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**THE KHMER WITCH PROJECT:
DEMONIZING THE KHMER BY
KHMERIZING A DEMON**



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THE KHMER WITCH PROJECT: DEMONIZING THE KHMER BY KHMERIZING A DEMON*

ABSTRACT This paper outlines an anthropological reading of Thai ghost films and their uncanny protagonists as a dialectic synthesizing ethnographic material with film analysis in an attempt to operationalize the premises of the ‘ontological’ and ‘spectral turns’. The paper is the first systematic study of *Phi Krasue*—one of Thailand’s most iconic uncanny beings—and its cinematic and vernacular ghostly images. It grew out of an attempt to make sense of local Khmer-speaking interlocutors’ acceptance and reproduction of an idiosyncratic origin myth that locates the origin of *Phi Krasue* in Angkorian Khmer culture. Based on Mary Douglas’ and Julia Kristeva’s theories the paper identifies abjection and its essential ambiguity as the logical principle structuring imaginations of *Phi Krasue* in vernacular and cinematic contexts. I argue that the reading of a ghost film’s social message depends on spectators’ embodiment of vernacular ghostlore and thus on an implicit knowledge of the cultural semantics Thailand’s *phi* manifest. However, this paper offers not only a structural explanation for the self-evidence of *Phi Krasue*’s origin in Angkorian Khmer culture, but also for the Khmer-magic link as the most important socio-cultural stereotype characterizing the category ‘Khmer’ in Thailand’s contemporary popular culture. Finally, the paper identifies ‘filthiness’ as the social idiom used to explicate abjection as the logical principle structuring processes of ‘self-formation’ in contemporary Thailand.

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INTRODUCTION

“The process of generating a language and set of institutions for constructing locations and populations as dirty or clean did not simply eliminate traditional notions of filth; it amalgamated these ideas, putting them to new uses.” (W. Cohen 2005, xviii)

In their edited volume *Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia* German anthropologists Kirsten Endres and Andrea Lauser argue for the eminently spirited character of contemporary Southeast Asian societies (Endres and Lauser 2011). Following Rosalind Morris (2000) Alexander Horstmann adds that “mediation through new media technologies” is essential to bring about the contemporary socio-cultural configurations Endres and Lauser call

“spirited modernities (Endres and Lauser 2011, 5; Horstmann 2011, 148)”. While the heuristic value of framing the multiple socio-cultural configurations of contemporary Thailand under the encompassing label of ‘modernity’ is debatable (P. A. Jackson 2008, 2014; Kasian 2000, 10-11; Pattana 2010; Taylor 2007), a paradigmatically modern medium—ghost film—may indeed help us to grasp their eminently spirited character (A. A. Johnson 2013; Meyer 2003, 202).

“[T]he current generation of Thai horror films contains powerful ethnographic material with which one can rethink not only the now classic issue in the sociology of religion of the persistence of magic and spirits in an age of post- or late-modernity, but also “the subtle and complex interconnection among everyday forms of relatedness in the present, memories of the past, and the wid-

er [historical and] political context in which they occur (Carsten 2007: 1).” (Pattana 2011, 202)

*Phi*¹ constitute the major category of uncanny protagonists featured in Thai ghost films. *Phi* is an essential but highly relational and contextual cultural concept that cannot be translated unambiguously (Stanlaw and Yoddumnern 1985, 142). As a ‘thick category’ it continues to challenge anthropologists trying to decipher the symbolism of its various manifestations. Pattana Kitiarsa suggests translating *phi* with the well-known term ‘ghost’ as it “specifically implies vernacular perceptions of ghostly presence and uncanny haunting” (Pattana 2011, 203). I follow Pattana’s lead in this paper to identify representations of *phi* as ‘ghostly images’ on the basis of their uncanniness without implying any moral judgment that differentiates categorically between ‘bad’ *phi* and ‘good’ *thevada* (Rajadhon 1954, 153; Tambiah 1970, 59; Van Esterik 1982, 2). I use the adjective ‘ghostly’ here as a referent to the category *phi* and to bypass more problematic categories like ‘spiritual’ or ‘supernatural’, which reproduce the logical premises of modernist rationalism and distort the logic of folk epistemology (Levy et al. 1996; Van Esterik 1982; White 2003).

Simultaneously, I draw a methodological boundary between ‘uncanny beings’ and ‘ghostly images’ in order to account for the ontological difference between encounters with *phi* in ‘real life’ and their discursive representations in popular media and beyond. With the term ‘uncanny being’ I thus intend to meet the demands of the ‘ontological turn’ (Paleček and Risjord 2013) and take ‘things’ encountered in the field ‘seriously’ without reducing them to our modern way of thinking by denying their ‘reality’ and exclusively identifying them as symbols or representations of something else (GDAT 2010; cited in Ladwig 2011, 22-23). In contrast to ‘uncanny being’ the category ‘ghostly image’ is inspired by the premises of the ‘spectral turn’ and thus explicitly designed to address the symbolic and representational dimension of *phi* in popular culture and discourse, where “ghostly manifestations are always constructions embedded within specific historical contexts and invoked for more or less explicit political purposes” (Weinstock 2004, 8).

This distinction between ontology and metaphor is purely methodological and I am aware that it is haunted by the same scientific rationalism that impedes an emic understanding of the category *phi* (Bräunlein 2013, 139). However, both categories may help us to frame how uncanny encounters with *phi* are always simultaneously ontological and metaphorical while drawing our attention to the limits of an analytic language still bound by the logical premises of Cartesian dualism (Scheper-Hughes

and Lock 1987, 10-12). Given their ontological status in the various configurations of contemporary Thai society, an analysis of *phi* has to acknowledge the dialectic of ‘uncanny being’ and ‘ghostly image’ that shapes a *phi*’s contextual meaning in accordance with the practical requirements of a given speech event.²

The following analysis is an attempt to decipher the meaning of a *phi* in a particular speech event dialectically. My approach in this paper is guided by the premises of a ‘dialectical structuralism’ and tries to account for the particularity of historical contexts and the meaningful actions of cultural agents in processes of social change (Hodder 1982; Sahlins 1985; Tilley 1982). I thus try to explain why a particular (ghostly) symbol is used in a particular historical context and how it is related to this context’s practical requirements.

PHI KRASUE

Usually depicted as a woman’s flying head with drawn out and bloody entrails dangling beneath it, *Phi Krasue* is one of the most iconic of Thailand’s *phi*. Given the commonality of encounters with this uncanny being in ‘real life’³ and the continuous presence of its ghostly images in popular cultural media it is remarkable that there is very little research investigating this specific phenomenon. In a recent overview of Thailand’s *phi* So Phlanoi describes the uncanny phenomenon in the following way:

“Phi Krasue has many regional names but usual belief portrays it as a woman that likes to possess other women. It likes to eat ‘dirty’ or ‘filthy’ things and is characterized by its appearance as a pulsating ball of light. Phi Krasue emits this light during its nightly search for food. Especially rural villagers believe in the existence of this phi. If they see a large and flashing green light they will immediately think it is Phi Krasue. Villagers say that it moves around as a head with liver, kidneys and some other entrails attached to it. Whenever someone gives birth Phi Krasue will smell the blood and rush to the place to eat of the woman giving birth or the newborn baby until its victim

² Ludwig Wittgenstein introduces the term ‘language game’ to address the contextuality of meaning, linking meaning making to the practical requirements of a given speech event (Wittgenstein 1984, cited in Rehbein 2013, 124-27). Elaborating on the late Wittgenstein one may thus identify any socially meaningful practice as a contextualized speech event (Rehbein 2013, 124-25).

³ While outside of Thailand this iconic Southeast Asian ‘ghost’ may be known purely by its filmic incarnations, it is important to keep in mind that in Thailand *Phi Krasue*’s existence is not limited to the fictitious and metaphorical in film, novels and comic books but that it is frequently encountered in ‘real life’ too.

¹ The transliteration of Thai words is based on the Rachabanditsathan system.

wastes away. Thus there is the custom to place thorny Jujube⁴ branches underneath the house, especially in the corners used to defecate, for Phi Krasue fears that its entrails will get caught up in the thorny branches. Phi Krasue is rather an old woman than a young maiden and besides raw and stinking food it also likes to eat human faeces. This is the reason why it is frequently encountered near public toilets.” (So 2009, 41-43, my translation).



Figure 1. Krasue Sao's movie poster (dir. S. Naowarat, 1973)

Despite the book's title, *Tamnan Phi Thai* (Legends of Thailand's Phi), which indicates that the legends of Thailand's phi will be revealed, So's account neither mentions *Phi Krasue*'s historical origin nor retells its origin myth. The same is true of *Krasue Sao* (Naowarat 1973),⁵ arguably the first Thai ghost film to feature *Phi Krasue* as a major protagonist, and all subsequent Thai films featuring this ghostly image made in the 20th century. Since ghost films have largely replaced orally transmitted ghostlore as the major site for the reproduction of ghostly images, they represent essential contexts for the analysis of a phi's contemporary meanings. Thereby, one has to keep in mind that mainstream cinematic ghostly images are structured by a nationalist logic

which Peter A. Jackson identifies as a 'regime of images' (P. A. Jackson 2004, 183-84). In a Foucauldian sense, this regime determines a public image's appropriate visual content, while being simultaneously sensitive to and a subject of the contextuality of Thai meaning making (P. A. Jackson 2004, 190-94).

