

# Gifts and Ghosts

## A Derridean Reading of Theravada Communities

*Sokthan Yeng*

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XXVII, No 1 (2019) pp 34-49

Vol XXVII, No 1 (2019)  
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)  
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)  
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2019.872  
[www.jffp.org](http://www.jffp.org)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program, and is co-sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

# Gifts and Ghosts

## A Derridean Reading of Theravada Communities

---

*Sokthan Yeng*

Adelphi University

### Colonialism and Theravada Buddhism

It is no secret that the expansion of Western knowledge of Buddhism coincided with European imperialism. British colonials were so fascinated by the religion they encountered in Burma and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) that they undertook projects to interpret and understand Theravada texts. Some British scholars with a sympathetic—if not also Orientalist view saw Buddhism as a less developed version of Christianity. It was a religion with similar ideals and an admirable leader but stunted by a less progressive culture.<sup>1</sup> For academics interested in other cultures such as Max Weber and Marcel Mauss, studying other religions was a way to go back in time and understand primitive beliefs that have left few traces in modern European societies. Mauss believed that analyzing gift giving in “archaic” societies would show the connection to modern societies that revolve around transactions among people.<sup>2</sup> Weber found in the religions of India, including Theravada Buddhism; philosophies that contrasted with a capitalist and “modern” model of the Protestant work ethic. However, he also saw Southeast Asian cultures as a chance to analyze, explore, and recapture knowledge of a past or primitive society.<sup>3</sup> Debate about which European scholars have the best and most accurate interpretation of Theravada Buddhism continues.

Considering the tangling of academic analysis of Theravada Buddhism with colonial power, it is not surprising that the Western empire that had the most influence in the region would claim to have access to the purest form of their religious and philosophical system. Penny Edwards argues that the French shaped the discourse on a “true” form of Buddhism and outdid the British in defining Buddhism for the West, even though the British project started earlier. Although British anthropologists had a hand in translating Buddhist scripture, many Theravada monks received their training in French

institutions. In order to proliferate the Buddha's knowledge, the French educated Khmer elites and founded schools in the late 1800s and early 1900s so that monks and laity alike could learn the language of the scripture (Pali) and learn the lessons of the Buddha. The Pali language has long held a privileged place in Cambodia and other countries where Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion because it is the language of the most important Theravada text: the *Tripitaka* which includes the Buddha's *dhamma* and *vinaya*. Because learning Pali was crucial to the development and enrichment of Theravada culture, French schoolmasters believed that the Cambodian people had access to teachings on morality and the way to salvation thanks to them. The spread of "true" Buddhism, therefore, was a French project, which helps explain why the revival of orthodox Theravada Buddhist doctrine coincided with French control of Cambodia.<sup>4</sup>

Theravada monks and the French-educated elite contrasted "true" or "pure" Theravada doctrine not with the French interpretation of Buddhism but with the belief system of the common Cambodian people. This tension between monastics and laity persists in Southeast Asia, as some monks believe that the uneducated pollute and degrade Theravada Buddhism by holding onto incorrect and irrational—not to mention superstitious—interpretations that turn almsgiving into a form of commodity exchange. Monks defending doctrinal views of Theravada Buddhism work to correct commoners who believe that almsgiving or providing material support for monks will result in an accrual of merit for the donor that will theoretically translate into a better future in one's present life or a more auspicious rebirth. Benedicte Brac de la Perriere describes how Burmese monks cast their eyes downward when receiving alms in order to avoid giving the impression that there is a transactional relationship between monastics and laity.<sup>5</sup> One cannot earn or transfer merit to another like a commodity through gift giving. Richard Gombrich reports that monks in Sri Lanka want to re-educate laypeople and dissuade them from linking gifts and commodities. Although giving to monks, beggars, and others is a part of the Theravada community, monks want to make it clear that deceased ancestors cannot partake in the food that laypeople offer.<sup>6</sup>

Max Weber, who has long influenced anthropological studies, suggests that Theravada Buddhist doctrine is backwards precisely because it does not fit within a capitalist mentality. He argues that monks and the elite of Theravada society spread doctrines and principles that are other-worldly and irrational because their religious outlook does not fit with an economic model of the Protestant work ethic.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Weber accepted the "true" and orthodox form of Theravada Buddhism promulgated by monks but rejected its philosophy all the same as a remnant of a pre-modern and pre-capitalistic time.

