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THE END OF RITUALS
A dialogue between theory and ethnography in Laos*

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Some predict that ritual will inevitably disappear, for better or worse, due to the growth of science or rationalism. Others claim that ritual persists or even proliferates, as it is a necessary part of human society or cognitive order. Yet others argue that the disappearance of ritual and religion is only illusory, and that what presents itself as non-religious, even as scientific, is in fact religious and ritual by nature. Yet, although anthropologists are frequently confronted with the disappearance of rituals and cosmological ideas, this is acknowledged far more than it is discussed, being either treated as obvious or ignored.

This article offers a perspective in which the discontinuance of ritual is taken seriously as a source of anthropological insight. It has two aims. First, it attempts to specify and formulate a specific question and to situate it within the anthropological discourse. Secondly, the exploration of the question is framed by the ethnography of the Rmeet in northern Laos, data that inspired its formulation. The issue is complex in both regards, the answers presented here at best sketchy and tentative. The dialogue between theory and ethnography serves to heighten the level of abstraction in order to make comparison possible.

The question is, What are the conditions for the discontinuance or reduction of rituals from the perspective of a specific society? How can the reduction of a ritual system be explained by the ideas at the core of the system?

1. *Definitions and approaches*

The Rmeet (Lamet) are mostly swidden farmers living in the northern provinces of Laos. They are non-Buddhists, speak a Mon-Khmer language and have no traditional

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organization above the village level. Rmeet ritual addresses a pantheon of spirits, the most important being the ancestors, house spirits (which are aspects of ancestors), village spirits and diverse spirits of the wilderness. Rituals integrate these cosmic entities with the kinship system, social structure and the rules of asymmetric marriage alliance (Sprenger 2006).

By 'ritual system', I denote the entirety of these integrated forms of social reproduction. My definition of ritual is thus as follows: a ritual is an activity that a particular community acknowledges as being effective in the maintenance or creation of social or cosmic relationships that are vital for the reproduction of this community; this creative or maintaining force gains its efficacy with reference to a higher level in the social or cosmological hierarchy than that represented by the persons or groups for whom the ritual is being performed.[1]

This definition hinges strongly on the social function of rituals, which, although it has been regarded as debatable (Handelman 2005), nonetheless applies to the phenomena I am concerned with here and highlights those features that need to be taken into account in addressing the present question. It is therefore both heuristic and analytical. It stresses that rituals have to be acknowledged – although not unequivocally – but need not be traditional. The 'higher level' is not restricted to metaphysical beings; a marriage in town hall is clearly a ritual, the higher level being the state.

But although the above definition identifies the structural features of ritual, one crucial point for the argument is that social reproduction by ritual can only be achieved through practice, and practice is highly contingent (Tambiah 1985a). Thus, a ritual system should be seen as a set of rules that enables communications, these communications being the individual ritual and social events and also the discourse that surrounds them. One must distinguish between normative statements and explicit rules on the one hand, and those that emerge from observation and analysis on the other. The latter are more complex, as the rules are applied to the specificity of each ritual occasion. While normative statements seem to outline 'structure', observation reveals 'process'. Yet, from the perspective of a general theory of systems, the difference is less fundamental than it seems. Structures only emerge as repeated practice; they consist of a series of events that is reversible. Processes, on the other hand, consist of irreversible events (Luhmann 1984:73–74). Both are subject to the same rules for the production of events.

There are many reasons for rituals to be discontinued, and my focus is on the less obvious ones. Straightforward prohibition by officials or missionaries, the decimation or dispersal of communities, or the dying out of specialists, are not taken into account. The case of conversion to a codified, non-ethnic religion is closer to the problems being considered here. Conversion as a reason for the disappearance of ritual is found mostly among so-called minorities, and it is often promoted by an identity as a disadvantaged people. Although I am not dealing with the literature on conversion, the problems and

1 See Barraud *et al.* (1994), Barraud and Platenkamp (1990), Iteanu (2005).

their possible solutions are comparable.[2] Another, related issue is the growing orthodoxy in communities that already belong to a codified religion, but that practice a synthesis of canonical and local ritual. Here, outside influences from authoritative religious centres and leaders may cause the discontinuance of the more local rituals.[3] But the question I am asking is most urgent in cases in which there is no obvious replacement for the system. This is the case for the Rmeet: a minority with a specific ritual system, which gives up part of it without conversion or strong outside pressure.

The discontinuance of ritual is rarely analysed in anthropology because it is usually seen in negative terms: certain things do not happen any more. This is supported by a tendency to stress the passive role of those who stop doing these things – they are often seen as succumbing to outside influence, or as simply falling victim to tedium.[4] Rarely is ceasing ritual considered in active terms, as a motivated decision and an act of cultural creativity. For this reason, the cessation of ritual lies in a dead centre as regards most theorizing. Anthropologists tend to fall into two categories with respect to ritual. Those who are interested in understanding it stress its fundamental importance and are hard pressed to account for its disappearance; they tend to focus on the persistence of ritual in either form or meaning, against the odds of historical change (Højbjerg 2004, Platenkamp 1992). Others, less interested in ritual meaning, integrate it rather into general trends of transformation in a given society, often conceptualized in terms of globalization, culture change or modernization. These studies engage much less in an analysis of the internal coherence of meaning systems. The two positions represent a more abstract problem: if a system of rituals and representations is meaningful, largely coherent and essential for the maintenance of the society, how could it be stopped or shrink without society and meaning systems themselves falling apart? And if, on the other hand, religion and ritual are nothing but cognitive form and tradition without coherent meaning attached to their detail, why is there any attention to detail among practitioners, and what does the obvious integration of relations and ideas rest on?