Since uncertainty and ambivalence surrounding a particular phi's origin are general features of vernacular ghostlore, omitting identification of *Phi Krasue*'s historical origin in these popular cultural contexts thus reproduces the cultural logic structuring vernacular ghostly classification in rural Thai folk epistemologies (Sangun 1976, 69; Tambiah 1970, 320). *Mae Nak*'s⁶ ghostly image is a significant exception to this general rule of popular ghostly imagination. The focus on *Mae Nak*'s legend in more than 20 films, which locates her historical origin in what is today Bangkok, has served various ideological projects, and has essentially turned her into Thailand's 'national ghost' (Fuhrmann 2009; Knee 2005; McDaniel 2011; Songyote 1999, cited in May Adadol 2007, 181).

The ongoing reinvention of *Mae Nak*'s legend found a temporary climax in Nonzee Nimibutr's hugely successful filmic adaptation *Nang Nak* (1999), which triggered not only a boom of heritage films in post-economic-crisis Thailand,⁷ but also resurrected the ghost film as a genre of post-modern Thai cinema (May Adadol 2006, 2007). Asked to explain *Nang Nak*'s extraordinary success at the national box offices, Nonzee regards his treatment of *Mae Nak*'s legend as factual reality as key, highlighting that he is the first director to take her origin myth as a real story instead of a fairy tale.

"Why wouldn't anyone treat this story like it was real? I spent two years researching everything I could about the legend of Nang Nak, because it's based on a true story." (Nonzee, cited in M. Davis 2003, 64)

⁶ *Mae Nak* represents the best-known example of a broad species of ghostly imagination known in Thailand as *Phi Tai Hong*. *Phi Tai Hong* is most appropriately translated as 'ghosts of bad deaths' and most phi encountered in Thai ghost films belong to this category. Since 'bad deaths' are inherently contextual phenomena this is a rather inclusive category of ghostly imagination that encompasses victims of traffic accidents and murders, suicides, and women dying during childbirth. The latter phenomenon constitutes a named sub-category known as *Phi Tai Tang Glom* to which *Mae Nak* obviously belongs (Ancuta 2011, 134). This subspecies of *Phi Tai Hong* is especially feared for its malevolence and inclination to harm pregnant women and small children (Rajadon 1954, 166-68).

⁷ Economic crisis here refers to the Asian financial crisis of 1997, which after more than ten years of constant economic growth—known as the 'boom-years' (P. A. Jackson 1999)—not only abruptly ended the dream of becoming rich for many Thais, but also caused a growing awareness of contingency that contributed to a social climate of vulnerability that characterizes post-financial-crisis Thai society (Viernes 2013, 239).

⁴ *Ziziphus jujuba*

⁵ The film was considered missing in Thailand until I found a Swedish collector of horror films who discusses the film on his homepage. Kasia Ancuta helped me to contact this collector, who agreed to share a digital copy of his VHS original with us. The film is now also available for viewing at the Thai Film Archive (Ainslie and Ancuta 2014, 155).

The cinematic reinvention of well-known legends and figures from Thai folk history as the narrative force of post-crisis blockbusters like *Bang Rajan* (Tanit 2000) and *Suriyothai* (Chatrichalerm 2001) is a lasting effect of *Nang Nak*'s success. In their intertextuality (Goodnow 2010, 16-17; Kristeva 1986, 111) these heritage films reproduce not only core elements of *Nang Nak*'s narrative structure, but also the assumed factuality of the historical events, embedded in a nationalist frame of reference (Knee 2008, 124; Sinnott 2000, 426). Given the economic success and international recognition of these films it is not surprising that a film promising to combine the two main genres of post-crisis Thai cinema under the title *Tamnan Krasue* [The Legend of Krasue]⁸ (Bin 2002), was released in 2002, shortly after these blockbusters. However, it is intriguing that *Phi Krasue*'s origin myth, which constitutes the film's narrative core, represents a contemporary invention without any predecessors in vernacular ghostlore or popular historiography.

PHI KRASUE'S IDIOSYNCRATIC ORIGIN MYTH

Tamnan Krasue portrays events in 13th century Northern Siam, an epoch largely outside popular Thai historiography. The plot arises from the first epigraphically backed revolt of Siamese nobles against their Khmer overlords in the year 1220 (Wyatt 2001, 52-57). The film's initial protagonist is a young Khmer⁹ princess who is forced to marry a

Siamese nobleman. When her affair with a Siamese soldier is revealed both are sentenced to death. The princess manages to escape her execution with the help of an old Khmer 'witch' and the use of 'black magic'. Magically transformed into *Phi Krasue*, the princess enters the dead body of a Siamese village girl who looks like her twin (both are played by the same actress). Resurrecting the village girl's body from death the princess assumes her identity and starts to live in her place among the Siamese villagers. After more and more villagers have uncanny encounters, the village monk discloses the truth about the village girl's uncanny resurrection.¹⁰ In a magical battle the Siamese monk defeats the Khmer witch and succeeds in exorcising *Phi Krasue* using 'white magic'. Although it seems as if the *phi* is destroyed, the film reveals that it is the Khmer witch's immortal soul that fused with the princess and took possession of the village girl's dead body. After the village girl's dead body and the princess' soul are finally freed from the witch's spirit, the film ends by showing how it enters the next village girl, turning her into *Phi Krasue*. The film closes with the final words "from this moment *Phi Krasue* was known in Thailand".¹¹

Tamnan Krasue is arguably the first attempt to construe in film a historically founded origin myth for a Thai *phi* other than *Mae Nak*. However, the cinematic (re-)invention of legends about mythological figures mirrors the political (re-)invention of various origin myths for local culture heroes throughout the 20th century. These origin myths are central elements of the cults that have developed around such local figures of folk history. While the meaning and significance of some figures remains rather localized, others have gained regional importance and constitute essential contexts for the imagination and expression of regional identities (Baird 2014; Denes 2006; Keyes 2002). The modern Thai state is usually an important agent in the public promotion of these mythical narratives, which portray local culture heroes as crucial players in the 'domestication'¹² of peripheral populations and

⁸ Instead of a literal translation *Tamnan Krasue* was released with the English subtitle 'Demonic Beauty'.

⁹ For the sake of clarity, I will use the category Khmer throughout this chapter although the film identifies the princess' cultural origin as *Khom*. The usage and genealogy of the category *Khom* in Thai popular discourse is a complex issue that deserves a separate study (Denes 2006, 122; Vail 2007, 115). Thai historian Charnvit Kasetsiri argues that the word *Khom* derives from the old Siamese category '*Khmer krom*', meaning lowland Khmer (Charnvit 2003). In the contemporary popular cultural configuration *Khom* is usually used to identify an old script used to write Pali and Thai that was banned from official contexts under the Sangha Act of 1902 (Vail 2007, 125). According to Justin McDaniel, present-day Khmer and *Khom* scripts follow the same graphic principles but are not identical (McDaniel 2011, 238). *Khom* script is today used in a variety of ritual contexts. Although positively connoted in these contexts, *Khom* remains an ambivalent category, surrounded by a mystical aura of antiquity and spiritual potency (Denes 2006, 51). The culture that founded Angkor tends to be associated with the category *Khom* in Thai popular discourse. This association allows for the drawing of a symbolic boundary separating the categories Khmer and *Khom* qualitatively in Thai nationalist rhetoric. In these 'imperial imaginaries' Siam is portrayed as having absorbed *Khom* culture after King Naresuan of Ayutthaya conquered Lovek in 1593 and Thailand, therefore, represents the legitimate heir of Angkor's cultural heritage (Charnvit 2003; Denes 2006, 124-26). Here I am following colloquial Thai usage, which draws no clear conceptual boundary between the categories *Khom* and Khmer (Sujit 2010, 86). Interlocutors

in Buriram were rather indifferent towards the conceptual boundaries of both terms. Chutima Pragatwutisarn's analysis of *Amaritalai* indicates that this is also true in scholarly contexts, where the category *Khom* also stands as an equivalent for 'ancient Khmer'. In her analysis Chutima uses both categories interchangeably, while simply dropping the prefix 'ancient' in the course of her paper. Starting with an analysis of *Khom* she ends up talking about Khmer (Chutima 2011).

¹⁰ The audience perception research I conducted with students of Buriram's Technical College identifies the sudden resurrection of the dead village girl as the film's scariest scene.

¹¹ See figure 4.

¹² I choose domestication here as it fittingly translates the logic structuring the Siamese elites' dealing with peripheral populations that were regarded as 'wild' and 'uncivilized' and whose integration into the Siamese state entailed their 'civilization'. However, in this process of national integration these 'wild' inhabitants of uncivilized spaces were treated

regions by bringing them under the centralized authority of the Siamese court (Denes 2006; Keyes 2002). However, counter narratives that challenge the official myth of peripheral populations' smooth integration into the centralized Siamese state may also manifest in these cults (Baird 2014).