Contemporary anthropologists, working to give voice to the common people and show how they have a hand in shaping the Theravada world, have

tended away from using doctrine and towards popular practice as a means to construct a competing portrait of Southeast Asian communities. Because it is still difficult to disentangle colonial powers from the elites of society, there is reason to pay more attention to the beliefs of the uneducated and those who have fewer material means. Tambiah, who studies Sri Lankan and Thai Theravada communities, argues that everyday practices by monks and laypeople show that Theravada Buddhism is both rational and oriented around economic principles. Although he concedes that Theravada doctrine and philosophy privileges other-worldly concerns because it emphasizes enlightenment, he believes that the actions of monks and laypeople tell another story. Tambiah suggests that Theravada monks engage in activities that are grounded in the betterment of this world. For instance, monks work to build schools and educate the laity. Through these acts, Tambiah argues that Theravada leaders did not simply have a soteriological view, which understood salvation as belonging to a different time and place. He further suggests that what orthodox monks describe as superstitious gift giving is a version of capitalist spending and earning.<sup>8</sup>

Although doctrinaire monks discourage laypeople from thinking that they can accrue merit by supporting monks or providing food for the deceased, Tambiah believes such gift giving is a means for the laity to develop a store of credit to offset any karmic demerits they accumulate simply through living. Melford Spiro further suggests that, for Theravada Buddhists living in unstable countries such as Burma, spending and giving to earn merit towards a future life is a better investment than working to improve one's present life.<sup>9</sup>

## French Theorists and Gift Exchange

Despite the focus on the practice of Theravada Buddhists, anthropologists have not rid themselves of theory. Quite to the contrary, philosophers loom large in their analysis of Theravada communities. French theorists, in particular, have been influential for anthropologists to understand popular practices of Theravada Buddhism. That gift giving is a common object of study for contemporary anthropologists can be traced back to Marcel Mauss' research. Mauss declared that gift giving is intrinsic to all cultures and epochs<sup>10</sup> but he had particular interest in religious gifts. Mauss' research in Hindu texts led him to believe that all giving was reciprocal in nature.<sup>11</sup> He claimed that, "although the prestations and counter-prestations take place under a voluntary guise they are in essence strictly obligatory, and their sanction is private or open warfare."<sup>12</sup> Mauss further suggests that Hindus understand that it is dangerous to take gifts because they form a bond of dependence between the recipient and the donor.<sup>13</sup> Scholars disagree if Mauss' claims correctly describe Theravada communities, despite its connections to Hindu societies. Michael Walsh reinforces the position of Mauss and Spiro, especially as he analyzes the expectations of the laity when they give to monks, which is common in Theravada culture. Although

laypeople do not give money and alms to monks with the expectation that the monks will give the money back with interest, the laity, according to Walsh, has a relationship of exchange with the monk. The monk allows the laity to earn merit in return for their donations.<sup>14</sup> Put simply, the model of mutual dependence shows that monks repay the laity for their material support by providing them with the merit they need to procure a better future either in this life or the next.

Jonathan Parry argues, in contrast, that Theravada Buddhism has an asymmetrical structure of giving because villagers make offerings to the Buddha who has already achieved nirvana and has no need for gifts. Gifts only exist in the profane world. Although villagers give alms to monks, the laypeople are the ones who are benefitting from the gift. Without monks accepting the support, laity would have one fewer source of gaining merit. The monks offer their services by accepting alms but do not benefit from them because they do not occupy a wholly profane space. The monk receives the gift and acts as a field of merit for those who hope to obtain salvation through religious donations.<sup>15</sup> Parry believes, therefore, that the ritual for accepting alms disrupts the notion of a direct relationship of exchange between monk and laity.

In another interpretation of asymmetrical giving, Claude Levi-Strauss builds on Mauss' work and credits Mauss for being "one of the very first to expose the insufficiency of traditional psychology and logic, and to break open their rigid frameworks, revealing different forms of thought, seemingly 'alien to our adult European mind.'"<sup>16</sup> Levi-Strauss takes a position that allows him to recognize that monks benefit from almsgiving but laypeople, in contrast, may not. He argues that gift giving is based on exchange but an indirect one.<sup>17</sup> He believes gift giving in Theravada cultures, in particular, does not hinge on direct reciprocity. Because there are multiple donors and recipients within the system of exchange, there is not an expectation that a particular gift will generate a reciprocal gift. There is no guarantee of receiving a gift in return. If a gift does arrive, it will likely not be from the one whom the original gift was given. In short, there are no reciprocal gifts between, say, layperson and monk or donor and recipient. Levi-Strauss suggests, instead, that gift giving works in a general economy of exchange.<sup>18</sup> Gift giving is necessary in order to improve the community but there is no guarantee of personal return of wealth. Reward comes in the form of a better community rather than a more personalized return to the donor.

