



ENCOUNTERS AT THE EDGE OF NIGHT: An Ethnography of the Weird

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“Do you believe in ghosts? [*Seua leuang phi boh?*],” Mon asks me. Mon—a pseudonym for a fifty-year-old Thai-Lao fisher with whom I had developed a friendship over the years—and I are sitting in his compound, around an open-air table overlooking the Mekong, where the great river marks the border between Thailand and Laos. Now, approaching midnight, darkness covers the view, and we can only hear the insects calling from the riverbank and the flow of the water moving past. We had spent the evening talking about sightings of the *naga*, a great water serpent that Mon described seeing in the river. The beast, according to Mon’s speculation, had recently died, and we were discussing its return in ghostly and dream form—thus the question. But it is a question that I hear often from people that I meet in Thailand when I describe my research. Do I believe the stories that people tell me? Have I ever met a ghost (*phi*)?

I have a stock answer in such situations, and it is this answer that I give Mon. “I don’t believe, but I don’t offend [them] [*Mai cheua, ya lop-luu*].¹ It is a response cultivated for my middle-class Bangkokian friends: those who might entertain the thought of spirits but also scoff at superstitious local traditions. But here, I provide the response hesitantly—I have been close with Mon for five years at this point. I lived in his compound on the banks of the river during my fieldwork trips, and spent many nights like this one, watching the river go by.

He had given his youngest son the use-name (*seu len*) Endoo, a cute variant of my own name, meaning “to be affectionate.” We have long passed the point for clever demurrals and stock phrases.

Mon immediately lets me know this. He raises his voice. “It’s a real fucking question [*man kham-tham jing wa*]!” He repeats:

Meung farang, ma nii, waw Thai, waw Isan. Meung pen dok-toe, hian-huu lai. Seua heuang phi boh? [You are a foreigner. You speak Thai, you speak Isan. You are a doctor who has done a lot of learning. Do you believe in ghosts?]

Mon’s anger at what I thought was a diplomatic response unsettles me. “No [*boh*].” I respond, looking him in the eye. “I have never seen one [*boh khoeu hen*],” I add, as a weak qualification, qualifying my “no” with “I have not seen.” Mon turns away without comment. Neither of us are satisfied.

In this article, I take this exchange and others like it about ghosts and dreams in Northern and Northeastern Thailand (Isan) as “weird” occurrences, ones that point to the edges of inquiry and the unknowability of the world, without the requirement that they be resolved (Fisher 2016; Harman 2012). In so doing, I seek to bring local understandings into conversation with a wide body of theory—Western philosophy (Wittgenstein 1961), Buddhist philosophy (Garfield 1995), anthropology, and Mon’s own interpretation. I do so with an eye to contributing to “ethnographic theory” in Giovanni da Col and David Graeber’s (2011) sense, using ethnographic encounters as a means to question and build on philosophy (see Puett 2019; Tomlinson 2016). In addition to Mon’s story, I draw from other Thai accounts of ghostly and dream appearances to see ghosts (*phi*) and dream-worlds as challenges to the everyday: upheavals that at the same time as they present a critique do not offer resolution in its wake. Ghosts here are contradictory in Nāgārjuna’s sense—these occurrences question normative propositions (“ghosts do not exist”), but they do not resolve into an alternative metaphysics (“ghosts exist”), instead revealing the lack of stable essences (“existence is contingent”). Such contradictions are not the business of the writing desk; they require multiple voices. Here, we have Mon, a fisher; Nok, the daughter and caretaker of a spirit medium; my own experiences; and the often inchoate other voices that speak to and through us.

TO NOT OFFEND

Spectral figures, including in dreams and other forms of experience, play uncomfortable roles within many ethnographies. For many scholars, ghosts provide a window into injustices not yet resolved, contradictions awaiting resolution

(see [Gordon 2008](#); [Good, Chioventa, and Rahimi 2022](#); [Good 2019](#)). Working with the ghosts of war in Vietnam, [Heonik Kwon \(2008\)](#) sees ghosts as a tool through which people can turn the horrors and dislocations of war into community and productive potential. But the strange experiences Mon and others talk about are not necessarily alternate narratives to be resolved. Rather, they are questions that remain open.

[Stephan Palmié \(2022a, 2022b\)](#) describes a similar struggle with ghosts in his own work on Tomás, a spirit that his interlocutors (and his partner) see, lurking behind his work. At first, Palmié approaches Tomás as a means to an explanation, a presence that points to suppressed or repressed histories that undergird, unacknowledged, the present ([Palmié 2022b](#), 484). Tomás, in this initial reading, cannot exist *as Tomás* but must be made a mystery to be resolved. But this would be to imagine the possibility of an un-haunted present, one free from Tomás. Instead, as Palmié writes, Tomás over time becomes more than metaphor, instead “unhinging” a Wittgenstenian “hinge proposition” ([Palmié 2022a](#), 76): an assumption about the nature of things that is uncontestable.

“I don’t believe, but I don’t offend” is a common response. Indeed, [Pattana Kitiarsa \(2003\)](#), an anthropologist born in a town not far from where Mon and I are sitting, used this phrase as the title of his dissertation, and [Felicity Aulino \(2022\)](#) has unpacked its contradictions. It is the first response that someone—even someone from Ban Beuk, Mon’s village—might give to the question “do you believe?” It also reflects a certain methodological sensibility: I am not going to suddenly accept as ontologically real a great scaly beast living in the river simply because Mon says so. At the same time, I felt that I should suspend my disbelief, and I certainly was not going to tell Mon that he was wrong. Like a good Geertzian, I was there to understand the “native’s point of view” ([Geertz 1974](#)).