Although principally possible, these dead or mythological figures from local histories are rarely classified as *phi*, and are usually regarded as *thep* or *thevada*, a term emphasizing their tutelary potential (Rajadhon 1954; Tambiah 1970, 59-61; Van Esterik 1982). This classification is marked by the use of honorifics like *chao*, *chao pho/mae* or *phra* when addressing them (Baird 2014; Denes 2006; Irvine 1984; Keyes 2002). Even *Nak* is usually addressed without using the 'ghostly' pre-fix *phi*. Her common designation with the kinship-derived prefix *mae* [mother] as *Mae Nak* indicates that a relationship of mutuality is possible with her (McDaniel 2011; Sahlins 2011). *Mae Nak* thus exemplifies the domestication of a once malevolent *phi tai hong* through the worship of devotees, who accept her tutelage and enter a reciprocal patron-client relationship.¹³

"When spirits are successfully bound, new types of entities become possible; they can even be transformed into gods. A bound spirit, put to community use, therefore has to be distinguished from a free, or unbound, spirit." (Levy et al. 1996, 14)

In contrast to the national iconization of *Mae Nak* in *Nang Nak*, the ghostly image of *Phi Krasue* in *Tamnan Krasue* emphasizes its free-floating character, its denial of reciprocity and thus the impossibility of its domestication. In its portrayal of *Phi Krasue* the film adapts various narrative elements of Jintawee Wiwat's¹⁴ novel *Amaritalai* (1976). Chutima describes *Amaritalai* in turn as an adaptation of Henry Rider Haggard's novel *She* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, indicating the high degree of intertextuality marking pop-cultural (re-)production in 'modern' Thailand (Harrison and Jackson 2009). Written in a time marked by war, the presence of foreign troops, a growing fear of Communism and 'ethnic' insurrections threatening the national borders from within, Chutima identifies *Amaritalai* as a national allegory manifesting the fears haunting Thai society in the 1960s and 70s. *Tamnan Krasue* not only adapts the novel's protagonist's monstrous femininity and her royal *Khom* origin but also the

novel's general outlook (Chutima 2011; Creed 1986). The novel, however, does not identify its monstrous and blood sucking female protagonist as *Phi Krasue*.

The film breaks with the implicit rule of omitting a malevolent *phi*'s historical origin by introducing various narrative elements that strengthen *Phi Krasue*'s metonymic relation to ancient Khmer culture.¹⁵ This attempt to transform the metaphoric relation between the categories Khmer and magic into a metonymic chain—where Khmer stands for black magic and black magic represents "Khmerness"—manifests the 'semiotic imperialism' of Thailand's 'regime of images' and its intent to craft a civilized image for the modern Thai 'self' with the category Khmer as its 'Other' (Dissanayake 1996; P. A. Jackson 2004; Leach 1976, 14). The central elements of *Tamnan Krasue*'s semiotization of the Khmer-magic-link are the location of *Phi Krasue*'s origin in 13th century Angkorian Khmer culture, while identifying a Khmer 'witch' as its initial creator and a Khmer princess as its first host. An analysis of anthropological, historical and popular cultural sources indicates that the link between *Phi Krasue* and Khmer culture was non-existent in Central Thai ghostlore prior to *Tamnan Krasue*'s release. As such, the film's origin myth represents an idiosyncratic construction designed according to the premises of Thailand's 'imperial imaginary' (Denes 2006).

In the following section I will explain the idiosyncrasy of the origin myth by analyzing its ghostly protagonist's symbolism and relating it to the *Zeitgeist* dominating Thai society during the film's production and release. The central questions guiding the analysis are why *Tamnan Krasue* associates an iconic creature of Thai ghostlore with 13th century Khmer culture, why this origin myth is regarded as logically coherent and why the film's semiotics, which link Khmer culture metonymically to 'black magic', are accepted by Thai audiences, even if these audiences belong to the Khmer-speaking minority of Thailand's lower Northeast.

rather animal-like, which turns domestication into the most appropriate metaphor (Thongchai 2000; Turton 2000).

¹³ In their attempt to outline a Central Thai folk taxonomy of 'ghosts' and 'spirits' Manasikarn and Amara state that the pre-fix *nang* signifies 'bad' whereas the pre-fix *mae* signifies 'good' female *phi* (Manasikarn and Amara 2014, 48). I cannot say much about the actual practices or devotees' perceptions at the *Mae Nak*'s shrine in present-day Bangkok, but people in Buriram continue to see her as the paradigmatic *phi tai hong* and continue to use the pre-fix *nang* rather than *mae*.

¹⁴ Pseudonym of Jintana Pinchaliw (Chutima 2011).

¹⁵ Edmund Leach defines metonymy as an intrinsic or prior relationship, implying that A and B belong to the same cultural context. Very roughly metonymy is where 'a part stands for a whole'. Correspondingly, a metaphoric relationship is marked by the absence of an intrinsic or prior relationship, A and B belong to different cultural contexts. While metonymy implies contiguity, metaphor depends upon asserted similarity (Leach 1976, 14).

THE SEMANTICS OF PHI KRASUE'S VERNACULAR GHOSTLY IMAGE—THE UNCANNY 'FILTH GHOST'

Thai ghost-films are produced for 'knowing spectators' (May Adadol 2006, 155), who recognize ghostly images on the basis of an atheoretical knowledge that is inscribed in their bodies (Bourdieu 1977, 89-90; Douglas 1972, 29, 41; Mannheim 1980, 73). This embodied knowledge of classifying ghosts is imparted through myths and bodily praxis during primary socialization and tends to reproduce the symbolic configuration prevalent in the social context of its production (Bourdieu 1977, 78).

"The fear of dangerous spirits, the phi, acquired during early childhood often does not disappear when a person grows up. Somebody who has to walk home in the middle of the night without company may well become extremely apprehensive, and a sudden noise or a moving shadow may suffice to convince him that something dangerous lurks in the dark. It is not considered unmanly to be afraid in the dark." (Terwiel 2012, 76, italics in original)

This is exactly what I encountered during my first period of fieldwork in rural Buriram.¹⁶ After a long day observing funeral rituals in a rural village it was already long after midnight. I prepared to leave the house of the deceased and said goodbye to some of the older men still busy chatting and preparing things for the next day. Pho Phranit, one of my key informants, a former *Kamnan* and soldier in his late seventies, stopped me and said "Benny, we need to find you a motorbike, you cannot walk home alone." I said "okay" and we tried to find someone who would give me a ride. As most young men had already left the ritual site and it was getting late, I said to Pho Phranit that I would just walk home, as it was not far away. Pho Phranit then decided to join me. As soon as we had left the village itself behind us and walked through the night with nothing but rice fields to our left and right, he took my hand and asked me: "Benny, aren't you afraid when walking through the night?" I replied, "No, why should I? This is a beautiful night!" Pho Phranit smiled and said "Good!" He squeezed my hand a little harder and told me about the locally specific *phi* that would lurk in the night, adding that solitary wanderers are

their preferred prey. We walked hand in hand until we reached his house.

Ghostly classification thus constitute important aspects of sociocultural variability in an overall Thai 'national habitus' (Rehbein 2013, 148-51). In everyday contexts a *phi*'s meaning and its uncanniness thus need no abstract verbal elaboration (M. Jackson 1989, 132). The 'conjunctive experience' of understanding uncanniness¹⁷ without explication unites persons who share a common habitus (Mannheim 1980, 255-56). The importance of the body for the identification of uncanniness is manifested in the reference to or the demonstration of goosebumps (*khon luk*) which many interlocutors develop while talking about *phi*. The importance of goosebumps for the contextualized meaning of *phi* is highlighted by Cassaniti and Luhrmann, who state that 'ghostly energy' "is often described as a directly experienced feeling, one that is felt either on the skin or in some other sense" (Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2011, 41).



Figure 2. Interlocutor in rural Buriram raising his arm to show his goosebumps while talking about Phi Krasue's local manifestation

Feeling a ghostly presence is thus a fundamental aspect of how *phi* manifest themselves, and one of the 'traces' they leave in "reality" (Ladwig 2011, 24; Manasikarn and Amara 2014, 36). This embodied recognition of uncanniness finds its expression in the common Thai idiom *na khon luk* which is used to describe the situation of feeling a *phi*. Usually translated as meaning 'scary', the idiom refers literally to the development of goosebumps and thus describes a bodily manifestation of the uncanny that is essential for vernacular conceptions of *phi*. Mary Douglas calls this a "guts reaction" (Douglas 1972, 29). In a culture that sees every aspect of the social

¹⁶ Buriram is one of the three provinces in the lower North-east that is home to the majority of Thailand's indigenous Khmer-speaking population. The local Khmer dialect differs from the Khmer spoken in neighboring Cambodia and is linguistically classified as 'Northern Khmer' (Denes 2012; Smalley 1994; Vail 2006, 2007). The anthropological fieldwork and audience perception research in Buriram was part of the research project "The Ritual Reproduction of Khmerness in Thailand" funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

¹⁷ In contrast to the common exegesis of Freud's classic study of '*das Unheimliche*' (Freud 1982) I treat uncanniness as a culturally contingent phenomenon based on contextualized meanings of '*heimlich*'. The importance of identifying what is meant by '*heimlich*' in a given socio-cultural configuration, and the essential ambiguity of the German word '*unheimlich*', are usually lost in psychoanalytic approaches that emphasize the return of the repressed or surpassed as the essential trigger of uncanny feelings (P. A. Jackson 2008, 168; A. A. Johnson 2013, 301).

pervaded by *phi* (Manasikarn and Amara 2014, 30) these conjunctive experiences and their embodied dimension critically frame the belonging to socio-cultural groups.

