work to do. Following the burial, the younger son offered rice to his mother each morning at the burial site. One day

he found a stone at the gravesite. The next day he heard the stone singing and whistling. Eventually he took the stone home with him where it began to sing at his command. When he boasted to some merchants about the stone, they wagered everything they owned that the stone could not sing. Winning the bet, the son became rich. When his older brother learned about the stone he asked the younger brother to let him borrow it so he could become wealthy as well. The younger brother refused, saying, "It is something mother gave to me to return [my] kindness and good care. I cannot give it to you!" So the older brother stole the stone and made a bet with another group of merchants that the stone would sing at his command. He agreed to enslave himself to the merchants if he lost. Of course, the stone would not sing for him, and he became their slave. Kam Raw concludes,

He did not love his parents. When his mother was ill and going to die he did nothing to cure her. When she died and he was asked to go and bury her he did not go. It was only his brother who took care of her all alone. Thus the younger brother received his mother's blessing, while he did not get any blessing from her.

Drawing Heidegger's and Georges Bataille's thoughts on the gift into dialogue, Rebecca Comay (1990) has written of an indebtedness that is simultaneously an infinite gratitude (for time, for other beings, for being itself).¹⁶ Comay suggests that this indebtedness marks a sociality prior to exchange and a responsibility prior to law. It is gratitude so profound in the face of generosity so extravagant, that no payback can be conceived of. David Graeber reasons that if we might be said to "owe an infinite debt to humanity, society, nature, or the cosmos (however one prefers to frame it)", no one could "possibly tell us how we are to pay it", in which case anyone who delineated amounts of debt would be presuming "to calculate what cannot be calculated" (2011, 68-69). Within European philosophy such an infinite gift, and the gratitude it pro-

¹⁶ Heidegger speaks of this indebtedness as "guilt", casting it in a distinctively Christian light (2010 [1953], 284).

vokes, is usually imagined as a gesture toward immaterial abstraction, rather than a moment of material exchange. Although the gift exchanges with the dead recounted above hold some of the resonance of that radical Heideggerian gift, they simultaneously exhibit a gritty physical existence: sticky rice, meat, coins. Jean-Luc Nancy and Richard Livingston (1991) note that for "Western" thinkers, the concept of sacrifice is "spiritualized" such that true sacrifice is necessarily figurative rather than literal. They point out that philosophers from the Greeks through Bataille consider the more literal sacrifice practiced by peoples around the world a vulgar economism. Yet they observe:

When someone says to his gods: "Here is the butter. Where are the gifts?", it may be that we do not know what he is saying, since we know nothing of the community in which he lives with his gods . . . We need to admit that what we consider as mercenary exchange ("here is the butter...") sustained and gave meaning to billions of individual and collective existences, and we do not know how to think about what founds this gesture. (We can only guess, confusedly, that this barter in itself goes beyond barter.) (1991, 26, 35)

For "gods", in this statement, we might substitute "the dead". The parenthetical caution that barter may go beyond barter is provocative. Yet, rather than resign ourselves to the absolute foreignness of a more literal sacrifice imagined by "billions" of humans, might we learn to sense what is at stake in a material reciprocity with the dead?¹⁷

At the time of our conversations, the Kmhmu man, Lt. Phanha, was contemplating converting to Christianity. His one hesitation was his loyalty to *róoy kâan*, the paternal ancestor spirit that he credited with protecting him during battles in Laos. "Whenever there was danger ahead," he said, "I always had a dream." He was unwilling to abandon his ancestors, he said, until he

¹⁷ See also Chakrabarty (1998) on the persistence of gods and spirits in modern practices.

could make arrangements for their well-being. "If I ever have the opportunity to go back to Laos", he said, "I will have a big Buddhist ceremony for my parents, and tell them: 'If you want to find me, look for me at the church.' I want to inform them in a kind way. Otherwise they will be waiting for me to make an offering every so often."¹⁸ When I asked why he would choose to do a Buddhist rather than Kmhmu ceremony for *róoy kàan*, he answered, "Kmhmu don't have a place for our ancestors. We just bury them anywhere. In my family we used to say the dead went to a certain lake. But now I see that some people have a place where they keep their ancestors. For instance, Buddhists keep the ashes in a temple. I want my ancestors to have a place to stay. That's why I have been keeping two *rit* [practices, rites], *rit* Kmhmu and Buddhism." In Laos, Lt. Phanha's debt to his ancestors would have been paid by dressing and acting in specific ways – handling the rice pot gently for instance – on the anniversary of the day that *róoy kàan* had died. Such practices have been replaced in his community by the offertory made to a Catholic parish in the name of the dead. Meanwhile the mountain landscape where *róoy kàan* were once said to reside was reordered for Lt. Phanha by the war operations in which he spent his early adult life.¹⁹ For years he has not crossed the distance to that place of ancestors, either in imagination or funeral songs. No one in his local community today chants the soul of the deceased along such a route. Lt. Phanha therefore contemplates a renegotiation with his ancestors, mediated by a Lao *wat*, during which he will redirect them to the offerings he will make in a U.S. church. In this way he hopes to continue to pay his debt to the dead.

Derrida has explored that inherent paradox of the gift, that in the very instant it is recognized as a gift, it is no longer a gift as such, but rather

an exchange, or to put it another way, the establishment of a debt. The giver develops the expectation of a counter-gift, even as the receiver becomes conscious of the call for a counter-gift (1992; cf. Derrida 1995).²⁰ In the exchange with the dead, however, there is little certainty regarding whether a gift to the dead was received, or whether the value of a gift exceeds or falls short of a prior gift traveling in the reverse direction. It is impossible to erase the risk of dangling and unclaimed gifts, unknowingly accepted gifts, and mysterious remainders of debt that, being beyond calculation, might be neither repaid nor repayable. Gifts offered to the dead, therefore, might take on some of the exteriority of a "pure gift" in relation to political economy. The exchange quickly falls into darkness, unfolding in a time out of time, exaggerating the quality of incommensurability that is already inherent to the gift (Comay 1990, 67). There is, finally, a bottomless quality to reciprocity with the dead, gifts mirroring gifts into an infinite distance, signifying an immeasurable debt to the dead that can only accumulate with time. Such spirit economies seem to mark a certain limit to capitalist expansion, registering the extent to which any living economy is encumbered by a debt to the dead, and to other forces beyond human life.

¹⁸ Mary Steedly found that a recent addition to the spirit world in Indonesia were those spirits whose Christian kin no longer provided for them (1993, 145).

¹⁹ According to Kam Raw, there were two spirit villages in Northern Laos, one where a large ficus tree grew, and another at a vast lake (also described as a "quagmire". Both were actual geographical locations that were not visited by living Kmhmu (Lindell, Swahn, and Tayanin 1977-1995, v. 3, 11, 313).

²⁰ This is an insight variously articulated by Bataille (1988, 70), as well as Marx, Hegel, and Nietzsche (Comay 1990, 66).

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