My response contains within it a certain condescension. Mon points directly to it. Where I had thought of my reply as the diplomatic response of a successful researcher, I had failed Mon as a friend and as a colleague. Mon, as he stresses to me, is asking me a real fucking question. He asks for my perspective as someone who is tapped into sources of knowledge beyond his experience—a figure, it should be noted, very like a ghost, who sees some things very differently from a human. It is a recruitment into a community of searchers: anthropologists, especially in recent years, have sought to deconstruct the line between researcher and community, noting how at times our own loyalties may be split, or, indeed, be greater to the “research subjects” than to the academic community ([Allen 2024](#); [Simpson 2007](#)). Mon’s question erases such boundaries between researcher and subject and casts us both as beings trying to make sense of a world

together, a world in which the boundaries of sense seem to trail off to unreason. The world contains uncategorizable experiences and limits to knowledge; we may seek resolution from alternate perspectives: our interlocutors or our visiting anthropologists. But such answers are, of course, partial.

Aulino (2022, 2019) breaks down this question—“do you believe”—to argue for “a kaleidoscopic view of the mind” (Aulino 2022), one where belief (as *khwam cheua*)² does not state one definition to the universe, but rather one possibility revealed by one way of looking, which might be contradicted by another. As a monk interlocutor relates to Aulino (2022, 234), “if we believe they [spirits] exist, then they do; if we say they don’t exist, then they don’t. But they do.” One valence of belief exists in a universe with ghosts; another does not. Thus, for Aulino, Thai approaches to belief create pluriversal possibilities. Within Buddhist studies, too, Justin McDaniel (2006) and Jim Taylor (2025) both point toward the lack of a defined orthodoxy, and the persistence of possibility along other registers and potentialities. Here, though, I seek to step beyond Thailand and Buddhism and connect Thai and Thai-Lao encounters with the weird to other experiences, including my own. Here, too, I make the case not for parallel, contradictory knowledges, but for an existence that incorporates unknowability, non-knowledge itself.

Diana Espírito Santo, Marjorie Murray, and Paulina Salinas (2023) write on those experiences that challenge evidentiary regimes, those that, even for those who experience them, “cannot be.” Consider the case of a person who sees not just a mysterious light in the sky but a perfect facsimile of the saucer from *Independence Day*, or aliens that offer their human abductee blueberry pancakes (Espírito Santo, Murray, and Salinas 2023, 6). Such “absurd” or, as I might say, following Mark Fisher (2016), *weird* terms do “not fit into rational models of explanation, or even religious rationalizations” (Espírito Santo, Murray, and Salinas 2023, 1), and they destabilize evidentiary regimes (see Engelke 2008; Hastrup 2004). Experience exists (aliens appear), but experience is not reducible to what is seen or understood. Some other qualities must be missing—none can explain why the aliens are making pancakes.

Mon’s appeal to me frames not a cultural text, himself as the possessor of cultural knowledge and me as his student, nor me as an absolute authority on (a) reality. He does not see us as inhabiting separate ontological worlds—indeed, why would he? Rather, he sees us as collaborators, both individuals seeking knowledge. Elsewhere, I have written of Mon as a co-researcher, a word that Erik Harms (personal communication, March 16, 2021) “misread” as “core-searcher.” Harms’s construction is perhaps more correct; Mon seeks to get at the heart of things.

With that in mind, when Mon asks me to take his question seriously, he is rejecting the kind of separation a notion of difference provides. Mon is seeking a truth larger than Thai-Lao or *farang* (Western) understandings, but instead

is undertaking a theoretical exploration, one that will bind us both in a shared world, neither entirely his nor mine. In taking up Mon's search, I seek not simply reflexivity about my place in the field, but rather an engagement with what [Jadran Mimica \(2010, 220\)](#) terms "un/knowning," a rethinking of what constitutes reality and an openness to Mon's knowledge and, ultimately, both of our non-knowledge.

But, first, I move to the riverbank on which Mon and I sat.

ISAN WORLDS

I had lived in Ban Beuk, a village in the Isan region of Thailand, for roughly a year, and had visited off and on (as teaching schedules allow) for five years between 2014 and 2019. I spent most of my time with fishers, casting nets, untangling fish from the lines, surveying points on the river, and drinking in the cool of the evening. I got to know Mon and a range of other fishers—generally men in their forties and fifties, as well as migrant workers (indeed, these were often the same people, as Ban Beuk routinely sent labor to Bangkok and abroad; see [Johnson 2018](#)).

Mon has not come to our encounter with the impression that I have come to study—as [Eduardo Viveiros de Castro \(1998\)](#) would have it—a Thai-Lao ontology or ontologies across an unbridgeable divide. He sees me as having (partially) integrated into the community, as a sort of kin. While others in the community call me *dok-toe* (doctor), following common Thai-Lao convention by simply using status as name, Mon and I are *siao*, close friends, and he calls me *meung* (an affectionate or, in the wrong contexts, profane second-person pronoun—imagine calling someone a profane word in English; this can tighten close bonds and fracture distant ones). While I have come from further away, I am similar to Daeng, who moved to the Mekong from another province, or Ngeun, a Lao man who married into the community. Like Daeng and Ngeun, I must be taught the right way to talk and fish, to be told who the relevant powers are in the area, but like them, too, I also bring insights from afar that Mon would like to understand. In a matrilineal system—where husbands marry into the household of their wives—it is customary to incorporate men of around my age into the community's way of life, as it is to learn from them. It is a process reflected in community stories, too: common community origin myths in the area often involve a (foreign, Indian) Brahmin marrying a (local, chthonic) *naga* princess, bringing Buddhist power and Indian knowledge to the vital power of the land. Even within the past forty years, marriages of *nagas* with local family lines were often cited as what made the village special ([Johnson 2020a](#)). One makes a kinship with strangers, including foreigners, a bond which by necessity changes both parties.

