

**Good Gambling: Meaning and Moral Economy in Late-Socialist Laos**

by

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## **Dedication**

To Andy

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I have dedicated this dissertation to my late brother, Andy, who died in a motorcycle accident in Laos in March 2009. Before he died, Andy and I had travelled in Laos together, and he taught me my best ethnographic and intellectual habits. One night on the trip, we went to a snooker hall and played for money with some locals. Andy, who had just lost his glasses in a river in Myanmar, struggled to make a shot. At each turn, he grabbed my slightly lower prescription lenses and squinted helplessly through them at the balls on the other side of the long table. After we played, he told me that the love of games would be the one part of Lao culture

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## Abstract

Anthropologists have long pointed out the intensity with which people sort economic practices into moralized types based on the practices' purported aims such as *gift-giving*, 'deep play,' and *guanxi*. Yet more than a century after Malinowski first pitched his tent in the Trobriand Islands and some nine decades after Mauss proposed his theory of the gift, we still know little about how people invoke these types in interaction and why they find them so compelling. In this dissertation, I explore the moral and pragmatic life of economic types in Luang Prabang, Laos and challenge the epistemological life of similar types in anthropology. I argue that understanding moral economy is fundamentally a semiotic problem. That is, moral economic types can only be understood if we study the communicative acts in which they are made manifest. With close attention to these acts, I show that any answer to the classic ethical question of 'How one should live' (Williams 2006) is inevitably entangled with another question: 'How is one living?'

In Laos, since the 1975 socialist revolution, typifying economic conduct has been a national project. As the late-socialist state adopts once-banned forms of economy, it reframes these practices using the moral categories of its socialist past: the lottery has become 'pro-development,' capitalistic business has become a vehicle for the eventual attainment of 'socialism,' and gambling, in certain forms, has become 'good.' Although I touch on a broad range of empirical economic and social practices—theft at a funeral, lottery buying and selling, paying for food at a bar—I focus empirically on conduct that seems to blur moral types of economy and combine conflicting aims and logics, like generosity and greed, friendship and estrangement, socialism and capitalism. Most centrally, I reflect on the moral and pragmatic

dimensions of a contrast that gamblers on the French colonial game called *pétanque* make between ‘gambling for money’ (*lin5 kin3 ngen2*) and ‘gambling for beer’ (*lin5 kin3 bia3*).

Using materials from more than fifteen months of fieldwork in the rapidly developing city of Luang Prabang, I disentangle the variety of reflexive forms people use to invoke these moral economic types, including implicit and explicit typifications of conduct as well as generic propositions about the types as kinds. I show that close attention to these forms reveals their allure and multifunctional utility: they are not just conceptual categories for reflecting on the world but also clusters of semiotic resources people use to make ethical and pragmatic claims about others as well as themselves. While anthropologists have been wary of ‘ideal types’ in recent years because they ‘distort’ practice, I show that by attending to the heterogeneous ways people use types, we can better understand the reflexive dimensions of ‘ordinary ethics’ and the methodological and epistemological muddles that arise when scholars try to disentangle communication from action.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

One Sunday afternoon, months into my fieldwork in Luang Prabang, Dii picked me up from my house on his motorbike. We rode toward the southern edge of town to a snooker hall to drink and gamble. The snooker hall was a masculine joint, dark and musky. The main room had six tables and brimmed with smoke and empty beer bottles. The patrons—tough-looking teenagers and adults—stubbed their cigarettes out on the floor and urinated in the storm drain outside rather than the indoor toilet.

We had been coming once or twice a week for months. When we arrived, we chose our table out of habit and waited for our friends. Sii, also in his late twenties, arrived next. Sii had spent most of the day working on his new business from home alongside his toddler son and wife. He now had the evening to drink and play snooker. Sii was a skilled player and usually beat me, even when he gave me a sizable handicap. In the lead-up to the game, we playfully jawed at one another. I told him that tonight was the night I would beat him. He said that history was against me. Sii then clarified the terms of the bet: 50,000 Lao Kip or about six US dollars. Whoever won would put 20,000 Kip of the winnings into a collective pot earmarked ‘for beer.’ That money was communal and might also be used to pay for spicy barbecued meats and vegetables, pre-packaged snacks, or the fees for using the snooker table. The winner would then pocket the remaining 30,000 Kip for himself.

I won the first game and Sii won the next three. He heckled me throughout, banging on the table, shouting, giggling. I tried to do the same but Sii was unfazed. Dii quietly watched us play—checking his phone, pacing around the table, occasionally laughing at bad shots, and admiring good ones. When it came time for me to pay, we disagreed about exactly how much I owed. For somewhere between two minutes and two hours, we argued about whether the

‘collective money’ earmarked for the beer and snacks should be calculated cumulatively across the four games we played. The arguments and figures feel stale and unimportant now, but they really mattered then. While I was living in Luang Prabang, I usually tried to be as agreeable as possible, as I thought a researcher should be, but that night, I dug my heels in. I made points and counter-points. I appealed to the mostly reticent Dii. I teetered on the edge of anger. I lost myself over a few dollars and so did Sii. Eventually, other friends arrived and I snapped out of it, yielded to Sii, and handed him the rest of the cash.

After I paid, Dii told me abruptly that he wanted to go home. It was much earlier than usual, we had spent very little of the money for beer and snacks that I lost, and others had just arrived, but he was adamant. On the motorcycle ride back, he lectured me. In most motorcycle conversations, you compete against the wind, but that night, Dii’s voice cut through with sharp disappointment. He asked if I noticed that immediately after losing the first game, Sii wanted to bet again. ‘Sii got too ‘hot,’’ Dii said. I felt like I was just as guilty of getting worked up, but Dii did not mention my mood. Instead, he told me that I shouldn’t ‘gamble for money’ with Sii anymore. As Dii made clear, my mistake was not how I had acted per se, not that I had gotten ‘hot’ or that I had argued too much. Instead, my mistake was agreeing to a particular type of bet: a bet ‘for money.’ The 20,000 Kip bet ‘for beer’ was fine, and similar bets were a routine aspect of our nights at the snooker hall, but that 30,000 Kip bet to keep, was a problem. As we sputtered down the road, Dii repeated as much: ‘Just don’t gamble for money with friends.’

## **Using ‘Types’**

When Dii told me not to ‘gamble for money with friends,’ he was espousing a common idea in Luang Prabang. I had heard people repeat the idea hundreds of times and expected to hear it whenever the topic of gambling came up. The repetition exhausted me. The idea seemed naive



and only tenuously related to how people gambled. I wanted to hear about people's individual desires, values, and ethical choices, not their canned morality. Yet when Dii said the rote words on the motorcycle, his words felt new, more powerful. My 'gambling for money' with Sii had spoiled Dii's night; after Dii dropped me off, I worried it had done more. I fretted over whether I had frustrated Dii, feared that Sii was starting to resent me, and felt bad about getting so wrapped up in the argument. Dii's words framed what I had done. They made me pay attention to myself and reflect on the past. He was not just feeding me a line about 'gambling for money,' he was telling me how to be a better person; teaching me things that I, as a foreigner, might not already know; and distancing himself from my bickering and frustration.

Anthropologists have long pointed out the intensity with which people like Dii sort economic practices into moralized types based on the practices' purported aims such as *gift-giving*, 'deep play,' and *guanxi*. Yet more than a century after Malinowski first pitched his tent in the Trobriand Islands and some nine decades after Mauss pitched his theory of the gift, we still know little about how people invoke these types in interaction and why they find them so compelling. In this dissertation, I explore the moral and pragmatic life of economic types in Luang Prabang, Laos and challenge the epistemological life of similar types in anthropology.

The empirical focus of much of this dissertation is the contrast between 'gambling for money' (*lin5 kin3 ngen2*) and 'gambling for beer' (*lin5 kin3 bia3*). I show that this seemingly narrow and insignificant subject sheds light on 'bigger,' foundational questions in political economy. I argue that understanding moral economy is fundamentally a semiotic problem. That is, moral economic types can only be understood if we study the communicative acts in which they are made manifest. This is not to say that concrete 'things' and economic practices are immaterial, inconsequential, or merely 'ideas in people's heads,' but rather that any satisfying

account of ‘things’ and practices must also be an account of how and when they are described, pointed to, and evaluated, and the moral dimensions of doing such semiotic work. With close attention to this semiotic work, I show that any answer to the classic ethical question of ‘How one should live’ (Williams 2006) is inevitably entangled with another question: ‘How is one living?’

To show this, I trace how people like Dii communicate about and with moral economic types and thereby (re)configure the relation between ethical and economic value.<sup>1</sup> I show that such communication is utterly heterogeneous and that understanding such heterogeneity helps us better understand the problems that have plagued moral economy. Types such as ‘gambling for money’ and ‘gambling for beer’ can be understood and invoked in several distinct ways. They are in part lexemes—i.e., meaningful strings of sound-shapes—that the analyst can track in transcripts and that people in Luang Prabang can use in distinct ways. At times, people wield these lexemes to refer to the types generically, saying, for example, that ‘money gambling’ is for getting ‘what other people have’ (*khòòng3 muu1*) and ‘beer gambling’ is for producing ‘solidarity’ (*khwaam2 saamakkhii2*). Often, these generic pronouncements are onramps for people to do evaluative work, to present themselves as certain kinds of people vis-à-vis their stances on the exchanges abstractly conceived. At other times, people use these same lexemes to refer to specific interactions, to metapragmatically frame what is going on, to indexically tie unfolding events to types. Such uses can produce equally ethical effects, they can make claims about whether someone is acting as one should. In addition to lexemes that people use, moral

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<sup>1</sup> Take Dii for instance. While I can never know exactly why he cited the idea that I ‘shouldn’t gamble for money with friends,’ he clearly wanted to correct how I bet in the future and help me understand that friendship should not be risked so cavalierly. Therefore, he also tacitly reproduced the notion that ‘gambling for money’ makes people argue because economic interest overtakes social relations.

economic types are also inevitably analytics that I use to group events that are never typified as such; the denotata of the terms, so to speak.

Using notes from more than fifteen months of fieldwork in Luang Prabang, Laos and hundreds of hours of video and audio recordings I collected during that time, I unpack uses of types such as ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ and emphasize two points. First, people use these types of economy to do more than *describe* concrete interactions in the world. They use them for an array of pragmatic, moral, and semantic purposes: to index their stances and their characters, to define ‘concepts,’ and to evaluate and make claims about other people. Second, the making of the moral economy is itself constantly moralized. This is especially salient in Laos. As the nation and Luang Prabang in particular rapidly develop and as once-banned forms of economy become legally and morally accepted, the late-socialist state continues to repeat the idea that all economic practices should aim to produce ‘solidarity’ among the citizenry. As I show throughout, for many people in Luang Prabang, claiming that practices have this pro-social aim is itself an ethical practice. That is, men and women throughout the city are committed to an image of the good and treat that commitment as a good. In the rest of this introduction, I show that these insights paired with a semiotic approach to moral economy help us better understand political economy, ethics, and the methodological and epistemological muddles involved in studying communication. I then briefly describe my fieldwork and orthographic conventions, and review the dissertation’s chapters.

## **Economic Types**

*The exchange of social values, material or immaterial, may take many different forms and fulfil many different functions. The purely economic purchase and sale of our own culture is hardly developed at all in many of the simpler cultures. Only when we have made a very extensive analysis and classification of all*

*varieties of exchange or payment shall we be able to create a really scientific terminology.*

*-Radcliffe-Brown (1929:98)*

Economic types were once the heartwood of economic anthropology. While anthropologists rarely adopted ‘type’ as a technical term, preferring words like ‘varieties,’ ‘categories,’ ‘forms,’ ‘spheres,’ ‘modes,’ they were committed to understanding and comparing the distinctions that local communities made among types of exchange, the objects involved, and how people evaluated them. For many anthropologists, tracking local distinctions in types and discussing the correct way to refer to them was an important theoretical project. In the journals *Man* and *American Anthropologist*, for instance, some of the most influential voices in the field (Torday 1929; Radcliffe-Brown 1929; Evans-Pritchard 1931; cf. Dalton 1966; Tambiah et al. 1989) spent years debating how they should refer to the payments that a groom’s family made to a bride’s family before marriage, searching for an alternative to ‘bride-price.’ Evans-Pritchard (1931) preferred ‘bride-wealth’; Radcliffe-Brown (1929) preferred ‘indemnity.’

Over the last three or four decades, interest in ‘types’ *qua* ‘types’ has receded from figure to ground. Contemporary anthropologists have mostly criticized the early emphasis on cataloging and comparing types, claiming that doing so only reifies messy practice. While analysts like George Dalton (1961:11) once argued that every ethnographer should investigate whether there are “distinct economic spheres with different operational principles and value norms in each,” Jane Guyer (2004:28) several decades later argued that “ideal type model[s] of moral barriers” like Dalton’s and Bohannan’s (1959; 1955) obscure economic practice. Guyer was not alone. Those interested in such ‘practice’ have stressed that “[a]ctually existing relations of exchange are...mixed and messy” (Tsing 2013:22), and many have abandoned the older notion of exchange itself in favor of terms such as ‘flow’ and ‘circulation,’ terms which they argue can, as

Maurer (2006:21) writes, “return[] the objects of exchange to ‘the space and time of their genesis,’ revealing relationships missed by the reification of subjects and objects that...the analytical category of exchange” sometimes obscures.<sup>2</sup>

From the perspective of this recent work, early anthropologists can seem quite naïve. Their enthusiasm for comparative analytics committed them to a false kind of objectivity and their interest in the local, dictionary-esque definitions of economic practice doomed them to reproduce local hegemonic ideas. Yet contemporary anthropologists have only been able to climb so far from ‘types’ and into ‘practice.’ This is because in a sense it does not matter whether types are idealizations or not. Invocations of and reflections on types—like Dii’s comment that I should not gamble for money with friends—are littered across any ‘practice’ that anthropologist finds herself studying. With this reality, contemporary anthropologists try to think beyond ‘types’ even as they remain tethered to the fact that such types are foundational human tools for representing and acting within the world.<sup>3</sup>

## **Moral Economy**

Anthropologists were first drawn to studying local types of economy because some of the types seemed to fuse economic and ethical value.<sup>4</sup> They marveled at the fact that types such as ‘gift exchange,’ *Kula*, and ‘sacrifice’ could in a single breath refer to a material exchange, cite

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<sup>2</sup> Maurer (2006:21) is citing Eiss (2002:293). I have omitted the internal citations from the quotation.

<sup>3</sup> Frequently, rather than move beyond moral economic types, anthropologists have charted their limits. On local types of economy, such as *guanxi* (Yang 1994), ‘fair trade’ (Moberg 2016) and ‘hot money’ (Znoj 1998), the contemporary anthropological position seems to be that—like other kinds of ideological structure often presumed to be ‘out there’—these types are interesting insofar as actors freely resist and negotiate their application in practice. Rather than show how or why these terms were constructed and used generically, the contemporary habit has been to call out the mismatches between the generic definitions and moments of application like a referee calling out fouls: ‘exception’ ... ‘contradiction’ ... ‘negotiation.’

<sup>4</sup> Note, however, that I use ‘economic’ in the ‘Western’ sense, as Dalton (1961:21) puts it: “A distinguishing characteristic of primitive life is the fusion of social and economic institutions. Indeed, even the word ‘fusion’ is distorting because it implies the bringing together of separate elements. It would be better to say that there is no awareness of the ‘economy’ as a distinct set of practices apart from social institutions.”

the objects involved in the exchange, and evoke the reasons why people engaged in the exchange in the first place. The ‘locals’ who described and evaluated these types sometimes seemed more interested in giving away or destroying wealth than retaining it, in collapsing notions of economic and ethical value rather than keeping them separate. Anthropologists (especially ‘substantivist’ anthropologists) used these types to argue that the economy is embedded in society,<sup>5</sup> and therefore subject to societal norms of right and wrong, and that not all economic action is aimed at acquiring material wealth.<sup>6</sup>

These classic concerns with moral economy implicate a fundamental problem in moral philosophy: Why should people do the things they do, that is, for what ends? For love or money, merit or profit, ethical goods or physical goods? Moral economic types reified diverse responses to these questions. What’s in a name? Often a lot. The ‘gift,’ the ‘bribe,’ the ‘sale,’ these types *qua* generic categories have their ostensible ends almost baked in. Each one presupposes an answer to the ‘why’ of exchange: the ‘gift’ is for ‘love,’ the ‘bribe’ is for ‘some bureaucratic end,’ the ‘sale’ is for ‘some object.’ When these types are referentially applied to conduct in the world, they have the capacity to thematize one end or another. As Anscombe (1979; 1957) pointed out and as Sidnell and Enfield (2014; Enfield and Sidnell 2017; see also Sidnell 2017) have recently argued, putting action ‘under a description’ can do moral and pragmatic work: it can emphasize responsibilities, imply intentionalities, and remind one’s interlocutors of expectations. In less technical language, anthropologists interested in economy have historically

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<sup>5</sup> As Ferguson (1988:488) writes, “Indeed, it is arguable that the founding insight of ‘economic anthropology’ was precisely the realization that economic could not be separated from the cultural and the symbolic.” There were, of course, many dissenting voices—cf. the ‘debate’ between substantivists and formalists.

<sup>6</sup> If Nintendo’s Mario Brothers was a game for anthropologists, Adam Smith—or more accurately, a somewhat pixelated caricature of the man—would certainly be the game’s final boss. Smith (1982:119) wrote that “[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest,” whereas anthropologists like Karl Polanyi (1944:48) argued that a person “does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets.”

recognized the embedding of intentionality and economy in moral economic types. For instance, in the debate about ‘bride-wealth’ mentioned above, Evans-Pritchard (1931:36) strongly rejected using the term because it “encourage[d] the layman to think that ‘price’ as used in this context was synonymous with ‘purchase.’” He concluded that “[i]t [was] difficult to exaggerate the harm done to Africans...” by that implication.

In Laos, since the 1975 socialist revolution, typifying economic conduct has been a national project. One of the revolutionaries’ principal aims was to regiment and structure the moral and economic lives of the citizenry. The hope was that if one could control the forms of exchange, one could produce a moral society. Some of the revolutionaries’ early work was linguistic, as they regimented language for talking about types of morally good exchange and sociality. In the present, as the late-socialist state adopts once-banned forms of economy, it reframes these practices using the moral categories of its socialist past: the lottery has become ‘pro-development,’ capitalistic business has become a vehicle for the eventual attainment of ‘socialism,’ and gambling, in certain forms, has become ‘good.’ As I show repeatedly below, when people discuss the contrast between ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ they often do so in ways that resonate with the state’s principal ethical end: to make ‘good sociality.’ When asked, people repeat that ‘gambling for beer’ aims to produce ‘solidarity’ among the gamblers; whereas ‘gambling for money’ is aimed at winning money and thus risks social strife.

The emphasis on the goodness of good sociality aligns with a dimension of Durkheimian theories of morality in which acts that strengthen social bonds are imagined as morally ‘good.’ As I review in chapter nine, much recent work in the anthropology of ethics has treated Durkheim as its principal strawman, a theorist who made ethics into everything and thus nothing. As Laidlaw (2002:315) writes, Durkheim’s “vision of human life” “lacks ethical complexity,

dilemma, reasoning, decision, and doubt, [and] does not constitute an advance.” Anthropologists such as Laidlaw have preferred ethical theories influenced by Foucault. In this dissertation, I rethink the utility of a Durkheimian morality. I do this not because I believe that such a theory captures the way morality or ethics always function, but because Durkheim’s ‘vision of human life’ fits so well with one view that people readily articulate in Laos: what is socially productive is good. Here, as in my discussion of types, I argue that while old preoccupations in anthropology might misrepresent the way things are, they often capture perfectly how people imagine them to be. As I follow the threads of the somewhat Durkheimian ethno-morality that is popular in Laos, it becomes clear that contrary to much of the recent discussion on the subject, ‘morality’ (*qua* rule-like system of commands for how to act well) and ‘ethics’ (*qua* Foucauldian (see Foucault et al. 1997; Foucault 2012a) practices of self-fashioning) are so intimately tied that choosing to study one over the other is a mistake.<sup>7</sup> Over and over again, I show that articulations of code-like morality—like Dii’s plea—are also second-order acts in which people fashion themselves as ethical individuals, concerned with how to live.