“One of the fundamental effects of the orchestration of habitus is the production of a common-sense world endowed with the objectivity secured by consensus on the meaning (sens) of practices and the world, in other words the harmonization of agents’ experiences and the continuous reinforcement that each of them receives from the expression, individual or collective (in festivals, for example), improvised or programmed (common-places, sayings), of similar or identical experiences.” (Bourdieu 1977, 80; italics in original)

A shared habitus and the shared perceptions of the uncanny this entails thus identifies vernacular conceptions of *phi* as essential contexts for the reproduction of ‘belongingness’—that is, a sense of belonging to a “we-group” (Elwert 2002, 40)—in rural Thailand. This sense of belonging then functions as a reference point for the contextualized reproduction of socio-cultural identities.¹⁸ The tacitness of this embodied form of knowing thus critically determines the ‘intertextuality’ of ghostly representations in popular media and vernacular ghostlore (Polanyi 1966). As such, *Phi Krasue*’s local ghostly images become foils against which audiences implicitly ‘read’ its cinematic incarnations. An anthropological analysis of cinematic ghostly images therefore requires a dialectic that considers vernacular images and ‘real’ encounters with uncanny beings too.

German polymath Adolf Bastian is arguably the first Western visitor to Siam to leave a detailed description of how *Phi Krasue* was imagined in mid-19th century Bangkok. In his account of Siamese ghostlore at the time, Bastian makes various references to an uncanny being known as ‘*Phi-Kasü*’.¹⁹ In his account, Bastian mentions *Phi-Kasü*’s inclination to enter a victim’s body and feast on its entrails; a witch’s nightly transformation into a flying ball of fire; a flying head and its detachment from the host’s body; the reunion of head and body at dawn; and finally, a woman’s transformation into *Phi-Kasü* if she eats tabooed foods (Bastian 1867, 257, 76). All of these remain characteristics of the contem-

porary image of *Phi Krasue* (Baumann 2014, 184). However, when Bastian writes “*Phi Xamop* designate the highest degree of voraciousness, since they even devour faeces” (Bastian 1867, 280, my translation), it seems as if he attributes *Phi Krasue*’s most iconic feature in vernacular ghostlore—its association with filth and especially its inclination to feast on human faeces—to another *phi* (Hanks 1963, 34; Terwiel 2012, 53; Textor 1973, 733).

During my anthropological fieldwork the most commonly described uncanny encounter was with a being local interlocutors identified as *Thamop* while adding that *Thamop* and *Phi Krasue* are merely terminological variations for a single phenomenon.²⁰ Although Cambodian anthropologist Ang Chouléan translates the Khmer word *Thamop* as meaning ‘male witch’ (Ang 1986, 46), Rajadhon lists it as a ‘Cambodian *phi*’ resembling *Phi Krasue* (Rajadhon 1954, 163). While my empirical data show that *Thamop* seems to be known primarily in Khmer-speaking villages, a comparison of the semantics structuring its local ghostly images with anthropological accounts of *Phi Krasue*’s ghostly image in Central Thailand reveals that they are indeed terminological variations of a common theme (Hanks 1963; Rajadhon 1954; Stanlaw and Yodumnern 1985; Terwiel 2012; Textor 1973).²¹

The local ghostly images of *Thamop* and *Phi Krasue* are semantically united by their shared symbolism and the cultural logic it manifests. Since villagers in Buriram usually live in multilingual environments and read ghostly images with their entire bodies (Bourdieu 1977, 89-90), the embodied understanding of the cultural logic structuring a local ghostly image’s meaning appears more important for its classification than its designation or visual features (Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2011; Douglas 1972, 41). The identification of an uncanny being is simultaneously a cognitive and somatic process. Its ghostly symbolism therefore seems linked to deeper and more essential habitual structures that determine what is reasonable or unreasonable in a given context (Bourdieu 1977, 77; Douglas 1972; Rehbein 2013, 148). In the case of *Phi Krasue/Thamop*, local actors explicate this cultural logic through social idioms of ‘filth’ (known as *sok prok* in Thai).²²

¹⁸ I conceive this sense of we-group membership not as exclusive but as contextual. Ego’s multiple we-group memberships are thus ideologically unproblematic, whereby these groups are usually located on different scales of sociocultural inclusion (Elwert 2002, 40). However, these groups may overlap, intersect, and contradict. Sociocultural identity therefore represents a language game in Wittgenstein’s sense, a contextualized configuration that unites actors with similar configurations in meaningful we-groups (Rehbein 2013, 124-26).

¹⁹ Writing in German Bastian uses a kind of transliteration that adapts Thai sounds to German phonetics.

²⁰ *Phi Krasue* and its analogues seem to be very common phenomena in my fieldwork area. My empirical data indicate that nearly all villages in the district of my research host these *phi*.

²¹ Bastian’s (1867) and Rajadhon’s (1954) accounts of Central Thai ghostlore and their recognition of (*Phi*) *Thamop* indicate that ghostly imagination in Bangkok was unified and Thai-ized to a lesser degree than it is today. We may furthermore speculate that the absence of ghost-films is one aspect that explains this greater diversity of ghostly imagination and classification until the mid-20th century.

²² *Sok prok* is the most commonly encountered of various concepts that are used interchangeably to indicate impurity or filthiness.

Since *Thamop* and *Phi Krasue* manifest a single logical principle embedded in local idioms—the breaking of taboos associated with malevolent forms of magic turns the culprit into an uncanny being that is condemned to subsist on filth—their designations can be used interchangeably. Simultaneously, socio-structural analysis indicates that the predominant ghostly designation mirrors the ethno-linguistic composition of a given locality.²³ However, and irrespective of the locally used designation, filthiness structures the semantics of this species of ghostly imagination and represents the key cultural concept to unlock its symbolism.

The importance of filth for the conceptualization of *Phi Krasue's* vernacular ghostly images in mid-20th century Central Thailand was indeed so thorough and explicit that it ultimately prompted the anthropologist Robert Textor to translate *Phi Krasue* literally as the 'Filth Ghost' (Textor 1973, 397). This importance of 'filth' is also evident in rural Buriram, where allusions to *sok prok* commonly feature in every conversation about this uncanny being. Villagers usually emphasize *Phi Krasue's* voracious appetite for 'filthy' substances that locally qualify as *sok prok* but also identify the entire being as a manifestation of filthiness.

Since *Phi Krasue* tends to avoid encounters with fellow humans, it usually feasts on faeces (*khi*), carrion and livestock, especially fowl and other small animals like frogs, which it snatches from rice fields or irrigation ditches. The fact that villagers eat most of these animals too indicates the relational character of 'filthiness' in local configurations. However, chicken and frogs—which together with human faeces are usually mentioned as *Phi Krasue's* favourite foods—constitute an ambivalent class of edible animals on its own (Trankell 1995, 99). Although widely consumed by humans, both chickens and frogs are considered filthy and eating them is regarded with ambivalence. The fact that *Phi Krasue* devours them raw enhances the filthiness of their consumption and represents a definite break of 'taboo'.²⁴ Thus, it is their ambiguity and filthiness that identifies them as *Phi Krasue's* most appropriate food.

"Frogs, kop, are special. They are frequently gathered in the fields and appreciated as food, but be-

lieved to be the cause of many illnesses. For some people it is bap, de-merit, or a loss of possible merit, to consume frogs. Frog's meat is classified as khong huen, smelly and causing wounds. This is something frogs share with other kinds of ambiguous or 'dirty' animals such as chicken." (Trankell 1995, 99)²⁵

Although the filthiness of matter is a relational and contextual quality (Douglas 1975, 50-51), the substances classifiable as *sok prok* in local configurations are all marked by an intrinsic ambiguity.²⁶ This also appears to be true for human faeces (*khi*), although anthropologist Jane Hanks states that in the 1960s Central Thai villagers neither felt revulsion towards human faeces nor considered them to be filthy or contaminating (Hanks 1963, 34). However, other ethnographic accounts of rural Thai village life from the same period suggest that human faeces were indeed seen as filthy. The devouring of human faeces is, for example, one of the main reasons the dog is regarded as a filthy and 'tabooed' animal in rural Northern and Northeastern Thai configurations (Tambiah 1969, 433; Wijeyewardene 1968, 86).

The reason for these seemingly contradictory evaluations of human faeces may be sought in environmental differences rather than the absence of ambivalent feelings towards human faeces in Central Thailand which Hank's analysis indicates. While the canals that traversed Hank's fieldsite in the 1960s simply carried human faeces away like "sins at the festival Loy Krataung" and thus out of sight (Hanks 1963, 34), the villagers of the drier North and Northeast usually squatted in liminal spaces right outside the village boundaries.²⁷ The Thai idioms "going to the rice field", "going to the forest" and "going to the boat landing" not only mean to defecate (Chittawadi 2011, 179), but also identify the spaces where to defecate properly. All of these spaces lie right outside the spatial and semantic realm of *ban* that encompasses house, home, and village. Their spatio-symbolic liminality identifies them as proper defecatory spaces and therefore as *Phi Krasue's* favourite dwelling places. It is thus no coincidence that older interlocutors in rural Buriram, where the introduction of bathrooms is a relatively recent phenomenon, not only well remember how they used to grab a hoe before they went to the rice field to defecate, but also recount their uncanny encounters with *Phi Krasue* while squatting there.

²³ While Thai-Khorat speakers in Buriram use *Phi Krasue* and Northern Khmer speakers *Thamop*, Lao Isan speakers use *Phi Pop* to identify uncanny manifestations of this ambiguous class of *phi* that roots in malevolent magic.

