Buddhism and Coffee:
The Transformation of Locality and
Non-Human Personhood in Southern Laos

Guido Sprenger

Among Jru’ (Loven) uplanders in southern Laos, three different ecologies intersect. Animism focuses on local non-human persons like rice and earth spirits. Cash cropping elaborates translocal relationships with foreigners and technology, but reduces the extent of non-human personhood. Buddhism stresses both the translocal character and the transcendence of non-human persons. Villages are now in transition from subsistence swidden agriculture to coffee production and from animism to Buddhism. These two processes reinforce each other, as the question of non-human personhood defines both the differences and the potential conflicts between ecologies. The translocalization of local reproductive cycles thus conditions the decreased importance of non-humans as persons.

Keywords: Laos, ecology, animism, Boloven Plateau, cash crops.

Although this article is about Buddhism and coffee, I start with two things that seem to be the opposites of a world religion and a cash crop: spirits and rice. In southern Laos, as in most parts of Southeast Asia, rice is the staple food. But the extensive ritual attention given to it shows that its importance extends into the realm of the invisible. Even the fact that it fills stomachs is not merely due to its physical substance. Many people in Laos argue that stored rice will not last long without the performance of an appropriate ritual.

Rice is thus not just a crop and a consumable; it is a partner in a life-giving relationship. Rice reacts to the way it is treated, and, if
treated with the care and attention that one might give to a person, it will bring prosperity and health to a household (Walker 1994; Phout 2006, pp. 95–120). The relationship between people and rice appears in the form of relational beings, spirits who animate rice. Spirits and rice thus are non-human elements of an ecological sociality that needs to be reproduced in order to maintain the life of its human members. They define a network in the sense of Latour (2008) in which agency and personhood are unevenly distributed among humans and non-humans (Sprenger 2016b, pp. 250–51, 260–61).

What, then, happens, when humans use fields for the cultivation of cash crops instead of rice, and buy rice on the market? What happens when additional cosmological relationships appear, engendered by a world religion? How are notions of personhood and agency redistributed in such different ecologies?

Scholars have often seen the transition from subsistence agriculture to cash cropping in terms of market access, globalization and the re-ordering of property relations (Rigg 2016, pp. 176–91), and scholarship on Laos is no exception (Delang, Toro, and Charlet-Phommachanh 2013; Kenney-Lazar 2012; Pinkaew 2012). This understanding has tended, however, to obscure the fact that engagement with the environment, as in agriculture, always has cosmological and ontological dimensions that are sometimes too casually described as “religious”. More recent approaches, not yet employed in the study of Laos, address the close interaction of humans and non-humans in ecological, economic, religious and political spheres as networks, assemblages or meshworks (Latour 2008; Ingold 2011; Kohn 2015; Orr, Lansing, and Dove 2015). What these attempts to understand as symmetrical the relationships between humans and non-humans often lack is a sense of the systematic character of those relationships. The term “ecologies” in the plural captures this systematic character without undermining the analytical potency of the aforementioned approaches — ecologies understood here as more or less coherent systems of relationships between humans and non-humans, which selectively construct, include or exclude particular beings or aspects of their existence. These ecologies manifest themselves in humans’
practical dealings with non-humans, in activities from agriculture to ritual. The differences among ecologies thereby emerge from moments of conflict and friction. Their specific processes of inclusion and exclusion are most conspicuous as they relate to the concept of the person, the central concern of this article. These processes also articulate hegemony, as they condition which beings are represented in the “parliament of things” of any given ecology (Latour 2008, chap. 5.5).

My ongoing research among Jru’, an ethnic group whose members live on the Boloven Plateau in southern Laos, yields a prime example of this kind of conflict. The Jru’ with whom I have worked enact distinctions between sets of relationships and types of communication among humans and non-humans. They also make explicit statements about differences between these sets of relationships and about their mutual exclusiveness. For reasons of analysis and comparison, I call these sets of relationships ecologies, and I observe three major ecologies among Jru’. One specific type of relationship dominates each ecology, even though any ecology contains various types of relationships.

The first type of relationship relates to beings that are more or less like persons but not like humans. They might be harmful or helpful, they are open to negotiations, and they are defined by fairly clear relationships to particular human beings, families or places. These beings are difficult to access by means of the senses, as they are invisible most of the time (Sprenger 2016c, pp. 37–40). According to Jru’, invisibility is their most characteristic feature. By convention, I call these beings spirits and their relationships to human beings animist.