To show how people use and distinguish between types of economizing—the selfish from the selfless, the fun from the profitable, the good from the bad—I narrate, track, and analyze often unremarkable moments in socio-economic life: arguments over whether one hand in cards trumps another, debates on whether the word ‘fuck’ (*sii5*) belongs in a written survey, jokes about whether someone is too ‘scared’ of his wife to accept a bet. Topically, my dissertation is thus one step in the broader movement to study ‘ordinary ethics’ (Lambek 2010a; Das 2012) in anthropology. But while I cite this literature throughout the dissertation, I also argue against

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I use morality and ethics without a formal distinction between the terms, except where otherwise noted. I also distinguish the moral (good or bad) from the morally good and the immoral. That is, throughout this dissertation I use the notion of morality to talk about things people treat as both good and bad, rather than just good.



some of its most prominent advocates. Partly, this is because of differences in methodology and epistemology. In a debate with Michael Lempert (2013; 2015), for instance, Michael Lambek (2015:130) writes that scrutinizing recorded events “can only describe the effects or the expression of judgment, not the difficult work of judgment, which we can come to understand only by talking and interacting ourselves with our interlocutors and not merely observing them at arm’s length on limited recordings.” Beyond Lambek’s assumption that working with transcripts precludes interacting with people, his position articulates a common sentiment that ethics is in the head. Note that Lambek (2010b:49) holds this position not as part of an overall stance on the insignificance of language to ethics; in fact, in other places, he argues that “language is central to the ethical and the ethical to language.” Rather, for Lambek, it appears that the real substance of ethics lies beyond the semiotic. That position goes against what throughout this dissertation I argue is a fundamental epistemic fact with broad consequences: while the work of ‘judgment’ might happen in the brain, both analysts and the actors involved only ever have access to what is semiotically available.

## **Linguistic Anthropology**

Throughout this dissertation, my theoretical approach counters the typical ways of talking about economic activity both in Luang Prabang and in Western academia. I show that many of the problems that have plagued economic anthropology—debates about whether types of economy are ‘ideal’ or ‘real,’ arguments about the ‘meaning of money,’ claims about the differences between ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities’—can be better understood with a subtler understanding of semiotic practice that distinguishes between specific reference and generic reference, labeled and unlabeled events, reference and pragmatics.

Whenever one studies moral economic types, the problem of what conduct counts as a token of the type immediately impresses itself. Linguistic anthropologists have shown that much of the work that people do to make their intentions, values, and activities known is not explicitly performative: that is, people often act without explicitly naming how they are acting, without uttering ethnometapragmatic types like ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money.’<sup>8</sup> That is, the answer to the question of ‘how one is living’ often goes unspoken. Rather, people do subtle things to reflexively frame what they are doing as they are doing it.<sup>9</sup>

The problem of the relation between tokens and types has created endless debate and argument in economic anthropology and understanding the problem is key to understanding how the moralization of exchange works. While it is tempting to treat both implicitly disciplined economic interactions and explicitly labeled ones as tokens of the same type, as many economic anthropologists have done, doing so erases the ethical work that people do when they use or do not use explicit ethnometapragmatic terms.<sup>10</sup> As I show, whether a moral economic type should be applied to a given stretch of conduct is not so much a factual question as a moral and pragmatic

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<sup>8</sup> Types like ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ are *metapragmatic* because they are, in one way or another, about pragmatics (namely the imagined sociality of an event); and *ethno-* because they are local terms, rather than those devised by outside observers as analytics. Note that ‘ethno-metapragmatic’ has traditionally been used to gloss language in contexts where the speech is being explicitly distinguished from ‘scientific’ concepts (note, for instance, that Silverstein (2003) uses the term only to describe ideologies of ‘register’ rather than glosses of pragmatic activity generally). At bottom, all metapragmatic activity, including ‘science,’ is *ethno-*. I add *ethno-* here to stress that I am not endorsing the accuracy of the contrasts only studying them. On the notion of metapragmatics and reflexivity generally, see Silverstein (1993) and Agha (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Such reflexive work is essential to how meaning functions (cf. Mead 1934; Bateson 1972; Silverstein 1993; Agha 2007); as Nakassis (2016:162) summarizes, “the pragmatics of any social activity are mediated through their metapragmatics, the particular ideologies and reflexive practices that construe and regiment, mediate and materialize, that very activity.”

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Silverstein (1993) on metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function. Note that the inverse of the point above is also true: when conduct has been labeled as one type or another, we cannot assume that that conduct is full of implicit metapragmatic forms that redundantly imply that type. Just because someone calls an event ‘an argument’ does not mean that that event includes any of the shibboleths or associated diacritics of that type. Rather than a bounty of redundant signs, I argue that we are at times presented with contradictory signs or, more common still, low-resolution tokens of types: arguments that do not look like arguments, beer gambling that does not look like beer gambling.

one.<sup>11</sup> Applying a type, in turn, can do moral and pragmatic work. I argue here that such work is not a byproduct of moral economic types but one of their chief functions: to make claims about the ends and ethical quality of a given exchange and other people. Furthermore, I show that moral economic types are not just used to talk about and thus, pragmatically alter events in the world. People also use them in generic propositions. As I describe in chapter five, generic propositions are those propositions that refer not to a specific event but to a class of events as such. Examples are propositions such as ‘gambling for beer is bad’ and ‘all dogs have fur.’ Such propositions generalize about the world and repeat the many ideal typical categories of which contemporary anthropologists are often wary. I show throughout the dissertation that although these generic propositions are not always about specific action, they too can be used to do moral and pragmatic work in the world. In describing and taking stances on generic types of economy, people can index moral character, more subtly evaluate others, and make the world appear orderly as if it were a simple choice between two types—the gift or the commodity, *kula* or *gimwali*, good or evil.

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<sup>11</sup> In their forthcoming book, Enfield and Sidnell (2017) argue that the explicit metalinguistic (i.e., ethno-metapragmatic) glosses that people frequently use in describing bits of conduct are not necessarily tied to the more implicit signaling that people do. In other words, when we make comments like ‘don’t insult me!’ or ‘why are you complaining?’ we are not necessarily invoking categories that were already present implicitly. Rather, we are doing things with words when we name activities. To have a felicitous theory of action, one need not conclude that the ‘actions’ that we label ‘complaining’ or ‘insulting,’ are understood to be ‘complaining’ or ‘insulting’ before they are so labeled. Instead, Sidnell and Enfield (2014:433) argue, that at bottom, “We need... to distinguish between ideology (as enshrined in vocabulary) – i.e., the set of actions ‘we’ think we have and think ‘we’ do – and practice (as observed in utterances), i.e., the actions we actually do, and are treated as having done by our recipients.” Sidnell and Enfield’s argument is aimed at conversation analysis, where action that is not explicitly labeled is often ‘binned’ in regard to an intuitive understanding of its categorical fit. As Stephen Levinson (2013: 105) put it, “this loose hermeneutics is the soft underbelly” of conversation analysis. The underbelly has often been just as soft in the anthropology of exchange. Agha (2015) makes a related point with a different emphasis in his study of the English ethnometapragmatic term ‘slang.’ Whether a given word should be called ‘slang’ is often not apolitical. Rather, “[t]o say that some utterance is slang, or contains a slang expression, is to inhabit a metapragmatic stance that evaluates its speaker as deviating from a presumed standard” (2015:307). He begins by noting that traditionally those who have studied ‘slang’ have reduced their interest to studies of examples of things people have called ‘slang’ rather than uses of the term. They, like those who have studied exchange, have looked through rather than at ‘slang,’ and, thus, obscured “the reflexive processes through which samples of [‘slang’] come to be differentiated from other discursive behaviors” (2015: 306). That is, they have ignored how people distinguish and identify a string of speech as ‘slang.’

Over the following pages, I show that people in Luang Prabang work with and on moral economic distinctions such as ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money.’ They make them; they morally evaluate them; they elide them; they embody them; they apply them to actual economic conduct explicitly and more tacitly; they associate them with gendered and moral kinds of person; and they use them as heuristics for understanding their lives, their friendships, and their country and also as a guide for future action.

### **Methodological Note**

Luang Prabang is a city of approximately 66,000 (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015:101), embedded in the mountains of northern Laos. Speckled with Theravada Buddhist temples (*wat*2), it sits where the Mekong River (*mèè1 nam4 khòòng3*) meets the *Nam Khan* (*mèè1 nam4 khaan2*). One can travel to Vientiane, the nation’s capital and largest city, in a long, almost ten-hour ride over the mountains or a short flight. Immediately before the 1975 socialist revolution, Luang Prabang was Laos’s royal city where the king sat. Locals and foreigners alike have long represented Luang Prabang as a hub of traditional ‘Lao’ culture and values.<sup>12</sup> In 1995, Luang Prabang became an UNESCO World Heritage Site, and it is now understood by many foreigners to simultaneously be a holy hamlet, a “charming small town set amongst the mountains” (Berliner 2012:777), and a place in danger of being overrun by tourists (see Reeves and Long 2011; Dearborn and Stallmeyer 2010; Harrison et al. 2009; Starin 2008).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> As historians such as Ivarsson (2008) have shown, this representation, and the imagining of Laos as an ethnically and culturally monoglot nation generally, is the product of a confluence of geopolitical interests including the French colonial desire to distinguish Laos from its always encroaching and culturally similar neighbor, Thailand (then known as Siam). After the revolution Luang Prabang was apparently a much sleepier town with broken military equipment littering the roads in and out of the city and its few hotels almost empty (Hiebert 1987a).

<sup>13</sup> In the early days of my research, one scholar reminded me with some disdain that Luang Prabang is not Laos, that the trends and life I noticed in the city would perhaps have little application to what I found outside of it. At the time and since, his comment has felt to me a reaction to a number of related dimensions. In part, he seemed to be reacting to the presence of hordes of tourists in the city and the concomittant sense that Luang Prabang was in the process of being ‘spoiled.’ But he was clearly also trying to correct a scholarly tendency to treat the history of Laos from the

The majority of the fieldwork was conducted in Luang Prabang in 2013-2014, with two preliminary trips in 2011 and 2012. I then returned to the city for three months in 2015-2016. Most of my time in the city was spent living with a family just outside Luang Prabang's UNESCO-protected area. The family consisted of an older couple Phòò Thiang and Mèè Phòòn. *Phòòl* means father, and *Mèèl* means mother and when I lived with the couple, I lived as their child, albeit a strange one from another country. The three-bedroom house was modest, although the value of the land on which it sat continues to grow exponentially. I had one room in the house, Phòò Thiang and Mèè Phòòn shared another, and in the third lived my host sister Salina and her two young daughters. I paid for my room, but Mèè Phòòn stressed that I should treat these payments as gifts of 'love,' both when I gave them and when I referred to them outside of the house. She rightly worried that if I were to talk about them as payments, others would come knocking on her door or mine for money. By the end of my time in the field, this systematic framing had done its work. To me, the money felt much more like gifts of love than payments and came with all the anxieties, ambiguities, and pressures such gifts are bound to have.

My days and nights were spent alternating across several sites: the pork-selling section of the market, temples, celebrations, civil servant offices around the city, snooker halls, and, most of all, the money gambling *pétanque* court. *Pétanque*, for the uninitiated, is a French game played like bocce and lawn bowling that has become extremely popular across urban, and in

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1800s onward as a history of Luang Prabang. Many people who live in the city are taken with this idea as well; for them, the city is not only a place of 'heritage' (*mòòladok*<sup>2</sup>) but a place of 'culture' (*vatthanatham*<sup>2</sup>). But as Stuart-Fox (1993:109) writes, Luang Prabang's history is no substitute for the nation's. Nevertheless, even though Luang Prabang might not be a stand-in for the rest of Laos, dimensions of how the city is operated, lived in, and talked about are different but nevertheless extremely revealing of the Lao experience generally. Namely and as much as any other city or town in Laos, Luang Prabang embodies the flexible, pragmatic attitude the Lao state has had toward its economic and social policies post-revolution. Perhaps no place symbolizes the state's exuberant revisions and cultivations of its socio-political roots any better. The city has been a principal site in which the state has embraced the foreign actors it once exiled and described as enemies. These foreigners come, moreover, to witness economic practices the state once dissuaded or treated with ambivalence at best, like dramatic Buddhist alms-giving, night markets, and even bowling.

parts, rural, Laos. I describe the rules in chapter two, below. For now, I only note that much of my discussion of the distinction between ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ involves games of *pétanque*. While people of all age ranges, men and women alike, play *pétanque*, it is most associated with (and commonly played by) men in their late-twenties to mid-fifties; these are the people with whom I spent the most time.

These players are, on the whole, extraordinarily affluent when compared to the typical person in Laos, but something like ‘middle-class’ in Luang Prabang. Most of them own some land in the city, a place where land value has sky-rocketed. Many have family members abroad who send remittances or are invested in various tourism-related businesses. They have the time and money to take part in leisure activities that others have only heard about. They are also in much more frequent contact with Western tourists than most people living in Laos. While some maintain gardens outside of the city, they were not typically farmers. They farm for fun, perhaps a bit more cash, and to remember the practices that they said again and again were at the heart of being Lao.<sup>14</sup> Everyone agreed that the richest people spent their times on other games—badminton, golf, or perhaps basketball—and that poorer people had no money to risk on bets for beer or for money.

Although I always told people at the court that I was studying language and life there, they tended to assume that I had some other job, and that I was, like them, merely wasting time between sessions of work.<sup>15</sup> Most mornings, I would head to the money gambling court early and

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<sup>14</sup> Questions of ethnicity have been at the heart of debates in Lao studies and for good reason: the nation, which at times is imagined as monoethnic, is very much heterogeneous. In this respect, my dissertation may seem strangely lacking, as if it projects Luang Prabang’s image of itself as a Lao city, with minorities surrounding it, onto the entire nation. I can only say here that these questions are mostly absent from these pages not because I am uninterested in them but because they rarely impinged on the kinds of questions I was asking. The reasons for this are important: the people I dealt with were mostly middle-class ethnic Lao or modeled themselves as such. Of course, this speaks to the ethnic dimensions of Lao ideas about class.

<sup>15</sup> Or perhaps I was not really working at all. After long days of playing *pétanque*, I often wondered myself.

drink coffee with the men who did the same. Wearing pressed shirts for their office jobs or dark sunglasses for a day of driving tourists around town, the men would flow in and out of the court until nighttime. I would often stay put, asking questions, conducting interviews, and filming games. At night, I would often head toward beer-gambling courts, where men played after work.

Although it was at *pétanque* courts where I initially met my group of friends—Dii, Sii, Muu, Khêng, among others—friends whom I discuss throughout this dissertation, my life with this group was often separate from games of *pétanque*. All of the men played, but the court was an everyday hang out for only a few of them. These friends were in their late twenties and younger than many of the daily *pétanque* players; most of them had recently gotten married and had their first children. They were on the cusp of relative economic independence, just beginning to take over work from their parents or their in-laws, rising in the ranks at their civil servant offices, and starting their own ventures. They were becoming ‘big people’ (*phuu5 ñajl*) and had dreams of becoming wealthier. As I show throughout this dissertation, games were a key space in which they worked through these dreams, played with being bold, big, and generous with their money. They treated competition, beer gambling, and mutual consumption as key to their identities and their relationships with one another. My focus on such young, increasingly affluent, but not ‘rich,’ men and their leisure in developing Luang Prabang, offers a particular slice of life in the city. For these young men, on the precipice of adulthood in a time of national political economic flux, the problem of how to live and recognize morally good ways of dealing with money and one another seemed particularly salient. But even as their concerns were unique to their socio-economic, gendered, and geographical positions, over the following pages I show that these concerns resonate with and shed light on other prevalent ideas about the relations between money, morality, and social relations in Luang Prabang.

## Note on Transcription

Throughout this dissertation, I transliterate the Lao language following the system outlined in Enfield’s (2007) *Grammar of Lao*:

		Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops	Voiceless unaspirated	p [p]	t [t]	c [c]	k [k]	q [ʔ]
	Voiceless aspirated	ph [p <sup>h</sup> ]	th [t <sup>h</sup> ]		kh [k <sup>h</sup> ]	
	Voiced	b [b]	d [d]			
Fricatives		f [f]	s [s]			h [h]
Nasals		m [m]	n [n]	ɲ [ɲ]	ŋ [ŋ]	
Laterals			l [l]			
Glides		v/w [v]		j [j]		

Figure 1: Basic inventory of consonants in Lao, IPA is in brackets (adopted from Enfield 2007)

	unrounded		rounded	
	front	central	back	
high	i ii [i i:]		ù uù [u u:]	u uu [u u:]
mid	ê êê [e e:]	e ee [ə ə:]		o oo [o o:]
low	è èè [ɛ ɛ:]	a aa [a a:]		ò òò [ɔ ɔ:]
diphthongs	ia, ua, ùa, àù [ia, ua, uaa, au]			

Figure 2: Basic inventory of vowels in Lao, IPA is in brackets (adopted from Enfield 2007). Note that vowel length is phonemic.

The Lao language has lexical tone. In Enfield’s (2007) transliteration system, numbers one through five, appended to the end of forms, represent lexical tone in the Vientiane dialect. A [-ø] in the same position represents an unstressed syllable.<sup>16</sup> Even though the Vientiane tone system has some differences with Luang Prabang’s tonal system, I nevertheless transliterate forms with their Vientiane tones so that readers familiar with Lao or Enfield’s system might reconstruct the native orthography. Common names of people and places are written according to popular custom. Where details of pronunciation are relevant to my analysis, I make note.

<sup>16</sup> On tone in Lao see Roffe 1946; Hoonchamlong 1984; Person 1998; and Osatananda 2015.



Throughout the dissertation, I adopt the habit of using single-quotation marks for glosses and non-recorded quotations, like those in my fieldnotes, and double-quotation marks for direct quotations I transcribed from a speech recording or a written document. This is part of an overall push in the dissertation to mark the exact source of information and to press the methodological and theoretical value of doing so. While living in Luang Prabang my video camera and audio recorders were often attached to my shoulder like notebooks were to anthropologists past. My friends became used to these cameras, and would often set them up or adjust them to get a better shot as we sat around drinking beer or stood to play snooker. As I make use of these video-recordings below, I provide details of non-verbal interaction when appropriate.

### **Summary of the Chapters**

I have organized the dissertation into ten chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. While the chapters build on one another in argument and ethnographic detail, they might also be read individually and in consultation with the summaries below. The following three chapters (i.e., two, three, and four) provide historical and methodological background to what comes next and tackle theoretical issues that those studying Laos, the state, and social interaction generally inevitably encounter. The subsequent chapters unpack the problem of moral economic types from the vantage of several problematics: generic and specific reference, gendered notions of economizing, the relation between tokens and types, the relation between types and sociality, and the reflexive mobilization of types for ritual events. In conjunction, the chapters sketch a vision of moral economic life in which the typification of moral economy is itself constitutive of ethical practice.

In Chapter Two, ‘Socialist Ends,’ I interrogate the notion of ‘ends’ historically. I show that the Lao state continues to imagine itself on a trajectory toward socialism while

simultaneously opening itself to global capitalism. Almost twenty years before my fieldwork, Grant Evans, one of the preeminent anthropologists and historians of Laos, declared that the country had entered the age of post-socialism. “Socialism in Laos lasted barely fifteen years,” he wrote, “[t]he roots it sunk were shallow and they were easily uprooted.” Yet two decades later and more than four decades after the revolution, socialism remains the state’s explicit aim. Relying on Evans’s and others’ historical and ethnographic writings as well as newspaper articles, interviews, and official documents, I argue that the Lao state’s continued insistence that it is on the path toward socialism should not be brushed off as inconsequential rhetoric. Rather, the state’s insistence legitimizes its historical rise to power, its current control, and the furtherance of its moral and socioeconomic projects. This insistence is also ethnographically and historically revealing. It manifests a ubiquitous moral logic in Laos. On topic after topic since the revolution, representatives of the state have emphasized the state’s consistency of moral purpose even as the socio-economic *means* for realizing this purpose have changed—regulations on economy and sociality have been lifted, collective agriculture has been abandoned, relations with former ‘enemies’ have improved, but the state still imagines itself as walking on the same moral pathway. I explore this in reference to three different historical threads: the affective notion of ‘solidarity’ (*khwaam2 saamakkhii2*), the Development Lottery, and the game *pétanque qua* sport. Each of these topics has been imagined in state rhetoric as a broadly conceived *means* for achieving moral and socio-economic *ends*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> My goal in this chapter is not to artificially separate means from ends. In fact, as I discuss, ‘solidarity’ or *saamakkhii2* is commonly talked about as both an end in itself and a means. The state has treated *saamakkhii2* as an affective state that produces positive socio-economic and military engagements and success, just as it has justified countless economic policies, development projects, and public events because they produce *saamakkhii2*. Rather, my goal is to unpack the cultural logic of accounts that explicitly distinguish socio-economic practices by their ends, such as early announcements for the national Development Lottery, which distinguished the new lottery from the ‘capitalists’ illegal lotteries’ (Pasaason 1983; JPRS 1983b:27) because it was a means to develop the nation, not to enrich a group of people.