James Laidlaw asserts that anthropologists have, therefore, largely followed Mauss' reading of the gift as a means to strengthen social ties and often in terms of obligations between community members. The no-strings attached form of gifts does not, according to Mauss and his followers, exist. The free gift is, furthermore, of no interest to anthropologists because it does not establish social connections.<sup>19</sup> Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of gift giving reflects nicely the internalization of socio-political knowledge. It is impossible

to understand the gift as coming from an isolated individual. The gift necessarily exists in relation to the community and the gift reveals the multiple forms of capital that work within society.<sup>20</sup> The influence of Bourdieu's text, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, which shows the circulation and transformation of economic capital into other forms of capital, still influences anthropologists. Richard Gombrich, for instance, believes that merit-making by supporting a monk financially allows individuals to be seen as spiritually virtuous.<sup>21</sup> In this way, economic capital turns into social capital in Theravada communities because the donor uses gifts to monks to gain esteem and recognition as a virtuous person in the community.

Katherine Bowie, who works to understand the agency of those in lower classes to push back against capitalism, also uses Bourdieu's framework to reveal social connections and obligations. She suggests that beggars use gift giving to wield power over would-be donors. In Theravada Thai communities,<sup>22</sup> beggars supply those with means with another field of merit. Bowie emphasizes the parallel between the treatment of monks and beggars while receiving material support. In both cases, donors remove their shoes and raise a bowl of rice over their head before offering it to the other. The poor provide an opportunity to give and part with material possessions for the good of the community. Conversely, Bowie reports that the underclass of Thai society has threatened to destroy property and goods of the wealthier community members if they continuously deny rice or other material support to beggars when they arrive.<sup>23</sup> This socio-political framework casts doubt on whether gift giving is a result of solidarity with the other. Because Bourdieu uses the master concept of interest to understand gift giving and human actions in general, he does not leave room for solidarity with the other. Do donors give out of self-interestedness or out of compassion with the other? A gift in this context, in other words, points to the paradox of the gift. Presenting a disinterested gift seems to be an impossible act.<sup>24</sup>

## Disrupting the Gift Economy

Derrida's analysis of the gift is similar to that of Bourdieu because he recognizes the asymmetrical form that is inherent within gift giving. Despite Derrida's numerous texts on the gift, Theravada scholars do not make much use of Derrida's theories to understand gift giving in Southeast Asian Buddhist communities because he focuses on the philosophical contradiction within gift giving. On the one hand, engaging with Derrida's concept of the gift goes against the dominant socio-political reading of gift giving in Theravada culture. On the other, there is something to be gained. Because Derrida works to understand gifts outside the socio-political structure that mimics the circulation of money, he is more able than Bourdieu and others mentioned above to think gift giving as a gesture of solidarity with the other.

By pushing asymmetry to its limit, Derrida breaks with dominant anthropological readings of the gift. Derrida believes a true gift is given when

there is no possibility of return. The gift, according to Derrida, must be given without an intent or desire for any type of recompense. He analyzes “the gift that is not a present, the gift of something that remains inaccessible, unrepresentable, and as a consequence secret.”<sup>25</sup> The donor must not expect repayment, a reciprocal gift, or even a show of gratitude. Giving, when placed in a circular economy of reciprocity, reveals a pernicious connection to debt. If giving engenders a gift in return, the recipient is indebted to the donor. The gift, therefore, is not a gift. The unconditional gift calls, instead, for a forgetting of the self. An unidentifiable donor circumvents the need to repay or thank a particular person. As David Borman notes, disinterested charity spurns the recognition of others but this can also be dangerous if this is a means for the giver to solidify notions of superiority. The only safeguard against such egocentrism requires forgetting that one has given.<sup>26</sup> A true gift, then, points to an absurdity where the gift giver is a secret kept even from the giver.

In the *Gift of Death*, Derrida engages the reading of Abraham made famous by Kierkegaard to reinforce the importance of paradox and secrecy. For Kierkegaard, Abraham breaks with ethics through his willingness to answer God’s call to sacrifice Isaac. Because ethics operates as a guideline for all community members to follow and Abraham’s actions are hardly a model for the many, Kierkegaard proclaims that Abraham does not act ethically. Instead, Abraham exemplifies the singularity that marks his relationship with God. Only in this context, does it make sense that Abraham is a hero in the Christian world.<sup>27</sup>