Human beings identify spirits in an ongoing process of interaction (Sprenger 2017a). Therefore, the identities of spirits might differentiate according to the ways in which humans address them in ritual. For Jru’, different rituals imply different beings. Each ritual actualizes specific relationships between different beings, among them humans and non-humans. The former include classes of kin, members of a household and ritual experts, and the latter spirits, sacrificial animals
and rice. At the centre of these momentary networks are invisible beings that become concrete and with which communication is possible through ritual action.

The second type of relationship concerns objects and resources. As I use these terms, they indicate passive beings that humans can handle at will, with due attention but without addressing them as persons or engaging in a dialogue with them. Modern science and the economy provide prime examples of this kind of relationship, but it is by no means exclusive to them.

The third type of relationship is characteristic of “world religions”, in this case of one such religion — Buddhism. The distinctive aspect of relationships of this type is that they combine translocalism with transcendence. Buddhism connects villages with cities in which larger temples and monk schools are located, with governments that organize the monkhood and use religion for legitimacy, and with other countries through history or monastic networks. In their reach, these connections indicate social distance, which has its cosmological correlate, at least in doctrinal versions of Buddhism. In these versions, non-human forces are removed from ordinary life, even antagonistic to it. People may connect to those forces properly only by turning away from bonds like those to family or from sexual relationships. This cosmological distance is upheld not least by means of the 227 precepts that Theravada monks observe (Crosby 2014, p. 197). One might therefore call the type of relationship that distinguishes world religions from “animism” other-worldly or transcendent. Buddhism transcends both village sociality and localized ecologies.

Each of these three types of relationships defines or dominates one of three distinguishable ecologies among Jru’, but not exclusively. While ecologies are not neatly separated, they differ from one another in their value systems, which attribute to certain ideas and relations superiority over others (Dumont 2013). For example, the object status of non-humans and the value-idea of “resource” are dominant in modern economic-scientific ecologies. Animist ecologies also acknowledge objects, but subordinate their value to that of beings that approach personhood (Sprenger 2016a, p. 73). Buddhism,
at least in the present case, provides options to evade non-human persons. It thus supports the de-personalization of the economy and its linkage to the market. On the Boloven Plateau, three ecologies, conditioned by these three dominant relationship types, interact. Therefore, economic change runs parallel to religious change, as the ontological status of beings shifts from immanence and personhood to transcendence and object.

The Setting

The Jru’, also called Loven or Laven, number about 56,400 persons, mostly living on the Boloven Plateau in the south of Laos. While the Jru’, like other Mon-Khmer-speaking groups on the plateau, have historically neither been Buddhists nor organized their society into communities above the village level, they have stood out among their neighbours in several respects. Nineteenth-century explorers noticed, for example, that Jru’ had well-developed links to the lowlands, as a knowledge of the Lao language and of even its script was comparatively widespread among them (Harmand 1997, p. 91). They even appeared to be the overlords of the neighbouring Nya Heun, another Mon-Khmer-speaking ethnic group (Wall 1975, pp. 6–7). From the 1910s to the 1930s, the millenarian leader Ong Kommadam combined claims for greater legal autonomy for the ethnic groups on the plateau with cosmological ideas inspired by Buddhism, in a demonstration of the combination of independent orientation or remoteness on the one hand and connectedness or openness on the other among Jru’ (Gunn 2003, pp. 164, 172–74; Moppert 1981).

An important factor in this combination was the cultivation of coffee. Introduced by French entrepreneurs in about 1930, coffee slowly became the major cash crop of the plateau (Ducourtieux 1994, pp. 62–64; Ducourtieux and Kéolabthavong 2003, pp. 15–16). Cultivation of the crop expanded even during the phase of planned economy in the 1980s, and today it has almost entirely replaced rice farming in my research sites. Albeit unevenly, the spread of
Buddhism and coffee production occurred in the same period of time, and I argue that these two processes reinforced each other.

I conducted fieldwork in two villages. The first is situated about fifteen kilometres east of the plateau’s administrative centre, Pakson, on a road passing through Jru’ villages, and is aptly called Lak Sip Ha (Kilometre Fifteen). Buddhist Lao dominate the closest neighbouring village. The other village, named Hueisan after a nearby rivulet, lies about seven kilometres north of Pakson.

Lak Sip Ha villagers claim that they follow “spirit religion” (sadsana phi), although they have adopted some Lao and Buddhist rituals. People in Hueisan say that they practise both “spirit religion” and Buddhism in parallel. On one level, this assertion is remarkable. While non-Buddhists commonly identify with “spirit religion” in Laos, Buddhists in general do not consider their own relationships with spirits as “religion” (sadsana). What is more, the term “spirit religion” (or animism) is not officially recognized (Steering Committee 2006, p. 5). Jru’ discourse, however, indicates a plurality of systems of human-non-human relationships, each recognizing different degrees and qualities of personhood and object status, that interact as three different ecologies.