The Isan region of Thailand is its poorest. Its arid climate limits rice harvests to twice per year, as opposed to the three annual crops typical of the

central region. As such, it is a source for manual labor, and most of Mon's cohort had gone off to work for many years in factories in South Korea, plantations in Palestine, or construction sites in Bangkok (see also Mills 1999).

With this class position comes a certain hierarchy. The term *naa Lao* (Lao face) (Hesse-Swain 2006) is an insult directed at those whose appearance matches what Isan people are imagined to look like: darker skin, deeper eye-wells, coarse hair (as opposed to East Asian facial features, markers of wealthy or imagined-to-be wealthy Sino-Thai urbanites). "Lao-looking" Bangkokians, too, might be barred from security perimeters set up around Bangkok's luxury malls (Vorng 2017), checkpoints set up after the unrest of 2010 (also blamed on an influx of Isan workers), which will allow wealthy-looking or foreign visitors to pass without a glance. A public education campaign targeting poverty in Isan foregrounded the need to tell Isan men to curb their drinking, as moral laxity was the cause of their poverty. Here, then, is a projection of class difference onto region, ethnicity, and language.

In the hierarchy of Isan and Bangkok, ghosts come into play, but ghosts of a certain sort. In Bangkok, among Thailand's wealthy and middle class, the practice of magic is not unusual. Thailand's military dictator at the time when Mon and I were speaking, Prayuth Chan-o-cha, famously displayed his collection of protective amulets in front of the press.³ Money-making magic, and the patronage of auspicious spirits, divinities, and past royal personages has a long tradition among Thailand's elite (see Siani 2023, 2018; Jackson 2022; Stengs 2009). Perhaps the most relevant such belief lies in Thailand's monarchism, a patronage that moves between royal grants and accolades to belief in divine charisma (*barami*) and fortune—public displays of devotion to the supernatural greatness of the monarch opens the door to official, social, and (for some) spiritual success (Work 2023; Johnson 2020b).

But such spiritual practices in Bangkok do not legitimate Isan beliefs. While the above urban practices go largely unquestioned (or, in the case of monarchical piety, are condoned as spiritual practice), Isan practices were often cast as *khwaam ngom-ngai* (foolishness, superstition) at worst, or "cultural" at best—as Sit But-in describes, "not meaningful" (Sit 1980). Thai media is replete with stories about the lacking sophistication of Isan people, from eating raw Mekong fish as a cause of bile duct cancer (Siani 2022) to a lack of iodine in the diet leading to low IQ scores, to political campaigns that sought to convince Isan voters they were not suited to making political decisions (see Funahashi 2016). Defenders of local traditions, too, do so by framing local practices as cultural heritage (*wat-thanatham*) or "local wisdom" (*phumipanya thong-thin*)—recasting "irrational and in need of change" to "irrational and charming."

Mon, then, puts himself at risk in confirming or denying his belief in ghosts. I might tell him that he was *ngom-ngai* and lacked education. While I do not do this, I perhaps do something worse: I refuse to engage with his question—do ghosts exist—at all. Instead, I silo his knowledge and speculating into a de-fanged and empty “belief,” a cultural practice without relevance to my own life. But why?

A ROSTER WITHOUT DEFINITIONS

To clarify, Mon asks me if I believe in *phi*. This term, *phi*, refers to far more than the sort of immaterial specter we might associate with ghosts from a Western tradition. Rather, *phi* refers to a general category of beings with qualities that extend beyond ordinary perception: benevolent guardian spirits (*phi arak*), malevolent undead spirits (*phi tai hoong*), ethnic groups with (for most Thais) strange customs (*phi tong leuang*),⁴ vampiric floating heads (*phi krasue*), witches (*phi pop*), and jungle goblins (*phi kong koi*). It can also simply serve as an insult—annoyingly loud teenagers racing motorcycles at night might be “crazy ghosts” (*phi ba*). Such beings might make themselves known by fortune or misfortune, dreams (which I discuss here), an odd string of coincidences, images in moving leaves or flowing water, or simple bodily presence (see [Davis 1984](#); [High 2022](#); [Work 2016](#); [Johnson 2016](#)).

[Robert Textor \(1973\)](#), in an early study, attempted to compile a “roster of the gods,” a catalog of the various kinds of Thai ghosts, spirits, *phi*, and divinities. Such guides are popular in Western and Thai presses (see [Shalardchai 1984](#)). But what should go into such a catalog depends on the aims of the manuscript, the audience, and the frame of the question—what is a ghost? One night, Mon’s sister and his younger farmhand, Nu, had a bitter dispute over whether *phi kong koi*, a kind of white, one-legged, hopping goblin that lives in dense forests, is a *phi* (as Mon’s sister maintains) or a human ancestor (as Nu maintained)—a cryptid, like the North American sasquatch. Neither doubted that the beings existed; indeed, Nu had seen one in the forest while hiking one day, but he held that because it seemed to be a kind of human with tangible flesh meant that it was not a *phi*. Mon’s sister, on the other hand, argued that *phi* could “be people” (*phi ko pen khon dai*). What made it a ghost was its existence at the fringes of evidentiary regimes, its weirdness.