A Derridean reading further suggests that the relationship between Abraham and God hinges on a secret that cannot be shared with or mimicked by the community. He adds, “It is only a matter of his determination, his passive-and-active commitment not-to-be-able-to-mean-to-say, to keep a secret even under the worst conditions, hence unconditionally...That is the test of unconditionality in love, namely the oath sworn between two absolute singularities.”<sup>28</sup> The proximity of love and the monstrous are bridged by the mysterious relationship to the other. Abraham in preparing his unconditional gift of Isaac to God says nothing to others about his plans. He bears the monstrousness of God’s call and keeps it hidden from Sarah and Isaac. The unconditional gift is an example of a secret that cannot be said, in part, because it defies understanding. The call of God is wholly other and, therefore, monstrous. Unlike Kierkegaard, Derrida argues that the relationship to the other, which is incomprehensible and even abhorrent to the community, is what allows for ethics. At the same time, the openness that Abraham exhibits towards God shows his unconditional love for God. Indeed, Rodolphe Gasche highlights the role of love within Derrida’s mystery. “[T]he unseen gaze of an absolutely self-less Goodness ... shakes the soul (self or person) because it is unable to adequately respond to this gift of love.”<sup>29</sup> Abraham’s responsibility to God stems from God singling him out,

which alludes to the gift of being that God has bestowed to Abraham. Although Abraham never catches a glimpse of God, he cannot deny the goodness of his existence that God has made possible. Abraham's willingness to accept responsibility for the murderous act out of love for God, furthermore, is a form of solidarity with the other that falls outside of the socio-economic understanding of the gift.

That Derrida conjures up Abraham's relationship with God as a focal point in his analysis of the gift may be off-putting to those who study Theravada Buddhism, where there is no personal savior. Derrida suggests, also in contrast to anthropological readings, that the gift shows a connection between two singular beings that falls outside of the community. A gift can have meaning precisely because it does not cohere with social norms and dictates. Derrida reinforces the ethics of gift giving through his reading of Mauss. He argues that, Mauss' analysis highlights an ethics of generosity that the giving-being embodies. The gift, furthermore, reveals excess and that which the community cannot capture even in language. Mauss, in Derrida's view, enumerates a dizzying array of gifts from potlatch to marriage (giving away one's child) so as to point to a madness that cannot be bound by a transactional system or language itself.<sup>30</sup> Mauss, Derrida relays, "has gone too quickly and too superficially over questions that deserve a wider treatment..."<sup>31</sup> In the end, Mauss' cataloguing of gifts makes the gift incomprehensible. How are these forms of exchanges related to gifts? It is unclear. Is there a thread that connects these examples of gifts? Again, it is unclear.

Considering Derrida's treatment of the gift, it is not surprising that anthropologists would shy away from his work that leads to puzzlement rather than greater understanding. Anthropologists, moreover, may resist Derrida's treatment of the gift because he shrouds the gift in mysteries that frustrate—rather than reveal—knowledge about the workings of a community. Prominent anthropologists such as Tambiah have, indeed, fought to establish a this-worldly philosophy of Theravada Buddhism. Anthropologists, who are sympathetic to Bourdieu, privilege readings of almsgiving and gift giving that connect meaning making within the earthly community and particularly in terms of power structures in society. Taking up Derrida's reading of the gift would seem to erase these efforts when he discusses singular relationships that not only make no sense for the community as a whole but also points to a connection with an other-worldly being.

## Gifts and Ghosts

Rosalind Morris suggests that Derrida's disavowal of anthropology's humanist methodology has not, however, blunted his influence on the field.<sup>32</sup> Many anthropologists, to the contrary, have found Derrida useful for understanding annual festivals in Southeast Asia that center on giving to

hungry ghosts.<sup>33</sup> Although anthropologists explicitly engage with Derrida's hauntological theories when it concerns ghost festivals, I suggest that his analysis of hauntology reinforces and deepens his concept of the gift—which anthropologists do not favor. Derrida's analysis of gift giving in conjunction with his philosophy of hauntology allows for a space of giving that challenges the strict dichotomy between this world and another world and dualistic thinking, generally, that runs through Western ontology. The link to the otherworldly, the monstrous, and the irrational or other to capitalist logic are all elements that connect Derrida's gift and hauntology to Southeast Asian ghost festivals. The gift connects to the ghost, as its being and presence are in question. Derrida states, "the gift, if there is any, should overrun the border, to be sure, toward the measureless and the excessive; but it should also suspend its relation to the border and even its transgressive relation to the separable line or trait of the border."<sup>34</sup> From a hauntological perspective, the reach of gifts beyond the earthly realm blurs the line between the world of material goods and spirit world. The gift, like the ghost in Derrida's work, defies containment. Gifts and ghosts, furthermore, point to the ambiguity of rational, economic, national boundaries. Giving to ghosts neither reinforces nor completely annuls borders of logic.