Ecology 1: Local Spirits

Jru’ call their indigenous ritual system sadsana phi (spirit religion) or sadsana Jru’ (Jru’ religion), thereby appropriating a Lao term that is officially restricted to world religions like Buddhism or Christianity (Sprenger 2017d, pp. 102–3). The actants in this ecology are, on the human side, members of households and villages, including ritual experts called griang. On the side of non-humans, they are ancestral spirits, spirits of the environment — rice spirits, earth spirits, invisible forest dwellers — and rice, sacrificial animals and other offerings. Rituals may also be concerned with household ancestors and the village spirit. Jru’ characterize spirits as invisible, although they may become visible in dreams or visions.

Everything concerning these relationships is the expertise of the griang, a position transferred by apprenticeship. According to myth,
all that is distinctive and traditional in Jru’ life goes back to seven primordial griang. Today, a village typically has two griang; they are well-respected men, but neither ritually initiated nor considered a specific type of person, like shamans or Buddhist monks. The most active griang in Lak Sip Ha witnessed or supervised all rituals in the village, including some non-Jru’ rituals. The griang of Hueisan distinguished more clearly between Jru’ rituals, their own field of expertise, on the one hand and Buddhism, the domain of the monks, on the other. Yaamuan, a second type of ritual expert, are diviners who cooperate with auxiliary spirits. While important in healing rituals, they only play a minor role in agriculture.

In the present context, two types of spirits are of importance, the spirit of rice (bra jä or pual jä) and the earth spirits. The performance of rituals for earth spirits are necessary to a successful rice harvest. According to the griang of Lak Sip Ha, the male or female head of the household waves an egg, some peeled and uncooked rice and a burning candle over a section of his or her field and asks Nang Tholani — the Lao term for the earth goddess — for a good harvest. The head of household also sows rice in this section of the field first. Those performing this ritual, more often the female head of the household than the male one, are chosen to play that role for their previous success in bringing good yields.

When the rice is ready for harvesting, the same person who has performed the earlier ritual peels two or three fresh grains and wraps them in a rice leaf, which represents the rice spirit. She then tells the rice spirit that the harvest is now proceeding. An adult household member repeats this practice every morning and evening during the harvest. On its final day, a household member binds seven or eight panicles of rice from the site of the first sowing into a bundle and waves them across the field, calling the rice spirit into the field hut in which the rice is stored. Ritual verses specify the spirit, who appears as both singular and multiple in this context, as a family, consisting of “father glutinous rice”, Nai Draang; “mother white rice”, Nang Degou; and two daughters, Nang Yedyöd and Nang Bedyuad.

After moving the rice to the granary, the ritualist puts the bundle of panicles upright in a basket of new rice on top of the heap of
stored rice. Without this attentive treatment, the rice would not last a full year. When household members later remove rice, they do so in the form of an exchange. After filling small basketfuls into a larger basket outside the granary, they leave a few grains in the basket containing the bundle of panicles, calling the rice spirit again. Thus, at every step, human beings enter into a dialogue with rice. Sowing, harvesting and consumption constitute a local cycle of relating to spirits.

Today, people who buy rice still place it in the granary, sometimes in the sacks in which they have bought it. I have seen a heap of stored grain still featuring the bundle of panicles from the last harvest. However, in Lak Sip Ha, most people stopped swidden cultivation between 2002 and 2008, in compliance with the anti-swidden politics of the government. In Hueisan, swidden agriculture was abolished over ten years ago.

Yet rituals for the rice spirit that highlight its dangerous and illness-inducing qualities have survived the end of swidden cultivation. The healing ritual called bra jā is performed in all Jru’ villages that I know. A griang performs it after a yaamuan has diagnosed an illness as caused by the rice spirit, usually after hospital treatment has failed. He addresses the ritual principally to the ancestors of the afflicted household. These fairly elaborate events take place both inside the home and the granary — or, if still in existence, the rice field — of a sick person and include the sacrifice of a pig and a cock. Thus, while the rice spirit only requires respectful treatment during the agricultural cycle, it demands a bloody sacrifice when it is actively bringing affliction to people. The griang of Lak Sip Ha explained this demand in terms of reciprocity. After years of providing “beautiful” (in Lao, ngam) rice, the spirit has become hungry. It thus appears as an entity that treats human beings differently according to situation.

The field spirit (bra meur) is similarly relational. The griang identified this spirit with the rice spirit. They were the same but different, he argued, as they were differentiated by sacrifices: when it makes people ill, the field spirit only needs the sacrifice of a chicken, not a pig. This statement of “same but different” makes sense if
spirits are beings that are literally “made” by the ritual (Sprenger 2017a, p. 119). A difference in ritual thus represents difference in a being that is otherwise the same.