2. *Secularization or not?*

The following model attempts to unify these contrary approaches to ritual – respectively meaning-centred and transformative. Let us start with the second, which stresses transformation over meaning. With regard to the relationship between the socialist Laotian government and Buddhism, Grant Evans (1998a) speaks of 'secularist fundamentalism'. Indeed theories of secularization come to mind when addressing the present issue. But can they be extended to the type of ritual systems being discussed here? After all, they

2 See, for example, Horton (1971), Cusack (1996).

3 For a general discussion, see Shaw and Stewart (1994).

4 See, for example, Kroeber (1948:403).

are designed to deal with the dwindling influence of codified, non-ethnic religions on social life. The phrase 'non-ethnic, codified religions' serves a mostly heuristic purpose. It covers the traditions of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and Hinduism, often called 'world religions' due to their crossing of national and ethnic boundaries. Of course, the term provokes objections – Judaism has a strong element of ethnicity – but it mainly serves to differentiate these religions from less codified systems of rituals and representations that are bound up with a specific ethnic identity. In Mainland Southeast Asia, for example, the boundary runs between Buddhism, Christianity and Islam on the one hand and the cosmologies of many minority groups on the other. 'Animism' is often used for the latter, but this term denotes rather a specific difference shared by various belief and ritual systems from the non-ethnic religions, and not much else.

Beyond this difference, it is difficult to discern the characteristics of such systems that are not defined only in negative terms. For the Rmeet and other groups in the region, a few points can be highlighted. Each of them can be found alone in some communities or aspects of non-ethnic religions. Ethnic, localized systems often lack written accounts of ritual practices and beliefs. Sometimes, written texts are used for recital during rituals or as ritual objects, though they do not describe the rituals themselves.[5] This aspect supports change: older versions disappear without a trace, as soon as the actual witnesses have died.

Another important similarity is that these ritual systems are not only associated with metaphysics, but with a 'way of life', covering, for example, types of social relations, economic practices, notions of organization and leadership that differ from the state. This connecting of ritual or 'religion' with everyday practice is done by both practitioners and outsiders. A well-known example is the *Akha zang*, the system of rules of behaviour and rituals associated with Akha identity (Kammerer 1990, Tooker 1992). Even when strong links and similarities with neighbouring ritual systems are recognized, the systems are, so to say, 'ethnicized' and integrated into the identity of a society. Other than the subjects of secularization theory, the 'religions' in minority scenarios are often bounded by cultural identity on the outside, while not being functionally differentiated from other aspects of social life on the inside. Among the Rmeet, ritual roles are tied up with kinship degrees, which themselves are determined by marriage rules. Therefore we can speak of socio-cosmic societies, with a tight integration between social and cosmological relations.[6]

But functional differentiation is crucial to the processes that secularization theories describe. Even when formulated in general terms, like 'disenchantment of the world', these theories are geared to describing the replacement of codified and institutionalized religions by secularist ideologies and practices. This is often thought to be a modern phenomenon. Yet, repudiation of ritual is not unique to modernity, but can be found in

5 See, for example, Holm (2003), Müller and Obi (1996).

6 See Barraud and Platenkamp (1990), Barraud *et al.* (1994).

other societies and historical periods as well. It is clear that these repudiations are based on processes which probably cannot be compared with what secularization theories describe (Bell 1997:255). Secularization under conditions of functional differentiation means that fields like politics, economics, education and medicine develop institutions and terminologies independent of the encompassing cosmology that is provided by religion (Dobbelaere 2002). Even if these subsystems relate in their entirety to religion – for example, when nation-states seek metaphysical legitimation – they are themselves structured by principles that do not immediately relate to some cosmic whole. In this way, religion loses its function as embracing umbrella structuring the entire society and cosmology and is increasingly restricted to a specific section of social life. In the socio-cosmic system found among the Rmeet and others, this is not the case.

The necessity of functional differentiation for secularization theory highlights another difference with the present problem – ethnic diversity. This issue plays a role in all states with regional differences in ritual, even when these rituals are accounted for in terms of a nation-wide religion. This differentiation is not functional; ritual systems of diverse groups may relate to each other, but not in the sense of a functional unity on a higher level. Here, the shift from ritual to secular practices is not only a shift from one functional subsystem to another, but also from local practices to (supra-)national ones, from 'old tradition' to (seemingly) universal solutions.

Still we can learn about conditions for the discontinuance of rituals from secularization theory. As Peter L. Berger has pointed out, in modern societies functional differentiation was preceded by cosmological differentiation.[7] European secularization has its roots not only in a general trend towards rationalization, but also in the Christian religion itself. Christianity established concepts of the distinction between the sacred and the world: 'the autonomy of the secular "world" was given a t h e o l o g i c a l legitimation' (Berger 1967:124; original emphasis). If we look for secularization in other societies, we may find similar distinctions, but we have to remember that there is no one single universal understanding of the 'secular', while 'religion' is contingent. When the realm of the sacred is differentiated from the world, the notion of 'world' is just as specific as 'the sacred'. Therefore, it is the overall cosmological system that initiates the changes that finally reduce its influence and dissolve it. The weakening of religious ideas does not originate outside the cosmological order and then intrudes upon it, as a rationalist, eighteenth-century ideology would have it. As Berger argues, the separation of religion and non-religion is a product of the encompassing religious ideology itself.