Ghost festivals disrupt the notion that Theravada Buddhism must orient its philosophy either towards the dictates of this world or succumb to the mysticism of another world. There is a common belief in Southeast Asia that it is possible for the deceased to exist in a space between life and death for various reasons. Anyone who had not lived a meritorious life or anyone who had not been given the proper funerary rites may not be able to break fully from the world of the living. Because war and conflict have left their mark on this region of Asia, there are many who committed immoral acts or have died in ways that have made it impossible for their family to hold a traditional burial ceremony. That is to say, many believe that ghosts haunt Southeast Asia in the form of monstrous beings who have been deformed because they cannot receive the nourishment they need to move beyond the ghostly realm. Yet the people, nevertheless, should try to feed and support these hideous beings.

These annual rituals to feed hungry ghosts allow Southeast Asians to provide acts of kindness and develop bonds with those who fall outside set familial, geopolitical, national, and temporal boundaries. As Derrida explains, hauntology "gives place and gives rise [*donne lieu*]. All national rootedness, for example, is rooted first of all in the memory or the anxiety of a displaced- or displaceable-population."<sup>35</sup> Participants of the festival are able to mourn the loss of those close to them, those who were cast as enemies, and even those lost souls who no one remembers by name. Ghost festivals in post-colonial Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are distinctive because they aim to feed and care for beings even if they do not share one's political affiliation, bloodline, or even humanity. Honoring and feeding the dead through these annual

celebrations are an attempt to ease the suffering of ghosts and give them what they need to transition into another, more auspicious form of existence. In short, the role of the gift is integral for understanding ghost festivals.

In Laos, villagers often fill baskets with the favorite foods of their dead relatives. Some even affix particular names of relatives to the baskets of foods and goods. Patrice Ladwig reports, though, that there is debate over whether or not ghosts can benefit from the gifts given by villagers. More doctrinaire monks argue that the gifts are really meant for them. This is the reason why wealthier community members now purchase pre-packaged gift baskets with objects that are most useful to monks to donate during the festival. Hence, there is synchronicity and melding between doctrinal Theravada and colonial readings of irrational attendants of ghost festivals. A scholar in the mold of Weber would likely see the ghost festival as an indicator of a pre-modern religion replete with irrational acts. Some orthodox Theravada monks, in similar fashion, describe feeding ghosts as superstitions that have been held over by a past and impure understanding of Buddhism. For anthropologists following in the tradition of Weber and scholarly monastics, capitalism and rationality work together. Those who do not prescribe to capitalist gift giving are, therefore, illogical because they believe that there is no strict line between this world and the other world. Yet villagers often place things such as combs in baskets, which would not be of any use to monks who all shave their heads. This suggests that some people believe that the deceased will make use of the gifts and that there can be some crossover between the material and spiritual worlds.<sup>36</sup>

Ladwig argues, furthermore, that ghosts operate as a form of political resistance for ethnic Lao. Because the state would rather be rid of monastic powers that challenge government, ghosts can represent a means for the people to express their desire to recapture or reassert their belief in a Buddhism that the state has repressed. Belief in ghosts goes hand-in-hand, therefore, with a challenge to the state. Monks are central to ghost celebrations because the festivals often occur on Buddhist temple grounds. The state, therefore, sees the celebration of ghost festivals as a reclaiming of past Buddhist traditions and places Buddhism in the millenarian struggle for a more just future for the people.<sup>37</sup> Heonik Kwon treats ghosts—like the monks in Laos—as beings that have the power to shape and disrupt the world of the living if they do not receive the proper care and respect. Unlike Western therapists who interpret ghosts as a response to a psychological trauma, a hauntological reading of ghosts suggests that they can have a kind of material existence. In a reading of post-war Vietnam, Kwon stresses that community members and informants believe that ghosts have the ability to cause damage in the physical world and even kill the living.

They are forced to move in the periphery of this world and live in the fringes of the other. Kwon states, “In short, ghosts are ontological refugees who are uprooted from home, which is a place where their memory can be

settled.”<sup>38</sup> They are ontological refugees because they are not at home either in the world of the dead or the living. The trauma of the Pol Pot regime, which was coextensive with the Vietnam War, has added an extra layer of danger in the way ghosts are conceptualized in Cambodia. If relatives or friends died during the Khmer Rouge, they may be enraged. Cambodians believe that ghosts enjoy tormenting and can kill the living in order to have a companion.<sup>39</sup> Ghosts can drag the living into their world, which shows that the ontological status of the living is not stable either.