As a foreign researcher often taking digital photographs, videotaping events, and interviewing people, I prompted people to put themselves and their language on display for me. Chapter Three, ‘Good Representations,’ explores a semiotic ideology prevalent in Luang Prabang that only ‘good’ (*dii3*) things should be displayed and the concomitant worry that others might judge one’s displays as not ‘good.’ I argue that these worries are a variant of what many in the anthropology of ethics have called ‘reflexivity.’ I unpack moments where people expressed concerns filling out written surveys I had prepared—concern that their written words were being put on *display* for indeterminate others to evaluate—and I trace how these concerns did not appear to extend to their spoken words. As respondents to the survey wrote ‘good’ answers in my paper survey, they simultaneously voiced, joked about, and debated their ‘bad’ answers into my audio recorder. In my discussion, I show how these moments help us move beyond the front-stage / back-stage metaphor, which has often been used to explain such disjunctures. I conclude by showing that people’s worries about the survey confound theories often treated as mutually exclusive by anthropologists studying ethics: an ethics oriented toward the personal repercussions that ‘bad’ *displays* might bring, and an ethics oriented toward the value of ‘good’ representations in and of themselves.

Chapter Four, ‘Inconsistent Evaluations,’ moves away from the *pétanque* court to describe the funeral of my host father’s sister. I begin by narrating a series of contradictory stances people took concerning the deceased woman’s daughter and son-in-law. I found that my host family, friends, and neighbors at the funeral produced somewhat predictable evaluative gaps between what they said *with* versus what they said *about* the couple. They were mostly helpful to the couple when the couple was present but extremely critical of the couple when the couple was absent. Although the example of the funeral is somewhat unusual in its venom and its mournful

circumstances, such patterns of changing stance depending on who is listening are common both in Luang Prabang and in the United States. Nevertheless, when we recognize this obvious dimension of life, a thorny question in both the study of interaction and in the anthropology of ethics rises to the surface: How might we account for relatively radical interdiscursive inconsistencies and gaps? In parallel to my discussion of the dramaturgical metaphor in Chapter Three, I argue that we should not try to settle once and for all which moments or feelings are ‘real’ and which are ‘dissemblances.’ Rather, we should both take moments where evaluations appear absent on their own terms and, at the same time, consider communicative practices that account for and at times resolve interdiscursive gaps. In Luang Prabang, many people account for such gaps by explicitly arguing that the *ethics of interacting* pleasantly should take precedence over the suspicions and judgments of the moment, say, that the deceased woman’s son-in-law was liar, a bad mourner, or a methamphetamine addict. I show that this ethics of interacting patterns with a broader insistence in Luang Prabang and state media that conflict is an inherently bad thing. It also reveals a crucial point in the study of moral evaluation: evaluations of things, people, and practices are themselves subject to evaluation.

In Chapter Five, ‘Clear Distinctions,’ I introduce ‘gambling for beer’ (*tii3 kin3 bia3*) and ‘gambling for money’ (*tii3 kin3 ngen2*) as both ideal forms of exchange and as phrases people use. In broad strokes, I show some of the things people do with types *qua* lexemes. I begin by discussing earlier work in economic anthropology which often unreflexively privileged local contrasts like ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ and newer research which has criticized that earlier work. I critique both lines of argument for tending to treat moral economic types such as ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ as found objects rather than the products of concrete interactions. I distinguish between two ways these types *qua* terms are used

in referential practice: as part of propositions with *generic reference* and as *labels for relatively specific conduct*. I show that these uses have different properties and help engender different pragmatic effects. I then consider why ‘beer’ and ‘money’ anchor the distinction between these two ends, and locate these two kinds of objects historically and socio-culturally. I conclude by showing how the distinction between beer and money gambling can appear to collapse in ‘actual’ practices of gambling and by reviewing the theoretical questions that this fact raises.

In Chapters Six and Seven, “Gendered Savings” and “Masculine Bets” respectively, I explore the moral entanglements between gender, money, and *pétanque*. In Chapter Six, I ask why women rarely go to money-gambling *pétanque* courts. The answer, I argue, resides in the gendered ideology that women are, and should be, economically responsible and ‘cheap’ (*khii5 thii1*) with their money as opposed to men who are expected to be reckless and ‘big-hearted.’

If Chapter Five considered the language people use to distinguish types of betting, Chapter Seven, ‘Masculine Bets,’ explores bet-making itself and the extent to which moral economic types do not determine their tokens. First, I review how bet-making is done and the types of bets one can make. I trace the ethno-distinction between two types of money bets: bets *with* someone (e.g., ‘Let’s bet on the Hawks tonight’) in which the bettors’ economic and rooting interests converge and bets *against* someone (e.g., ‘I bet you the Hawks win tonight’) in which the bettors’ economic and rooting interests diverge. I use these two types to show that making money bets on *pétanque* courts is both conventional and resolutely variable. I argue that while there is a reflexive quality to much exchange, just as there is a reflexive quality to most meaningful action, that this reflexive quality is not prefabricated or baked into action as a function of its type.

Chapter Eight, ‘Fractured Friendships’ again moves away from the *pétanque* court to explore some of the people who frequent the court and their relations. I argue that the tension between friendship and hostility, exaggerated when people play sports like *pétanque*, exists in life as well. I begin by recounting how during my time in the field, a WhatsApp chat group was formed called ‘*Phùan1 bò-thiim5 kan3*’ or ‘Friends that don’t throw each other away.’ Shortly thereafter, the chat group was deactivated and some of the ‘friends’ became acquaintances, or worse yet, estranged. I explore the reasons behind the group’s demise and compare these to classic discussions in Southeast Asian studies concerning Thai ‘loose-structure’ and ‘speech levels.’ I argue that the group’s demise, while extreme, reflects the transitory and ambivalent relations of many *siaw1* or ‘age-mates’ in Luang Prabang who stress an ideal of perennial friendships ‘to the death’ even as they form and disband friendships with others frequently.

In Chapter Nine, ‘Good Gambling,’ I discuss two contexts in which most people agree that gambling for money is morally acceptable: funerals and post-partum houses. I begin by reviewing in depth how people justify this fact, and I then explore video-recorded moments of gambling at post-partum houses. This chapter brings together many of the discussions in the dissertation. I show that the games at post-partum houses embed money gambling—a type of economy imagined as inherently antagonistic—into a deeply non-antagonistic activity: honoring the birth of a friend. I show that this embedding is not without its own risks, as ‘inside’ this generic, moral frame is messy action, choice, and activities that can test one’s mettle.

## Chapter 2 Socialist Ends

### Introduction

In this first chapter, I interrogate four economic and ethical types historically: ‘socialism,’ ‘solidarity,’ the ‘lottery,’ and ‘sport.’ My goals are two-fold. First, I introduce and describe many of the basic categories and issues to which I return throughout this dissertation: the resonances between state discourses and talk ‘on the ground,’ the ubiquity of appeals to ‘good sociality,’ the state’s position on gambling, and the rise of *pétanque*, among others. Second, I use my discussion of these four types to argue that over the last forty years, as Laos has changed drastically, the core of the state’s moral discourse has stayed mostly the same: the state is good because it fosters the goodness of people. That is, since the revolution and until the present, state representatives have continued to frame the state’s interventions as explicitly aimed at fostering a solidary, loving, and good society. As I explore this discourse, I also draw out criticisms of it, both among academics and people in Luang Prabang.

I begin the chapter with ‘socialism’ itself, a type of economy in the grandest sense. I then explore ‘solidarity’ (*khwaam2 saamakhhii2*) as a type of prototypically good sociality. In the third section, I track the foundation and evolution of the state’s Development Lottery as a moral economic type, distinguished from other kinds of lotteries not because of how it is run, but because of what it is for. Finally, I describe how *pétanque* became typified as a ‘sport,’ and what its status as a ‘sport’ has meant for the evolution, restriction, and encouragement of the game.

### Late-Socialist Laos

*There are no exclusively capitalist societies and there will no doubt be no exclusively socialist ones. There have been no societies that were only feudal, or only monarchic, or only republican. There are only societies which have a*

*regime, or rather—what is even more complicated—systems of regimes, which are more or less characterized, regimes and systems of regimes of their economies, of their political organizations; they have customs and mentalities that can be more or less arbitrarily defined by the predominance of one or other of these systems or institutions. That is all.*

*-Marcel Mauss (cited in Evans 1990:231).*

Luang Prabang has changed drastically in the years between the 1975 socialist revolution and when I was living in the city. In 2015, two back-to-back anniversary celebrations encapsulated the change. Within seven days, Luang Prabang celebrated both the fortieth anniversary of the nation's revolution and the twentieth anniversary of the city's status as a UNESCO cultural heritage site. It would be difficult to pick two more potent symbols of the city's recent past. On December 2, 1975, after years of war, the Lao state seized power from the abdicated Lao king, and on December 9, 1995, the nineteenth session of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage adjourned after deeming Luang Prabang a UNESCO protected site.<sup>18</sup>

On National Day (*van2 saat4*), December 2, 1975, the party consolidated the country, shut down old political pathways, and reaffirmed new ones. It disciplined those individuals and practices it viewed as traitorous: shipping off enemies of the state to re-education camps, shuttering night clubs, and regulating and restricting trade. The “combination of political repression, social control and economic collapse” caused people to flee (Stuart-Fox 1996: 167).

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<sup>18</sup> I watched the celebrations for 'National Day' on television with Mèè Phòòn and her granddaughter. Mèè Phòòn was only home watching because the government had canceled the lottery for the day—normally she would have sold tickets—and I was only home watching because she had ordered me to be. I had planned to go to the Luang Prabang stadium to watch the celebrations in person, but she was worried that somebody might 'do something' there, that it might not be safe. Seven days after the National Day celebration, the UNESCO Heritage anniversary parade marched through the center of Luang Prabang. She told me that this celebration would be safe, and she, and my host-sisters and I, and seemingly everyone I knew in town, went out to either watch or march in the parade.



Five years later, ten percent of the national population had evacuated the country (Evans 2002:178). Those who remained in power intentionally closed Laos off from the capitalist world.

When Luang Prabang became a UNESCO heritage site, the city welcomed many of the people, ideas, and practices the revolutionary party had feared. Luang Prabang's boom was symptomatic of a general trend. Five years prior, in 1990, the state recorded that 14,400 foreign tourists entered the country. In 2015, there were 4,684,429 tourists nationally. Thus, over the last 25 years, tourism has grown by more than 300 per cent (Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism 2016). Luang Prabang's status as a UNESCO site pushed tourism growth in the city even higher. A year after the status was awarded, "50,000 tourists visited Luang Prabang—about one per inhabitant..." (Stuart-Fox 1998:76). Over the coming years, night clubs and bowling allies became prominent parts of the city's landscape, and economic activity expanded and grew in ways early revolutionaries would have scoffed at. Even the reasoning for the city's selection would have troubled some revolutionaries. UNESCO honored some of the royal and colonial heritage that these party leaders had opposed and suppressed.<sup>19</sup> Subsequent tourists have created a demand for history that the Lao state finds uncomfortable; the tourists have arrived with an appetite for Luang Prabang's royal history, its French colonial memories, and its Buddhist heritage (Evans 2009:35). To satisfy the demand, the state has awkwardly and selectively "had to reach back into the cultural past and revive it" (1998:130).

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<sup>19</sup> In the original nomination for the city as a UNESCO site, the nominators (ICOMOS 1995) wrote that "Luang Prabang is outstanding by virtue of both its rich architectural and artistic heritage and also its special urban development, first on traditional oriental lines and then in conjunction with European colonial influences. This is uniquely expressed in the overall urban fabric of the town. It may therefore be considered to be a unique combination of a diversity of communities—rural and urban, royal and religious—within a defined geographical area."

Tourist Arrivals in Laos, 1990-2016

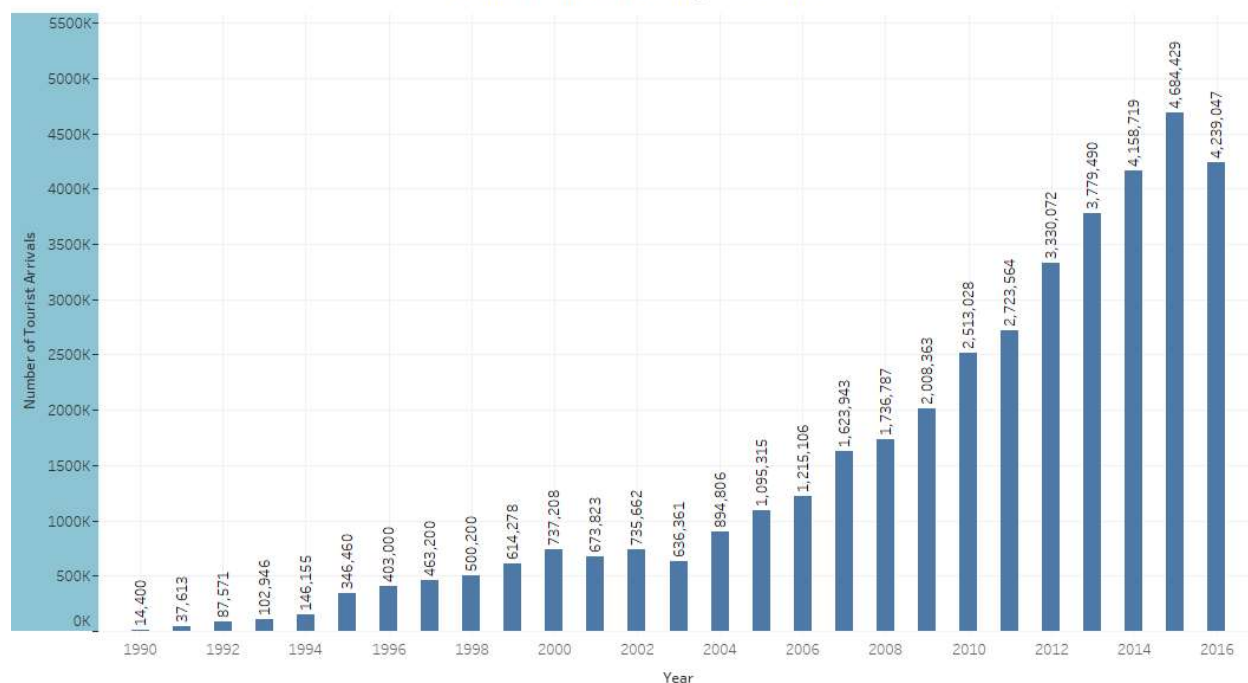


Figure 3: Tourist Arrivals in Laos from 1990-2016 (Lao National Tourism Administration 2009; Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism 2016)

It is tempting to imagine these two December dates as key points along opposite historical trajectories. Many researchers do this and have good reasons for doing so. They treat 1975’s National Day as a step into socialism and Luang Prabang’s 1995 establishment as a UNESCO heritage site as one of many steps out of socialism. They write about Laos’s recent socio-economic history as a series of such steps, which together reveal a nation slowly backing away from the strong policies set out after the revolution.<sup>20</sup> As the pivot on which Laos began this walk from socialism toward capitalism, they point to the Fourth Congress of the People’s Revolutionary Party held in 1986 and the ‘political report’ within it (Government of Lao PDR 1987). The ‘report’ formally embraced a series of liberalizing policies often called the “New

<sup>20</sup> This story is treated as either a story of a nation ‘liberalizing’ or ‘neoliberalizing’ depending on the political position of the author.

Economic Mechanism” (NEM).<sup>21</sup> As the geographer Jonathan Rigg (2005:21) shows, the NEM’s reforms have tracked a “matrix of generic recommendations linked to the neo-liberal Washington consensus.” Since the NEM, Laos’s economy has drastically improved as have its relations with the capitalist world from which it had closed itself off. In July 1997, Laos became a part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN; see Stuart-Fox 1998), eventually hosting the ASEAN regional forum in 2016. In early 2013 “after 15 years of effort” (Howe 2014), it became the last ASEAN nation to ratify its membership in the World Trade Organization. “[O]ver the years,” Rigg (2005:21) writes, “the Lao government has been lauded more than once by the World Bank and the IMF as an exemplar of economic reform.”

Socialism in Laos, these authors claim, has been left behind. Askew, Long, and Logan (2006: 175), remark that, after the mid-1980s, “Laos was embarked on a process of market reform and economic liberalization that was, by the 1990s, to leave it a socialist country in name only.” In an article on Lao politics, Martin Stuart Fox (2007:161) refers to Laos as a “nominally Marxist-Leninist” state. And, in 1995, Grant Evans (1995:xi) wrote that “Socialism in Laos lasted barely fifteen years. The roots it sunk were shallow and they were easily uprooted.”

In this section, I argue that the scholarly portrayal of Laos as nominally socialist, while at times compelling, misrepresents how Laos imagines itself—for the state, socialism is a long-term goal, not a present reality—and undervalues the ethical work that ‘names’ and acts of ‘naming’ do. If socialism is so irrelevant to Lao political economic culture, why do state actors repeat that Laos is on the path toward it? The invocations of socialism I discuss below are not empty

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<sup>21</sup> I use the word ‘embraced’ rather than ‘established’ because Meng (1987:184–185) writes that “The so-called new economic management mechanism or system has been the buzz-word circulating inside and outside the government throughout 1986 and long before its official endorsement by the Congress in November [*sic*].” The reforms, like Laos’s revolution itself, paralleled the Doi Moi reforms in Vietnam, which were also inaugurated that December of 1986. Here is how Beresford (2008:221) describes those: “At its 6<sup>th</sup> National Congress in December 1986, Vietnam’s Communist Party made a decisive step to abandon the central planning model of socialism and to adopt a ‘market-oriented socialist economy under state guidance’—also known as Doi Moi (Renovation).”

language, but markers of an ethical commitment that portrays the state as a continuous entity, marked by a consistent purpose of becoming socialist, even as the means for achieving that purpose have shifted. From the perspective of many state actors, the New Economic Mechanism and Luang Prabang's new status as a heritage site are just additional steps toward the development that the revolution promised. These events mark stones on the same path, not U-turns. While Laos might not be 'socialist' from the perspective of some economists, and while everyday people rarely mention 'socialism' in so many words, I show that state actors use 'socialism' *qua* an ethical type to frame the present as one moment in the state's broader ethical life.

### **Socialism is Dead**

In his masterful *Lao Peasants Under Socialism*, Grant Evans explored the Lao state's attempts to promote collective agriculture in the decade and a half after the revolution. Evans documented life within Laos when very few academics had permission to do so. A mix of statistics, ethnographic vignettes, and deep discussion of Laos's political leadership, the book is one of several reasons for Evans's reputation as "arguably the most influential scholar" of modern Lao studies (Cox and Rehbein 2016:1). In 1995, he reissued the book as *Lao Peasants Under Socialism and Post-Socialism* and included a new chapter on 'post-socialism.' In the first moments of the new chapter, Evans laid out "[t]he central claim made in the new edition," as one reviewer put it, "that 'socialism has come and gone in Laos'" (Walker 2000). He then offered a bleak sketch of the rubble left behind:

*Travelling through the country in the early 1990s was like driving through a deserted movie set. Archways constructed over the entrances to what had once been a cooperative or a state restaurant or guest house lurched dangerously, about to fall. Panels of flimsy plywood, with faded slogans like, 'Hold December*

*2 in Your Heart Forever', the date of the communists coming to power in 1975, flapped in the breeze (Evans 1995:xi).*

Evans's (1995:xv) point was clear: almost twenty years after the revolution, socialism was dead.