7 Berger (1967), quoted in Dobbelaere (2002:36–39)

3. *Conditions of discontinuance*

Rituals and social relations form a system in socio-cosmic societies. Elements of this system can only be changed or removed in terms of the system. This ties in with the understanding of ritual, structure and process outlined above. Socio-cosmic systems are not essentially repetitive or rigidly traditional. In fact, they have to accommodate an almost infinite variety of specific cases, in particular where social relations are concerned. Each performance of a ritual varies with the specifics of the situation and the relations involved, even when the performers identify it as a repetition of a 'traditional' pattern. This is mirrored in the extensive discussions on the correct way of doing things that accompany Rmeet rituals. The potential for change emerges from the cosmology itself because the terms of the cosmological system demand variation. This variation is pushed to its limits when rituals are changed or discontinued. Still, changes must be performed and explained as part of the system. Even irreversible discontinuances, therefore, are, at the moment when they are instigated, part of the reproductive pattern that they are supposed to end.

A classic example is Marshall Sahlins' analysis of the abolition of the *tapu* system in Hawaii, early in the nineteenth century (1981, 1985). In 1819, about forty years after the first – and, for James Cook, fatal – encounter with Europeans, and before the arrival of missionaries proper, the Hawaiian court put an end to the system of ritual and taboos in favour of Christianity. Sahlins explains this as a political calculus made in terms of cosmological power. The decision made sense in the existing system of socio-cosmic representations, although it finally led to its disappearance. This was only possible because ideas about and representations of Europeans were integrated into the system. It was thus not the active influence of Europeans themselves that led to the abolition, but the meaning that was attributed to them by the Hawaiians, especially their ruling class. Rulers competed for Europeans items and identities, but these were couched in terms of spiritual power. Sahlins describes the process as 'an extension from ritual to practical purposes' (1985:142). This may sound like a major upheaval, a shift from ritual imagination to pragmatic utilitarianism, from structure to agency. But the rift is not as deep as it seems from the point of view of functionally differentiated societies like ours: ritual always has practical purposes, and it is only the conception of ritual as practical and useful that opens it up to uses in the entire field of social reproduction, both 'traditional' and 'creative'. There is no substantial break in Sahlins' statement – the extension he mentions is rather easy.

On these grounds, the following case studies allow the identification of several modes or conditions for the diminution and discontinuance of rituals. Not all possibilities are covered here; I focus on those cases in which the actors locate the intention to give up rituals with themselves, not with some outside force.

4. *The Rmeet, history, and the state*

Data on the Rmeet were collected in both rural and suburban villages. The discontinuance and diminution of ritual is evident in both settings, although more so in the suburban one. Everywhere this is a phenomenon that is clearly perceived and reflected upon by the Rmeet themselves. The Lao term *loblang* is used for it, meaning 'to abolish', 'to do away with'; it is also used in official administrative discourse to describe the ending of 'unmodern' features of society, like illiteracy. The term is complemented by another one: *riid Rmeet* (Rmeet tradition), often employed to explain ritual by referring to the distinctiveness of the ethnicity.

The major sources on the past are the writings of Karl Gustav Izikowitz (1979, 1985, 2004) who conducted research among the Rmeet (whom he called Lamet) from 1937 to 1938. Compared to what I witnessed, he describes the ritual life of the Rmeet as more elaborate in some respects and less so in others. But historical reconstruction offers little for an understanding of how the Rmeet themselves perceive their history. Only their own accounts can elucidate the significance of the discontinuances within the meaning system of the rituals itself. The same is true for outside forces. Thus, when speaking about government policies, I do not refer to official documents but to the Rmeet's depiction of them.[8]

The Rmeet acknowledge both external and internal motivations for ritual change. The external ones are also stressed by scholars dealing with ritual change in Laos.[9] The Laotian state officially recognizes its multi-ethnic composition and grants each group the right to its own culture (Pholsena 2002). Yet, there is a certain pressure towards mainstream Buddhism or secularism, which was most explicit between the revolution in 1975 and the end of the 1980s. In this time, the expensive animal sacrifices among many highland groups were strongly discouraged by government agents, who came from both lowland Lao and highland minority backgrounds. A number of better educated people who worked with the administration – village and parish (*tasaeng*) headmen – went from village to village both to report the end of the war and to explain the new government's policy. Among these explanations were arguments against ritual, especially animal sacrifice. Although the government was firmly socialist in its early years, it seems that the campaign in highland villages did not employ ideological arguments of the 'religion is the opium of the people' type. It was rather pragmatic: rituals are expensive and destroy valuable livestock; instead of killing animals people should take medicine. An informant who was involved in the campaign explained that the government started it because of its awareness of people's poverty – it wished to give people a chance to decide for or against the sacrifices.

The campaign still had a political dimension. Today the Rmeet describe the former

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8 See Sprenger (2004).

9 See Evans (1998a, 2003), Goudineau (2000).

rulers as supporting and prescribing rituals. The old government, although actually that of the King of Laos, is strongly associated with the French colonial regime and the American influence during the Second Indochinese War. In these accounts, the French and Americans appear as the agents of ritual conservatism. In this way, the past and its foreign regimes are contrasted with the current one, usually with the latter being seen in a favourable light. But significantly, mostly the Rmeet do not see themselves as the passive subjects of historical change and government policies. One may assume that the positive attitude towards reform and the government that was evident in the statements I heard is a kind of defence mechanism against the foreign anthropologist. Yet, I have reason to believe that the positive position of many Rmeet is genuine – even though it is expressed in the form of official rhetoric. Most Rmeet I talked to do not stress their allegiance to the government when talking about ritual change, but rather their own choice. Only a few consider the government to be forbidding rituals, which, given the remoteness of many villages and the relative weakness of the administration in many highland areas, would have been an impossible task. But the government, from my informants' point of view, opened up new spaces for decision-making. Thus, the Rmeet were able to decide what from the 'old tradition' (*riid priim*) they would keep and what they would abandon. These decisions were sometimes made at the village level, sometimes at the level of individual households.