## Hauntology and the Present

Hauntology reflects the ontological status of the living as well as ghosts. Although Derrida does not engage with Buddhist ontology, his ideas concerning hauntology resonate with the Theravada conception of the self. The Theravadin understanding of “no-self” and the ghost hinge on dynamism and the coming together of composite parts that shift.<sup>40</sup> Much has been written about the five aggregates that constitute the no-self (body, mind, volition, sense, and perception) but the element of time, which is not counted as an aggregate, is often hidden. A hauntological perspective fits with the concept of no-self because Derrida describes being and co-dependent arising. Derrida states:

Now... what properly (*eignet*) belongs to a present, be it to the present of the other, to the present as the other, is the jointure of its lingering awhile, of its time, of its moment (*die Fuge seiner Weile*). What the one does not have, what the one therefore does not have to give away, but what the one gives to the other, over and above the market, above market, bargaining, thanking, commerce, and commodity, is to leave to the other this accord with himself that is proper to him (*ihm eignet*) and gives him presence.<sup>41</sup>

Breaking from the canonical Western notion that the self exists as a contained and atomized being, Derrida suggests that one needs the other and to give to the other in order to understand oneself, which adds a relational aspect to Heidegger’s intentionally abstract ontology. Some one has to give some thing to another.<sup>42</sup> What one has, can, or is willing to offer to the other elucidates what belongs and constitutes the self because one cannot offer what one does not have. While Derrida moves towards grounding being through the gift—to which presence is tethered, the other remains difficult to define and allusive. Derrida’s hauntology, therefore, does not operate strictly on the plane of abstract ontology nor does he seek to find meaning solely through material interactions.

Jean Langford suggests that, “The dead might be conceptualized, ultimately, not only as versions, but also as temporary, if recurring, coalescences, shifting assemblages similar to the Buddhist self, playing loose

with time."<sup>43</sup> On a rudimentary level, it is clear that one's physical body and ideas do not remain consistent through time. It is also the case that certain parts of the self can remain largely the same while others change. For instance, one remains the same height for years while one may have various beliefs about religion throughout one's life. The no-self changes in physical form and shifts in time. Time serves as the backdrop for the coalescing and disbanding of aggregate parts. Time is the invisible but allows for appearance.<sup>44</sup>

Ghosts are not only ambiguous in terms of being and substance but they also raise questions concerning time that go beyond ascertaining historical eras in relations to colonialism, which are common tools for understanding the significance of ghost festivals in Southeast Asia. Anthropologists show that believing in ghosts or participating in ghost festivals shows one's political allegiance. In Cambodia, the festival to feed ghosts (pchum ben in Khmer) is not seen by "modernists" as properly belonging to Buddhism. Traditionalists, conversely, see it as integral to Khmer culture because it has connections to Ang Duang, the last king before a French colonial protectorate was established in 1863. This is not a historically accurate claim but rather alludes to a political statement by the Khmer people.<sup>45</sup> Holt stresses the ways that the importance of this festival serves as a resistance to both Communist and French influence. Even young Khmer monks recognize that pchum ben is more a Khmer tradition than a Buddhist festival. This is striking to Holt for two reasons. First, monks continue to inflect the ritual with Buddhism and bind the two together. Hinton et al also suggests that Cambodians invoke the qualities of the Buddha during festivals in order to ward off ghostly harm.<sup>46</sup> Second, the realization that this ritual is not Buddhist was probably not clear to Cambodians until the arrival of the French. Beforehand, there was no questioning that what belonged to Khmer culture was Buddhist.<sup>47</sup>

Derrida invites us through hauntology to play with notions of time and to recognize what is present and what is not present, which includes both the past and the future. Ghosts in Southeast Asia conjure up the hauntological because they do not exist properly as spirits or earthbound beings, as Kwon describes, and because it conjures up the often hidden connection between being and time that arises from a philosophical analysis that is often missing from ghost festivals. These festivals reveal the ways that the present, the past, and the future converge in the treatment of ghosts. Derrida's analysis of gifts and exchange point to the being-together and at-the-same-time.<sup>48</sup> It is, indeed, difficult to discern which meanings of ghost festivals belong to the Khmer tradition and that which is a response to outside forces. They coningle, even as scholars try to separate them.