²⁴ Although raw *lap* or *koy*—a Thai-style 'salat' made out of minced meat—is a characteristic dish of the Northeast, chicken is never used for its preparation (Trenk 2012, 120) and eating raw frog is considered a ridiculous idea. Nevertheless, grilled chicken is a highly appreciated food in the Northeast and minced frog was frequently served at wedding banquets during my fieldwork. The ambivalence of chicken seems currently expressed in the differentiation between 'filthy' factory chicken and the 'cleaner' *kai ban* chicken that are raised by individual farmers and sold on local markets.

²⁵ On my way from Bangkok to Rayong a taxi driver once attributed the blindness of his youngest son to his immense accumulation of de-merit, resulting from killing too many frogs as fishing bait.

²⁶ In Douglas' theory, ambiguity and filthiness are two sides of the same coin (Douglas 2002).

²⁷ Although it cannot be elaborated here I would argue that the *khlongs* of central Thailand were also regarded as highly liminal spaces marking the boundaries of *ban*.

With the hoe they would dig a hole before squatting and thus not only remove their faeces from sight, but also prevent *Phi Krasue* from being attracted by the odour. Despite the sanitary reforms that introduced toilets to the countryside—first in the form of outhouses and later as bathrooms within the house—toilets represent the most common places where *Phi Krasue* may attack humans and cause human fatalities, while rice fields and the edge of forests are the usual locations where the floating lights are encountered.

The introduction of toilets throughout the country is a lasting effect of King Chulalongkorn's sanitary reforms, which were an essential aspect of Siam's self-civilizing project which started in the late 19th century. With the overall aim of turning Siam into a member of the 'Victorian ecumene' (Peleggi 2002, 15), King Chulalongkorn's sanitary reforms targeted all kinds of public defecation (Chittawadi 2011). By relegating defecation to a newly established space marked by its '*Heimlichkeit*'²⁸—in the sense of 'hidden'—King Chulalongkorn banned human faeces from public sight and thereby framed the private realm of Thai modernity.²⁹ With the help of various state agencies—above all public schools and their curricula that directly targeted pupils' bodies—the modern private/public dichotomy informing this attempt to create an image of Bangkok pleasing to the gaze of Western visitors slowly spread to the countryside (Chittawadi 2011, 190). King Chulalongkorn's concern was not with his subjects' habits of personal hygiene (Chittawadi 2011, 178), but rather with the aim of turning Siam into a member of the 'Victorian ecumene'. His sanitary reforms thus fostered the abjection of human faeces, which then became essential for establishing the official image of the modern Siamese subject and its bounded 'self' (Laporte 1993, 31). The boundedness of the modern Thai 'self', however, resonates

with aspects of local epistemology, where the impermeability of the (male) body is of central importance (Irvine 1982, Turton 1991) and social space is conceptualized along a human body analogy that emphasizes an inside/outside dichotomy (Formoso 1990; Rhum 1994; Tambiah 1969; Turton 1978).

Although generally known, the striking visual features characterizing *Phi Krasue*'s cinematic ghostly images are under-emphasized in local contexts. Villagers thus usually outline a rather unspectacular ghostly image, stressing *Phi Krasue*'s nightly manifestation as a flickering light that hovers over the rice fields in close proximity to the village. Villagers compare this light to the glow of fireflies but add that it is much larger, so both lights cannot be confused. If interlocutors are asked to describe the visual features of *Phi Krasue* in any greater detail then they begin talking about a floating head with drawn-out intestines and, significantly, it is at this moment that explicit references to cinematic ghostly images are usually made. While early anthropological sources mention the detachment of the head in *Phi Krasue* and so identify it as an established aspect of its vernacular ghostly image (Bastian 1867, 276; Terwiel 2012, 53), the drawn-out intestines seem to appear for the first time in the middle of the 20th century (Rajadhon 1954, 158), and are an essential aspect of *Phi Krasue*'s ghostly image in the 1973 film *Krasue Sao*.



Figure 3. Krasue Sao's iconic ghostly image of *Phi Krasue* with the drawn-out intestines (dir. S. Naowarat, 1973)

The drawn-out intestines have, however, become iconic of *Phi Krasue*'s contemporary cinematic ghostly image. The identity of *Tamnan Krasue*'s uncanny protagonist is thus clear, although this is first made explicit in the film's final scene. Throughout the film it is referred to as 'the *phi* with the drawn-out intestines' [*Phi Lak Sai*], which is itself an idiosyncratic filmic construction. The appropriation of the drawn-out intestines as a seemingly recent feature in local discourse is thus indicative of the intertextuality that links both vernacular and cinematic contexts of ghostly imagination and blurs their boundaries. Authenticity of ghostly features is thus a negligible factor in the analysis of ghostly images of *Phi Krasue* as any feature can be appropriated as long as it is meaningful under the logical premises of *sok prok*.

²⁸ I am using the German word '*Heimlichkeit*' here as it is essential for Sigmund Freud's discussion of the uncanny ('*das Unheimliche*') (Freud 1982). In Freud's theory the uncanny draws its frightening potential from the semantic ambivalence of the word '*Heimlichkeit*' in German. In German cultural history the word '*Heimlichkeit*' and its meanings are closely connected to the privatization of defecation (Duerr 2002; Elias 1990; Laporte 1993). I argue that this connection is essential to understand the ambivalence of '*heimlich*' and thus '*das Unheimliche*' in Freud. The usual English translation of Freud's concept as "the uncanny" is not able to transport its implicit link to human defecation.

²⁹ I am not proposing that pre-modern or local symbolic configurations were indifferent to practices of human defecation. An analysis of the traditional Thai house and its spatial symbolism shows, on the contrary, that the areas used to defecate and to wash were located on the physically and symbolically lowest and 'filthiest' levels and thus diametrically opposed to highest and purest levels of the building (Tambiah 1969, 430; Turton 1978, 120-21). These opposed levels of the house were furthermore associated with distinctive classes of *phi* (Rhum 1994, 44). However, these opposition and the proper place to defecate were not identified on the basis of the modern private/public dichotomy (Laporte 1993, 116).



Figure 4. Tamnan Krasue's final scene, explaining how the formerly unknown 'phi with the drawn-out intestines' became known as Phi Krasue (dir. Bin Banleurit, 2002)

As this discussion indicates, the idea of 'sok prok' structures *Phi Krasue's* semantics and is the main classifier used to comprehend it in vernacular ghostlore. 'Sok prok' is therefore the cultural principle essential to unlocking and revealing the symbolism of this species of ghostly imagination. 'Sok prok' is largely a contextual state that depends on the transgression of symbolic boundaries and thus manifests localized ideas of ambiguity. As such, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection proves useful to theoretical reflection on the broader meaning of the concept, since various substances, states or even humans may qualify as *sok prok* as soon as they become 'matter out of place' (Douglas 2002; Kristeva 1982).

ABJECTION: TRANSLATING THE CULTURAL LOGIC STRUCTURING PHI KRASUE'S SYMBOLISM

I argue that *Phi Krasue's* contextualized ghostly images ontologically manifest the ambiguity of abjection as an abstract principle structuring the drawing of symbolic boundaries, and thus processes of 'self' formation on various levels of social organization in Thailand. With the concept of abjection, Julia Kristeva elaborates Douglas' theory of defilement, which highlights the importance of anomalies and ambiguities for any classification system, since notions of 'filth' or 'matter out of place' make conceptual boundaries (re)cognizable (Douglas 1972, 2002). In Douglas' model the human body represents the paradigmatic figure of social thought that "can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious" (Douglas 2002, 142). Social groups, therefore, tend to draw on the human body as a model for their self-image. Douglas sees this as a universal analogy, in which bodily functions and secretions become central metaphors to imagine social dynamics by marking the boundaries of social units.³⁰

³⁰ Various Southeast Asian societies elaborate this human body analogy in the way they imagine their houses as being

Kristeva reproduces Douglas' paradigm of contextualized pollution in social reproduction in her structural-psychological theory of subjective identity formation. The human body extricating itself from bodily matter thus becomes the exemplary model for the imaginations of subjective 'selves' and their genesis (Kristeva 1982). Kristeva's human body/'self' analogy turns all bodily margins into symbolically potent spaces, defined by the abject. The abject dwells in these spaces after being banished from the body that is imagined as 'self' (Douglas 2002, 141-42; Kristeva 1982, 65-66). Abjection thus becomes the logical prerequisite for the imagination of social bodies, their boundaries and, finally, selves. The abject constitutes those tabooed and rejected entities that despite their exclusion remain essential for the identity of the body that expels them.

"It describes the process of throwing away or casting aside a part of the self through which the self comes into being. It is by ridding oneself of the abject—a something that fails to be entirely named or captured—that one becomes a self in the first place. The abject is therefore not an object; rather, it is a something that simultaneously creates the borders of the self as an object and makes possible the self as a subject. Identity begins, in other words, with abjection." (Bubandt and Otto 2010, 6)

Through their constant challenge from the margin, the impossibility of their assimilation and their essential ambiguity, the abject defines the subject by threatening it with meaninglessness. This collapse of meaning lurks in the given incompleteness of all abjection processes. Despite their primal repression, the abject always remains an aspect of the subject that expels it, threatening its identity by questioning the possibility of 'in-dividuality' as such (Kristeva 1982, 12). This ambiguity threatens the logical premises of the subject's meaningful world, but also emphasizes its 'self' by locating it in an imagined realm of unambiguous meaning. It is the ambiguous position between 'subjects' and 'objects' that turns the abject into a paradigmatically uncanny 'non-thing' (Kristeva 1982, 1-2).

"Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. [...] Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us." (Kristeva 1982, 2, 4)

simultaneously symbolic structures, social units, and social actors. As politico-religious entities houses are prime agents of socialization whose meaning is read with the body (Baumann 2010; Bourdieu 1977, 89-90; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Tambiah 1969; Turton 1978; Waterson 1991, 2).

Since abjection is above all ambiguity, the abject is not only generative for the imagination of social bodies and their ‘selves’, but its manifestations become cultural devices to imagine the ambivalences that haunt any identity construction that is predicted on a self/other dichotomy. As a modernist discipline psychoanalysis takes this dichotomy and the presumed in-dividuality of the ‘self’ as the essence and universal feature of subjective identity formation (Kristeva 1982, 12; Lacan 2006). Despite this assumed universality, vernacular cultures usually lack a verbal category to explicate abjection as an abstract but generative principle of psycho-social reproduction. Douglas shows that vernacular notions of ‘taboo’ and ‘witchcraft’ fulfil this symbolic task in many cultures (Douglas 1970, 1972, 2002). Since both notions are rather unelaborated in the local configurations of Buriram and seem to be so in most vernacular contexts throughout Thailand³¹, I propose that *Phi Krasue*’s ghostly images fulfil this symbolic task in various contexts. *Phi Krasue* thus functions as a manifestation of abstract principles that make the ambiguities haunting Thai social bodies and their boundaries cognizable, while social idioms of ‘filth’ are used to explicate them.³² These ambiguities arise from the contextual recognition of ‘others’ within the ‘self’ as ‘non-selves’ that is constitutive for Thai subjective identity formation on all levels of social organization (Kristeva 1991, 183; Tanabe 2002, 48; Thomson 2008, 99). This symbolic importance of non-selves for social identity formation persisted despite—or was even enforced by—the modern idea of the bounded and in-dividual ‘Thai self’, which is based on the dichotomy of ‘self’ and ‘other’ as the symbolic fundament of Thailand’s self-civilizing ‘project modernity’.

As abjected non-selves, manifestations of *Phi Krasue* continuously inhabit ambiguous symbolic spaces located between more clearly defined classificatory realms. *Phi Krasue* is thus neither dead, deathless nor fully human, it is usually encountered on the outskirts of human settlements or in paradigmatically ambiguous spaces (like toilets, rice fields, crossroads and irrigation ditches), its inside is turned out, it enters a victim in a reversed fashion through an excreting orifice, it feasts on faeces, while its hosts are women—usually unmarried or widowed—who live on the fringes of human settlements. Given its overall ambiguity it is no coincidence that *Phi Krasue* is so closely associated with

the bodily-derived substances theoretically qualifying as ‘the abject’ and vernacularly as *sok prok*.

Although all bodily fluids that transgress the human body’s borders from inside to outside constitute ‘filth’ in Douglas’ theory (Douglas 2002, 150), Kristeva identifies excrements and menstrual blood as the two bodily abjections that are essential for subjective identity formation. Both are symbolic of the ‘horror within’; those features that lie beneath the body’s beautiful surface and beyond the social image—constitutive elements of the ‘self’ that are usually excluded from sight. Their public recognition as aspects of the ‘self’ thus threatens to blur the essential symbolic boundary separating inside from outside and private from public (Kristeva 1982, 53–54).³³ *Phi Krasue*’s ghostly images thus epitomize ambiguities lying beneath the social body’s ‘beautiful’ (sur)face, things which modern Thai society seeks to keep in the ‘*Heimlichkeit*’ of the private realm, so they remain invisible to the public gaze and don’t threaten to contradict Thailand’s civilized self-image (E. Cohen 2012, 227; P. A. Jackson 2004, 186–93).

THE FILTHINESS OF SAIYASAT

Although widely practiced and highly sought after for various reasons by all kinds of social actors in Thailand (Ananda 2005; Baker and Pasuk 2008, 2013; E. Cohen 2012; Wasana 2008), one rarely encounters interlocutors who admit to practicing, relying upon, or being the customer of a *saiyasat*³⁴ practitioner. The practice of malevolent forms of magic (*saiyasat*) is a particularly significant hidden social element embodied by the abject *Phi Krasue*, one that is intimately linked to its filth-as-menstrual-blood symbolism. The spiritual potency which folk epistemology attributes to menstrual impurity identifies certain forms of *saiyasat* as dangers issu-

³¹ Northern Thai configurations seem to be an important exception to this general rule of Thai folk epistemology. The symbolic significance of concepts that are usually translated as ‘taboo’ (*khyt, ubat*) (R. Davis 1974; Wijeyewardene 1977) and ‘witch’ (*phi ka*) (Anan 1984) is generally accepted in Northern Thai ethnography. However, these northern Thai notions of ‘taboo’ and ‘witch’ are unknown in Buriram.

³² Gananath Obeyesekere reaches a similar conclusion in his analysis of the *pretas* and their symbolism in Sinhalese society (Obeyesekere 1981, 116–17).

³³ Since Dominique Laporte (1993) identifies the privatization of ‘shit’ as the essential feature of Western modernity, Kristeva’s theory seems especially apt for an analysis of modern societies with their core value of the bounded individual (Dumont 1991). However, Hans Peter Duerr’s encyclopedic study of the private/public dichotomy offers an entire collection of historic and ethnographic examples that indicate the universality of abjecting human ‘shit’ (Duerr 2002).

³⁴ *Saiyasat* is a Thai cultural concept that tends to be rather poorly subsumed under the Euro-American categories of magic, witchcraft and sorcery (McDaniel 2011, 111; White 2005, 71). Simultaneously, *saiyasat* is just one of various cultural concepts that can be used—largely interchangeably—to classify ritual practices as ‘magical’, ‘esoteric’ or ‘occult’. Just as their Western counterparts, Thai concepts relating to ‘magic’ are all relational. I chose *saiyasat* here only because it was the most commonly encountered category during my fieldwork.

ing from within the social body (Douglas 1975, 63; Kristeva 1982, 71).³⁵

While emphasizing its voracious appetite for filth, villagers simultaneously stress that a person becomes a *Phi Krasue* when a taboo associated with *saiyasat* is broken. Malevolent *saiyasat* is marked by the mixing of abjected bodily substances, like menstrual blood, excrements and corpse remnants, with sacred knowledge (I. C. Johnson 1999, 303; Terwiel 2012, 90). The hybrid result is then usually made to transgress the victim's bodily borders or hidden in close proximity, which makes the victim's 'self' vulnerable to various external forces (Golomb 1985, 243).

"In terms of ritual materials, creating negative power involves polluted substances. Rusty nails, bodily fluids, human and animal excrement and fluid taken from a human corpse, particularly if the death was sudden or caused by an accident were cited as ingredients." (Conway 2014, 77)

The mixing of things that are normally held apart identifies these ritual practices as *sok prok*, while it simultaneously represents the source of their potency (I. C. Johnson 1999, 302-03; Kapferer 2002, 22). The malevolence of these rituals remains, however, relational, and their general evaluation ambivalent. Practitioners, clients, and victims of *saiyasat* may thus evaluate a single ritual differently; in the case of love magic a practitioner may stress the beneficial dimension of a ritual for the client, whilst the victim feels attacked. Socially speaking, practitioners and their clients are usually considered guilty of violating the personal freedom of the victim, thereby making their practices morally condemnable (Golomb 1985, 96). These two 'filthy' practices—the devouring of *sok prok* substances and the violation of taboos associated with the ritual handling of polluted materials—are thus emphasized as *Phi Krasue's* most distinguishing characteristics. Both are usually highlighted in vernacular contexts before allusions to the visual features of its ghostly images or their explicit content are made.

Phi Krasue's filth-as-menstrual-blood symbolism is further reinforced by the ghostly images' detachable head and the oozing out of bloody entrails, which, as a grotesque metaphor of menstruation, is metonymically linked to the impurity of menstruating women and their spiritual potency that threatens male supremacy in folk epistemologies (I. C. Johnson 1999, 302; Terwiel 2012, 113; Wijeyewardene 1977, 24). *Phi Krasue's* cinematic ghostly images and the encounters with the uncanny being in 'real life' are thus not only public reminders that powerful ritual practices are frequently performed

in the '*Heimlichkeit*' of private realms, beneath the official image of Thailand's state-sponsored and rationalized Theravada Buddhism, but also of the spiritual potency that folk epistemologies attribute to women and magic. The motif of the detachable head simultaneously expresses women's penetrability by verifying the weakness of the female body and its boundaries. It is this permeability that renders a body 'soft' in folk epistemology, so characterizing it as female in the first place (Irvine 1982, 111; Tanabe 2002, 190). This fluctuation between potency and weakness adds to *Phi Krasue's* overall ambiguity while it is dialectically related to its female gender and thereby enforcing its uncanniness as a manifestation of the 'monstrous feminine' (Creed 1986).

The practicing of amoral *saiyasat* threatens bodies from within, while the roaming, filth devouring creature threatens them from without. *Phi Krasue* has to be read as an abject, an ambiguous boundary signifier, emphasizing the cultural value of a bounded 'self' in various contexts of signification. As a manifestation of abjection's spiritual potency that threatens social bodies from within as well as from without, *Phi Krasue* is an ideal and logically coherent metaphor to conceptualize Khmer culture's relation to the boundedness of the modern Thai 'geobody' and the national imagination of its civilized 'self' (Thongchai 1994).