An example is the keeping of buffalo and pig skulls in the house after a sacrifice to the house spirit. In traditional households, these objects are kept on the site of the house spirit and have the effect of strengthening its presence – there is more protection by the spirit, but also more restrictions and taboos. In the mountain village of Takheung, all households except one throw the skulls away after the ritual, yet many households in neighbouring villages keep them. The discontinuance of this practice in Takheung seems to have been gradual, with one household after another deciding to give it up. By now, throwing away the skulls has become a part of the village's identity. This does not mean that change in general was always smooth, without conflict with the administration or power-holders and households within villages. Yet, besides the obvious use of government rhetoric, the discursive framework of the changes emphasises Rmeet agency and decision-making.

Nonetheless the discontinuance did not destroy the entire system. Skulls are removed in order to decrease taboos, not as demonstrations of disbelief. People do take house spirits into account, but handle their relationship with them differently. In fact, individual belief has little to do with the discontinuance of ritual. People often perform rituals even if they do not believe in the cosmology that they represent. On the other hand, people may cease holding rituals even hough they continue to believe in the beings these rituals are addressed to. Changes in personal attitude must be translated into communications before they can affect socially acknowledged practice. In their turn, these communications must be framed by the respective system, otherwise, attitudes and social life remain pretty much separate.

The second type of motivation for discontinuing rituals is more internal and derives from personal and reflected experience, though it still relates to the nation state. Compared to earlier times, the Rmeet today find themselves in close contact with various cultural traditions and ethnic groups. Migrations during the war, the following peace and the re-emergence of economic networks facilitated the experience of ethnic variety. Another important factor is army service: platoons in the army are multiethnic, a policy probably designed with an eye towards the ethnic politics of rebellion in Laos and neighbouring countries. Also, there are more multiethnic villages emerging along the trade routes, in the lowlands and near the towns, composed of migrants from various areas. The number of young people going to lowland or mixed villages for schooling has increased. The argument of the Rmeet regarding these changes goes like this: in earlier times, the Rmeet did not know about other ethnic groups, but now they have been around and watched them. They now see that others do not perform the rituals and do not observe the taboos the Rmeet know.

This argument mirrors the motivations and experience of the Rmeet, but it must be qualified. Certainly the channels through which interethnic contact is possible have multiplied. Still, the situation is gradually rather than absolutely different from the past. According to Izikowitz, the Rmeet were involved in labour migration and trade in the 1930s. Trade was more restricted than today and seldom seemed to have made people leave their villages for a prolonged period of time: the traders went to the villages, or close by, in order to buy rice, and then left. Although trading villages and the Rmeet co-existed in close vicinity, as in the Nam Tha river valley, there seems to have been little interaction.[10] Labour migration to Siam was more important, with numerous young Rmeet staying in this neighbouring country in order to acquire wealth. Izikowitz notes that the Upper Lamet, among whom migration was more frequent, have less strong rules (Izikowitz 1979:352) – an observation that supports the Rmeet interpretation of ritual change. But intercultural contact does not necessarily lead to the discontinuance of rituals; the point made by the Rmeet is valid in the current case, but it is not an inevitable development. In fact, there are hints that Rmeet shamanism originates from or was strongly influenced by Northern Thai ritual healing (Izikowitz 1979:23). There is thus an elaborate and frequently performed set of rituals that came from another group in fairly recent times; the Yuan settled in the Rmeet area for only a brief period in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The intensification of interethnic contacts may thus lead either to an elaboration or a discontinuance of rituals, depending on the perception of one's own and others' representations.

From the Rmeet point of view, both types of change imply comparison of one's own practices with others'. They conceive of their rituals and ideas as a way to understand and handle the world, not just as a marker of cultural identity. They therefore acknowledge that other people's practices are functional equivalents of their own. These

10 See Izikowitz (1979:310–311; 2004:63, 182).

functional equivalents emerge in the Rmeet's perception – they are not statements that the anthropologist makes about the universal functions of social systems (like 'all religions need to deal with death'). But the perception of functional equivalence forms a kind of relay by which outside features can be translated into the language of the system. There is thus a potential to conceive outside elements or systems as the functional equivalents of inside elements or sub-systems. This, although in need of more research, denotes the condition for the comparison of own and other practices.

The perception of such equivalence seems paradoxical, due to the dependence of elements on a system that generates relational meaning. In socio-cosmic societies, social reproduction depends on rituals that connect relations among the living to those with spirits, gods, the dead and other forces. Given this integration of social and cosmic relations, discontinuance not only affects relations with the metaphysical within the confines of institutions that are specialized on ritual – these discontinuances directly or indirectly concern the maintenance of social relations in general. The perception and practice of functional equivalence requires the isolation of elements from the system that gives meaning to them. Their relatedness is suspended for the needs of comparison. But in the event of reintegration, or of the integration of new elements as a result of the comparison, relations with the rest of the system have to be established. Therefore, the discontinuance of rituals indicates redefinitions of the concept of society and the categories of relations that are necessary to maintain it. It implies that other, new types of social relations are available that may, if not neatly replace, at least take on a number of the functions of the former ones. What comes to mind here are relations outside the socio-cosmic society, such as trade, employment, state administration, non-ethnic religion. But it would be misleading to conclude that the closed system of socio-cosmic relations now opens itself up to the wider world. Socio-cosmic systems, like all meaning systems, are always closed. Only meaning determined by the system can produce meaning, even when it integrates outside influences. Insofar as new relations replace older ones, they become part of this closed system; whatever their nature outside of it, they have to be translated or transformed at the boundaries of the system in order to become effective within it. This means that, although the persons or institutions involved are situated on the outside, their involvement in the form of acts and communications is only relevant insofar as they are operationalized by the system. This is mirrored in Rmeet statements that the altering of their rituals was inspired, but not implemented, by outside forces.