Although Derrida—who identifies as Franco-Maghrebian<sup>49</sup>—reflects on France's relationship with its past North African colonies in his work concerning the other, he mentions nothing about France's influence in Southeast Asia. This is curious because as Harootian notes,

‘Southeast Asia’ has always been the common frame that structured the particular relationship between Europe of the colonizers and its Asian colonized and thus became the location that best exemplified for him the peculiar nature of the “haunting,” as he puts it, as both the place of comparison and the necessity of comparability... As a result, Southeast Asia, and by extension all colonies, became the overdetermined place of haunting.<sup>50</sup>

By confronting the ghost of colonialism in Southeast Asia, Western philosophers can see that time has been crucial for lending a positive air to Theravada Buddhism that takes into account the other-worldly. Although earlier colonial forays required a this-worldly defense of Theravada cultures, time has now made it possible to see that Theravada communities may have a lesson to give to Western others precisely because its relationship to the other (world) is ambiguous.

## Conclusion

Because knowledge about Theravada ghost festivals depends on anthropological fieldwork, analyses of social and power networks are front and center. The desire to interpret ghost festivals as practitioners, rather than foreigners, would be understandable given the history of colonialism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Yet the emphasis in Bourdieu’s anthropological research, for instance, has been to understand gift giving in terms of gaining power and status, which has made locating ethical currents in Theravada communities difficult. As the work of Kwon and Ladwig shows, some Theravada Buddhists maintain that giving to ghosts is an act of kindness and solidarity with the other. In Laos, monks residing on temple grounds not only help organize the annual event but they also represent the ethical responsibility to care for the other. Monks, like the hungry ghosts of the festivals, require the support of the people for food.<sup>51</sup> In Sri Lanka, it is custom to carry small coins to give to a beggar as a show of compassion.<sup>52</sup> Obeyesekere further notes also that Theravada Buddhists believe that rejoicing in the good work of another is valuable because that act of recognizing meritorious behavior creates merit for the one who rejoices even if she has not made an offering herself.<sup>53</sup> Ignoring the ethical sentiments of local practitioners or reworking these acts to fit into a transactional and capitalist schema does not capture the complexity of gifts and ghosts in Theravada culture.

It is not clear how much Theravada practices have shifted with the rise of capitalism in Southeast Asia but it is also possible that interpretations of the irrational villager can be transformed into one who resists capitalist tendencies. Invoking Derrida’s hauntology allows a greater possibility for the ontological and the ethical to mix with socio-political readings of Theravada communities. Only by addressing the other, which can include the other-

worldly or that which does not completely belong to this world, can there be a glimpse of the ethical. Whereas Tambiah fought against an other-worldly interpretation of Theravada Buddhism in order to show that its philosophy was rational and in sync with capitalism, a hauntological examination of Theravada practices such as giving to ghosts shows that contact with the other (in terms of theory or another discipline such as philosophy) can be positive. Philosophers may be freer than anthropologists to take lessons from others because they do not feel obliged to represent fully and accurately what the other means. Derrida, in particular, plays with meaning, what others mean to say, and what is said nevertheless. In this spirit, ghost festivals are an opportunity for thinking an ethics of the gift. Ghost festivals, indeed, show the tension in accepting the ethical component of the celebration, which some participants want to maintain, while not falling into an Orientalizing reading of ghost festivals as a romanticized resistance to Western capitalism.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 33-55 and Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-colonial Theory, India, and the "Mystic East"* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 144-149.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison, (New York: Norton & Company, 1967), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, trans. and eds. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958), 68.

<sup>4</sup> Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 103-118.

<sup>5</sup> Benedicte Brac de la Perriere, "Religious Donations, Ritual Offerings, and Humanitarian Aid: Fields of Practice according to Forms of Giving in Burma," *Religious Compass* 9, no. 11 (2015): 394.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Gombrich, "Merit Transference in Sinhalese Buddhism: A Case Study of Interaction between Doctrine and Practice," *History of Religions* 11 (1971), 217.

<sup>7</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1958), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Tambiah, "Buddhism and This-Worldly Activity," *Modern Asian Studies* 7 (1973): 2.

<sup>9</sup> Melford E. Spiro, "Buddhism and Economic Action in Burma," *American Anthropologist* 68 (1966): 1166.