Indeed, the most common referent to the term *phi* is an unexpected presence—and old man who walks down a dead-end lane toward a deserted house in the middle of the night; a young boy who floats outside a second-story window; or simply a shadow. *Phi* are generally to be avoided, even as a conversation topic

at night, unless one is particularly brave or bold (Mon's reference comes with the fortification of alcohol, as well as from his own "tough" persona). For some fishers, such dangerous *phi* might be cultivated as assistant spirits: one fisher repeatedly offered to take me to see his attendant *phi*.

Critiquing a reduction of *phi* to "ghost" or "spirit," Benjamin Baumann (2014) suggests "uncanny presences" and, elsewhere, "numinals" (Baumann 2022) to indicate a link between *phi* and that which lies beyond immediate apprehension. In other words, a roster of *phi*, a catalog of "Thai ghosts" or "spirits in Thai ontology" misses the point—*phi* are those things that have links to worlds beyond comprehension and capture (see also Morris 2000). *Phi* are defined by a lack of definition, beings who contain a mysterious and unknowable excess. Indeed, a link between ghosts and distant, possibly hostile but possibly beneficial sources of power runs through the region (see Johnson 2020a; Sprenger 2017).

For Baumann (2022), debating the ontological status of *phi* marks a movement between different Wittgensteinian language games. Baumann, as I do, seeks to decolonize ethnographic fieldwork by examining statements surrounding *phi*—especially those that seem contradictory: "I do not believe in ghosts, but I have met them." This is, for Baumann, neither a logically incoherent statement nor simply an expression of contexts (one mentions ghosts in informal contexts, but maintains middle-class rationality in formal ones), but instead a reflection of the dual nature of *phi*—a ghost to be denied, but also a co-creator of personhood to be embraced (Baumann 2022, 176; see also Aulino 2022).

And ghosts persist, whether or not we believe (recall Aulino's "then they don't [exist]. But they do"). Lisa Stevenson (2014, 55) describes an exchange with an Inuit boy narrating his friend's death in a snowmobile accident. Reflecting on this, the boy remarks that "My sister used to say that my uncle came back to life as a raven, and that the raven is living behind our house." Stevenson prompts further: "Does she still think that?" to which the boy responds, "I don't know." And then, "It's still there."

The raven is present, in other words, and we do not have to create a pluriverse—a separate Inuit world of ancestor-ravens and an ornithological world of *Corvus corax*. Whatever it is, it's still there. Its presence, and its unusual behavior frequenting a boy's backyard, challenge these lines in ways that we do not have to resolve. We can allow the raven to remain, irreducible to an essence, to being/not being.

In looking at the co-being between things that problematically remain or cross boundaries, I am reminded most forcefully of Sophie Chao's (2022) analysis of the encounter between the Marind people of West Papua and palm oil. Facing dispossession at the hands of large, rapacious palm oil companies, with

their draconian security regimes and the devastation of local wildlife, Marind come to see the oil palm—notably, the tree itself, not necessarily the companies involved—as an adversary. Just as palm oil has displaced Marind land, Marind dream of being taken over by oil palm, their skin turning rough and dry, and losing some fundamental connection to the human world. This is neither an ontological world separate from our own (as it is deeply embedded in imaginaries and lived realities of the growers and consumers of palm oil), nor is it a representation of capitalist excess, but an agentive thing, one that reshapes the world into indeterminacy (*abu-abu*, in Indonesian).

Mon lives with *naga*, then, we might say, and the serpents themselves form a part of how the Mekong River (*nam khong*) functions, like oil palm, not only as a hydrological entity, but as a social, political, and spiritual entity—indeed, my own need to clarify that a *river* can *be* all of these things (rather than saying that the word *nam khong* represents these things) is a sign that such a de-worlding step is needed. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (2020) note that monsters emerge in times of change, and now is just such a time for the Mekong. Each of the river's modalities of being are in flux. New hydropower projects have fundamentally altered the way the river works—its rises and falls follow the power needs of China and Laos, upstream, and even the color has turned from a muddy red to a clear blue. While I argue that ghosts always question, the fundamental material structure of the world seems to be in times of change now, and thus their questions have gained teeth (see Johnson 2019).

Mon's inquiry is one that ends unsatisfactorily: I cannot answer his question, and I am not fully convinced that I believe my denial. I am, and have been, unsettled. Both answers—"I don't believe, but I don't offend," and "no"—are said instead of saying what I really mean, which is "I don't know." That ghosts cannot exist is, as Palmié (2022a) points out, a "hinge proposition"—one which cannot be refuted. Ghosts don't exist—every professor should, to be taken seriously in the lecture hall, affirm this. And I have never seen a ghost—that is, I have not seen one in waking hours, providing that I forget a few moments that I, in my everyday life, I dismiss as misapprehensions. Eels I saw once as a child swimming through the night air in the living room, I generally understand as a hallucination. A shark-eyed, needle-toothed woman on the edge of my bed I file away in my mind as a moment of sleep paralysis. In other words, I apply a double standard: a neat "cultural" box for Mon's experience, and a refusal to apply my interlocutors' evidentiary regimes to my own memory.