Ecology 2: The Coffee Economy

Cash cropping changes the relationships between humans and non-humans significantly. The ecology underlying such cropping involves, on the human side, farmers, companies supplying coffee bushes and fertilizer, and coffee buyers in the commodity chain. State policy in Laos promotes an increase in agro-industrial production and the replacement of subsistence agriculture (Pasicolan and Thatheva 2014, p. 845). The state has also introduced land titling, thus transforming relationships between people and land from shifting mobile land use under swidden cultivation to permanent cropping. Land thus becomes a marketable commodity with the status of an object, in a process that an increase in systematic scientific knowledge about crops and land as encoded in agricultural technology reinforces.

The process establishes not only coffee bushes and land but also vehicles, mills and other devices as the non-human elements of this ecology. Some of these elements or actants bring about relationships with additional elements. Many farmers have in the past ten to fifteen years shifted from high-growing Robusta and Arabica varieties of coffee to Catimor, high-yield breeds that a single person can harvest while standing. The yields of Catimor varieties decrease significantly without the application of chemical fertilizer, however. The cultivation of Catimor thus creates relationships with fertilizers as non-human actants and also with their human suppliers.

Coffee ecology also brings contact with things invisible, but these things differ from those that figure in animist ecologies. Coffee is sold as red berries or as peeled and dried beans. Beans sell for a much higher price than berries, but farmers need access to a mill to produce beans. The process increases their production costs and the labour input required. Only a few larger farmers own such mills. Furthermore, the pulp produced during the peeling process is highly
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acidic and can contaminate ground water. A select number of farmers is aware of these issues, as they have taken part in training courses offered by one of the coffee-producing and -buying companies. The scientific framing of the training expands farmers’ realities to include invisible non-humans like acid content or ground water.\(^9\)

The increased complexity of the side of this ecology involving objects thus mirrors the greater complexity of human sociality involved. Coffee production has attracted lowland Lao to the Boloven Plateau and created transethnic links, especially as Lao men have married local women. Also, during the phase of collectivization in the late 1970s, the state granted coffee plantations on the Boloven Plateau to numerous lowland farming collectives (High 2014, p. 100).\(^10\) More recently, coffee brought foreign investors, company employees and labourers, including Vietnamese, Indians and Malaysians. It also links the plateau to remote buyers and consumers.

In contrast, the complexity of non-human personhood significantly decreases in the context of coffee production. None of the new non-human actants is person-like. I am not aware of blessing rituals for newly acquired machines on the Boloven Plateau, in contrast to my research among Rmeet in northern Laos. When I asked the griang of Lak Sip Ha about the coffee spirit, he just laughed and replied that coffee had no spirit.\(^11\) Indeed, there are no rituals for coffee plants. A few farmers in Lak Sip Ha perform a small ritual for the spirits of the sky and the surroundings on less productive coffee plots once a year. The verses used in this ritual are comparable to those used in opening a rice field, a mixture of Jru’ and Lao. They include Buddhist lines like the blessing satthu satthu satthu. Villagers trace this ritual, although it is of apparently recent vintage, to one of the primordial seven griang. In this way, Jru’ localize coffee and integrate it into the pattern of reproduction of their cultural specificity.

The purchase of saplings, fertilizers and machines, the sale of the harvest and the presence of external knowledge and people situate coffee in a translocal cycle of reproduction. The coffee economy includes numerous new beings, but it does not involve the personhood of non-humans.
Ecology 3: Buddhism

Buddhism has been an active force in carrying globalized notions of “ecology” into Mainland Southeast Asia (Darlington 2017, pp. 488–89), although less prominently in Laos than elsewhere (Ladwig 2008, pp. 478–80). However, I am not aware that doctrinal Buddhist concepts of nature (in Lao, dhammasad) or its protection have found their way into the practical Buddhism of the Jru’ with whom I have worked. It is thus open to debate whether Buddhism constitutes a distinct ecology in this context or rather operates as a catalyst that ritualizes the gap between an animist and a cash-crop ecology. Whatever the case, like an ecology, Buddhism creates networks of humans and non-humans, even though plants and animals play a minor role in those networks in the present case.

For several decades Buddhism has provided an alternative to Jru’ rituals. While the rituals of “spirit religion” address beings that are distinctively local, Buddhism extends across ethnic and national boundaries. It differentiates humans into monks and laypersons and links living beings through trans-species reincarnation. It has also introduced powerful non-human forces like “merit” (in Lao, boun) (Tannenbaum 1995, pp. 705–7) and relics and statues (Crosby 2014, pp. 25, 47–52) to the Jru’. Like the Karen in Thailand (Hayami 1996, p. 346), the Jru’ did not adopt Buddhism all of a sudden but rather in a modular way. Households took cases of misfortune or death as occasions to celebrate a Buddhist ritual, by inviting monks for chanting sud (in Pali, suttha). But initially they did not identify as Buddhists. For many of my informants, only the building of a temple marks the adoption of a Buddhist identity.