TAMNAN KRASUE—INTRODUCING THE KHMER WITCH AS THE 'HORROR WITHIN'

Tamnan Krasue's release with the English subtitle "*Demonic Beauty*" indicates the international audience also targeted by the film. Looking towards foreign markets was not unusual during the post Asian financial crisis boom of Thai cinema. This awareness of a foreign gaze led to a short-lived trend in Thai film in which directors attempted to reduce the narrative ambiguity of Thai films in order to make their plots more easily digestible by Western audiences (Knee 2008, 124, 33). This outward oriented trend to reduce ambiguity may explain some of the film's idiosyncrasies, like the portrayal of the Khmer 'witch' that reproduces Western cinematic images of 'the witch' and *Phi Krasue's* elongated fangs that give her a vampire-like appearance (Bauermann 2014).

³⁵ In Buriram 'love magic' [*sane ya faed*] is the most frequently mentioned form of *saiyasat* with the potential to cause a transformation into *Phi Krasue* (Golomb 1985, 246).



Figure 5. Some of *Phi Krasue*'s idiosyncratic ghostly features in *Tamnan Krasue* (dir. Bin Banleurit, 2002)

However, most of the film's narrative idiosyncrasies are inward oriented and continue to privilege the knowing Thai spectator. Although they also function to reduce ambiguities—those threatening the conceptual borders of the national identities 'Thai' and 'Khmer'—the deciphering of their social message still presupposes viewers with a tacit understanding of abjection as the abstract principle manifested by *Phi Krasue*. Certainly the most important idiosyncrasy—relying on abjection while simultaneously reinforcing it—is the film's identification of Angkorian Khmer culture as the source from whence *Phi Krasue* came. Consequently, various narrative elements continue to emphasize and reiterate *Phi Krasue*'s Khmer origin throughout the film. Most significant amongst these are the depiction of the Khmer princess as an *Apsara*,³⁶ the image of the witch who speaks Khmer only,³⁷ Khmer magic as the reason for the princess' ghostly transformation, and the *unalom*³⁸ appearing on the hosts' forehead. All of these explicit links to contemporary emblems of Khmer culture are completely alien to older cinematic depictions of *Phi Krasue*. *Tamnan Krasue* is thus the first film to explicitly link *Phi Krasue*'s cinematic ghostly image to Khmer magic, portraying it as an emblem of Angkorian culture. As

³⁶ Trudy Jacobsen describes an *Apsara* as "a category of female divinity able to change shape at will and move between the celestial and mundane worlds, in Cambodian art and architecture (Jacobsen 2008, 45)." *Apsaras* feature prominently in the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat and are an important character in Khmer court dances which have had a large influence on classical dance forms in Thailand. *Apsaras* are easily recognizable on the basis of their elaborated headdresses and have therefore become icons of Khmer culture in the popular Thai imagination (Denes 2006, 343-46; Kukrit 2001, 18-20, 51-60).

³⁷ Local interlocutors (themselves Khmer-speakers) identified the Khmer witch's language as Northern Khmer and not Cambodian Khmer.

³⁸ "The *unalom* is a conically shaped figure often placed above or around a design in order to draw attention to its importance" (Rajadon 1964, 185; Terwiel 2012, 83). An *unalom* usually accompanies magical drawings (*yant*) and spells (*khatha*) in Pali which are frequently written in *Khom* script (Rajadon 1964, 178). The cabalistic writing in *Khom* is said to enhance their potency. Most Thais are unaware of the fact that *Khom* is simply a script used to write Pali and Thai (Terwiel 2012, 55-56, 77-78).

previous studies of Thai ghostlore make no mention of this link before the film's release, the question is why local interlocutors in Buriram—who are often Khmer-speakers themselves—accept this idiosyncrasy, regard it as logically coherent, incorporate it into their local language games and thus reproduce it?



Figure 6. Tamnan Krasue depicts the Khmer princess as an *Apsara* (dir. Bin Banleurit, 2002)

The most commonly encountered explanation attributes the authenticity of the origin myth to the simple fact that 'the Khmer'³⁹ are known for practicing 'black magic' (Denes 2006, 56; Golomb 1985, 209). Since *Phi Krasue* is an unintended result of these ritual practices, it is therefore logical to locate its origin in Khmer culture. It is thus not the existence of *Thamop* and its association with the category Khmer in the local configuration of Buriram that makes *Tamnan Krasue*'s origin myth acceptable for local interlocutors, but the simple fact that it reproduces the abstract logic this *phi* embodies: *Phi Krasue* is doomed to leave its body and eat filth as a punishment for practicing malevolent forms of magic and breaking an associated 'taboo'. Buriram Khmer-speakers' reinforcement of the socio-cultural stereotypes associating the category Khmer with magical skills and their particular inclination to practice 'black magic' arts is, however, not really a self-stereotype. The relationality of the category 'Khmer' allows Thailand's Khmer-speakers to always identify another social group as being contex-

³⁹ Regarding the category 'Khmer' in contemporary Thailand, one has to keep in mind that it is a relational expression (Elwert 1994, 12) that can be used, amongst other things, to refer to the native Northern Khmer speakers of Thailand, the founders of Angkor, the people of Cambodia, as well the nation state itself. Furthermore, Khmer-speakers in Buriram use the category to identify the population of the neighboring province of Surin, which is home to the majority of Thailand's Northern Khmer speakers. Elwert (1994) uses the term 'relational expression' (*relationale Ausdrücke*) to capture the contextuality of cultural concepts that change their meaning in accordance to the relation between speaker and listener. The relationality of the category 'Khmer' is thus further enhanced by its context-bound polysemy and its dialectical relationship to the category 'Khom'. Whether a local Khmer speaker will thus use this language or identify as 'Khmer' depends on the social context, or as the Thai idiom *kalathesa* indicates, the right space and time (Chalermchai 2014, 123).

tually ‘more’ Khmer and therefore not only as the true bearers of Khmer (black) magical knowledge but also as abjects of their own subjective Thai ‘selves’.

The contextual significance of this relationality is evident in the multiple references made to the metaphoric Khmer-magic link in Thai popular culture. This link grew in visibility as a socio-cultural stereotype during Thailand’s boom-years and became an omnipresent aspect of socio-cultural classification after the Asian financial crisis. Since 1990 the metaphoric link between the categories Khmer and magic can be found in all kinds of popular media, from English and Thai language newspapers to internet blogs, movies, TV soap operas and even popular religious literature. However, since the Asian financial crisis the quality of this link seems to have changed towards a metonymic chain rather than metaphoric association. In contemporary popular cultural discourses both categories seem to reinforce each other up to a point, where they can be used interchangeably and where the prefix ‘Khmer’ merely qualifies magical practices as aggressive and thus immoral (Baker and Pasuk 2008, 10; McDaniel 2011, 35).



Figure 7. Enforcement of the Khmer-Magic-link in the Thai film *Phi* with original English subtitles (dir. Paul Spurrier, 2005)

Douglas’ structural-functionalist witchcraft-paradigm grounds the attribution of magical knowledge to particular out-groups in the reproduction of social boundaries and in-group solidarity (Douglas 1970). *Tamnann Krasue*’s central metaphor thus rests on the premise of witchcraft attack, as Douglas outlines it. The body of the victim symbolizes the betrayed community whose internal strength is sucked out or poisoned by someone who can enter into close contact (Douglas 1970, xxvii). In the film the betrayed community takes the form of an innocent Siamese village girl’s body, which has become possessed by the witch-like *phi* through the practices of Khmer magic. The village girl thus not only represents the Thai geo-body but—through the fact

that she and the princess look identical—also manifests the similarity of Thai and Khmer culture in general.

“Among the neighbouring countries of Southeast Asia, none seems more similar to Thailand than Cambodia ... Both nations share similar customs, traditions, beliefs, and ways of life. This is especially true of royal customs, language, writing systems, vocabulary, literature, and the dramatic arts.” (Charnvit 2003)

This similarity allows the Khmer witch to enter into close proximity and even to transgress the social body’s boundaries by living within a Siamese girl and among Siamese villagers without being recognized and thereby paralleling the official invisibility of Thailand’s indigenous Khmer-speaking population (Vail 2007). By (re-)imagining the Siamese nation’s ‘moment of birth’ and the violence of ‘primal repression’ (Kristeva 1982, 12) that was necessary to draw the symbolic boundary separating the socio-cultures of ‘Khmer’ and ‘Thai’, *Tamnann Krasue* acknowledges the foundational place of Khmer culture for Thailand’s conceptual order and modern sense of ‘self’. Simultaneously, by linking *Phi Krasue* to the socio-cultural category Khmer, the film identifies ‘Khmer’—with its potential to blur the boundaries between inside and outside from its ambiguous place of banishment (Kapferer 2002, 15)—as the abject which haunts the ‘Thai-self’. The film’s final scene thus acknowledges Khmer culture’s continuing presence within the body politic, which in turn is proven by any publicly recognized encounter with *Phi Krasue* in ‘real life’.

The embodied knowledge of *Phi Krasue*’s symbolism of abjection thus allows Thai audiences to identify Khmer culture not only as the docile ‘other within’ (Thongchai 2000, 48-50) but as an abject and thus symbolic of the ‘horror within’, continuously haunting the social body of Thainess with its ambiguity (Denes 2006, 148-49; Kristeva 1982, 53).