Let us correct this now.

DREAMS AND THE WEIRD

Three eel faces hung in the darkness of my parents' largely unused living room. I was perhaps seven years old, heading upstairs to bed, and when I saw them, I stopped cold. One was blue, one was red, and one was green. They stared at me as I froze in terror on the stairs, then I ran the rest of the way and closed my door—tightly. I never entered that room again when it was dark. I do not think about this or mention it often. I clip it out of my memory as something that does not make sense, or say things like “I was an imaginative kid” or “my dreams sometimes started before I was asleep.” They were, for my practical life, like a dream; as Shakespeare puts it in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), as “the children of an idle brain, begot of nothing but vain fantasy”; or, for Charles Dickens in *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1898, 177), images that “melt away in the first beam of the sun, which lights grim care and stern reality.” I don't believe, but I did not return to that room if I could help it—I did not offend.

In literature, “the weird” refers to the suggestion of an unknowable outside. It is most closely associated with horror and speculative fiction—turn-of-the-twentieth-century authors such as Arthur Machen, Clark Ashton Smith, H. P. Lovecraft, and present-day authors (the “new weird”) such as Jeff Vandermeer or China Miéville. (Japanese fiction has its own, existentialist version—Kobo Abe or Sayaka Murata come to mind, and filmmakers such as David Lynch have long engaged with the weird.) For Mark Fisher (2016, 7), the weird becomes a useful theoretical lens in the uncanny's failure to move outside of the self, placing, as he puts it, the “strange *within* the familiar.” It is a reflux within a bounded world. Instead, the weird allows one to contend with the appearance of things that do not belong but nonetheless are. While Fisher keeps his focus on cultural studies, it is worth thinking through weird encounters through stories such as Mon's or, as I expand on below, Buddhist philosophy.

Lovecraft, known both for his influence on modern horror as well as his racism, articulates a version of the weird that we might use here. Consider his statement that “the most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents” (Lovecraft 1928, 159). Here is an anti-modernist stance, one that avows that more detailed fieldnotes and better questions will not yield more understanding. Rather, the world is open-ended. For Lovecraft, the weird becomes a lens into horror—it is unsurprising that the notorious xenophobe would associate strange presences with foreign places and peoples. But as we see in anthropological cases of ghosts, the inability of the human mind to correlate all the world's contents is not always so fearful—ghosts could be cajoled, supplicated, even seduced (Willerslev 2004). One might embrace aporia to recognize unspeakable presence.

Here, I bring in another figure from my research, a friend and “key informant” from a previous project, Nok (Johnson 2014). In 2006, I was working with spirit mediums in the Northern Thai city of Chiang Mai and had become friends with the eldest daughter of and caretaker for an elderly medium in Chiang Mai’s suburbs.⁵ Over a lunch of Kentucky Fried Chicken, we were looking over photos taken of the *naga* sculptures in a temple in her mother’s neighborhood. In a lull in conversation, I remarked that I loved the crocodilian heads of the great serpents, as I had been one of those children who learned the names of all dinosaurs by heart.

Nok looked at me and adopted a pedantic air. “Dinosaurs and *nagas* are very different. One of them we know is real, and the other we do not.” I started to agree with her, but it quickly became evident that our meanings were confused. “No one has ever *seen* a dinosaur,” Nok told me. In contrast, “we know that *nagas* exist, because people see them all the time.” For instance, she sees *nagas* and *yaksha* (Southeast Asian giants) often in her dreams, and, in that context, she manages to engage with difficult but possible communication. Such communication is not possible with long-dead dinosaurs.

Nok spoke of how at this temple, she had seen a *yaksha* moving behind the Buddhist stupa. Terrified, she tried to hide, but the giant found her and smiled. Despite the giant’s horrific tusks, and even though its rumbling voice spoke words she did not understand, its demeanor suggested that the giant was Nok’s patron and protector—the reason why she attended and made donations there. While this is an encounter with something imperfectly perceived (the *yaksha*’s speech, recall, cannot be understood), it is not malevolent. It is weird, but becomes a source of comfort for Nok, even despite its weirdness.

Nok directly challenges my own evidentiary regime. Of course, in my everyday life, I act as though dinosaurs exist and *nagas* do not. I also act as though eels do not appear in the living room, although I have seen them. At the same time, I have only seen dinosaur bones (but, Nok counters, villagers find *naga* tracks on the riverbank), and I believe that paleontology as practiced by university and museum staff founds its theories on sound bases (but Nok daily interacts with *nagas* as they possess her mother and slither into her dreams). Here, similarly, dreams provide evidence, but they do not arrive at one, ultimate reality—the weird must always remain inconclusive. Neither Nok nor I are experts in our respectively beloved scaly beasts—I am an anthropologist and not a paleontologist; Nok is the caretaker of a medium, not a medium herself, and such experts may pronounce with more authority than Nok and I do. Instead, we each evaluate our evidence in ways that require a degree of speculation we know to be imperfect. This emerges in the incomprehensibility of the *yaksha*’s speech or

when mediums speak in “*naga* language,” understood neither by the medium, who does not remember their possession, nor the attendant, but only the possessing spirit (see [Johnson 2020a](#), 149). A *phi* may exist—Nok displays little doubt about this—but what this might mean, what it intends to convey, and how it speaks always leaves an excess that defies understanding.

Let us look, then, at dreams. To do so involves coming to Mon and Nok and being open with them, too, to speak of our own dreams and open them for analysis.