The inside-outside relationship can also be formulated in terms of a system-environment relationship. Systems depend on their environment, but they are themselves marked off by specific types of relations between their elements. Social systems consist of communications or social relations. Yet, the environment can only have an effect upon the workings of the system if the system in question is able to produce a system-specific response to the environmental input.[11]

[11] See Luhmann (1984:Chapter 1, especially p. 69).

5. *Healing and efficiency*

How, then, are functional equivalents conceived? What makes comparison possible in local discourse and practice? The practical side of ritual creates important inroads for non-ritual types of action. In my material, the element of power that is crucial for Sahlins' analysis retreats, and the element of efficiency steps to the fore. One must differentiate here between rationality and rationalism. Rationality, in the sense of Weber's *Zweckrationalität* (instrumentally rational action), can be defined as the effort to optimize means-end relations: to design and employ means to come to certain ends in the most efficient manner. It must be stressed that, in the sense I use 'efficiancy' here, it has nothing to do with scientific empiricism, as is often assumed. But instrumentally rational action becomes a central value in modern ideology, pairing up with the rejection of metaphysics and an exclusive positivism to form rationalism.

But just because rational efficiency is central to modern ideology – although not the organizing principle of social structure (Luhmann 1994:69) – this does not mean that efficiency is unimportant in non-modern societies and their rituals.[12] Among the Rmeet, at least, there is a difference between rituals and actions with externally measurable, differentiated efficiency, and those with non-measurable, absolute efficiency. The latter concerns rituals which reproduce certain crucial relationships like annual sacrifices to village spirits, weddings and funerals. There is no measure to describe them as more or less efficient, as their performance is seen as necessary and sufficient to create or maintain the relationships involved. The effect is inherent in their performance. Therefore, they cannot be replaced by more efficient practices.

But other rituals do have an external measure for efficiency. Healing rituals which may fail or succeed are one example.[13] Their effect is, for the Rmeet, not completely part of the ritual. This type of efficiency, that can be measured against events external to the ritual, creates the possibility for practices from outside the system to influence it.

The role of efficiency as a mode of functional equivalence is highlighted in the reduction in sacrifices when medical services become available. Modern pharmaceuticals are on sale in the mountain villages, but often there are no village health workers or other specialists to supervise their proper use. Illness is frequently treated by ritual, usually consisting of a performance by a shaman and a sacrifice. Shamans differ from lay healers who know healing formulas or herbal medicine by their relationship to spirit familiars. This relationship, along with the knowledge of lengthy chants, is usually acquired through initiation. The chants are sung in a largely incomprehensible idiom identified as a lowland language or Lao; it may be a corrupt form of Buddhist or Yuan origin.[14] The

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12 Despite what Whitehouse (2004:3–4) sugests.

13 Of course, this is not a universal distinction. There are societies in which weddings may cause infertility if they are performed incorrectly; it is also conceivable that healing rituals to expel spirits are always considered effective, the ongoing disease being covered by a different explanation.

14 See Izikowitz (1979:252), Tambiah (1970:323–324).

largest sacrifices involve buffaloes, occasions on which the sick person and his family are integrated into a socio-cosmic whole that consists of ancestors, relatives and spirits. This integration brings about the healing (Sprenger in press a).

Yet the Rmeet are equally ready to accept medical services, which are often considered more effective. In Hangdeun, a suburban village in Bokaeo Province, hospitals are only a few minutes away by car, and people often prefer them to sacrifices. Medical cures are not associated with socio-cosmic wholeness; in fact, the Rmeet are usually not able to explain the basics of modern medicine, including germ theory or pharmacy. Their belief in the efficiency of medicine derives partly from experience, and partly from a general sense of the superiority of technological advance, sophisticated organization and the means of the modern state. Still, the efficiency of medicine does not itself eradicate the necessity for a ritual. After all, efficiency is not a cosmology itself, but is situated within one. Both rural and suburban Rmeet differentiate between illnesses caused by spirits and those called *beñad*, a category that comprises what we may call naturally caused diseases. Even in a single case, both medicine and ritual may be required to fight all causes of the illness, spiritual as well as natural ones. There is no conflict of cosmologies involved here – a concept of externally measurable efficiency is part of the cosmology that shapes the rituals, and as such it is applied to modern medicine.

Yet, there is an important difference between the two systems involved. As mentioned earlier, measurable efficiency is a central value in modern societies, not just one possible mode of action. This, under conditions of functional differentiation, creates a medical system with exclusive claims to heal. But in the Rmeet system, the idea of efficiency and its related practices are integrated differently. There is a measure of efficiency regarding healing rituals or those that promote human fertility, and many are considered successful: the sick do better, women do become pregnant after rituals. These are fields where rituals and outside practices compete in terms of the system itself. But this inroad or form of functional equivalence, here denoted as 'measurable efficiancy', is limited, and efficiency cannot claim sole validity regarding the entire system, as it does in regard to 'rationalist' medicine.