“The reasons for the special horror of the abject within are twofold. One is that the abject within is less viewable and so less easy to cope with. The other is the threatening possibility that one’s sense of identity will be lost.” (Goodnow 2010, 34)

While Douglas’ witchcraft-paradigm and Kristeva’s theory of abjection help to explain why “Khmer” constitutes “the most commonly mentioned source of mysterious magical power among Buddhist Thais” (Golomb 1985, 209) and not an alternative socio-cultural category like Lao, the question remains why *Phi Krasue*’s idiosyncratic origin myth appeared for the first time after the Asian financial crisis?

DEMONIZATION: REDRAWING SOCIO-CULTURAL BOUNDARIES THROUGH INVERSION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Beyond its economic impacts the Asian financial crisis had even more profound ideological dimensions. Submission to IMF conditions required the Thai government to further open its economy to foreign capital. Fuelled by feelings of vulnerability, an interest in cultivating a strong ‘Thai self’ grew as an attempt to withstand the impact of impending foreign domination (Connors 2005, 535). Localist politics moved to the mainstream and the economic crisis “provoked a revival of interest in local culture as a reaction against everything modern and global” (Amporn 2003, 298). As a consequence, state-led nationalist movements seeking to revitalize local cultural heritage and localism blossomed (Denes 2006, 2012; Hewison 1999, 2000). A central feature of these localist trends was a conception of the crisis as an externally rooted threat to Thainess which evoked in response a popular sense of nostalgia and longing for a golden age of antiquity (Amporn 2003, 299-301). This longing for a ‘paradise lost’ explains the national success of heritage films like *Bangrajan* and *Suriyothai*, which both revolve around Siamese struggles to ward off Burmese troops. Heritage films thus became hyper-real arenas to reconstruct and defend the boundaries of Thainess in relation to an imagined world of powerful external others of which ‘the Burmese’ became the most potent (Amporn 2003, 299; Hamilton 2002, 153).

“While Burma was a true historical entity, it is at the same time an allegory of colonial power in modern Thai historiography. The entire narrative of Thai wars against Burma is allegorical. A huge proportion of historical enterprise in Thailand is an investment in this historiographic allegory.” (Thongchai 2011, 38)

Despite this emphasis of external danger, David Streckfuss (2012) observes that the conceived threat to the boundaries of Thainess was also internally rooted and linked to the growing awareness of the geo-body’s multi-ethnic composition as an unintended outcome of state-led localism. This revitalization of local cultural heritage furthermore facilitated a growing visibility of ‘Khmerness’ at the heart of Thailand’s own ‘self’ (Denes 2006, 142; 2012). This public recognition of the non-self in the form of suppressed Khmer culture challenged the modern ideal of the in-dividual national ‘self’, and revealed the abject character of the socio-cultural category Khmer. ‘Khmerness’ became symbolic of the ‘horror within’, thereby drawing Thainess to a place where the collapse of meaning is a constant danger. The surfacing of a contested, national Khmer/*Khom* past after the economic crisis thus

contributes essentially to the ongoing ‘crisis of Thai identity’ (Streckfuss 2012, 315-16).

“In times of social crisis, which was, and continues to be the case in Thailand since the Asian economic crisis in 1997, when national identities and geo-political space are threatened, there is an immediate concern (indeed anxiety) with maintaining existing bodily boundaries and the purity of bodies.” (Taylor 2001, 13)

Aleida Assmann (2010) identifies ‘demonization’ as a discursive strategy of popular culture encountered in times of crisis when symbolic boundaries have to be redrawn. Demonization enshrines hierarchical social relations within cultural memory and works by ‘normative inversion’, which turns suppressed cultural elements—society’s non-selves—into threatening and dangerous ‘others’. This inversion not only reduces ambiguity through the clear re-definition of ‘self’ and ‘other’, but also allows for the official recognition of suppressed cultural elements in popular discourses by relegating them to inferior positions within the national value configuration. Usually these suppressed cultural elements root in different socio-cultures and thus contradict official imaginations of an in-dividual and homogenous national ‘self’. The inversive logic of demonization thus turns the sacred of one culture into the horror of another and thereby defines the hierarchy between both cultures (Assmann 2010, 167, 77).

Assmann’s theory of discursive demonization in modernity allows us to identify the film *Tamnan Krasue* as a cinematic project of demonization, which turns the holy Khmer *Apsara* into the uncanny Thai *Phi Krasue*. The inversive logic of *Tamnan Krasue*’s origin myth explicitly demonizes the Khmer by ‘khmerizing’ a well-known Thai *phi*. It is this inversion which turns the ambiguous uncanny being of vernacular ghostlore into an officially recognized ‘demon’.⁴⁰ The film thus aims at redrawing the symbolic boundary between both socio-cultural categories and strengthening the in-dividual and bounded Thai ‘self’. It identifies Thai culture not only as morally superior, but also attributes to Khmer culture all those filthy qualities vernacularly embodied by *Phi Krasue*. However, by choosing *Phi Krasue* as its uncanny protagonist, the film unintentionally acknowledges Khmerness as the ‘non-self’ of Thainess, which will continue to haunt the national ‘self’ from its ambiguous place of banishment.

⁴⁰ In a structural sense then, being a demon is not an intrinsic quality as such but rather a relational state, linked to conceptions of the sacred and structured by an inversive logic.

CONCLUSION: DEMONIZING THE KHMER BY KHMERIZING A DEMON

"(...) [T]he purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (...)." (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 229)

In this paper I have argued that the structural logic of abjection is a key to unlock *Phi Krasue's* symbolism, and that actors' embodied recognition of this logical principle is more important for vernacular classifications of *Phi Krasue* than the usually explicit content of its ghostly images' visual features. Since the elements of myth usually function to make abstract social logics graspable, their embodiment is essential for the formation of meaningful social identities (Lévi-Strauss 1980, 11). Bruce Kapferer (2012) also stresses the relevance of incorporated cultural logics for shaping actors' responses to the idiosyncrasies of nationalist iconography. He emphasizes that nationalist ideology and their myths draw their persuasive power not so much from their content but rather from their confirmation of previously embodied logical principles. This tacit knowledge of a cultural logic's generative principles allows actors to relate idiosyncratic elements of newly created nationalist myths in a meaningful way and thus to make sense of the contingencies of their historical worlds.

"Comparing nationalist beliefs in Sri Lanka and Australia, he [Kapferer 1988] observes that "these ideologies contain logical elements relevant to the way human beings within their historical worlds are existentially constituted" (p. 19). In this view, instantiations of idiosyncratic variation, the ultimate source of cultural change, are reflexively linked to underlying structural paradigms: "no tradition is constructed or invented and discontinuous with history. . . [they] are chosen because of what they distill ontologically; that is, they make sense and condense a logic of ideas which may also be integrated to the people who make the selection although hidden from their reflective consciousness" (p. 211)." (Fischer 1999, 479)

A contextual analysis of Thai *phi* thus has to look beyond surface representations to uncover the cultural logic (the generative patterns of relations) realized in and transformed through their contextual ghostly images (Fischer 1999, 478). Interpretations that target the implicit logic structuring *Phi Krasue's* ghostly images' symbolism allow us to account for the variability of its features. This may vary not only between vernacular and cinematic contexts of ghostly imaginations, but also according to the practical requirements of social contexts and their prevalent 'regime of images' (P. A. Jackson 2004). Thus, it is the identification of demonization as a structural analogue of abjection that explains

the linking of *Phi Krasue's* ghostly image to 13th century Angkorian Khmer culture in *Tamnan Krasue* and its plausibility for Thai audiences, despite its factual idiosyncrasy. This plausibility draws its persuasiveness from the metaphoric Khmer-magic link in Thai popular culture that grew in visibility as a socio-cultural stereotype during the Cold War and Thailand's boom-years, becoming an omnipresent aspect of socio-cultural classification after the Asian financial crisis. Since the Khmer-magic link is generative of the same logical principle that underlies abjection and functions to imagine the superiority of the category Thai vis-à-vis the category Khmer in contemporary Thai popular culture, *Phi Krasue's* origin myth is simply the link's metonymic transformation that presents a proper past, rendering visible the officially recognized nation and its geo-body (Viernes 2013, 239). Linked under the premises of demonization and communicated via social idioms of filth, the symbolism of the abject in *Phi Krasue* and Khmer in the film *Tamnan Krasue* is thus not only complementary, but also mutually reinforcing. The film's khmerization of an uncanny being renders 'the Khmer' uncanny and strengthens the self-evidence of this association through the transformation of metaphor to metonymy (Douglas 1972, 28-29).

With Lévi-Strauss we may finally say that *Tamnan Krasue* provides a logical model for overcoming contradictions haunting post-crisis Thai identity. These contradictions arise from the growing visibility of Khmerness within the 'Thai-self', and its irreconcilability with the modern ideal of the individual national 'self'. Just as the 'Myth of Asdiwal' analyzed by Lévi-Strauss functions to reconcile the contradictions inherent in matrilineal descent combined with patrilocal residence (R. Davis 1974, 8; Lévi-Strauss 1967), *Tamnan Krasue* offers a spectral explanation why, despite its foundational role, the socio-cultural category Khmer remains socially stigmatized, Thailand's indigenous Khmer-speakers invisible, and relationships with neighbouring Cambodia tense.

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