- <sup>10</sup> Ilana F. Silber, "Neither Mauss nor Veyne," in *The Gift in Antiquity*, 202-220, ed. Michael Satlow (London: Wiley-Blackwell 2013), 204.
- <sup>11</sup> Jonathan Parry, "The Gift, the Indian Gift, and the 'Indian Gift,'" *Man: New Series* 21 (1986): 459.
- <sup>12</sup> Mauss, *Gift*, 5.
- <sup>13</sup> Mauss, *Gift*, 76.
- <sup>14</sup> Michael J. Walsh, "Economics of Salvation: Towards a Theory of Salvation in Chinese Buddhism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75 (2007): 369. Although Walsh's article focuses on Chinese Buddhist communities in America, he references the legacy of Mauss' analysis of gift giving.
- <sup>15</sup> Parry, "Indian Gift," 462.
- <sup>16</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. Felicity Baker, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 65.
- <sup>17</sup> Parry, "The Indian Gift," 454.
- <sup>18</sup> James Laidlaw, "A Free Gift Makes No Friends," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6 (2000): 625.
- <sup>19</sup> Laidlaw, "Free Gift," 617.
- <sup>20</sup> Camil Ungureanu, "Bourdieu and Derrida on Gift: Beyond 'Double Truth' and Paradox," *Human Studies* 36 (2013): 396.
- <sup>21</sup> Richard Gombrich, "Merit Transference," 215.
- <sup>22</sup> Although Thailand was never colonized by any European nation, I include analysis of Thailand because Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion there. More to the point, French theorists such as Bourdieu inform Bowie's fieldwork in Thailand.
- <sup>23</sup> Katherine Bowie, "The Alchemy of Charity: Of Class and Buddhism in Northern Thailand," *American Anthropologist* 100 (1998): 471-472.
- <sup>24</sup> Ungureanu, "Bourdieu and Derrida," 398.
- <sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 31.
- <sup>26</sup> David A. Borman, "To Give in the Name, or to Give without Names: Derrida, the Gift, and the Giving of Alms," *Philosophy Today* 49 (2005): 151.
- <sup>27</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 25-27.
- <sup>28</sup> Derrida, *Gift*, 155.
- <sup>29</sup> Rodolphe Gasche, "European Memories: Jan Patocka and Jacques Derrida on Responsibility," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007): 298.
- <sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 44-47.

- <sup>31</sup> Derrida, *Given*, 60.
- <sup>32</sup> Rosalind C. Morris, "Legacies of Derrida: Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22 (2007): 356-357.
- <sup>33</sup> Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln, "Toward a Critical Hauntology: Bare Afterlife and the Ghosts of Ba Chuc," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57 (2015): 197.
- <sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Given*, 91.
- <sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 103.
- <sup>36</sup> Patrice Ladwig, "Haunting the State: Rumours, Spectral Apparitions and the longing for Buddhist Charisma in Laos" *Asian Studies Review* 37 (2013): 518.
- <sup>37</sup> Ladwig, "Haunting the State," 518-521.
- <sup>38</sup> Heonik Kwon, "The Ghosts of the American War in Vietnam," *The Asia Pacific Journal* 6 (2008): 7.
- <sup>39</sup> D.E. Hinton, A.L. Hinton, V. Pich, J. R. Loeum, and M. H. Pollack, "Nightmares among Cambodian Refugees: The Breaching of Concentric Ontological Security," *Cult Med Psychiatry* 33 (2009): 259.
- <sup>40</sup> Please see Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*, (New York: Grove Press, 1974) for greater analysis of the "no-self" in Theravada Buddhism.
- <sup>41</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, 31.
- <sup>42</sup> Derrida, *Given*, 11.
- <sup>43</sup> Jean M. Langford, *Consoling Ghosts: Stories of Medicine and Mourning from Southeast Asians in Exile* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 213.
- <sup>44</sup> Derrida, *Given*, 6.
- <sup>45</sup> John Clifford Holt, "Caring for the Dead Ritually in Cambodia," *Southeast Asian Studies* 1 (2012): 11.
- <sup>46</sup> Hinton et al, "Nightmares," 259.
- <sup>47</sup> Holt, "Caring for the Dead," 54.
- <sup>48</sup> Derrida, *Given*, 37.
- <sup>49</sup> Muriam Haleh Davis, "Algeria as Postcolony?: Rethinking the Colonial Legacy of Post-Structuralism," *Journal of French and Francophone* 19 (2011): 136.
- <sup>50</sup> Harry Harootunian, "Ghostly Comparisons: Anderson's Telescope," *Diacritics* 29 (1999): 135-136.
- <sup>51</sup> Ladwig, "Rumours," 521.
- <sup>52</sup> Carol S. Anderson, "The Possibility of a Post-colonial Buddhist Ethic of Wealth," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 33 (2013): 149.

<sup>53</sup> Gananath Obeyesekere, "Religion and Polity in Theravada Buddhism: Continuity and the Great Tradition. A Review Article." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 21 (1979): 626-627.