Efficiency as part of the system also contributes to the acquisition of ritual. When shamanism was allegedly learned from the Yuan early in the twentieth century, it was probably considered to be more efficient than earlier local rituals. Still, it was not introduced simply by copying: today, shamanism is not only regarded as a Rmeet tradition, its practices are more often than not well integrated with the rest of the ritual system. The ritual use of colonial silver coins, wrist-tying and the smearing of shins with sacrificial blood all play major roles in both shamanistic and non-shamanistic rituals. New techniques therefore only became accepted as part of the existing system of ideas and practices.

6. *Rejecting lightning*

The reduction in healing rituals after the arrival of medical care was not itself a ritual act. But the discontinuance of rituals sometimes takes a more obviously active and ritualized form. I shall focus on two examples, both stressing the creativity of the Rmeet themselves, though relating to external representations. The first concerns the invention of a much shorter and smaller scale ritual, catalyzed by government secularism; the second exemplifies the gradual diminution and marginalization of ritual, derived from a general pattern in Mainland Southeast Asia.

The first example is the discontinuance of buffalo sacrifices for lightning spirits. When lightning struck a house or a field, a household that follows 'old custom' has to perform a series of rituals. First, the members of the household visit the site of the strike, mostly one of the few tall trees left after clearing a rice field, where they sacrifice a white chicken on a rack. After this, the household has to observe a lengthy taboo period of up to a year that virtually isolates it from the rest of the community. Its members are not allowed to speak to outsiders, nor partake in their rituals. There are also a number of restrictions on behaviour, everyday activities and food. During this period, the household 'has' a lightning, that is, a spirit identified with an ancestor, its coming being seen as punishment for some misdeed. The spirit becomes a guest of the household, making it dangerous. In particular, its members can not talk to people in whose houses there has recently been violent death or suicide. Both spirits represent dangerous, but opposing types of the dead, one a bad death, the other a proper ancestor who became angry; their conflict would bring fresh death to the households. The end of the taboo period is reached either after a year or at the beginning of the new agricultural year in spring, when the household performs a large ritual, spanning three days. At its centre is the sacrifice of a white buffalo, a pig and a chicken. Buffaloes are highly prized animals which are almost exclusively killed in rituals. A sacrifice to a lightning spirit, having much less urgency and immediate effect than the healing sacrifice or payments of buffaloes as bride-price, is seen as a major expenditure.

Some Rmeet households and villages responded willingly when the government demanded the abolition of large-scale sacrifices. The changes were introduced over a long period, some houses starting in the 1970s, others only in recent years. Today, the village of Takheung and a number of houses in other villages practice a very much abbreviated version of the ritual. When lightning strikes, the village headman writes a letter, using the official rhetoric of the socialist state, announcing that the 'rules of the old society and the affairs of the sky spirits will not be respected any more'. The accompanying ritual is performed after one or two months. A crowd of young men and women, significantly not restricted to the afflicted house, gathers at the site of the strike. The house father brings along a dish with banana leaf rolls and an egg for the lightning spirit. After the headman has read the letter, he places it on the burned tree, and everybody dances around the site in lowland Lao *lamwong* style. Back at the village, only a pig is killed for

the house spirit, and there is some drinking and singing. Afterwards, some houses may observe some taboos – in particular avoiding other people's rituals – but they are less strict, taboo periods are shorter than before, and at their close only a pig is sacrificed.

As the incomplete discontinuance of the ritual demonstrates, the relationships it reproduced are still thought to exist. After all, lightning is understood to be an enraged ancestor; completely disregarding it would risk the protective relationship between the dead and the living. But it is not only the persistence of the ritual that demonstrates the enduring nature of the socio-cosmic system. The diminution is only possible through the ritualization of an originally non-ritual object. The letter that denounces the ritual signals secularism and politically conceived rationalism, in form – as a written document – content and style. But it is still ineffective. It is only through its use in a ritual modelled upon the older practice that the text alters the ritual system. The model is the initial chicken sacrifice made to the lightning immediately after the strike is discovered. Yet, instead of a rack with offerings, the letter is left on the tree. The existence of the lightning as a spirit is not denied, but a superior force is invoked, represented by the letter, itself a symbol of the power of the new state. The socialist government is linked to the sphere of ritual as was – in hindsight, at least – the royal government. The earlier rulers supported ritual, but the new ones do not, the Rmeet argue. In this way, a place is claimed for the state in the ritual system.

The relationship between the living and the dead, fundamental to Rmeet social reproduction, is not called into question. Only one specific representation of it is limited in its influence. There is no other way but ritual of relating to the ancestors; but changing the ritual reshapes the relationship. The continuation of the ritual allows repetition, while its diminution is irreversible: both varieties appear within the confines of a single system of meaning and value. An anecdote from Takheung illustrates this point. During an interview, a householder in his late twenties said that it was observing other groups that had led to the diminution in lightning rituals. A few minutes later he mentioned, without voicing doubt, that the hide of such a spirit had been discovered in a neighbouring village; it resembled that of a goat.

Again, the active role of the state is contested: while some people, including the headman of Takheung, said that the new ritual and the use of the letters had been invented by the Rmeet themselves, others claimed that they had been adopted at the instigation of the government. It seems that the impulse to abridge the ritual originated with the state, yet it acquired its specific form only through the creativity of some Rmeet leaders. This allows personal choices with regard to whose agency is deemed to be decisive. In any case, the state is accepted as a higher level in the value hierarchy of the ritual ideology. As such, this is also a way to identify functional equivalence.