The link between coffee and Buddhism is at once obvious and indirect. As villagers in Hueisan argue, coffee growing attracted lowland Lao to the plateau, and they brought Buddhism. In contrast to many other Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia, not a single monk whom I encountered living in the temples of the Jru’ villages that I studied was native to the village or even an ethnic Jru’; they were all lowland Lao. There are Jru’ monks, but I have not heard of
any who stayed in their village of birth or ordination. Rather, for the Jru’, Buddhist monkhood signifies tranethnic mobility. Nevertheless, the migration of lowland Lao to the plateau does not explain fully why Jru’ turned to Buddhism.

Buddhism’s translocal character may have become meaningful when the reproductive cycles of rice and coffee also became translocal. Buddhism is related to the state. Even though the Lao People’s Democratic Republic is by constitution secular and more than 30 per cent of its population comprises “animists” (Steering Committee 2006, p. 8; Lao Statistics Bureau 2016, pp. 36, 123), Buddhism plays a clear role in shaping national identity. Buddhist symbols like stupas adorn flags, bank notes and other representations of the state. The monkhood provides free schooling for novices, often in larger towns and cities. Jru’ describe Buddhism and Lao culture as the “generic” or “common culture” (in Lao, *hidgong gang*), drawing a contrast to their own local usages. Buddhism also provides a form of demonstration of status shared among all Buddhist communities in Laos and beyond, in the form of donations to temples. These donations, mostly monetary, receive publicity and thus render visible the status of givers across ethnic boundaries (Sprenger 2017c, pp. 287–88).

This transcultural quality is inherent to Buddhism. It not only connects members of various ethnic groups, but people are also aware of its origin in a faraway place, India. The millenarian leader Kommadam may have been the first to institutionalize this kind of tranethnic linkage on the Boloven Plateau. He bridged various ethnicities with a ritual system that borrowed ostentatiously from Buddhism, as a means of reacting to French colonialism (Moppert 1981, p. 50). While in Kommadam’s time, the cycles of reproduction were mostly local, his use of Buddhist elements predated and perhaps prepared the shift towards translocal cycles. The association of Buddhism with tranethnicity was reinforced during the Second Indochina War (1954–75). In the early 1970s, American bombing targeted the plateau, and some of its inhabitants were evacuated. Hours (1973, p. 41) reports that, as an act of reciprocity for the help
that the refugees received from the lowland Lao, they participated in the latter’s religion.

Buddhism also stresses otherworldliness in relation to the spirits, “transcendence” in the sense of remoteness and unavailability (Århem 2016, pp. 16, 20). The spirits of deceased parents (in Jru’, keshok) are at the centre of Jru’ households, and most rituals are addressed to them. While the Lao ritual system sometimes treats ancestors in a similarly personalized manner, Buddhism as such offers means to reduce the complexity of relationships with the dead by removing them from the household and the village. Accordingly, some of my informants argued that the deceased go to the temple in a Buddhist village, so that households are relieved from caring for them with animal sacrifices. This belief indicates a shift from attaching value to prestigious animal sacrifices towards making temple donations.

But doctrinally, as many people in Hueisan know, the souls (in Lao, vinyan) of the dead go to heaven (savăn) or hell (nalok), where they prepare for rebirth. This knowledge offers the option of ignoring the dead entirely most of the time. The Buddhist system of relationships between humans and non-humans potentially excludes the dead, by making them appear remote or even non-existent. In this respect, Buddhist hegemoniality\(^\text{12}\) silences ancestral spirits and therefore narrows the range of non-human persons with whom villagers are involved.