As I floundered, wondering what to say in the face of Nok’s casual “people see *nagas* all the time,” Nok reversed the question: what did I dream about? Could I see her perspective, having possibly had a *phi* or other uncanny being speaking with me without knowing it? At the time, I was so stunned by the implications of Nok’s statement that I could not answer. But the same questions emerged years later, at Mon’s compound. They became especially relevant after I won the lottery, choosing a number at random and earning about \$2,000 USD, money that I gave to Mon’s family. People do not just win the lottery on a random pick like that, so I must have had help. As I had no connections in the lottery system, that assistance must have been of a less perceptible, *weird* nature. Such an unusual occurrence came as a sign that some unknown force was *possibly* working through me; that I had received and unconsciously understood some message from a vital force previously unknown or inactive. But while it was difficult to see, it was not invisible. There would be signs. The clearest of these would be dreams.

Each morning, Thip and Yai, Mon’s sisters, would quiz me about my dreams. I shared the most vivid ones, ones infused with overwhelming feelings of terror or exceptionally lucid images—ones, in other words, that felt like more than dreams. Some dreams were bizarre—an enormous golden-colored crochet doll that marched in absolute silence around my apartment as I in terror tried to ignore it. When I confronted the silent, animate thing of yarn, we were both unable to speak, moving our mouths in silent word-shapes. There was a horrific, icy wind that filled the sky with sickly gray light and sought out myself and my dog. Another dream involved a skeletal old woman who pronounced a very specific date and time (Tuesday, September 6, 6:15 a.m.). Finally, one night I dreamed of a fountain of clear water that gushed out of an island in the Mekong, midstream.

I have my own interpretations of some of these dreams. The doll’s yarn body was made of the same golden material as a hand-knitted gift from a relationship that ended badly, and thus might represent fear, anxiety. The wind came in the same year, during a bout of major depression (and, it should be noted, a global pandemic), when I lived alone with only a dog for company. The specific date and time is far more troubling, and I still live in fear of the year (2033)

when September 6 falls on a Tuesday. The fountain was an outlier, but unsurprising, as it was the last thing I saw at night before I slept, and even after I closed my eyes, I could hear the rushing Mekong (the poetics of material inflecting my dreams—see [Bachelard 1999](#)). The unsettling impact of such a dream lingers sometimes for years after having it, and these images still trouble me.

But Mon and others were not satisfied with my dream interpretations. Sure, they *could* represent emotional, unconscious processes. They could be rather banal pronouncements about trauma and anxiety. But this seemed doubtful. The specificity of the old woman's date and time was so unusual that it could only be either a prophecy (and thus indicating clearly the action of a ghost) or an invitation to calculation, and the numbers 6, 11, 15, 3 (for Tuesday), and 2565 (the next year in the Buddhist calendar when September 6 would fall on a Tuesday) were put through numerous tests (and lottery tickets). The doll, similarly, seemed too weird to be anything but a ghost, and was clearly seeking to communicate some desire that no one could understand, perhaps, owing to its color, a "golden child" (*kumanthong*) (see [Sinnott 2014](#)). The fountain may have been a message from a lord of an island (*jao don*), promising prosperity or hinting at a sacred site just across the river ([Johnson 2020a](#)). Regardless of the conclusions—and without a confirmation (e.g., a winning lottery ticket, some dreadful event in September)—it was clear to Mon and his sisters that some *thing* had spoken to me from the outside, as it was clear that it was my own obstinacy that kept me from believing in ghosts. As I heard on multiple occasions, whether or not I believed in ghosts was immaterial—they believed in me. Thip was understanding of my doubt, though, sympathizing and unknowingly echoing Nok: "It's hard to understand [spirits] when they speak."

What, then, to make of dreams?

Dreams, in Thailand, can kill. [Mary Beth Mills \(1995\)](#) describes the attack of dream-ghosts (*phi mae mai*, a variety of *phi am*) who sexually pounce on their victims (young men working in migrant construction jobs overseas, in her case), killing them in the process. Such a collapse of dream-reality into waking reality explodes the naturalistic model of dreams. Such deaths (sudden unexplained nocturnal death syndrome, or SUNDS, detailed in [Hufford 1989](#)) are explained in medical terms by terror-induced heart attacks, with an underlying cause of great stress and pain. Indeed, [Pattana \(2011\)](#) describes just such a story, as a migrant worker from Isan died of SUNDS while living in Singapore. When his body was returned to Thailand, his wife refused to collect the corpse and sent her lover instead, that act indicating the both figurative and literal heartbreak the dead man had been under. However, for many of my interlocutors, SUNDS

deaths—or, rather, widow ghost attacks—served as clear evidence of dreams as a state of openness to the outside, one that could have either beneficial (e.g., Nok’s *yaksha* protector) or horrific results (death).

Thus, dreams for Mon and others are not hermetic, but open channels, allowing uncanny others to communicate or otherwise act on the self. Such examples are common in other anthropological studies—Charles Stewart (2017) describes dreams he encounters in Naxos, Greece, as able to run forward and backward along a Heideggerian notion of Being, collapsing future and past into a brief image in the present. Adrienne Heijnen (2005, 2013), working in Iceland, notes how dreams originate outside of the dreamer, in a world of darkness where other knowledge is possible, knowledge that is hidden (see also Hastrup 1990).