“Some reference continues to be made to Marxism,” he noted,

*but it takes the form of pointing out that it is a mistake for socialists to try to skip the capitalist stage of development. Thus, the task of the party is to promote the capitalist stage and guide it towards socialism in the long run. This return to the classical Marxist scenario is an interesting, perhaps ingenious (or ingenuous?), rationalization of its position by a ruling communist party. But does anyone really believe that the party will survive in the 'long run'?*

While *Lao Peasants Under Socialism* continues to sparkle, the chapter on ‘post-socialism’ has not aged as well. Twenty years after its publication, the Lao communist party has maintained its power. Although the nation and the world surrounding it have changed radically, some of the decrepit propaganda signs Evans noticed and said would soon disappear, have been more or less reprinted. The party still flies the hammer and sickle. Party members continue to take time in speeches to remind the people that Laos is still heading toward socialism—albeit in the long run. If socialism’s roots in Laos were shallow, as Evans put it, then in contemporary Laos, these same shallow roots still remain atop the soil.

In 1991, the *Chicago Tribune* mocked an apparent contradiction in the Lao state’s rhetoric. After noting that “prosperity and democracy” replaced “socialism” in the nation’s motto, the journalist added that, “That doesn’t mean Laos has bought a one-way ticket to democracy. Laotians say they’re still on the road to socialism; it just happens to pass through capitalism on the way” (Magistad 1991). Funny as this justification may be to readers of the *Tribune*, this is actually a serious position the state has often taken on its own history. Over time, it has presented itself as a pragmatic, ‘flexible’ government, which has not undermined its earlier

policies, but through processes of experimentation, selected the ‘good’ parts of its national history, culture, capitalism, and tourism for its own long-term uses and goals (see Gunn 1998:150; Askew, Long, and Logan 2006:173). In concert, state actors treat these selections as steps ‘forward.’

The most important of these state actors is probably Kaysone Phomvihane. Kaysone was the nation’s prime minister and later president and he emphatically embraced the pragmatic attitude toward policy. In December of 1979, four years after the revolution and as part of an effort to “usher in more liberal economic policies” (Stuart-Fox 1996:127), Kaysone discussed how Laos needed to adopt the ‘positive’ parts of capitalism and discard the ‘negative’:

*The capitalist economy in our country at present is still useful to production and social life. Therefore, we must still use it. However, it still moves according to the economic laws of the capitalist state, is geared only to making profits, develops independently, and takes any opportunity to engage in the hoarding of goods. These are discouraging characteristics. We must check and limit these negative sides of the capitalist economy. We are fully capable of using its positive characteristics in our production and social life, and of checking and limiting its negative sides without being afraid that when capitalism is fully developed it will override socialism. This is due to, on the one hand, state laws, and, on the other hand, the state’s control of all fundamental economic arteries as well as finance, monetary business, banking, industrial enterprises, transportation, major construction enterprises, the export and import of essential goods, and abundant sources of materials” (FBIS 1980:132).*

In his speeches, decrees and ‘political reports,’ Kaysone often recognized mistakes made in the past—usually mistakes in the implementation of socialist ideology—but like other party members, he never framed the state’s shifts from ‘socialist’ to ‘capitalist’ economic policies as reversals of principle. As Evans (1990:55) writes, “The long-term superiority of socialism over capitalism remained unquestioned. The reappraisal was based on a more realistic understanding of the weaknesses of Lao society and its economy.” In a 1990 interview with a Swedish newspaper (FBIS 1990: 60), for instance, Kaysone explained why the nation was changing the

management of its economy. As he emphasized that Laos had made mistakes, he framed these mistakes as growing pains encountered during an unflinching progress forward.

*After the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975, we mobilized the multiethnic Lao people to further hold aloft and enhance their right to mastership and to exploit all potential for restoring the economy and defending and building the country. In the process of carrying out our economic development and rehabilitation, we apparently made a hasty and emotional decision to do away with all nonsocialist economic elements and to set up state-owned and collective economic foundation by restricting the markets and goods circulation and managing the economy through bureaucratic centralism and state financing.*

*The rehabilitation and management of the economy through such a method have caused severe adverse effects on production, goods circulation, and the living conditions of the people, thereby retarding the pace of growth of the national economy. That development has prompted us to rethink and to effect new changes in a profound manner in our economy. The new changes are aimed at rectifying and harnessing the hasty and emotional line of thinking, doing away with the state financing management mechanisms, implementing the goods-monetary-market relations, developing the strength of all economic sectors, utilizing the form of state capitalism to vigorously promote the goods economy and the legitimate and free circulations of goods, opening up more domestic markets, broadening economic relations and cooperation with foreign countries, providing facilities to the development of production forces, and improving the living conditions of the people.*

Later in the same interview (FBIS 1990: 60-61), the Swedish interviewer asked Kaysone to reflect on what was happening in Eastern European countries. He responded with a mix of realism and confidence that the Lao nation was on the correct path, even if the details of that path and the obstacles to going down it were yet unclear:

*We regard Perestrojka and new changes taking place in the Soviet Union and Socialist countries in Eastern Europe as a probable trend and the subjective law of development of socialism [sic]. We are concerned with the profound new changes in Eastern Europe and acknowledge that they constitute a long process of evolution full of difficulties and confusion. In this process, mistakes are unavoidable. However, if each country adheres to socialist objectivity, maintains a sense of vigilance against all subversive schemes from the outside, resolves to do away with objective mistakes, draws lessons from past activities, and finds correct methods to solve problems in conformity with the aspirations of its people, it will be able to overcome all difficulties and crises, thereby undoubtedly taking the cause of restructuring and reforms to victory.*

The logic of taking the good and leaving the bad of capitalism fit with another rhetorical emphasis of Kaysone's: Laos, he believed, was in a prolonged state of economic hybridity. At the 1986 fourth congress, for instance, he said, "It would be incorrect to say that our country is not at all a socialist society, and it would also be wrong to say that our society is a socialist one" (cited in Evans 1990:63).<sup>22</sup> As Evans (1990:63) put it, throughout his speeches and writings, Kaysone "never tire[d] of a chance to remind his cadres of [this] fact," that Laos was not yet a socialist country but in a period of transition to socialism.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 4: An Image of the IX Congress in 2011, Marx and Lenin are Pictured to the Right (Lao Ministry of Public Security 2011).

Kaysone died in 1992, but representatives of the state have tacked close to the rhetorical path he charted.<sup>24</sup> At the ninth party congress in 2011, the leaders of the party stressed that Laos

<sup>22</sup> Cf. a contemporary, and not surprisingly parallel article on Vietnam, "Is Vietnam Socialist" (Gough 1986): "The Vietnamese say their society is not socialist, and cannot be until they have industrialized, but that they are 'moving to socialism.'"

<sup>23</sup> In late 1979, for instance, he wrote, "Since 1976 our party and state have affirmed that under the condition in which socialism has become one of the world systems, our country can directly advance toward socialism, bypassing the period of capitalist development. As Lenin pointed out, the direct advancement from small-scale production to socialism is required to pass through a transitional period, which essentially takes several years" (FBIS 1980:122). He reaffirmed this point again during his Political Report at the party's third congress in April 1982, remarking "our starting point being very low, we must take many transitional steps in our socialist construction..." (cited in Thayer 1983:86).

<sup>24</sup> One recent commentator wrote that the English newspaper, *Vientiane Times*, "a veritable mouthpiece of the regime, systematically expunges any mention of the word 'socialism' in reference to contemporary Laos" (Soukamneuth 2006:64). But this was not strictly true in 2006, when the commentator wrote it, nor has it been true since (e.g., *Vientiane Times* 2004; 2006; 2007; 2011a; 2011b). Nevertheless, mentions of socialism in the *Vientiane*



had two major objectives, to leave the list of “Least Developed Nations” and “to continue rising toward the goal of socialism” (Lao Ministry of Public Security 2011).<sup>25</sup> During the 40th anniversary of National Day, the then-president of Laos Choummaly Sayasone concluded his speech by asking people to continue creating the “primary factors to facilitate the path towards the socialist destination and the bright future of the nation...” (Vientiane Times 2016).

This teleological narrative of taking the ‘good’ and leaving the ‘bad’ on the way to socialism, and this insistence that Laos has not changed its end-goal but rather revised and modified its path to getting there, accords with contemporary attempts at pre-revolutionary Lao historiography (see Lockhart 2006). That is, party-approved scholars tend to project backward onto old kings, rebellions (Baird 2007), and galactic polities as previous moments in the journey toward socialism. In histories of Laos as a nation, the state treats this pre-revolutionary history as a series of other stumbles and mistakes from which the state has learned.

Much as a ‘quest’ or ‘purpose’ can give unity to a story or the narrative of a life, for state workers and the state media socialism continues to project moral unity onto the Lao revolutionary project. It does this even as mention of socialism is relatively uncommon in daily life in Luang Prabang. On the ground, so to speak, people usually answered my questions about socialism, the state, and the dividing lines between the public and the private with confusion. They would sometimes distinguish ‘the old system’ (*labop2 kaw4*) from the ‘new system’ (*labop2 mai1*), as shorthand for pointing to the relaxation of social restrictions, the increased presence of tourism, and changes in economic policy, but they tended to talk about these two

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Times are relatively rare and typically historical in nature, i.e., related to celebrations of National Day or memorials for Kaysone.

<sup>25</sup> ສ້າງພື້ນຖານອັນໜັກແໜ້ນໃຫ້ການນໍາເອົາ ປະເທດເຮົາຫລຸດພົ້ນອອກຈາກຄວາມດ້ອຍພັດທະນາໃນປີ 2020 ແລະ ສືບຕໍ່ກ້າວຂຶ້ນສູ່ຈຸດໝາຍສັງຄົມນິຍົມ

systems as moments encompassed by a larger trajectory toward an end-goal, a goal to which, they said, ‘the party leads’ (*phak1 namphaa2*).

### **Socialism is Late**

When Evans wrote that socialism had come and gone in Laos, he clearly had a particular sense of ‘socialism’ in mind: a command economy, with state enterprises, restrictions on profiteering, and projects like Laos’s attempt at collective agriculture. Put another way, his was a relatively analytic definition of the type. In regard to whether Laos was socialist, he was not ultimately concerned with how the state used words like ‘socialism’ or *sangkhomniñom2* to identify itself or describe its long-term aims, how it flew the flag of the hammer and sickle, or how it aligned with other ‘socialist’ nations in the name of socialism. Reflecting on Laos, China, and Vietnam, he (1995:xii) wrote that “it is the regimes as a political form which have survived, not socialism.”<sup>26</sup> As others have adopted Evans’s position, cited it, and carried it forward, we are left with a cognitive dissonance. If ‘socialism’ left no impact, then why, forty years later, is the state still talking about it? While Evans and others might want to separate ‘socialism’ from ‘politics,’ the fact of the matter is that the regime continues to politicize socialism.

Recent work has addressed similar issues on two fronts. In research on the few remaining ‘socialist’ states, anthropologists have stressed that we should take the proclaimed socialism of these states seriously. Writing in the introduction to a volume on the topic in China, for instance, Zhang and Ong (2008:14) challenge claims that “socialist rule is dead... or that China is

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<sup>26</sup> In later work (1998:172), he wrote that after having “deserted communism” the Lao state has been forced to return to “older sacred centers of the cultural order”: the That Luang festival, *baci* “soul calling” ceremonies,” and Buddhism generally. These older cultural touchstones, he argued, legitimated the nation and filled the vacuum that socialism left behind. In a similar vein, many outside observers have quipped that the goal of the initial NEM reforms was to have “*perestroika* without *glasnost*” (Zasloff and Brown 1991:143; Bourdet 2000; Askew, Long, and Logan 2006:173), to liberalize the economy *and* maintain the party’s power.

becoming a variant of Western models of neoliberalism.” “Rather,” they continue, “the adoption of neoliberal reasoning has made possible a kind of socialism at a distance, in which privatizing norms and practices proliferate in symbiosis with the maintenance of authoritarian rule.” Similarly, in a special issue on the topic in Vietnam, editors Schwenkel and Leshkovich (2012:397) emphasize “the ways in which the socialist ‘past’ is integral to the present in Vietnam, even as it is remade and newly configured.”<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, other recent work has deconstructed the purported evidence of socialism *qua* economic type. In an introduction to an edited volume entitled *Enduring Socialism*, West and Raman (2013:3) challenge the distinction between it and ‘capitalism.’ They remind us that “postsocialist transitology” is “the legacy of a conceptual schema wherein socialism is seen as capitalism’s opposite” and they stress that claims of a state’s ‘capitalism’ or ‘socialism’ are often disputed and that ‘capitalist’ and ‘socialist’ policies inevitably mingle. To accentuate the ways that the two economic types can appear to blur, West and Raman draw on Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP). They remind us that “the very first attempts at revolutionary change were built on the premise that capitalist forms could coexist with socialist initiatives...” and that Lenin’s NEP “was itself a conscious model of a mixed economy....” They (2013:9) argue that we should use the NEP as a trope for understanding socialism, that doing so “helps perforate the imagined spaces of homogenous capitalist development, revealing fissures

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<sup>27</sup> They continue, “Instead of making broad general claims about the ‘newness’ of certain logics and practices that assume profound breaks with former expressions and manifestations of socialism,” they and the other contributors aimed to be “attentive to continuities, recurrences, intersections, and cross-fertilizations across the domains of public and private, state, nonstate, and transnational” (Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012:397). Note that Zhang, a contributor to both *Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar* and Schwenkel and Leshkovich’s *Neoliberalism in Vietnam*, pointed out that although the political economic changes in Vietnam and China were different from one another, they, on the whole, were following similar paths. “Similar to what I have observed in my research on urban China, while there is a general shift toward a private self and an increased concern with self-care engendered by a new mass consumer culture and an increasingly commodified society, social embeddedness and social moralities remain salient in the remaking of the self and living in postreform Vietnam” (Zhang 2012:663).

and complex trajectories that belie simple models of ‘transition’, whilst also complicating notions of ‘before and after.’”

Without proclaiming or knowing it, these two threads of recent anthropological work are, like much theoretical work, commentaries on the flexibility and analytic slipperiness of typifications. Scholars like Zhang and Ong argue that we should expand how we understand ‘socialism’ *qua* type and they emphasize that dimensions of the socialist revolution can perdure even as the state adopts neo-liberal economic policies. They do not claim that ‘socialism’ as a type should be abandoned, but rather, that we should expand its denotata and reconsider the assumption that it works against capitalism. Scholars like West and Raman make a similar point from a different angle: for them, every economy that has ever been called ‘socialism’ is patently impure. Like Marcel Mauss, they posit that “there are no exclusively capitalist societies and there will no doubt be no exclusively socialist ones.” Because the type will never fit the world, West and Raman valorize disassembling ‘socialism’ as a neat, polarized analytic and reimagining it as an inherently hybrid concept.

Interestingly, the arguments of these two threads of recent research parallel how the Lao state has narrated its own progression after the 1975 revolution. Like Zhang and Ong, state actors have long argued that socialism continues to matter as an end-goal and an ethical frame even while Laos integrates ‘capitalist’ principles. They treat these principles not as contradictions but as additional steps toward the development that the revolution promised. Likewise, West and Raman’s comments fit beautifully with how Lao state actors have discussed their own economy. In fact, when, in the 1986 congress, Lao leaders like Kaysone justified their New Economic Mechanism, they were, like West and Raman, partly inspired by Lenin’s New Economic Policy as a model. In years after adopting these liberalizing policies, party members “frequently cited

[the NEP] to legitimize the movement towards a market economy and the necessity of stimulating private initiative” (Zasloff and Brown 1991:143).<sup>28</sup>

There is, however, a fundamental difference between these academic discussions and how the Lao state has imagined itself. For Lao actors who have continued Kaysone’s rhetorical path, the question of whether Laos is on the path toward a socialist future is inherently ethical. This is particularly clear in relation to West and Raman’s argument. West and Raman argue that socialism is always hybridized; Kaysone believed it was only hybridized for the moment. West and Raman argue that there is no pure-type of socialism, but Lao state discourse still points to a vague future where there might just be. This point on the horizon unifies the present and the past, just as it excuses their missteps as lessons learned on the journey to something even better.

It is because of this ethical function of ‘socialism’ in the present that I call Laos a ‘late-socialist’ state. ‘Late’ (cf., Harms 2011:233) not because socialism is dead like the late, great David Bowie but because socialism continues to unify Laos’s moral project, as an idea, a reference point, a compelling type, much past its apparent bedtime.

## **Solidary Laos**

*In consultant documents, and in the speeches of local officials, one can find simplistic appeals to ‘community’, ‘solidarity’ and ‘mutual help’, ‘because we are all Lao!’ Of course, no villager is going to contradict such statements in the abstract, for indeed on the surface the rhetoric is compatible with their basic viewpoint.*

*-Grant Evans (2008:521)*

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<sup>28</sup> It is worth emphasizing, as Walker (1999:69) and the Lao state both do, that although the policies have on the whole liberalized trade, movement, and other dimensions of the economy, this liberalization is not purely de-regulatory, but opens up opportunities for other kinds of regulation.

It was early morning and I was already being passed a glass of Beer Lao with ice. I sat on the sidelines of a state-sponsored *pétanque* tournament with a group of men whom I had just met. There were sunflower seeds spread out on the metal, circular table in front of us, our plastic chairs teetering back and forth on the uneven ground. My recorder running, I asked one of the men what the tournament was for. He turned to ask his friend sitting next to him: “It is for our *saamakkhii2*,” the friend said and then chuckled. I got the sense that he chuckled not because it was a weird idea that the tournament would be for something but because the answer was so plainly obvious, so platitudinous—as if I had asked why he drinks water or why the suicide drinks cyanide: to live and to die, of course.

By that point in my fieldwork, I knew the platitude already: like all tournaments, it was for *saamakkhii2*, or solidarity. I was used to sitting at tables, listening to the importance of *saamakkhii2* ad nauseum, alongside clinks of glasses and invitations to eat more of the food on the table, embedded in formal speeches. I had not even meant to ask the men what the tournament was aimed at producing. I had meant to ask what the tournament was celebrating, and so I clarified. The man told me that it was for the anniversary of the establishment of the Lao Women’s Union. Neither he nor the other man was sure how many years it had been since the Union was founded nor did they seem to care. The only thing they needed to know was the reason they had been asked to attend: *saamakkhii2*.

After the socialist revolution, ‘solidarity’ became the stated goal of most state-sponsored meetings, policies, business transactions, and sporting events like the tournament. It doubled as a good-in-and-of-itself and as a means to other ends. It was everywhere. In contemporary Luang Prabang, ‘solidarity’ is still mentioned constantly, even if some other relics of the early ‘socialist’ days have faded away; the notion continues to be used much as ‘team-building’ might

be used at an office retreat in America. In this section, I first show that the term's history undermines a sub-claim of Evans's that socialism has come and gone: namely, that in contemporary Laos, the rhetoric of nationalism has "swamped the rhetoric of socialism" (1995:xiv). Rather, many of the socialist project's key rhetorical terms continue to matter in the present. I then reflect on a tension that has re-emerged again and again in the anthropology and sociology of Laos: the apparent gap between ideologies of fellow feeling and concrete practices. As Evans documented in *Lao Peasants Under Socialism*, one of the Lao revolutionaries' economic aims was to convince people to treat everyone as if they were family. Evans claims this project failed. Below, I show that the broad moral circle that Evans said the socialists tried and failed to implement as effective policy continues to exist discursively, as a virtuous stance one can take. People in the city might debate whether *saamakkhii*<sup>2</sup> really exists in any given relationship, but they also often agree that having solidarity with everyone, loving everyone, accepting everyone is itself a good thing to do and voicing this idea can itself index a good person.