In addition, Buddhism enhances the object status of coffee. In Hueisan, the Coffee Festival (in Lao, Boun thäd kafee) has become one of the twelve rituals of the Buddhist annual cycle, celebrated in the third month of the Buddhist calendar. This ritual is also widely observed among the Lao communities in the area and replaces the important Festival of Prince Vessantara (in Lao, Boun phaweed) in villages in which the expensive paraphernalia necessary for the latter are unavailable.\(^\text{13}\) The Boun thäd kafee sees farmers offer part of their yield to the temple, which subsequently sells it to coffee merchants. The proceeds go to the temple. The main crop of the village is thus integrated into its ritual life, not as a person but as a consumable whose value is measured by its equivalence to money.
Other rituals that I have observed often acknowledged Buddhism’s dominance, but they maintained the plurality of ecological networks; mortuary rituals are an example (Sprenger 2017d, pp. 111–12). The effect of Buddhism on relationships with spirits of the earth is, however, less direct. Elsewhere in the region, Buddhists feel decisively protected from spirit influences (Spiro 1967, pp. 56–59; Ferguson 2014, p. 60). They thus enjoy more leeway when a shift from swidden agriculture to cash cropping demands the renegotiation of the relationship with the spirits of the land. While swidden cultivation demands rituals for the spirits of the land each time plots are established anew, the establishment of a fixed coffee plantation only requires a single ritual. Again, Buddhism helps to diminish the extent of person-like interactions with the environment.

From Swidden to Coffee

Currently available data suggest that coffee growing has a longer and more continuous history around Hueisan than around Lak Sip Ha. Detailing this difference will clarify some of the factors that have promoted economic and religious transition among Jru’, in particular regarding land tenure and animist ritual. This story demonstrates the ways in which frictions between ecologies enhance their systematic features.

In contrast to lowland wet rice fields, as a general rule among Jru’ swidden fields did not have permanent owners. If a household planned to clear an old plot left fallow, it had to ask for permission from the previous tiller. The request was informal and required no ceremonial gift or fee, in reflection of the weak bond between tiller and soil.

Coffee plots, however, are in the permanent possession of their cultivators and thus correspond better with lowland Lao usages and with the official land titling policies initiated in 1997. Swidden cultivators are thus under pressure to convert land into coffee plantations. While some farmers have managed to register many of their former swidden fields as their property, other households have
ended up owning much less land than they may have previously cultivated. In Lak Sip Ha, for example, household ownership of land ranges from twenty to thirty hectares at the top end to half a hectare at the bottom.

Concessions to mostly international investors for coffee estates have increased pressure on access to village land on the Boloven Plateau (Kenney-Lazar 2012, pp. 1025, 1032). While some of the resulting conflicts have been resolved, villagers remain as a general matter vulnerable to land grabbing. In a broader sense, this situation shows how the hegemoniality of a modern economy, in which land represents a marketable resource, conflicts with an animist notion of land as that property of spirits that one may use after ritual negotiation.

The comparison of the two villages studied suggests that areas with more swidden cultivation and fewer fixed smallholder plantations have seen more land ceded to outside companies. In Lak Sip Ha, investors have received land concessions since 1997, but in Hueisan only since 2006. In Hueisan, villagers continue to work most land; only 363 hectares comprise estates under the control of outsiders. In Lak Sip Ha, in contrast, 624 hectares of a total of about 1,764 hectares of village land is covered by estates. Portilla (2015, p. 18) estimates that concessions in Lak Sip Ha excluded villagers from access to about 43 per cent of the land. My data on the history of coffee cultivation are not entirely conclusive, but apparently the early establishment of permanent smallholder plantations leaves less land to be ceded to investors.

The shift away from swidden cultivation also had immediate effects on the relationships with spirits, as articulated in ritual. One of the most conspicuous acts in virtually all Jru’ rituals is the drinking from a jar of rice wine, a fermented mix of chaff and water, through bamboo straws by seven or eight people at a time. Most Jru’ rituals are structured as a series of rounds of this distinctive drink, common among Mon-Khmer-speaking uplanders in Laos and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{15}

The purchase of rice makes this practice difficult to continue. While Lak Sip Ha villagers still perform it, it has fallen into desuetude in
Hueisan. Villagers there either buy rice in husked form or have it milled by a motor-powered mill and thus causing the chaff to be too fine-grained for the production of rice wine. Hueisan Buddhists consider sieving the fine particles out too bothersome. They offer rice wine only in token form to the spirits, as empty jars with twigs posing for straws. Without the centrepiece, the structure and experience of the rituals has changed significantly, in an outcome that reinforces the marginalization of the spirits already promoted by Buddhist hegemoniality.

As noted above, Hueisan Jru’ explain the arrival of Buddhism by referring to lowland Lao men marrying Jru’ women and then moving in, in accordance with a matrilocal pattern common to both ethnic groups. This sequence of events enabled Lao men to gain access to land for coffee growing and thus to participate in the cultivation of the lucrative cash crop. Hueisan villagers claim that the arrival of these migrants was the main factor behind the adoption of Buddhism in the village. But lowland Lao sons-in-law have become prominent in Lak Sip Ha as well, having married into the wealthiest families and increasing those families’ wealth. Although Lak Sip Ha villagers mostly identify as “animist” (in Lao, sadsana phi), they have adopted various lowland Lao and Buddhist rituals (Sprenger 2017d). Permanent land tenure, cash cropping and Buddhism have thus created a network of new actants and relationships that restricts the operation of the animist ecology without replacing it entirely.