What they are here, too, is weird in Fisher’s sense. They contain elements that cannot be assimilated to any human logic—culturally bounded or otherwise—and their contours point to and beyond the horizons of knowledge. But, as Mon indicates, one cannot therefore ignore (as in my response, *mai cheua, yaa lop-luu*) or dismiss (as in my response, *boh*) such a presence—indeed, the knowledge therein may be vital to human flourishing—or threatening to its existence. It is not enough to treat such questions as epistemological paradoxes to be worked out on one’s own, or as incomplete metaphors for political economy; while psychological or political-economic factors might play a part, they do not capture the whole of such presences. One cannot rest on certainty, but nevertheless, one must engage.

CONTRADICTION

For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987, 69), the unconscious is a manifestation of what they term the “mechanosphere”: the conglomeration of social and biological networks in which we exist. Just as chains of being extend beyond the bounds of the human, so, too, does our awareness extend toward those things that are only partially or not at all captured by perception. Here, it is a reframing of the uncanny that allows for the weird.

In analyzing my conversation with Mon, I attend to presences that exist partially beyond perception, and on evidentiary regimes that permit different glimpses of those presences. But I challenge the proposition that an attention to dreams, and the situating of knowledge as always imperfect, is something particularly “Thai.” An attention to difference and incommensurable worlds (e.g., “us” and “them,” “Western” and “Thai,” “Indigenous” and “settler”) has the distressing effect of erasing Nok’s or Mon’s own status as observers, theorists, and thinkers, and reducing them to *Thai* (or *Lao*, or *Meuang*) thinkers.⁶ Nok does not give a caveat and say, “Thai people see *nagas* all the time.” I am included in the category of

“people” who can see *nagas* (or, depending on whose interpretation of my dreams one follows, has seen *nagas*). Indeed, Mon is quick to attribute my own dreams to the communication of spirits, the only difference being my refusal to see them as such. Dreams, here, provide evidence of a sort, ones that allows an open-ended ontological world, one that does not call for resolution nor enforces boundaries (e.g., a “Thai” world and a “Western” one). The latent content of dreams is always going to be imperfectly known—whereas for [Sigmund Freud \(1940\)](#), the unconscious had bottomless depths, in this case one never knows who is on the other end of the metaphorical nighttime phone line. Such attention to dreams also offers a way to pay attention to and respect our interlocutors as theoreticians in their own right, rather than relegating them to their own, separate reality.

Thus, when Mon asks me about my beliefs, or Nok questions me about my dreams, these are invitations to theorize, to join in figuring out a world of unpredictable rivers and changing fortunes. These worlds provide not stability, but contradiction.

Here, then, I turn to contradiction as method.

In the second century CE, a group of *nagas* came to a South Indian Buddhist and delivered to him a set of sacred texts, thus prompting the philosopher, Nāgārjuna, to expound on them. A caveat: Nāgārjuna is not a household name for Thai Buddhists. Despite their origins in the same part of the continent, I am not turning to Nāgārjuna’s writing as an example of “local theory,” but rather as a theoretician in his own right. This said, the Buddhist basis of Nāgārjuna’s thought provides a helpful respite from the Abrahamic roots of other deconstructionists (see [Derrida 1995](#)).

Nāgārjuna asks about the nature of reality, but the answers he receives are full of seeming contradictions. As he writes in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, “to say ‘it is’ is to grasp for permanence. To say ‘it is not’ is to adopt the view of nihilism. Therefore, a wise person does not say ‘exists’ or ‘does not exist’” ([Garfield 1995](#), 40). It is a question that approaches not exactly Mon’s question, but the question of divine excess within dreams, which are both “vain fancy,” as well as deadly attack, or the uncanny excess of *phi*—that which always escapes, but must always be pursued.

This is more than just stubborn mysticism, but rather a positing of two realities—two truths, in Buddhist parlance. These two realities are: a conventional reality, both in the sense of what we can perceive, but also that which is partially determined by social and linguistic convention ([Garfield and Priest 2003](#), 5). It is reality that the Mekong is a long, brown-red body of water snaking from the Himalayas to the South China Sea, and it is also reality that this body of water marks an international boundary. But this conventional reality is not ultimate reality, which is the acknowledgment of the emptiness of forms. While Aulino’s notion of ontological plurality draws from Buddhaghosa (see [Heim 2014](#)),

this focus on emptiness (but not nothingness) is what makes Nāgārjuna so useful specifically to a weird analysis. What Nāgārjuna means by emptiness is that no object exists independently, and that the properties of object and beings are also themselves dependent, “empty,” in Buddhist terms (Garfield and Priest 2003, 6). Things appear distinct, but they are in fact bound to each other, and in so being, their very “thing-ness” is only an illusion. Nāgārjuna means far more than objects—beings, concepts, and ideas are not exempt from emptiness.

Nāgārjuna has received a fair degree of attention in existentialist and deconstructionist writing, and I cite him here not only as a Buddhist thinker (though he is) but also as a globally important theoretical figure (Garfield and Priest 2003; Jaspers 1966). More important, perhaps, we can see something fundamentally anthropological in his call to aggressively attack certainty—in contradiction as a method (Jaspers 1966, 122). Here, too, are shades of Georges Bataille’s (2001) “non-knowledge”: a truth that is ungraspable or irreducible to God or other abstractions. Significantly for ethnographers, contradiction involves not a thinker in solitude, but many in conversation.