### **Solidarity for Everyone**

Whenever I sat at a table of people eating together at a *pétanque* tournament, or joined a party I just happened to be walking by, or otherwise found myself at a social event in Laos, somebody would inevitably mention to me that Lao people 'love' one another. They would usually say this while offering me a drink or inviting me to eat more food or after I had asked about how much something cost. This was not a romantic love, although the same word, *hakl*, is often used with that sense. It was instead a fellow feeling, enacted in moments of eating food together, helping one another, and embodied in the Lao nation itself.

In Laos, ‘love’ (*hak1 phèng2 kan3*) is in the air.<sup>29</sup> Floating nearby, as it were, and with slightly different connotations, is ‘solidarity’ (again, *saamakkhi2*, sometimes translated as ‘unity’).<sup>30</sup> The two terms are part of an arsenal of forms people use for talking about ‘good,’ positive sociality; fellow feeling; and economic, alimentary and social practices, like working together, eating together, spending time together, that are thought to automatically lead to such sociality, such as ‘mutual aid’ (*suaj1 lù3 kan3*), ‘mutual construction’ (*saang5 san2 kan3*), and, ‘gambling for beer’ (*lin5 kin3 ngen2*). These terms are so ubiquitous on the ground—at causal gatherings, official events, and in newspapers—that any foreigner in the country for more than a few months learns to either tune them out entirely as ‘mere rhetoric’ or become fascinated by them as the key tropes and touchstones for local notions of the good. For many, the terms seem to form an ensemble, a mini-metapragmatic register of discursive ready-mades. Take, for example, the lyrics to a state propaganda song entitled *phêng2 saamakkhi2*, or “The Solidarity Song.” In the song, the various terms unfold in neat succession, praising the ‘goodness’ (*khwaam2 dii3*) that good sociality can produce. The lyrics are nationalistic, modernist, and praise the ability of ‘solidarity’ to bring about the nation’s dreams. The music video (ສິລະບິນ ດີເດັ່ນ ສຸຕິນ ພົນສົງຄາມ 2016), posted in early March of 2016 on Youtube.com, shows a series of images of people working together that is said to both build solidarity and emerge in response to it, everything from production at a Beer Lao factory, to diplomatic meetings, to government officials watering plants.

*Saamakkhi2 khù2 phalang2 qan3 ñing1 ñaj1*

*Solidarity is like a great energy*

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<sup>29</sup> During his influential 1986 speech at the party congress, Kaysone, for instance, began each section by addressing the crowd as “beloved comrades” (*i.e.*, *sahaaj3 thii1 hak1 phèng2 thang2 laaj3* ; Government of Lao PDR 1987). This was not his verbal tick alone.

<sup>30</sup> I omit the nominalizer *khwaam2* for ease of reading.



*Laaw2 huam1 caj3 saang5 khwaam2 saamakkhii2*  
*Laos, with one heart, makes solidarity.*  
*Hak1 phèng2 kan3 san5 saang5 tèl khwaam2 dii3*  
*Mutual love produces only good.*  
*Suaj1 lù3 kan3 haj5 caleen2 hang1 mii2*  
*Mutual aid leads to prosperity and wealth.*  
*Juu1 dii3 kin3 dii3 bòl haj5 mii2 look5 phaj2*  
*Live well, eat well, avoid the dangers of illness.*  
*Saamakkhii2 khù2 phalang2 qan3 khèng3 kèn1*  
*Solidarity is like a strong energy.*  
*Laaw2 thua1 dèn3 huam1 hèn2 huam1 caj3*  
*Laos across the country collects its strength, collects its heart.*  
*Saamakkhii2 thang2 phaaj2 nòk4 phaaj2 naj2*  
*Solidarity inside [the nation] and outside [the nation].*  
*Saamakkhii2 tòl suu5 mii2 saj2*  
*Solidarity fights and triumphs.*  
*Pòt2 pòj1 saat4 ñòn4 khwaam2 saamakkhii2*  
*We freed our country because of solidarity.*

In the first verse of this song, several of the most common terms people use for good sociality appear: ‘mutual aid,’ ‘mutual love,’ ‘solidarity.’ High (2014:156), in her recent ethnography of southern Laos, glosses these terms together with the single form ‘mutual aid,’<sup>31</sup> attempting to capture their shared ethical valences and uses. In state media like this song, the forms often appear in long strings of parallel constructions that iconically figure them as

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<sup>31</sup> She cites a few of the terms specifically, *sòj1 kan3* (‘mutual aid’), *saamakkhii2* (‘solidarity’), *hak1 phèng2* (‘love’).

semantically parallel ways of talking about ‘good’ purposes and practices. In life more generally, people often mobilize these terms in clusters to make clear to one another their positive intentions, feelings, and aims, in a veritable ‘register of love.’ Examples appear throughout this dissertation. But even though High’s terminological move does capture a unity across the terms, it also obscures differences among them. That is, the terms produce different effects in different contexts and afford different kind of acts. For example, I often heard my good friends talk about *khwaam2 hak1 phèèng2 kan3* or ‘love’ with me and with one another in moments of deep feeling (and inebriation), but they rarely used *saamakkhii2* in the same way. The different terms also have different grammatical and semantic properties and emphases. ‘Mutual aid’ (*suaj1 lùà3 kan3*) and ‘mutual construction’ (*saang5 san2 kan3*), for instance, emphasize effortful and economic support, while ‘mutual love’ (*hak1 phèèng2 kan3*) and *saamakkhii2* emphasize a state of affinity and sociality that is alternately presupposed by such support, thought to stimulate it, and described as a product of it.

In the rest of this section, I focus on *saammakhii2* and explore its ties to socialist discourse. *Saamakkhii2* is not a Lao socialist neologism. Rather, when the revolution came, *saamakkhii2* was a term ready at hand, which helped make the People’s Revolutionary Party’s means and ends intelligible.<sup>32</sup> Almost a century before the revolution, in nearby Thailand, “[King] Chulalongkhorn repeatedly stressed the mystical importance of *chat* [country], and the overriding duty of the citizens to have *samakkhi*, [or] unity [and] to defend it (Baker and Phongpaichit 2009:77).” As Copeland (1993:18) describes, the king “not only instructed his

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<sup>32</sup> Commenting on a handbook that the Ministry of Education, Sport and Religious Affairs printed shortly after the 1975 revolution, Creak (2015:182) contends that the handbook’s emphasis on ‘solidarity’ exhibits “the recycling of existing themes” and thus “not only how universal [these themes] were in sport and in Lao culture...but also how [the recognized] benefits [of sport] were appropriated by each of the state ideologies that prospered in twentieth-century Laos.”

courtiers on the meaning of *samakhi* but the court-run publication *Darunoway* carried a series of parables on the subject in an effort to emphasize its importance to the broader literati as well.”<sup>33</sup> *Saamakhi* had also more recently been a part of political discourse in Laos. In his history of sport, Creak (2015:126) tracks the use of discourses of ‘solidarity’ across the decades leading up to the revolution. He writes that “the themes of teamwork and sportsmanship—i.e., solidarity among team members and opposition players—were ubiquitous in colonial Laos, particularly during the Vichy years when sport and youth activities were harnessed for character-building purposes.” As Creak’s book and the historical record show, interests in ‘solidarity’ did not fade. In a 1941 issue of *Lao Nhay* (i.e. *laaw2 ñaj1*) newspaper, for example, an anonymous author complained about the lack of solidarity in modern Lao society. “Among all the things that we lack first,” the author wrote, “most important of them is cohesion and solidarity” (cited in Ivarsson 2008:159; also see High 2014:153).<sup>34</sup>

From the beginning of the revolutionary party, *saamakhi* formed a central part of the Lao socialist message, a shorthand for moral sociality. The notion was wrapped up in the figure of the ‘New Socialist Man,’ a person “guided by a ‘moral life,’” and “animated [in part] by ‘a spirit of solidarity’” (Vatthana 2006:58; internal citation of Doré 1982:109). To inculcate solidarity, the state’s strategy was, among other techniques, to repeat that people should feel and strive for sociality. For example, when state representatives ran “constructive criticism” sessions during early socialist education, they asked participants to reflect on the “fundamental principle” of solidarity, namely whether they had “adjusted [their] personal behavior so that [they could] get along well with others and live a proper collective life” (Brown and Zasloff 1986:158).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Copeland writes that the Pali rooted term had a Buddhist connotation, of unity within the sangha (1993:17).

<sup>34</sup> I have not yet been able to see the original article.

<sup>35</sup> Here is the entire list: “Normally at the end of the week in each workplace, as well as at the termination of study courses, criticism is conducted among co-workers or students in group of five to fifteen, under the direction of a

Like the author of the pre-revolutionary *Lao Nhay* article cited above, the state wanted *saamakhhii2* to pervade social life and deplored spaces where it seemed lacking.

State media used *saamakhhii2* especially to describe relations between groups that might otherwise appear not to have positive mutual feeling, such as different ethnicities and nation-states. In parallel to how other movements in the ‘political left’ have used the notion (Featherstone 2012), state media particularly stressed that solidarity undergirded the bond between Laos and other socialist nations. In the early 1980s, when China was seen as “a subtle and relentless menace aimed at undermining the security and viability of the Lao state” (Stuart-Fox 1996:204), Lao leaders followed the Vietnamese in arguing that China’s “monstrous plot” could “only be foiled by maintaining a ‘monolithic solidarity’ among the three peoples of Indochina” (Stuart-Fox 1996:204). In 1986, in an advice column on how to celebrate the 11th National Day (JPRS 1986a), the author listed slogans like “Long live invincible Marxism-Leninism” and “Resolutely oppose the arms race, a nuclear war, and the Star Wars of the U.S. imperialists!” alongside slogans about increasing international socialist solidarity: “Strengthen our solidarity and all-round cooperation with the Soviet Union and the other fraternal socialist countries” and “Strengthen the militant alliance, special solidarity, and all-round cooperation

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group leader. Participants are taught certain fundamental guidelines for criticizing themselves and others: (1) political thought—have you assimilated the proper principles of behavior, and have you followed the party line? (2) solidarity—have you adjusted your personal behavior so that you get along well with others and live a proper collective life? (3) working spirit—do you work well? (4) self-sufficiency—do you work hard to fulfill your needs, or are you a parasite?”

among Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia.”<sup>36</sup> That same year, leaders in Vientiane hosted a ‘solidarity dance’ to warm relations with Thailand (JPRS 1986b).<sup>37</sup>

The Lao party’s enthusiastic embrace of the term *saamakkhii2* aligned with its other linguistic pushes: the use of ‘comrade,’ spelling reforms, the replacement of the polite affirmative marker *dooj3* with the less courtly-feeling *caw4*.<sup>38</sup> Some of these efforts have left little mark in the present. When I heard people in Luang Prabang use ‘comrade’ outside of official meetings and documents, they tended only to do so in ways akin to what Yurchak describes as *stiob* in Russia. As Yurchak (2006:250; see also Boyer and Yurchak 2010) writes, “The practitioners of *stiob* themselves...[produced] an incredible combination of seriousness and irony, with no suggestive signs of whether it should be interpreted as the former or the latter, refusing the very dichotomy between the two.” Gamblers in card games at a post-partum party I attended (see chapter nine), for instance, counted the number of people playing in the game as “comrades,” e.g., ‘there are now six *sahaaj3* in the hand.’ Compared to *sahaaj3*, *saamakkhii2* has more seamlessly transitioned into the language of everyday life in late-socialist Laos. But it has done so with a continual socialist indexicality. Writing in 1999, Enfield (1999:275) noted how *saamakkhii2*’s socialist flavor was making *saamakkhii2* less common in casual

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<sup>36</sup> Some of the sources cited here have been accessed in translated (and digitized, text searchable) form from the Foreign Broadcast Information Service and Joint Publication Research Service. When I cite passages from these sources that mention ‘solidarity,’ I presume that the original text used the word *saamakkhii2* (but that ‘unity,’ rather than ‘solidarity,’ might have been translated from other Lao forms). I know that the FBIS, according to their own translation guide (FBIS 1985:10), translated *saamakkhii2* as ‘solidarity.’ I here assume that the Joint Publication Research Services did the same.

<sup>37</sup> “After a Laotian-style buffet dinner service with Lao-made beer and European liquors, the Thai and Laotian officials moved to the hall of the [Lan Xang Hotel] for entertainment. There was a Laotian band which played a mixture of classical and modern music. Women dancers invited both and Laotian officials to join them in the ‘Samakhi Ramwong’ [‘solidarity dance’] to Bua Khao (White Lotus) and Loi Krathong—two of the best-known Thai songs. The Thai visitors were apparently impressed” (JPRS 1986b).

<sup>38</sup> On the latter change, Enfield (1999:274) writes: “Many Lao report that the initial period of transition was a very difficult and uncomfortable one, in which ordinary people had to drop a well-established habitual politeness marker overnight, replacing it with something unfamiliar. People report having felt embarrassed in doing so, and conscious of being ‘rude.’ One must wonder how long it took for the new usage to become normal, or even if for some people it remains uncomfortable to this day.”

circumstances. When Enfield himself used the word to describe “an invitation to dine amongst friends who hadn’t met for some time,” another guest told him that “it was inappropriate (unless ironic in tone) for a casual and intimate engagement such as it was.” Although I did occasionally hear the term used in intimate encounters—especially in alimentary contexts, in which people invited friends walking by or hanging out on the other side of a *pétanque* court to join for a drink or a meal—people tended to choose different forms to describe their relations with closer friends. In more formal contexts, such as efforts to motivate participation in development projects, written invitations to events, and the tournament I described above, the term continues to flourish (e.g., High 2006).

### **Solidarity for Someone**

The leadership of the Lao revolutionary party “celebrated...the inherently ‘cooperative’ nature of society” (Evans 1990:8)<sup>39</sup> and drew parallels between this cooperation and the ‘socialist’ moral economy they were trying to build. They trumpeted the national predisposition toward *saamakkhii*<sup>2</sup> and argued that Laos was a community bound together by the sentiment (High 2006; High 2009; see Irvine 2006 and Stasch 2009 for discussions of ideologies of ‘community’ as solidary, strifeless, and homogenous).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> He writes that this is paradoxical because socialist theorists usually emphasize that peasants are ‘spontaneous capitalists.’

<sup>40</sup> Academics studying Laos have both interrogated this notion (e.g., High 2009; High 2014) and transported it onwards. Here is how one author writes about the continuation of collective values across periods in Lao history: “Collective values with the concomitant striving for harmony and ‘face saving’ are evident in child-rearing practices and through such linguistic items as the kinship terms which extend outside the family into all social transactions, so that a particular person is seen as playing, for example, a father-type role in relation to the wide community and/or in relation to the speaker” (Achren 2009:35). Such ideologies of community are present across the world. Irvine (2006:697) writes, “...the word ‘community’ invokes an aura of consensus and common cause, even if you try to define it in some other way. It is tempting, therefore, for ‘community’—whether researcher’s or participant’s construct—to conflate, or slide among, at least three quite different axes of relationship: homogeneity and difference, consensus and conflict, solidarity and distance.”

After taking power, the party built this ideology into policy.<sup>41</sup> *Saamakkhii*<sup>2</sup>, they argued, would lead people to adapt easily to socialist forms of economy. Take, for instance, their policies regarding collective agriculture. Kaysone stated that collective agriculture did not constitute a new form of economy but “a continuation and development of the tradition of mutual solidarity and assistance among [the Lao] people” (cited in Evans 1990:123). The plan was for peasants to develop traditional forms of cooperation into the simplest forms of socialist cooperation. As a contemporary newspaper article exhibits, the simplest form, the ‘solidarity unit for exchanging labor’ or ‘unity unit,’ was said to evolve from the Lao practice of ‘asking a favor’ (*kaan3 khò3*):

*A unity unit is merely a mutual aid organization that is aimed at gathering labor forces to join in carrying out major works in certain fields. Those who join a unity unit are paid nothing for their labor. This form of collective labor organization is adapted by our party from the notion of ‘asking a favor,’ which our Lao peasants of various nationalities have been acquainted with for a long time....(siang3 pasaason2; cited in Evans 1990:47).*

The movement from less structured units of cooperative agriculture like the ‘unity unit’ to more formally structured ‘units’ like the ‘solidarity production unit’ and the ‘unit for collective production’ was imagined as an equally natural progression (1990:94).

As Evans (1990:149) argued in *Lao Peasants Under Socialism*, the state’s view of how Lao moral economy worked was one reason why the collectivization of agriculture failed. “The Lao communists have invoked traditions of ‘mutual solidarity and assistance among [the Lao] people’” he wrote, “but [they have] discovered that these do not translate directly into production cooperatives.”<sup>42</sup> To describe Lao peasant’s actual ‘moral economy,’ Evans evoked Marshall

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<sup>41</sup> “Following the communist takeover in late 1975 there was no headlong rush into social transformation of the countryside. Peasants were simply encouraged to adopt ‘a collective way of life’ and to form ‘solidarity and labor exchange units’ through which they were expected to come to appreciate the advantages and necessity of forming cooperatives” (Evans 1990:44).

<sup>42</sup> A similar argument was made in the very different political context of Thailand: “We believe that the impersonal corporation that developed in the West is poorly suited to Thailand. Co-operation under abstract articles of

Sahlins's (1972) model of the relation between kinship distance and forms of reciprocity.

Sahlins's model is a classic in anthropology. With it, he made explicit some cross-cultural trends that anthropologists had long noticed: in 'primitive economies,' as Sahlins put it, moral economic norms pattern with social relations. In these economies, whether a given type of exchange is morally sanctioned or approved is a function of who is involved in the exchange—that is, "morality, like reciprocity, tends to be sectorally organized in primitive societies. The norms are characteristically relative and situational rather than absolute and universal"

(1972:199). Sahlins distinguished three major types of exchange, abstractly and analytically conceived: 'generalized reciprocity,' 'balanced reciprocity,' and 'negative reciprocity.' As the figure below shows, in 'primitive' economies these three types of exchange tended to co-occur with distinct kinds of kinship relations—e.g., relations within a house, within a lineage, within a village, et cetera.

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incorporation demands pre-conditions that are not found there. Where freedom to enter and leave a relationship between superior and inferior is the recognized guarantee against excess, a corporation is too inflexible. When a slowly-established mutual confidence has to be built before co-operation between two persons is truly possible, a corporation is too impersonal. Labour unions, cooperatives, and political parties with a national programme have all failed to function in the Thai climate" (Hanks Jr and Hanks 1963: 450).



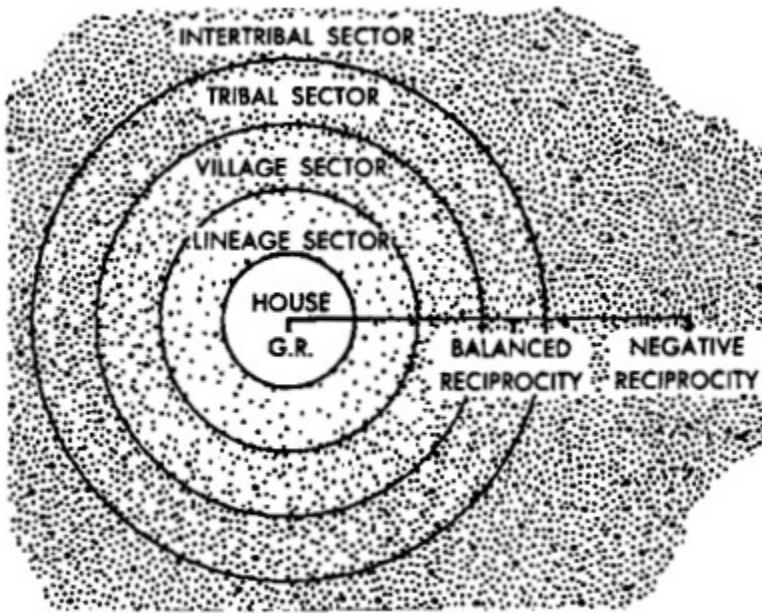


Figure 5: A reproduction of Marshall Sahlins's (1972: 199) model of the relationship between kinship distance and reciprocity; 'G. R.' stands for 'generalized reciprocity.'