Ecologies and Personhood

One effect of the transition discussed above is a shift in what counts as a person and what as an object. This shift has diminished the personhood of non-humans and has brought their status closer to that of objects. Personhood in Southeast Asia often depends on two factors: the intensity of communication networks in which a being is embedded, and the difference between communication with and communication about a being (Sprenger 2017a, p. 123). Rice becomes
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less person-like when bought in sacks in the market, as there are in that situation fewer occurrences that recognize it as communicative than when one cultivates it. The process of treating it respectfully during sowing and harvesting has disappeared, and what is left are its illness-inducing aspects, as highlighted in the bra jā ritual. Coffee, as its replacement, has no person-like traits.¹⁶

These conclusions echo Naveh’s and Bird-David’s observations on Nayaka hunters and gatherers in India. When Nayaka address plants and animals in the context of their own society, they treat them respectfully — as partners in durable relationships. But when they exploit the same beings for sale, they do so without any sense of sustainability and turn them into mere objects (Naveh and Bird-David 2014, pp. 79, 82). This finding suggests that the intrusion of a capitalist market economy dissolves relations to non-humans as persons and turns them into resources.

This argument is convincing to a degree, as it accords with the common observation that capitalist-modern ideologies assign greater importance to relations between humans and objects than to relations among humans (Dumont 2013, pp. 308–9; Graeber 2001). But it still raises questions regarding Southeast Asian societies. After all, many of those societies, and certainly the Jru’, have been connected to markets for quite a long time. What then is the difference between the trading relationships of the past and current participation in the market? How does the spirit of capitalism relate to the spirits of the land — especially if we recognize that relationships with spirits continue to thrive in Southeast Asia, even in urban environments (Johnson 2012 and 2014; Ferguson 2014; Goh 2011)?

The social distance characterizing the ecologies appears to be a crucial factor. In their current form, cycles reproducing the central means of livelihood extend beyond the horizon of the local reproductive community. Rice is produced elsewhere and only consumed locally, while coffee is produced locally but mostly consumed elsewhere.¹⁷ This differs from “dual economies” in which subsistence and production for the market were quite independent of each other (Dove 2011, pp. 15–18). It was not the growth of
coffee production itself, but rather that production’s displacement of rice production, that made a significant difference. As Bird-David (1999, pp. S70–71) argues, familiarity with non-humans leads to the attribution of personhood in animism. In the Jru’ case, this familiarity results from embedding non-humans into reproductive cycles. People’s current interactions with both rice and coffee are less complex, and less comprehensive in relation to reproductive cycles, than was their interaction with rice in the practice of swidden cultivation. Both products are less embedded in local reproduction, and personhood is thus less easily assigned to these non-humans.

But while diminished in relation to the conditions of personhood, complexity increases on the level of ecologies. Each ecology has its own variant of complexity. Jru’ animism is mostly concerned with the complexity of communication and personhood, while cash cropping elaborates complexity in relation to objects like mills and fertilizer. Objects appear in three relationships. First, in relation to laws and regulations, land and crops are mere possessions. Second, transactions between buyers and sellers transform local products into translocal commodities, thereby disembedding them from the complexities of their production. Finally, ground water, acid and pests interact, as elements of a scientifically defined environment, without any communicative dimension. These definitions of the environment sometimes directly contradict the animist ecology (McAllister 2014, pp. 508–9; Bräuchler 2018).

The third ecology, Buddhism, supports the transition from swidden agriculture to the cultivation of cash crops. On the one hand, the translocal dimension of coffee production finds a structural parallel in Buddhism. Both bring people from outside to the plateau. Sometimes these people even come from outside the country; at the very least coffee production creates connections beyond national boundaries. And, like Buddhism, the coffee economy also allows local people to travel — in this case trainees rather than novices.

Buddhism also offers transcendence in relation to the spirits. It protects human beings from them or relocates them altogether, whether to heaven or hell. Like animism, Buddhism is concerned with the
possibility of increasing or devolving personhood, but it operates on somewhat different cosmological premises. Numerous Buddhist rituals construct non-human personhood, as when celebrants treat Buddha images like persons (Crosby 2014, p. 51; McDaniel 2011, pp. 163–66). Buddhism also introduces a new kind of person, the monk. Monks are set apart from ordinary humans, as they cannot be touched and do not have sexual intercourse, and common words for “person”, “eating” and “sleeping” do not apply to them (Ladwig 2006). Nevertheless, in severely restricting the agency of the spirits and reinforcing the objectification of coffee, Buddhism is — like the other ecologies — distinguished by a specific construction of personhood.