Mon’s world of *nagas* and my own world without them are not two non-overlapping poles, two worlds among many worlds. Instead, through our interaction, we co-create each other’s world in a way that leaves openings to contradiction. When Mon asks me if I believe in ghosts, he is asking me for access to that which he does not know, and I deny this access by brushing off his sincere question with a polished phrase. With Mon, I have initially drawn up boundaries between what Philippe Descola (2013) might term a Thai-Lao animist ontological world and a Western, naturalist world. Mon counters by reminding me that, especially in his house overlooking the nighttime river, we are dependent.

Anthropology is a discipline that—perhaps uniquely—involves contradiction. When given an epistemological, ontological, moral, or social universal, anthropologists’ first instinct is often to push back. This critique, as in Nāgārjuna and others here, constitutes a constant process, without reaching an end goal. But anthropologists are not alone in this—our co/re/searchers struggle with such questions as well. We may as well get comfortable with non-knowledge.

I dedicate this article to Robert Johnson—at the edge of the forest, as night comes on.

ABSTRACT

Ethnographers often hear stories that, for the listener, cannot be. Explanations that shelve away such “weird” stories into cultural boxes or reframe them as metaphors for something familiar not only close the door on the theoretical possibilities of openness but also do not do justice to their interlocutors’ own inquiries about the world. Here, I draw on stories of ghosts and unsettling dreams taken from my fieldwork in Thailand, both from my interlocutors’ and my own experience, as a way to contradict evidentiary regimes. Taking up the idea of “the weird” from literary studies and the Buddhist philosophy of Nāgārjuna, I understand such stories not as representations of the mundane workings of economy or psychology, nor as culturally bound narratives, but instead as a co-creation of a world always unfinished and unfixed. Seeing Nāgārjuna’s notion of contradiction as a method, I argue that a productive, dialogic engagement with the weird can destabilize not only the ethnographic encounter but also the way that the world works. [weird; ghosts; dreams; Thailand; ethnography; Buddhism; decolonial]

บทคัดย่อ

นักชาติพันธุ์วิทยามักได้ยินเรื่องราวที่ดูเหมือนเป็นไปได้ไม่ได้ การอธิบายเรื่องเล่า “แปลกประหลาด” เหล่านี้เป็นแค่ “วัฒนธรรม” แล้วมองข้ามไป หรือแปลงให้กลายเป็นเพียงคำอุปมาอุปไมยของสิ่งที่คุ้นเคย ไม่เพียงแต่ปิดกั้นความเป็นไปได้ทางทฤษฎีที่เปิดกว้าง แต่ยังไม่ใช่ธรรมต่อคำถามเกี่ยวกับโลกของผู้ร่วมสนทนาด้วย ผมหยิบยกเรื่องราวเกี่ยวกับผีและความฝันจากการทำงานภาคสนาม ซึ่งรวมทั้งประสบการณ์ของผู้ให้ข้อมูลและของผมเอง มาใช้เป็นวิธีหนึ่งในการโต้แย้งระเบียบแห่งหลักฐาน

ด้วยการหยิบแนวคิดเรื่อง “ความแปลกประหลาด” จากวรรณคดีศึกษา และปรัชญาพุทธของนาคารขณ ผมมองว่าเรื่องราวเหล่านี้ไม่ใช่ตัวแทนของกระบวนการธรรมดาทางเศรษฐกิจหรือจิตวิทยา และไม่ใช่เรื่องเล่าที่จำกัดอยู่เฉพาะในบริบทวัฒนธรรม แต่เป็นการร่วมกันสร้างโลกที่ไม่มีวันเสร็จสมบูรณ์หรือหยุดนิ่ง ด้วยการมองแนวคิดเรื่อง “ความขัดแย้ง” ของนาคารขณในฐานะวิธีการ ผมขอเสนอว่า การมีปฏิสัมพันธ์แบบแลกเปลี่ยนกับสิ่งแปลกประหลาดนี้สามารถทำให้ไม่เพียงแต่การพบปะในงานชาติพันธุ์วิทยาสันคลอนลง แต่ยังรวมถึงวิธีที่เราเข้าใจโลกนี้

[คำสำคัญ: แปลกประหลาด; ผี; ความฝัน; ประเทศไทย; ชาติพันธุ์วรรณา; พุทธศาสนา; แนวคิดปลดอาณานิคม]

NOTES

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1. A note for Thai and Lao speakers who may notice my quotations moving between the two languages: Mon's mother tongue is Isan, a broad category of Lao dialects spoken in Thailand. The variety used in Ban Beuk, my fieldsite, includes both Northern Lao and Vientiane Lao influence. Although he was fluent in Central Thai and used it on formal occasions, Mon rarely used Thai with me. I spoke Lao to him, but on nights like this, I often slipped into Central Thai, as it is a language in which I am more fluent, although I have had formal training in Lao and, relevant elsewhere in this article, *kammeuang* (Northern Thai). When I reproduce our conversations here, I reproduce them as they were spoken, in a blend of Thai and Lao.
2. *Khwaam seu*, in Lao.
3. Prayuth seized power in a coup in 2014, continuing a cycle of coup and election that has persisted in Thailand for nearly a century.
4. These people call themselves *Mrabri*.
5. It is part of the goal of this piece to problematize totalizing ethnic labels and avoid reducing Mon to a "Lao fisher." But for context's sake, I should point out that Nok identified as a member of Chiang Mai's Khon Meuang ethnic group, a Tai minority within Thailand speaking a language related to but distinct from either Thai or Lao, and historically having deep ties with Burma, the Shan States, and Laos, as well as Siam.
6. *Meuang* here references Nok.

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