Following Sahlins, Evans argued that although the Lao state imagined that all Lao citizens engaged one another with forms of generalized reciprocity—or 'putatively altruistic' exchanges—in reality, relations of 'generalized reciprocity' were not universalized (Sahlins 1972:193; Evans 1990:141).<sup>43</sup> Instead, who engaged in generalized reciprocity with whom was a function of kinship distance: "[A]s a general rule, the farther one travels from the core of the domestic group, the more exchanges move toward a situation of strict reciprocity. Thus, for example," Evans continued, "rent for buffalo or paddy fields will often be determined by the affinity of the renter to the renter, the terms becoming more strictly reciprocal—or more approximating the going market rate—the less related by kinship or friendship the two parties to the exchange are" (1990:141).

<sup>43</sup> Sahlins writes, "'Generalized reciprocity' refers to transactions that are putatively altruistic, transactions on the line of assistance given and, if possible and necessary, assistance returned. The ideal type is Malinowski's 'pure gift.' Other indicative ethnographic formulas are 'sharing,' 'hospitality,' 'free gift,' 'help,' and 'generosity.' Less sociable, but tending toward the same pole are 'kinship dues,' 'chiefly dues,' and 'noblesse oblige.' Price (1962) refers to the genre as 'weak reciprocity' by reason of the vagueness of the obligation to reciprocate."

Moral models like Sahlins's were antithetical both to the party's sociology of its people and its hope. If people treated those to whom they were unrelated differently than they treated their own relations, then the nation—and the broader socialist community—could not become the web of 'mutual aid,' mortared together with 'solidarity' and 'love,' that it hoped to be. Socialist discourse promoted a model of morality that was not a series of concentric circles, like Sahlins's model, but a large moral circle (see Keane 2015:226), in which everyone in the nation would engage economically with *hak1 phèng2* ('love') and *saamakkhii2* ('solidarity').

For Evans, the gap between the state's moral economic model of the Lao peasantry, and the peasantry's actual moral economy explains the failure of collective agriculture. He writes:

*The traditional collectivization drive in 1978-79 cut across the logic of traditional peasant cooperation in Laos. It attempted to encourage the formation of large labor-exchange groups or cooperatives regardless of traditional lines of solidarity. In a sense, and in true populist style, it asked the peasants to work together as one big, happy family. But these attempts threw together people who felt no natural affinity for or commitment to working together, and it led to feelings of injustice as the group worked individual peasant land, regardless of size. As one peasant woman explained, in the early stages remuneration was based simply on turning up, 'showing your face,' and she claimed there were no fixed hours. Some people would turn up late and others would work lazily and sloppily. They worked in big groups on a single plot rather than splitting up into smaller groups and working on specified plots. In the end, she claimed, everyone received the same amount of payment, and this meant that lazy people got the same amount as hard workers, which was terribly demoralizing and led to poor workmanship. As another woman exclaimed with some passion, she would never join such a cooperative again even if her husband did. 'They allowed lazy people to live off us!' In a family, the first woman said, working together was easier because it ensured that everyone turned up to work at the same time and took care in their work (1990:146).*

Similar accounts of the failure of socialist policy have been given in regard to Vietnam. There, as in Laos, anthropologists have argued that the socialist project revealed a tension between "[t]he traditional sense of moral obligation, [which] was focused on the person's immediate kin, especially parents and ancestors," and the socialist state's model of moral obligation, which

emphasized everyone working together, no matter their relations, and therefore promoted a broad moral circle, a “God’s eye view without God” (Keane 2015:216; 226). As Maclean (2013:27) and Malarney (2002) show, the attempt to implement this universal morality bred mutual mistrust and discord among peasants, and eventually doomed socialist policy. When Malarney (2002:51; also cited in Keane 2015:226) asked Vietnamese farmers why they worked so poorly on collective lands, they responded with the terse, Sahlinsian phrase that “No one mourns for the father of everyone.”

This argument, that the socialist model of the moral economy did not fit with the local model, prompts an obvious question: what do these models of economic morality model? For Evans, the answer presupposes a distinction between economic practice and moralizing rhetoric. That is, when he discusses moral economy in *Lao Peasants Under Socialism*, Evans is modeling what peasants ‘do,’ not what they ‘say.’ In fact, while his central argument is that peasant economic practice did not align with socialist policies, he shows that their rhetoric about solidarity and mutual aid often did. As he put it, “various linguistic confluences and confusions often allow peasants to do just what they want to do while saying they are working collectively” (1990:95). Peasants preferred “the language of helping (*suay leua*) rather than the language of reciprocity (*dtorp thaen*), which has the much clearer implication of paying back” (1990:142). When he asked Lao peasants about their “solidarity and labor exchange units,” he found that they referred to their agricultural practices in the most ‘cooperative’ light. One man Evans interviewed “did not speak of paying rent to his landowner; rather, he said he ‘shared’ his crop with him because the person who owned the land had helped him by ‘loaning’ him the land.” Another man “described his cooperative...as an ‘ordinary cooperative’ (*sahakorn tamadaa*), by which he meant traditional peasant cooperation” (1990:95). “In this way,” Evans (1990:143-144)

wrote, “peasant culture continuously reproduces the language of reciprocity and mutual assistance while safeguarding the interests of those involved in exchange arrangements.”

Others in Lao studies have repeated this point. As Rigg *et al* (2004:992) put it, Lao farmers have a “segmented moral labor market,” even if rhetoric sometimes implies otherwise. About a Thai village in their study, they write, “The dividing line between the rational peasant and the moral peasant is neither clear nor fixed and the language of community can be used to disguise and justify, in village terms, actions that are far from community oriented” (Rigg et al. 2004:992). Ireson (1996:244) similarly argued that in “areas closely linked to markets” there was a decline in “the number of events of cooperation” and “the number of persons assisting at any one event,” and yet, “the traditional values and understanding of cooperation and village solidarity and mutuality are still evident and verbalized by the villagers, and may still form a basis for cooperation and community work....”

Evans returned to this theme almost two decades later (2008:520–521):

*Not surprisingly, these moral economies generate ideologies which value mutual help and cooperation highly because it is fundamental to the system. In the countryside people readily speak, usually rhetorically, about the value of ‘solidarity’ and ‘mutual help’. However, it would be a grave mistake to assume that such commitments easily transcend a clearly defined community, or are applied indiscriminately internally (to do so was a fundamental misunderstanding during the collectivization programme in Lao from 1976-86...). Indeed, reckonings are made of reciprocity, usually scaled according to kinship distance. Everyone has an acute eye for ‘free riders’ (i.e. people who do not reciprocate), who are always a problem in systems of mutual assistance, and such people are usually spurned, primarily by others refusing to enter into reciprocal transactions with them, and perhaps finally branded as ‘lazy.’*

Evans warns academics here of the same mistake the Lao socialist state made: Do not confuse moral economic language, which might promote an indiscriminate, universal, broad moral circle, with moral economic practice itself.<sup>44</sup>

Evans's point is well taken and intuitive: we cannot assume that what people say about what they do in one moment is what they do. His argument also draws attention to the different moral logics that exist in Laos; these re-appear in disparate discussions throughout the dissertation—e.g., debates around the ethics of gambling (chapter 5), with whom one should use 'bare' pronouns (chapter eight), whether one is afraid of ghosts (chapter nine). But Evans's division between practice and rhetoric obscures the continued importance of the socialist emphasis on 'solidarity.'

Evans's argument is misleading in two respects. First, language is social action. Dividing what people say from what they do implies that saying cannot be a kind of doing. As I show repeatedly in this dissertation, and as linguistic anthropologists have argued again and again, it can. In this respect, Evans's argument fits with a larger obsession in socialist studies with sincerity and the disjuncture between language and action (in the next chapter, I criticize this idea; see Lemon 2000; Yurchak 2006). Of course, concern with degrees of sincerity is clearly not just an issue of socialism, as similar points have been made about Northern Thailand, and perhaps everywhere in the world where people often talk about their generosity, e.g., “‘*Cuaj kan*,’ ‘cooperation,’ is the basic theme of social relationships within the village. It is the basic village ideology. ‘Everyone is alike in this village; we all help one another; we are all kinsmen,’ is the way village society is described to an outside. In ideal terms, the Chiangmai people

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<sup>44</sup> In parallel to Evans's argument, High (2014) likewise shows that attempts to mobilize villagers at her fieldsite in Southern Laos failed because these attempts did not recognize the importance of particular relationships of reciprocity, rather than generalized moral solidarity.

conceive of their village as a group of community-spirited citizens who are always ready to help each other for the good of the community, in a spirit completely lacking in self-interest. Like all idealized versions of social life, reality does not come very close to this; but the existence of such an ideology does affect behavior” (Potter 1976:42). Because Evans was such a careful and diligent scholar, he himself provides evidence of what language does throughout his book, even as he implies it is unimportant. For instance, in his discussion of one of the farmers who typified his economic relation with his landlord as a kind of ‘sharing,’ Evans (1990:143-144) comments that doing so was a benefit for both parties. Second, all action is semiotically mediated. That is, all of the variables that Evans uses to discuss, consider, or understand whether Lao people are in ‘solidarity’ or not are just as politicized as the rhetoric he dismantles: kinship terms can be applied and removed (chapter four), friendship can endure or dissolve (chapter eight), people can debate whether a given exchange is of one type or another (chapter five), whether it indexes solidarity or selfishness (chapter seven). If one follows a path of criticizing rhetoric versus reality, hard facts can start to soften, and the ground can turn to sand.

Whether or not people always treat everyone with the same sense of ‘solidarity,’ they nevertheless say that they do, and doing this allows them to present themselves as good people, to thematize their relations with others, and to continue the importance of ‘solidarity’ as an ideal form of sociality. Put differently, one legacy of the socialist state is the persistent utility of its universalistic moral economic logic. As High (2014:153) shows in her recent monograph, the ideologies of ‘solidarity’ and ‘mutual aid’ that were promulgated by the socialist state continue to be “dispersed throughout political action at all levels...not as a reality but as particular kind of rationality on which people build their recriminations, expectations and assessments and tear down those of others.” Claiming that such a logic is merely rhetorical dressing fails to consider

the moral and ethical work that it does, namely, the fact that merely invoking the logic can at times constitute a moral practice.<sup>45</sup> This part of socialism's legacy has not been wiped away, "swamped" by the rhetoric of nationalism as Evans wrote, but adopted and carried into the present.

## **Playing Laos**

*Therefore, we can say that no gambling is good, and it is also against the laws of the land.*

*-Vientiane Mai, October 1982 (JPRS 1982)*

In December 2015, the lottery drawing was canceled for the 40th National Day celebration. At the next drawing, many people bought tickets with the numbers '40' and '040,' to mark the anniversary and hope to play off the day's luck. A few days later, for the 20th anniversary of Luang Prabang's status as a UNESCO heritage site, special lottery tickets were issued and village officials, who made a small profit on each ticket they sold, came to our house to sell them. The special lottery promised that with a 20,000 Kip ticket, or about 2 dollars, a lucky person could win the grand prize of 100,000,000 Kip, or more than 10,000 dollars.

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<sup>45</sup> It is clear from the historical record that the socialist revolutionaries were not the first people in Laos to offer a universal ethics, even if such invocations often now take a socialist flavor. One need not look far to find earlier instances of a similar logic, small and large. In 1963, for instance, one woman wrote that "the sense of fellowship [in the country] is not confined to brothers and sisters, but unites all Laotians" (Levy 1963:265) and, much more broadly, Lao Buddhism has encouraged such generosity for centuries, although, I am not suggesting here that Buddhism offers only this model. In fact, the question of whether alms are for specific individuals or something greater is very much alive in Luang Prabang. See also Ladwig (2009) for a discussion of ethical and moral ambiguity in the Vessantara Jātaka.



**ລາຍການລາງວັນ**

- ລາງວັນທີ 1 ມີ 1	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດ	100,000,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 2 ມີ 2	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	50,000,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 3 ມີ 3	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	20,000,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 4 ມີ 10	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	10,000,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 5 ມີ 20	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	2,000,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 6 ມີ 100	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	200,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 7 ມີ 1000	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	100,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນຂ້າງຄຽງຂອງລາງວັນທີ 1 ມີ 2	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	10,000,000 ກີບ

ໝາຍເຫດ : ໃບຫວຍ 1 ໃບໄດ້ຮັບລາງວັນດຽວ ແລະ ຈ່າຍໃຫ້ຜູ້ມີໃບຫວຍຖືກຕ້ອງ ( ກຳນົດຈ່າຍລາງວັນ 30 ວັນ ຖ້າກາຍຖືວ່າສະລະສິດ ).

Figure 6: The Front and Back of the UNESCO Heritage Lottery Ticket

Even before I started studying the Lao lottery, it played a role in my daily life in Laos. In fact, I met Mèè Phòòn, my host mother, as she sold lottery tickets. On her plastic table along the side of the road, she kept a page of tips, clues, and predictions about which number might emerge that day. The tips were printed from Facebook, copied at a local copy shop, and sold to Mèè Phòòn for one thousand Kip. Walking by, I asked her about them and we began talking. Floating around different topics, we realized that I already knew one of her relatives. A few days later, after visiting her house, I moved in with her and her family. She sold lottery tickets multiple times a week (initially, every Tuesday and Friday, and then every Monday, Wednesday



and Friday), usually with Phòò Thiàng and sometimes alone. I would sit with them, sometimes filming and sometimes just chatting as people came by, swapped prognostications, bought tickets, and gossiped about what was happening in the city, the nation, and the world.

For people such as Mèè Phòòn who buy and sell tickets in Luang Prabang, the lottery is implicated in everything, and everything is implicated in the lottery: festivals, parades, the animals they see on motorcycle rides, the dreams they have, the deaths and tragedies they experience or hear about. These events give hints about what numbers might be drawn and the lottery, in turn, reframes these events as significant, orderly, as sufficiently important to affect the drawing.

In this section, I trace the lottery's emergence and how the state and critics have framed it as a type of economy with an ethical force. When the lottery was first introduced in 1982, the state had previously banned all forms of gambling, including lotteries. In Laos, state actors justified the foundation of the lottery by arguing that it was of a fundamentally different type than 'capitalistic lotteries.' It was different not because of how it was run, but because of what it was for: the development of the nation. Over the following thirty-plus years, the Development Lottery has changed from a purely state-run enterprise to a mostly privatized entity, but its name and its explicit purpose have remained the same. Over the following pages, I show that the lottery continues to purport to 'develop the country' even as it has been privatized and become a lightning rod for accusations of corruption.

### **Playing for the Enemy**

When the socialist revolutionaries rose to power, they rhetorically aligned lotteries and other forms of 'gambling' (*kaan3 phanan2*) with the decadence of their enemies, especially the

Americans.<sup>46</sup> In an August 1975 radio broadcast by the State News, KPL entitled “All Vestiges of Decadent Culture Must be Swept,” the state said that “Carrying out their neo-colonialist policy the U.S. and its lackeys brought about decadent culture to Laos which engendered robbery, gambling, prostitutes.... Many pagodas and temples were turned into gambling houses and dancing bars in service of rightist reactionaries, henchmen of U.S. imperialism. Youths in areas controlled by the old Vientiane side became victims of these social evils” (FBIS 1975). Another broadcast, airing in August 1981, stressed the same themes: “At present, the enemies have concentrated efforts on sabotaging our country by waging sinister psychological warfare tactics. They have tried to bribe our cadres, soldiers and policemen at all levels through business transactions, giving bribes whenever the opportunity arises.... They have also instigated our people to destroy our social culture, lured women into prostitution and youths into gambling, and tried to popularize reactionary Western songs and movies<sup>47</sup> among our cadres, army men, policemen and youths so as to gradually persuade them to abandon the revolution and to follow a decadent colonialist way of life” (FBIS 1981). The broadcasters concluded the segment by stressing that only if people understood the tricks of the enemies could they “firmly and

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<sup>46</sup> There were many precursors to the Lao Development Lottery. Before the revolution, the Department of Finance ran a lottery and many Lao citizens played the Thai lottery. They did this not by buying Thai lottery tickets, but by following the Thai lottery’s drawing and issuing their own tickets and prizes. Jacoby (1961), in a review of Lao taxation published in 1961, wrote that most people at the time preferred the Thai lottery over the Lao one, and that this, along with administration costs, caused revenue drawn from the Lao lottery to be low: “Lottery revenues have also been very small in recent years, probably because the sparse and scattered population and the poor communications make the market too small and the administration too costly.” Writing about Vientiane in the late 60s and early 70s, Branfman (1978:33) similarly said that, “Many villagers spend a fair amount of money on gambling. Most of them participate religiously in the version of the Thai lottery popular all over Vientiane. This is based on the last three numbers of the national Thai lottery. It is controlled by downtown Chinese businessmen who built up a large organization over the years. There is a local resident in Ban Pha Khao, 1 kilometer to the south, who visits the village regularly selling tickets. He is well known to the villagers, has been at his job for years, and is considered completely trustworthy. Drawing takes place every 10 days and tickets cost \$.16 and a winning one fetches \$12.00. Many villagers buy several tickets every drawing. In addition, villagers gamble a good deal at *bouns* in village level dice games, and private card games.”

<sup>47</sup> In the source material, the word “movies” is printed with an adjacent question mark, apparently signaling that the translators were unsure if that was the word used.

triumphantly carry out the socialist transformation and construction in our country and turn our people into new genuine socialist men.”

Gambling, along with prostitution, became one of several social evils associated with the old regime and U.S. imperialism and listed repeatedly in newspaper articles, radio announcements, and the speeches of representatives of the state. In 1974, gambling was officially banned in Luang Prabang “to maintain law and order.” In 1975, the Ministry of Interior issued a strong statement banning gambling of any kind nationally, “regardless of the time or circumstances (birth celebrations, funeral ceremonies, or various festivals held at home, in a temple, or anywhere else.)” (JPRS 1975).<sup>48</sup> The order, printed in the *Daily News (khaaw1 phacam2 van2)*, claimed that “everyone knows that gambling is a terrible scourge for Lao society.” The order went so far as to ban the sale of bingo sets and playing cards. To combat these social evils, gamblers, along with “idlers,” “drug addicts, hooligans, and robbers” were sent to “rehabilitation and medical treatment” (FBIS 1976).

The topic of lotteries particularly was raised in an October 1982 letter to the editor of the state-controlled newspaper *Vientiane Mai*. The reader noted the rise of illegal lotteries and the editor responded by forcefully condemning gambling (JPRS 1982; emphasis mine). Note how he contrasted “solidarity” (*saamakkhii2*) and “national construction” with the “anti-sociality” of the “illegal” lotteries (*lêek4 thuan1*) and other evil traces of the “old society.”<sup>49</sup>

*Concerning this I just want to say that the traces of the old society must be absolutely wiped out, such as superstitious beliefs, anti-social activities like prostitutes, gambling, cards, illegal lotteries, etc. These are caused by the old anti-social elements still with us.... [Reader] I want to tell you that wherever [these lotteries] occur and there is definite evidence, please call 2053 or 3352. The most important thing is to talk to them first. This means if anyone is addicted*

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<sup>48</sup> See chapter nine for discussion of these exceptional moments.

<sup>49</sup> *Thuan1* which I have translated as ‘illegal’ here can also be translated as ‘wild.’ For more on the the ‘wild’ economy see Johnson (2012).