Conclusion

The three ecologies that I have observed among Jru’ produce or assume different types of personhood and different relations of locality and translocality (see Descola 2011, chap. 12). The ecology of sadsana phi prioritizes immediate exchanges with person-like beings. These exchanges constitute local cycles of reproduction for rice-producing households. Non-human persons remain mostly invisible, with invisibility indicating social distance and difficulties of communication (for example, Platenkamp 2006, pp. 80–81; Sprenger 2016c, pp. 38–39).

The ecology of cash cropping extends these reproductive cycles. Coffee is fed into international commodity chains extending beyond what is visible to local people. New non-person-like non-humans appear, and at the same time, some farmers become, for example, more aware of certain invisible effects of their farming, like the pollution of ground water.

Buddhism also offers relationships beyond localities, again in both human and non-human dimensions. Like cash cropping, it involves translocal networks of people and organizations — for example, monasteries in cities within and beyond Laos. On a non-human level, Buddhism promises a world with less suffering and greater
distance from the spirits. It makes remote the ancestors who would otherwise remain members of society, thus enhancing the distance signified by their invisibility. But it also integrates coffee into ritual life without personifying it.

Personhood thus appears as a central indicator of the inclusion of beings in and their exclusion from ecological networks. Personhood implies more intense relationships, more mutual dependence and increased communication, especially in the form of ritual. Object status suggests easier alienability, an absence of communication and strong fluctuations in interaction over time. In the present case, the differentiation of persons and objects indicates the boundaries of human and non-human systems of interaction, termed ecologies here. In particular, formerly animist relationships become differentiated into those belonging to the “economy” and those belonging to “Buddhism”. Buddhism shares relationships to non-human persons with animism and its translocal nature with cash cropping. It thus serves as a mediator between the two other ecologies, even as a catalyst of change.

However, both coffee growing and Buddhism suggest a fairly clear distinction between objects and persons (Davis 2016, p. 125), one that is less negotiable and improvisatory than in sadsana phi. Because the ontological status of beings is quite malleable in the latter, it appears to be less hegemonic and more open to plurality, especially in its potential to connect to other ecologies. For that reason, animist rituals may contain references to Buddhism or treat non-humans contextually as either object or person. Ironically, it is this potential of animism to assimilate and contain relationships from other ecologies that places it in a sub-hegemonic position.

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**Guido Sprenger** is Professor of Anthropology in the Institute of Anthropology, Heidelberg University, Albert-Ueberle-Straße 3-5, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany; email: sprenger@eth.uni-heidelberg.de.

**NOTES**

1. Research was conducted over the course of more than five months between 2012 and 2016, using participant observation and unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted mostly in Lao, but employing important Jru’ terms.

2. See Sprenger and Großmann (2018), in this issue of *SOJOURN*.

3. I do not associate the term with otherworldliness or ethereality, which would be inappropriate in this context. Valeri (2000, p. 26) suggests “occult powers”, but that term does not highlight the person-like character of these beings — crucial to my argument — while Baumann (2017) prefers “numinals”.

4. Some places in the forest are home to a category of spirits called bra vinyam. These human-like beings live and die with their families in their own villages but are invisible. Thus, if one starts clearing a plot of land, these spirits may appear in one’s dreams, complaining about the destruction of their homes. In such a case, the tiller asks a yaamuan to plead the spirits to move. No compensation is offered. In contrast to bra vinyam, spirits of the ground are everywhere; see Alexander (1978).


6. Space does not allow me to provide a full description of this ritual or a case study.

7. Interview, 16 August 2013, Lak Sip Ha.

8. Interview, 16 August 2013, Lak Sip Ha.

9. I thank Karsten Ziebell for information on coffee production.

10. Also confirmed in conversation with Ian Baird, Toronto, 18 March 2017.

11. Interview, 16 March 2013, Lak Sip Ha.


13. This applies particularly to the painted scroll depicting the life of Prince Vessantara that is at the centre of ritual proceedings; see Lefferts and Cate (2012).

14. Monks engaged in forest protection in Thailand strategically accept
animist notions that trees are inhabited by spirits without sharing these ideas (Darlington 2012, p. 64). I am not aware of similar intersections regarding trees on the Boloven Plateau.

15. See for example Fisksjö (2010).

16. Of course, I cannot rule out the possibility that “coffee spirits” will emerge in the future.

17. Ironically, this “elsewhere” may be rather close by. Most coffee farmers sell their produce to a large coffee processor about two hours away by car and then buy its products — pulverized, sweetened instant coffee — in small plastic wrappings.


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