7. *Displacing the ancestors*

The second case of an active, ritualized form of diminution concerns the spatialization of ritual. It also touches upon another aspect of discontinuance that, although not prominently so, permeates the entire process; therefore I discuss it first. This is the self-description of the ethnic ritual system. As already noted, these systems do not differentiate themselves from other systems on the basis of functional specialization, but they usually relate to the entirety of existence. Therefore, their forms of self-description are different from those of the sub-systems of modern society. The perception of functional equivalence with regard to certain elements and sub-systems of the socio-cosmic system is already self-referential. More engrained in practice are references to the inside-outside dichotomy in rituals, common in Southeast Asian societies, such as the construction of certain kin degrees as outsiders, or the ritual integration of foreign goods or unsocialized spirits.[15]

Members of these societies also use ideas of ethnic and cultural identity that encompass the entire society to describe the difference. 'Because it is our custom (and different from our neighbours')' is the paradigmatic and usual explanation and the most explicit form of reflexivity. These differences depend on how the others are defined – whether they contain immediate neighbours, the state or foreigners from other countries. Definitions of the other have changed over history, and it is very likely that one or another form of making a cultural difference has always been an element of these systems, especially in the dense patterns of ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia. The relationship between the system and its environment always implies specific definitions of system and environment. The socialist state provides a different environment than the royal government did, and this is immediately reflected in the production of meaning within the system.

How does awareness of the distinctiveness of the system as part of the system itself contribute to its change? One point is the seemingly paradoxical case of ethnic identity: its development, at least in a modern setting, may go along with the destruction of features that partially make up this identity. When a group's members enter a new arena for ethnic identity, whether created by nation-states, tourism or developers, they often find it necessary to present their specificity in a censored or reduced manner. As Evans (1998b) and Dru Gladney (1994) have observed, minorities are allowed to dance and dress colourfully, but not to practice what might be harmful or irrational, like destroying valuable livestock in bloody sacrifices. Giving up rituals may thus be considered the price for maintaining distinctiveness in the context of minority/majority identification. But the same dynamic that leads to the discontinuance of rituals may also fuel the revitalization and continuation of traditions in other areas of society.

Another aspect of this development is that the perception of rituals and taboos as a

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15 See Sprenger (in press b), Luhmann (1984: 64).

pragmatic necessity dictated by the world order is complemented increasingly by a concept of 'tradition' as a marker of ethnic difference. One may even say that the 'outsourcing' of the pragmatic aims of certain rituals and the recognition of efficiency outside the system go hand in hand with an intensification of ethnic identity – the reflexive elements of the system.

The following and final case study highlights this point, but it also shows how models that are used in a repetitive practice of ritual can likewise be used in an irreversible process. It comes from Hangdeun, a migrant village close to the provincial capital, Houeisai, and it concerns the relationship of the ancestors to space. Ancestral spirits reside in two different forms in the house: as 'house spirits', the spirits of a line of male ancestors with their wives, and as the spirits of lightning. The spirits are located in a specific place inside the house, called *sekä ña* (the taboo of the house). The numerous restrictions that must be observed for them vary from village to village. In some villages one may not make loud noises in the house; strangers may not enter the central room; one must leave the building through the same door one used to enter it; during taboo periods, roasting chilli or steaming rice is not allowed; and so on.

One of the most thoroughgoing taboos concerns birth, although again there are significant differences between villages. In Takheung it is the house spirit who demands the restrictions, while in Sepriim and those houses in Hangdeun that originate from there, they are only observed by houses who 'have' a spirit of lightning. Other than in Takheung, the rituals for the latter do not expel it entirely from the house; it has be to treated separately on all major ritual occasions as long as the house as a building exists. However, the taboos are similar in both cases. For ten days after a woman has given birth, she and the newborn child are not allowed to enter the house. They usually stay between the house posts beneath it, where a bedstead is set up, or in a shack belonging to the house. The newborn baby is gradually integrated into the house by both ritual and care, so its *klpu*[16] will become part of the pool of *klpu* that is protected by the house spirit. Before that, the *klpu* roams around and is in constant danger. A number of taboos prevent it from leaving: the father is not allowed to hunt because the child's *klpu* would accompany him and get ill from the sound of gunshots. No knots should be tied in the forest because that would tie up the *klpu* as well; instead, knots are tied into the sheets where the baby lies. All these taboos acknowledge the uncertain position of the child's *klpu* in the socio-cosmic space defined by the inside and outside of the house.

Yet many people feel that the demands the spirits make are bothersome and they try to diminish their influence in their everyday lives. The throwing away of skulls after sacrifices has already been mentioned. Another method is relocating the spirit. After rebuilding their houses and replacing wooden structures with stone ones, many Hang-

16 *Klpu* is an immaterial and personalized aspect of all human beings; it sees the future in dreams, may leave the body and thereby cause illness, and turns into the spirit of the dead after death. Binding *klpu* to the body, for example by wrist-tying, is a major objective of many rituals (Sprenger 2006).

deun villagers moved their 'taboo of the house' to the kitchen, called the 'small house', which is often a separate structure, sometimes within a short distance of the main building or linked to it by a door. In most cases, there is a clear architectural distinction: kitchen houses are made of bamboo, while the main building is made of wood or stone. Relocation has a similar effect as throwing away skulls: the house spirit is still present, but its power does not reinforce the taboos within the house. But now the house may be freely visited by guests who may 'play' (that is, party and drink) there. A frequently given reason for this is that the owners would be 'ashamed' of visits by Lao during spirit sacrifices, which is much more frequent in Hangdeun than in Takheung. Especially the girls would despise the sight of the blood-stained 'house taboo'. In this way, the maintenance of cultural identity in front of outsiders leads to change and 'censoring'.