*to these anti-social activities, that person must be trained and educated. And if he still does not listen we have to apply new measures. We all live together with love, solidarity, and unity. We all carry out all the resolutions issued by the party and government. Now more than ever the party and government have asked for the solidarity, the grant [sic] and firm solidarity of all Lao people of all nationalities and all races, to carry out the national construction and socialist construction.*

*Illegal lotteries arise from the idea of gambling. Which country started it first I do not know, because I have seen it ever since I was born. There was an example a little after 1950 in Vientiane when the powerful authorities played [tombola]. Later on they played the [lottery]. However, these two languages are referring to the same thing, which in Lao is called illegal lotteries and number[s] games, or shares. We assume that it was more of a capitalist idea because for the illegal lottery mentioned the capitalists who were owners would get the money. The ones who lost were the gamblers. The capitalists would never lose because they let the winners use the gamblers' money. The money left over they put in their own pockets. Therefore, those who are addicted to gambling will go broke, and none of them is ever wealthy. Some of them gambled so much they had to sell their houses and ricefields; they quarreled with their wives, children, and relatives. When the money to gamble is short then they steal little things, and do other things none of which are good. These are all anti-social activities. Therefore, we can say that no gambling is good, and it is also against the laws of the land. Let me stop for now. I hope you find this satisfactory. Thank you.*

I argued in the last section that for the party, *saamakkhii*<sup>2</sup> became one of a few constantly mentioned 'good' forms of sociality, and it makes its appearance in this letter. I suggest now that, for its part, gambling became one of a few constantly-cited 'bad' socialities like 'prostitution.' For the author and the party line generally, gambling fractured the nation's hope to live in 'love, solidarity, and unity'; it broke up families, caused greed, made noise, and supported the enemies. The new leaders contrasted the frivolous evils of gambling with their own asceticism and seriousness. As Halpern (1961:2) wrote of the 'Pathet Lao' revolutionaries in 1961, years before the revolution:

*The communist presents his life as one of sacrifice and self-denial for a noble end, arousing sympathy in his priestly audience who link his efforts to the ascetic tradition of Buddhism. The Pathet Lao representative contrasts himself, a poor man, with the rich officials who are linked to the American Imperialists. Among*

*monks and townspeople as well as villagers the Pathet Lao are often known as the People of the Forest.*

Halpern's comments especially characterize Prince Souphanouvong (see Evans 2009), the 'Red Prince' and future president of the post-revolutionary Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Souphanouvong understood himself as embodying the new kind of socialist man. In a 1949 letter, he wrote that the "political arena...demands men of action and self denial." "For my part," he continued,

*I decided at the age of thirteen, to rid myself, no matter what the cost, of the 'xu-xu' [i.e., frivolous] character of letting things drift, of indolence, of 'resting on big words,' all so characteristic of our country and of declining races, destined to serve as sheep to hungry wolves. I avoid the vulgar materialism that wants to reduce everything to three things: women, liquor, and useless and debilitating merrymaking; the only 'materialism' that counts in my eyes and merits being sought by all the people of the earth is the materialism of health, hygiene, and cleanliness coupled with solid intellectual, spiritual, and moral principles, all based on progress and work ethic (Brown and Zasloff 1986:344; also cited in Evans 2009:289).*

### **Playing for Development**

Given this hard stance on gambling, it might be surprising that in December 1982, just a few months after the above letter-to-the-editor was published, in an announcement signed by Kaysone, the state founded the Development Lottery. Anticipating criticism, Kaysone framed the lottery as something more than a crass money-making scheme, as something moral (see Morgan 2000 and citations within for discussion of such charitable lotteries among economists). As he outlined, the lottery would be a state enterprise, controlled by the Ministry of Finance with three aims: to entertain, to increase the circulation of cash within the country, and, most importantly,

to ‘develop’ (*phatthanaa2*) the nation.<sup>50</sup> He deemed the lottery the ‘Development Lottery’ (*huaj3 phatthanaa2*), as ‘forty to fifty per cent’ of its gross sales would go to ‘develop’ the nation.<sup>51</sup>

As far as the state was concerned, this name, the ‘Development Lottery’ and the underlying idea that the lottery’s profits would go to the nation, gave the lottery a moral rationality. Like the notion of *saamakkhii2*, the lottery continues today as an artefact of the post-revolutionary experience. A perduring economic type with a moral economic logic, the lottery belies claims that Laos has totally abandoned socialism, even as its organizational structure has morphed into a relatively capitalistic form: it is now mostly for-profit, operated by private companies, and awash with competition among lottery sellers.

From the beginning, state media argued that the ‘Development Lottery’ was a unique moral economic type, over and against ‘illegal lotteries.’ For instance, a newspaper article published a few weeks after Kaysone’s initial announcement, explicitly laid out the case that the development lottery was not similar to the ‘gambling’ (*kaanphanan2*) of the ‘capitalists’ (*naajthùn2*):

*The printing and distribution of our national lottery tickets will not only create a happy atmosphere for the people but also provide money for the construction of schools, hospitals, public parks, etc., that are useful for society. These will be the collective property of all society for all of us who, together, have set them up by determinedly promoting and supporting the national lottery. This is clearly different from the capitalists’ illegal lotteries which not only are gambling which poisons and destroys many generations but are also capitalists’ exploitation methods of taking money from a great number of people in order to enrich themselves. Society gains nothing at all. Our national lottery is socialist savings. Its purpose is to increase the amount of property which serves the people of all social classes (Pasaason 1983; JPRS 1983b:27).*

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<sup>50</sup> “The opening of the development lottery,” it read, “is aimed at entertaining the people, mobilizing people of all levels to take part in national development, and [taking] in money from the market” (JPRS 1983a; Government of Lao PDR 1982).

<sup>51</sup> The gross sales were to be split between the provincial government of Vientiane and the central government.

Fitting with this rhetorical push, the state (ostensibly) made the Development Lottery’s prizes objects, not cash money.<sup>52</sup> This policy fit a pattern that predated the lottery. A 1976 dispatch advising how citizens should celebrate various Buddhist festivals, for example, not only reminded citizens that there should be no gambling at the *That Luang* festival, but also ordered that, regarding boat-racing (cf., Platenkamp 2008), “all gifts which are given to the winners should be in the form of production tools so they will be utilized in work” (JPRS 1976). In the case of the lottery, money was not enclaved from the scene so completely: the announcement presenting the prizes listed their monetary value and qualified that “while the prizes may change, the [monetary] value will be the same.” Nevertheless, the incorporation of prizes marked the Development Lottery as something different from the cash-money ‘illegal lotteries.’

<u>Prize No</u>	<u>No of Prizes</u>	<u>Value</u>	<u>Item</u>
1	1	100,000 kip	70 cc motorcycle or refrigerator
2	2	30,000	" television or sewing machine
3	5	10,000	" bicycle, tape deck, radio or other electrical appliance
4	50	1,000	" electric stove-electric iron student supplies
5	100	500	" prize gift boxes or household items
6	1,000	100	" [gifts]

While the prize items may change, the value will be the same.

Figure 7: The Development Lottery prizes as listed in an image from JPRS (1983b)

As the state rolled out its new type of lottery, the population still bought ‘illegal lottery’ tickets. The failure to stop other forms of gambling was evident in a January 1, 1987 article published in *Vientiane Mai* (JPRS 1987).<sup>53</sup> In the article, the overwhelmed Ministry of Finance

<sup>52</sup> It is not clear whether the prizes were in fact distributed as objects, rather than money. When I spoke with people who remembered this early lottery, they provided me with conflicting accounts.

<sup>53</sup> There were also moments in these early years where the government touted the lottery’s relative success (e.g., see JPRS 1984b).

ordered citizens to stop supporting and promoting various illegal lotteries, including lotteries run by other government organizations and ministries outside the fold of the Ministry of Finance. Similar to the initial announcement of the Development Lottery, the state's complaints about illegal lotteries framed the lotteries as a radically different type of economic practice: "In order to prevent [lotteries] from becoming a form of gambling and bringing damage to the economy and society" the order argued, the state needed to regulate all lottery activities. Only in cases where a lottery "was needed for the benefit of the whole" would the Ministry of Finance grant permission to operate them.<sup>54</sup>

As this article exhibits, state media did not describe the difference between the Development Lottery and 'illegal lotteries' as a formal difference. That is, the state recognized that, from the perspective of the citizenry, the lotteries were formally similar: someone who wanted to play would buy a ticket and potentially win a prize. Rather, state media emphasized the difference in moral ends between the two types of lottery and thus led citizens to see their choice between the two types as a moral choice.

State media continues to emphasize the moral dimensions of buying lottery tickets, even as the Development Lottery has morphed from an entirely public to a partially privatized entity. When it was founded, the lottery was organizationally structured in a prototypically socialist

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<sup>54</sup> "Recently... we have noticed that the organization of lottery drawings has been held widely outside the control of the Development Lottery Committee and the Ministry of Finance. This has occurred at various celebrations and is a violation of the regulations and has become a form of widespread gambling without control by the government.

In order to prevent such activities from becoming a form of gambling and bringing damage to the economy and society, the Finance Ministry henceforth issues this circular to ministries and equivalent organizations, state committee members, and administrative committee for all provinces and Vientiane Capital to order the people, the private sector, organizations, and offices and organizations under their responsibility to stop all drawings starting the day this circular is received. In cases that are needed for the benefit of the whole, as well as any organizations and offices that wish to earn income by means of drawings or suchlike, these organizations must contact the Ministry of Finance each time in order to have the lottery designed by the Finance Ministry and the Development Lottery Committee for distribution" (JPRS 1987:7-8).



way, as a state enterprise; as Evans (1995:xv–xvi) writes, such state enterprises were always “the main basis for Laos’s claim to be socialist.” But the state has since reorganized the structure of the lottery into a more capitalistic form. In state newspaper articles, online summaries, and lottery brochures, these changes are described as incremental efforts to give the Development Lottery more and more autonomy. These histories are primarily legislative ones. They repeat the dates and identifying numbers of decrees by which the lottery was created and regulated (see, for example, the history within AKAT Solution Sole CO. LTD 2012), and embed these dates and numbers in a tripartite periodization (e.g., 1983-1986; 1986-1997; 1997-present).<sup>55</sup> With abbreviations like “127/nòò2 ñòò2,” “347/pòò3 sòò3 lòò2,” “502/hòò3 sòò3 nòò2 ñòò2,” they present the lottery’s evolution as if it has been crisp and clear, even as particular legal changes often had a tenuous relation to on the ground policy in Laos.<sup>56</sup>

In contrast to these official histories, when I asked the men and women who currently operated local branches of the Development Lottery in Luang Prabang about the lottery’s history, they focused not on decrees but on how different state policies had affected their bottom line, their autonomy from Vientiane, and the rise of their competitors.<sup>57</sup> Take Pan, for instance. In

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<sup>55</sup> Official accounts of the lottery tend to divide its past into three periods. In an interview published by the Ministry of Finance in 2010 (Government of Lao PDR 2010), a lottery official described the first phase as beginning in 1983 and ending in 1986, when the Ministry of Finance was given more autonomous control in distributing the lottery. It is not clear from the interview or other documents what exactly happened in 1986, or if 1986 is the correct date at which the lottery’s management changed. It is possible that in referencing 1986 the government is only pointing to Kaysone’s Political Report at the Fourth Congress as a broad temporal marker of a development in policy. This second phase lasted until 1997, when the lottery started to be operated as a “joint state enterprise” (*lat1 visaahakit2*) and the third phase began, running into the present.

<sup>56</sup> In regard to all state enterprises, the state legally granted relative autonomy in a March 1988 decree, but, as one scholar puts it, it “began experimenting with operational autonomy for select state enterprises as early as 1983, and by 1987 the majority of state firms were enjoying a greater degree of business freedom, albeit with some targets for output and tax contributions” (Freeman 2003:37). Contemporary media reports likewise document that many state enterprises became “autonomous economic enterprises” before the decree (Hiebert 1989). As Hiebert (1987b:44) described, “Under the reforms, managers are expected to make a profit instead of relying on the government to pay their bills and they are free to find their own raw materials and equipment instead of waiting for the government to supply the goods. The prices charged for products will be based on the actual costs of production and workers will be paid according to their output.”

<sup>57</sup> When I asked people on the street about the history of the lottery, they remembered the stages of the lottery by the kind of ticket being sold: the five-number lottery, the ‘tear-off’ (*ciik5*) lottery, the ‘written’ lottery (*cot2*). Phòò

2012, just before my fieldwork, the Development Lottery celebrated its thirtieth anniversary. When I arrived for my main fieldwork in 2013, there were still a few celebratory windbreakers lying around; Pan, one of the long-time lottery operators in Luang Prabang, was nice enough to give me one. A few months later, he let me interview him. Sitting at the desk in the office, surrounded by various memorabilia—old lottery calendars, shirts, hats, and sheets for determining which dreamed-of animal should translate to which number—I cleared my throat and asked him when the lottery was founded. He was unsure and told me to count backwards, ‘We just had the 50th anniversary, so what year would that be?’ he asked me. ‘1962,’ I said, a bit confused. ‘Yeah, that’s right,’ he said, ‘1962.’ After I politely asked him whether that *really* was the correct date, whether the government had *really* operated the lottery both before the revolution and during the war, he wandered off to find one of the commemorative windbreakers that he had given me. Coming back with the sleek windbreaker, which had a large ‘30’ printed on it marking that the Development Lottery had just celebrated its 30th, not the 50th anniversary, he was now confident: ‘1982, that’s right,’ he said, ‘not 1962.’ The twenty year difference did not seem to really matter.

Pan’s interest in the history of the lottery was personal, not comprehensive or academic. Over the next hour of the interview, he rattled off the dates of his own involvement in the lottery with precision.<sup>58</sup> When he talked about the early days of the lottery, before he started working for

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Thiang often waxed nostalgic about the old ‘tear-off’ tickets. They were easier, and avoided a problem he sometimes encountered. That is, a few times during my field work he accidentally sold too much of a given lottery number (*khaaj3 keen3*), something, as I describe below, made possible because written lottery tickets have the seller write in the amount that someone wants to invest in any one number. If that number is higher than the amount the seller is permitted to sell, per number, then he, the seller, is forced to pay the remainder of the prize to the winner.

<sup>58</sup> There was only one other operator in the city in those early days, who had been working since 1995, and he narrated a slightly different story, more in line with the lottery’s official periodization, even as he stressed his role in innovations and how they had affected his own sales. Like the official account, he broke the history into three periods: its foundation in the early 1980s until 1991—when the lottery became a more autonomous enterprise—1991 until the early 2000s, and the early 2000s onwards, when the government started the ‘writing lottery’ system and began to lease out the rights of selling the lottery. He told me that currently he paid five billion Kip per period of

it, he sketched them as chaotic. Sounding a bit like those who justify privatization by pointing to ‘state failure’ (Songvilay, Insisienmay, and Turner 2017: 241), he said that during the nine years after the lottery was founded, it was mismanaged, disorganized, and corrupt. It sometimes lacked the funds to reward those who won, and the citizens consequently had little confidence in it. Things changed when he arrived in September or perhaps early October of 1991, just after it switched from a five-digit lottery to a two and three-digit lottery. At that time, the lottery was drawn three times a month—on the 10th, the 20th, and the 30th (‘the 28th in February,’ he added)—and his office in Luang Prabang earned seven percent of its gross sales. Pan and his office did not actually sell tickets, but he distributed tickets to sellers who would set up lottery stands around town. When Pan first arrived, the lottery office in Vientiane, based in the ministry of finance, paid these sellers eight percent of their gross sales. This practice continued until the early 2000s, when his lottery office began leasing its rights to sell lottery tickets from the central office and paying the sellers themselves.<sup>59</sup>

Leasing was the most common form of privatization in the early years of Laos’s market liberalization (Freeman 2003). The first state-owned enterprise to be privatized, a steel factory, was leased in May 1989 (Otani *et al* 1996:2). In Laos, leasing arrangements are often described as ‘partnerships’ or ‘collaborations’ (*huam1 mù2*). While the economic literature tends to refer to leasing as a kind of privatization, it is an especially hybrid form of privatization in that it sometimes allows the state to maintain relative control of the enterprise, to choose who wins a contract to lease, and to continue to earn income from the leased enterprises. Representatives of

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lease, but he did not specify how long these leases lasted. He did not mention a 3.2 per cent fee on materials as Pan did, and when I asked Pan why he did not pay a flat fee to lease he told me that contracts were negotiated with the central office on a case-by-case basis. He implied that his low fee was a consequence of his office’s standing as a long-time seller in the city.

<sup>59</sup> Pan told me that he paid 3.2 per cent of the cost of the materials for the lottery—the tickets, the sheets to write how much was sold of each number, and so forth and that was all. He told me repeatedly that this was all he paid currently, this flat percentage fee, but I am suspicious of this low figure.

the Lao state have found the public/private hybridity of leasing attractive insofar as it gives “continuity with the past pattern of state ownership” (Songvilay, Insisienmay, and Turner 2017:254). For the Development Lottery, leasing has afforded the state the possibility of maintaining its argument—with some legitimacy—that the lottery is not merely a capitalist institution for private profit, but an institution still overseen by the government and for the good of the people.

Most lottery sellers and buyer in Luang Prabang have only a vague sense of what kind of entity the Development Lottery is, when it was founded, who owns or operates it, and whether it is public or private. When I asked, a few people told me conspiratorially that it had been sold to the Vietnamese or the Thai. Most, however, said nebulously that it was owned by the state, or perhaps that it was partly owned by the government and partly by private companies. Upon further questioning, it became apparent that they knew little about how that might work. After hearing the same vague answers repeatedly, it struck me that I would not have done better if someone came to the United States and began asking me comparable questions. I have only a vague sense of the publicness, privateness, or autonomy of institutions in the United States such as the University of Michigan, USAID, the electric company. While I know that the University of Michigan is one of the great ‘public universities’ in the United States, I have no idea what that means in concrete details or how independent or autonomous its finances and profits are.

In Laos, what is public and what is private is often only murkier. I am sure that if I spent time investigating, I could quickly determine how the University of Michigan is run. But information on the Development Lottery’s current ownership structure is obscure. The opacity of privatization in Laos has been noted before (Freeman 2003), but the Development Lottery puts into relief one of the reasons for this opacity: ‘state’ versus ‘private’ ownership is itself

moralized, especially when private ownership involves foreign nationals. This explains one of the appeals of leasing, it keeps the private or public status of an entity ambiguous.<sup>60</sup> The morality of state institutions is clearly a long-term consequence of state rhetoric. In early announcements and promotional statements about the lottery, for instance, the lottery was described as good in part because it was owned and operated by and for the nation. In contemporary Laos, the ambiguity about exactly what the status of an institution is can thus be exploited for pragmatic effect. Calling the lottery public was one way for people to take a positive stance on it, just as saying that it had been ‘sold’ to foreigners was a way of negatively evaluating it.

The force of making claims about the public or private-ness of the lottery became clear to me when I went to the central lottery office in Vientiane to interview leadership about the lottery’s history. Initially, I was refused entry. The woman at the front desk, a long-time employee, told me that I should return the next day with a letter of introduction. So long as I did not want to inspect the lottery’s finances, she said, someone would be able to talk to me. When I returned the next day with a letter of introduction she demurred again, but told me I could speak to her about the lottery’s history. When, as one of my first questions, I asked whether there was any truth to the rumors that the lottery had been sold to a Vietnamese or Thai company, she adamantly denied these rumors and the conversation became uncomfortable. I left without my interview.

The hesitance about making claims about how exactly the lottery was owned and operated led to secrecy that occasionally seemed absurd. When I went to a bank in Luang Prabang that had just begun an online lottery program, I asked a senior employee if I might be able to interview someone about it. He told me I should go to Vientiane. As I was being politely

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<sup>60</sup> As Otani *et al* (1996:47) write, leasing is a “...more politically acceptable [option in Laos] than selling outright because of the public concern that the nation’s holdings will be entirely sold.”

shuffled out the door, I asked the man if the bank was a public or a private one, thinking that he could surely provide that much information. He said that I would have to ask that question in Vientiane as well. Singh (2012:133), also writing about Laos, notes similar secrecy around state-owned enterprises and a preference for referring to hybrid private/state enterprises as ‘of the state.’<sup>61</sup> In her discussion of the history of the state-owned enterprise, “The Mountainous Areas Development Company” (BPKP), she shows that the BPKP had undergone a “voluntary institutional amnesia.” Although the Lao-Swedish Forestry Program played a large part in the enterprise’s foundation, the program was more or less erased from the BPKP’s institutional memory. As a consequence, “[t]he international connection to BPKP have mostly been elided in contemporary knowledge,” and contributions by the Lao-Swedish Forestry Program are treated as the state’s achievements.