But for those households in Hangdeun that have 'lightning', relocation sets off another process. If a woman does not give birth in hospital, she will also not do it within the house, because the spirit of lightning will be angered by the blood. But because of the extended presence of the spirits, she cannot give birth in the kitchen either. Retreating under the house is equally impossible, as most buildings in Hangdeun are low or even built directly on the ground. This necessitates the building of a bamboo hut near the house, one that is only maintained for the duration of the birth taboos.

This is a rather special case, but it makes visible the general conception that the removal of the spirits represents their marginalization. It is not simply an exchange of positions: the kitchen is an important site of transition, of mediation between the inside of the house, which is governed by taboos and the ancestors, and the outside of foreigners and alien spirits. But in the new arrangement, the kitchen is not a zone where the rules of the house spirit can be ignored. Therefore giving birth necessitates a further extension of the margin into a space away from the spirit. This marginalization is considered an irreversible shift in the practice of ritual among the Rmeet.

Yet, similar procedures can be found in both Rmeet and lowland Lao rituals. There is a pattern of centre-margin relations that may be used for both repeated and irreversible events in the ritual system. Among the Rmeet, this relationship is played out in the rituals for the village spirit. Like the house spirit, this spirit is a composite, this time of all the house spirits and the sky and earth spirits. During its actualization at the annual sacrifices, the centre and the margin of the village are connected. The spirit is addressed in two forms, one located in the village centre, in a ritual shack called a *cuông*, the other on the village boundary, in a particular tree or rock. The spirits at these two locations have different names, but are either identified with each other or considered to be related. What is important is that the spirit on the outskirts is integrated into the village during the ritual, but expelled and confined to the border again by its end. Without the shift in position, the spirit would become dangerous: hungry and demanding without a ritual, but equally bringing death and illness if kept within the village after it.

Similar shifts can be found among the Lao. After building a new house, the spirits in the ground who own the site must be ritually removed to its margins (Platenkamp

2004). Again, the power of the spirits is weakened and their influence no longer affects the house members. Unlike the Rmeet house and village spirits, these spirits are not representations of social units – like patrilines – but exist independently of humans. Yet the process of weakening through marginalization is comparable: the relationship with the spirit is translated into spatial arrangements, with a focus on centre-margin distinctions.

The existence of this pattern in several ethnic settings makes it likely that it stems from a more general concept of spaces and spirits, that is shared by numerous groups in Mainland Southeast Asia. The 'galactic polities' of the past were built on comparable notions of centre and margin which are often articulated in terms of the spirits of various encompassed domains (Tambiah 1985b, Tanabe 1988). Deborah Tooker (1996) has demonstrated how these models work on several levels of social organization, such as the village and the house, even in groups without large polities. As these concepts have an important function in relating different communities and spiritual realms, they certainly worked as a communicative model between Mainland Southeast Asian groups. It can therefore be expected that the model, in its many variations, infuses the way spatial relations are conceived, including the mapping of socio-cosmic relations. In the Rmeet case this means that, although the Lao are the dominant ethnic group, the centre-margin model may not be a simple borrowing, but rather a general way in the region to communicate about social space across ethnic boundaries. In any case, the process of marginalization follows local conceptions of socio-cosmic order, even in contexts of modern influence.

Again, these models work as modes for the identification of functional equivalence, in this case both within a ritual system (the model is transferred from the village ritual to the house) and across its borders (similar processes are found in non-Rmeet ritual). The tool that makes discontinuance possible comes from the system itself. At the same time, as the shame felt in front of Lao visitors suggests, such revisions are made in the light of the differentiation of the system from its environment.

8. Conclusion

In order to make sense of rituals, one has to assume a degree of coherence to the representations that they consist of and that link them to other domains of culture and society. Even if their meaning and practice are debated, there has to be a set of terms and ideas that inform such debates. This implies that rituals are best understood as forming one of several systems or as being part of a system – systems of values and ideas, or even entire systems of social reproduction, including elements of social morphology beyond the immediate field of ritual. These systems are adaptive and productive at the same time, reacting to specific inputs and producing specific responses. Each performance of a

ritual has to adapt to the particular occasion. The same is true of the entire system when large-scale changes – economic, political, demographic or others – affect communities. Structure and process are only two manifestations of the same meaning-producing system.

The system/environment relationship is crucial for the way a ritual system works. The system itself is to a large extent defined by its relation to the outside, being shaped by the relay points at which outside forces are translated into the language of the system. These relays are themselves part of the system and reproduce or change its specific form. One important relay is the acknowledgement of functional equivalence of elements inside and outside of the system. This acknowledgement paradoxically demands ignoring the definition of elements through their relatedness, thus reifying these elements. Identifying functional equivalents reduces the complexity of the system, but it also makes it and its elements comparable. The Rmeet data suggest several ways to identify functional equivalence. One is the measuring of efficiency in rituals and medicine. Another is the juxtaposition of certain higher levels in the cosmology, as in the comparison of state power and ancestral power in the discontinuance of rituals for lightning. A third method uses general models for ritual process shared among neighbouring groups, being found in the centre-margin relations employed to marginalize house spirits. These models of ritual and social space are applied in irreversible processes to reduce spirit influence.

In this perspective, the discontinuance of ritual is an act of cultural creativity that can be described in the terms of the ritual system itself. Revitalizations at a later stage notwithstanding, discontinuance is conceived as irreversible, apart from the repeated events of 'traditional' ritual. At the same time, the discontinuance of particular rituals does not necessarily imply the disappearance of entire ritual systems,[17] nor is it a reliable indicator regarding personally held beliefs. Ritual is a structured means of communication within communities and should be understood independently from individual attitudes.

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17 But see the Hawaiian case.

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