The confusion over whether the Development Lottery is a public or private entity is intensified by the fact that, for most lottery buyers and sellers, the effects of its public or private status are undiagnosable as such. In fact, in Luang Prabang, the privatization of the Development Lottery did not affect the average lottery buyer or seller until around 2010. To explore its eventual effect, I first need to explain how the written Development Lottery, the form that was most popular while I was in the field, actually works. The written Development Lottery is a two or three-digit lottery. So long as a buyer bets above the 500 Kip threshold (during my time in the field, 500 Kip was the smallest denomination bill, and even it was falling out of circulation and being replaced by the 1,000 Kip bill), buyers can bet as much value (in Lao Kip) as they want on any number. For every thousand Kip a buyer bets on a winning two-digit number—e.g., 2-7—

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<sup>61</sup> The 2015 census (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015) even separates office workers into three major categories. Private employees (*phuu5 qòòk5 hènngnaan2 haj5 qèkkason2*), state enterprise employees (*phuu5 qòòk5 hènngnaan2 haj5 latvisaahakit2*), and government employees (*phanakngaan2 lat1*). In practice, state enterprise employees often just refer to themselves as ‘government employees.’

she makes 60,000 Kip. For every thousand Kip she bets on a winning three-digit number—e.g., 0-2-7—she makes 500,000 Kip. During the day of a drawing, sellers sell tickets at roadside stalls, offices, markets—almost anywhere you can find people. In the evening, the winning numbers are drawn in Vientiane at the Lao Development Lottery Joint-Venture’s headquarters. During most of my time in the field, the drawings occurred twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, but these drawings thereafter changed and then changed again. If a player wins, she brings her winning ticket to the ‘branch’ (*saakhaa3*) through which the ticket was distributed. That is, if I sell lottery tickets for the branch in *khòj2* village, and I sell a ticket to you, you must redeem your winnings from the office in *khòj2* village. To avoid confusion, the offices stamp their names (and associated numbers) on the back of each ticket. In the ticket reproduced below, the purchaser bought three thousand Kip on six different numbers: 8-1-2, 8-5-2, 8-9-2, 3-1, 7-1, 1-2, and the ticket was sold by a seller from Lottery Office number two, located in the *mùnnaa2* village. At the bottom of the ticket is a warning against selling illegal lottery tickets.

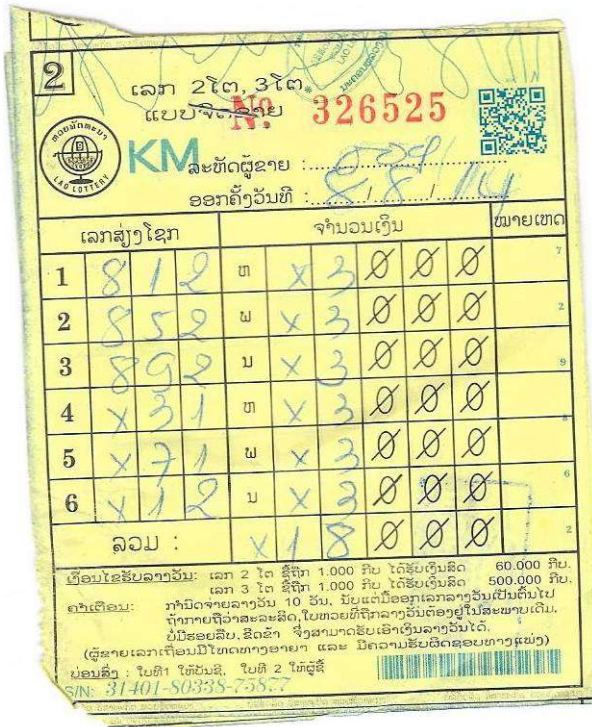


Figure 8: A typical lottery ticket during my fieldwork. To the right is the stamp applied to the back of the ticket, which identifies the office that distributed it.

Until the late 2000s, the city of Luang Prabang had only two lottery offices. These offices were relics from how the lottery had been structured since 1986. During the first two decades of the lottery's life, it had one broad organizational structure.<sup>62</sup> As I diagram in Figure 9 below, the Development Lottery Joint-Venture, headquartered in Vientiane, was overseen by the Ministry of Finance. The Joint-Venture office, in turn, oversaw local lottery distributors across the country, such as the two offices in Luang Prabang. These offices of distribution then managed local lottery sellers, who were paid low percentage fees by the Joint-Venture office in Vientiane.

<sup>62</sup> All of this information was, as I mentioned above, rather difficult to ascertain, and it is possible that other changes happened during this time regarding the Ministry of Finance's relation with the Development Lottery Joint-Venture office. Furthermore, how the lottery is leased and operated appears to vary drastically across provinces and cities, so Luang Prabang's lottery history is likely not representative of the nation's.



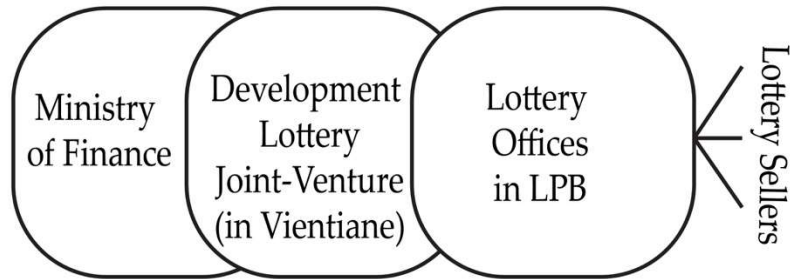


Figure 9: Structure of lottery offices in Luang Prabang after the Development Lottery was given autonomy around 1986

Sometime in the early 2000s, most likely 2003, the Development Lottery Joint-Venture began to lease the rights to distribute lottery tickets, collect winnings and losses, and hire sellers. At this point, the lottery took on the structure diagrammed in Figure 10 below. Distribution offices like those in Luang Prabang, which had previously been organizationally encompassed by the Development Lottery’s Joint-Venture, now became private companies leasing from the central office and competing with one another. With this new structure, the risk of any individual drawing was passed onto individual lottery offices. Henceforth, when lottery players won or lost, the distribution offices paid those winnings from their own coffers.

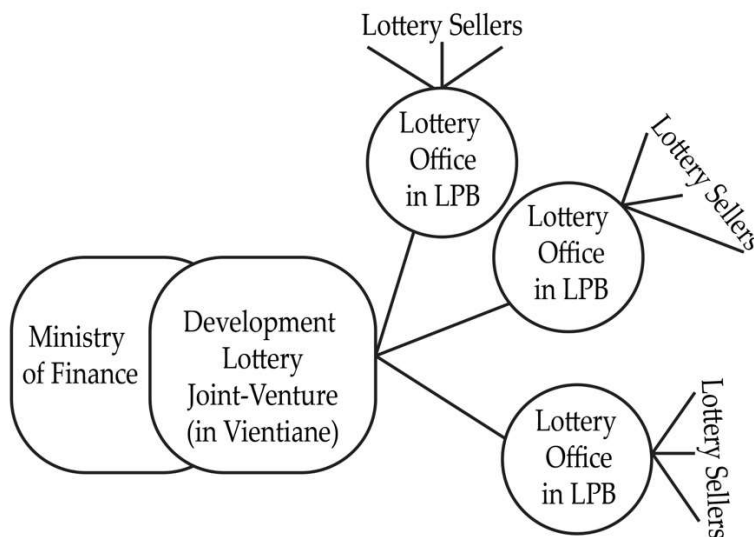


Figure 10: Structure of lottery offices after privatization until the present.

For reasons that I could not determine, the Joint-Venture office did not lease the rights of distribution to any additional offices in the city of Luang Prabang until 2010. By 2013, there were six offices distributing tickets and hiring sellers. Each office was owned by a different private company (and each had affiliations with ‘branches’ (*saakhaa3*) in Vientiane and elsewhere in the country). The central Joint-Venture office in Vientiane sold these leasing rights for large, flat fees. The five billion Kip that one Lottery operator said he paid was equal to around \$610,000 in 2013.<sup>63</sup> Because of the nature of the lease agreements, it was in the central office’s interest to lease to as many businesses as possible.

Of course, as the central office leased the rights of distribution to more businesses, the value of the rights lowered. This created tension among lottery operators, lottery sellers, and lottery buyers. In 2013, the proliferation of lottery distributors caused a veritable price war, as they competed to attract sellers. When I first moved in with Mèè Phòòn, lottery sellers were paid 12 to 14 percent of their gross sales. A few months later, I heard rumors that some sellers were being paid as much as 25 percent. When I interviewed Pan, he told me that the number of sellers his office contracted had dropped precipitously. While only a year before, he distributed tickets to over one hundred sellers, when we spoke he distributed to only thirty sellers. To acquire more sellers, the lottery offices lowered their vetting standards. Just as an increase in credit card companies might encourage lower thresholds of required capital to earn higher credit, lottery distribution offices began hiring younger, less reliable, and lower-volume sellers.

The competitive market created tensions among lottery operators. On one night, I went to a party that one lottery distribution office had organized. Many of the other operators in the city attended. The party had seemed cordial and lively to me, but when my operator friend gave me a

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<sup>63</sup> Note again that it was unclear how long a lease period he had purchased.

ride back on his motorbike, a bit earlier than I had planned to stay, he immediately seethed with anger and indirect criticism. It was almost an inversion of the motorcycle conversation I had with Dii after gambling for money at the snooker hall: 'If you are not too close with someone,' he told me into the wind, 'you should not drink too much with them.' 'There are two kinds of friends,' he continued, 'good friends and bad friends.' 'One should not spend too much time with bad friends. Just go with them for a little while and then leave.' As we rode, it became clear to me that he was explaining why we had left the party. As he told me a few days later, with slightly less emotion, he felt like he had helped the hosts of the party set up their distribution office, but that they, in return, had only cut into his market share. Their friendship had become a 'bad friendship.'

Tensions also emerged between distributors and lottery sellers. Chasing higher percentages, many sellers transferred from one office to another. Others did not, however. When I discussed the new competition with lottery sellers, they often mentioned that although a different distributor offered a better percentage rate, they did not want to break loyalty with their current distributor. Unsurprisingly, people often stressed that choosing a distributor was not a purely economic choice. As justification for why they sold for one distributor or another, many people mentioned social ties along with the geographical proximity of the lottery office where they would need to drop off cash and receipts of their sales. One woman who decided to switch from one distributor to another told me that to switch, she lied to her old office and told them she was going to stop selling lottery tickets all together. She was worried that if they found out that she was still selling tickets they would dislike her, but she wanted a better percentage.

Mèè Phòn sold tickets for the same distributor for years, but as the boom began, she started complaining that another office paid more to its sellers. Weeks went by and she brought it

up to me repeatedly, telling me that she did not want to make the distributor ‘sad’ (*sia3 caj3*), as they had developed a relation of ‘mutual love’ (*hak1 phèng2 kan3*) over the years. She eventually did apply to sell for another office but, so as to not offend the first operator, she kept selling for him as well, splitting her sales across her two sheets.<sup>64</sup>

During my time in the field, the lottery distribution offices attempted a crackdown on the inflation of percentages paid to sellers. As a block, they simultaneously lowered commission rates. Many offices also dropped their lowest-yield sellers. After hearing the latter news, Mèè Phòòn ran into my room excitedly and told me that she would be able to sell more tickets now because the ‘students’ were gone.<sup>65</sup>

Both before and after the crackdown, most lottery sellers were women, often young women. Selling lottery tickets is rarely considered a primary job, except among elderly people like Phòò Thiang and Mèè Phòòn. For instance, when I asked people what they did for work, unless they currently had their lottery sheets in front of them, they rarely mentioned selling lottery tickets, even if they sold them. For many, it was obviously a side hustle, ‘outside work’ (*viak4 nòòk4*) that they did in their free time. Nevertheless, someone who sold significant amounts of tickets like Mèè Phòòn could make a decent amount of money in a day’s work—say, 200,000 Kip, or about twenty-five dollars. This was more than a quarter of the monthly salary of some civil servants. Like Mèè Phòòn, however, many of the people who did this spent the money that they made on lottery tickets.

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<sup>64</sup> As I tried to track the frenzy of lottery selling in Luang Prabang, it became clear that there was much secrecy surrounding the exact percentage different offices paid out. Different people would quote that they received different percentages from the same office. While this might have been partly a result of tiered percentages systems that a few of the distributors introduced, where higher grossing salespeople would receive higher percentages, it was also a part of a more general tendency for people to underplay their profits.

<sup>65</sup> She asked if I wanted to sell tickets too, so that she would be able to sell more volume of each number. As I entertained the possibility, Phòò Thiang squashed it. He was worried that I would accidentally oversell a particular number and be forced to pay someone’s winnings out of pocket, as he had done a few, expensive, times before.

On a lottery day, it was never difficult to find a seller. In every government office, restaurant, section of the market, or retail store someone sold lottery tickets, had a sheet at the ready. People also set up tables along the street.



Figure 11: A line of women selling Development Lottery tickets on the street

The profusion of new lottery distribution offices also affected lottery buyers. They now had to determine where they would collect their winnings when they bought a ticket. Some offices were less convenient, and others developed a reputation for not paying out winnings for officious or nitpicky reasons—a torn ticket, a smudged number, a late claim. Any of these apparent infractions might lead an office not to pay. People took these rumors seriously and at times used them to guide their lottery purchases. ‘Don’t trust that office,’ people would say, ‘they are hard to collect from’ (*caaj1 ñaak4; qaw3 ngen2 ñaak4*).

As more people sold tickets, lottery buyers’ choice of where to buy tickets became more difficult. Everyone sold lottery tickets, and thus, everyone wanted you to buy from them. As in other selling environments in Luang Prabang, lottery sellers would pressure friends and strangers

to *sù4 sòj1 dèè1* or ‘please buy to help me.’ As I saw from watching Mèè Phòn sell tickets, relations between frequent buyers and sellers were often warm. If a customer won after buying a ticket from a particular seller, she might associate that seller as lucky and return, sometimes even treating that seller to food or drink. Sellers, for their part, reciprocated by wishing their buyers luck, saying ‘lucky, lucky, lucky’ (*maan3 maan3 maan3*) as they passed them their tickets.

### **Playing for Profit**

That the Development Lottery is a morally good type of economy is reiterated in newspaper articles and lottery advertisements stressing the institution’s generosity; in photographs like those reprinted below, representatives of the lottery pose with oversized checks, sports equipment, and computers they are donating to representatives of the people. In her book on money in Vietnam, Truitt (2013:131) writes that the promotion of lotteries in the state “reflects the postrevolutionary emphasis on personal wealth over national development...”<sup>66</sup> In Luang Prabang, the lottery has encompassed an activity for generating personal wealth within a framework of national development. We can get rich together, it implies, and make the nation good in the process.

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<sup>66</sup> Truitt (2013:131) continues, “After 1975, the national lottery was abolished as part of a campaign to outlaw gambling as a bourgeois vice. But by 1980, lotteries were again in vogue as provinces in southern Vietnam promoted them under the slogan of ‘welfare lotteries’...with the proceeds promised to those people who appeared to be suffering.... Tickets printed before 1975 touted images of national development, such as rice paddies and monumental architecture, whereas tickets in the 1980s depicted imported commodities.”



Figure 12: A Donation from the development lottery office to flood victims (Vientiane Mai 2013)



Figure 13: The Development Lottery Joint Venture hands over funds to the Ministry of Finance from the Third Quarter of 2015 (Vientiane Mai 2015)

In this sub-section, I trace two common ways people criticize this state-constructed image of the lottery as a good economic type: they argue that it is bad for the people and they question whether it is fixed. As I show, the two threads of criticism can at times come from opposite directions and camps, and create a double bind for the state. This is what happened, for instance, in debates about whether the lottery should be televised, which I discuss below. Together,

however, criticisms of the lottery all sketch a similar conclusion: the state is greedy and pitted against the people.

In 2014, while I was living in Luang Prabang, the Development Lottery Joint-Venture began leasing out the right for companies in Vientiane to operate businesses where people could legally bet on international soccer games. The Joint-Venture argued that this would capture money from ‘illegal’ betting and funnel it toward the public good (see Vientiane Times 2014a; Souksakhone 2014; Vientiane Times 2014b; Vientiane Times 2014c; ຮ້ານຂາຍຫວຍທວາຍຜົນ ຕະບານ 2014). The Joint-Venture branded its new operation the ‘Soccer Lottery.’ By not using a more obvious name such as ‘Soccer Betting’ (*long2 baan3 têq1*) or ‘Playing Soccer’ (*lin5 baan3*; in the sense of ‘playing the horses’), the branding emphasized that this was a new kind of ‘lottery,’ not ‘gambling’ (*kaan3 phanan2*). The move only worked partially, and the ‘Soccer Lottery’ faced some pushback and accusations that it was merely an attempt to legalize ‘gambling.’ When I went to Vientiane, saw and played the ‘Soccer Lottery,’ and returned to tell my friends in Luang Prabang about it, they were incredulous: ‘I don’t believe you, it must still be illegal,’ one said. In a Vientiane Times article asking ‘people on the street’ what they thought about the new kind of ‘lottery,’ one woman said, “I don’t think we should be promoting gambling if we can avoid it. Personally, I have to ask myself ‘what is the difference between legal and illegal gambling?’” (Vientiane Times 2014c).





Figure 14: A brochure distributed by the Development Lottery in 2012 documents the kinds of lottery available from it. The written lottery, the one most popular during my time in the field, is second to the left in the top row.

The ‘Soccer Lottery’ was one of many other lotteries that have emerged over the past decade. Some of these have been operated by the Development Lottery Joint-Venture. Other lotteries are or were operated by other state organizations. The most controversial of these was the Sports Lottery. Although extremely popular, the Sports Lottery was discontinued before I arrived in the field. It was founded in 1999 and operated in parallel to the Development Lottery; the idea was that the profits would “generate funds to sponsor sports persons while contributing to government coffers every year” (Vientiane Times 2006a). In its first years, the sports lottery was managed by the Lao National Sports Committee, but in 2005 it was transferred to the control

of the Ministry of Finance (Sisay 2005).<sup>67</sup> It appears that the Sports Lottery was begun on a leasing structure similar to the structure the Development Lottery adopted around 2003, in which a private company leased the rights from the government to sell tickets and distribute winnings; one Vientiane Times article reported that from 2001 until 2003, the Sports Lottery paid the state 150,000,000 Kip monthly in leasing fees. In 2003, that monthly figure almost doubled to 250,000,000 (Vientiane Times 2006a), a testament to the lottery's success.

When I asked lottery operators like Pan about the Sports Lottery, they talked about it as if it had been a mistake, a short foray into too much gambling. Pan told me that when the Sports Lottery was at the pinnacle of its popularity, everything was messy and too 'loud' (*nan2*—see chapter four for a discussion of 'noise' as a metaphor for 'bad' sociality). He stressed that there were too many lotteries happening—eleven every month for a while. Contemporary newspaper editorials made similar points. In April 2003, the Vientiane Times (2003) published a discussion asking people to consider the “number of lotteries on sale in town” and whether people are “spending too much money hoping to get rich.” In a 2008 article in the same paper, entitled “Assembly members question value of sports lottery” (Souksakhone 2007), Lao National Assembly members voiced skepticism as to “whether the money was in fact used to develop and support sportsmen and women as intended. [One member] said that people had asked why, if the money was used to train athletes, the performance of sports competitors had not improved.” The article reported that “many members” thought the lottery encouraged people to gamble.

That the Sports Lottery was encouraging people to 'gamble' was a damning opinion. The criticism highlights a tension between the two original justifications for the Development

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<sup>67</sup> This was part of a more general trend in which the state was trying to gain control of the lotteries, as a 2008 government agreement proclaimed that all lotteries needed to operate through the Ministry of Finance (Government of Lao PDR 2008).

Lottery. One justification for the lottery was pragmatic, that the people were already gambling on the ‘illegal lotteries,’ and thus, the state might as well absorb that money for the greater good.<sup>68</sup> In my interviews with Pan and the other long-time lottery operator in Luang Prabang, both men channeled this idea and mentioned that the Development Lottery was a way of making the best out of an ultimately negative social reality. Lao people like to gamble, they said. Pan framed the lottery’s foundation as a concession to these urges—if they want to buy lottery tickets, so much so that they will break the law, then sell the tickets to them. The other operator said that ‘Lao people have gambling in their bones.’ ‘If they are going to gamble on the illegal lotteries anyway,’ he told me, ‘the government might as well channel that money into its coffers.’<sup>69</sup>

The other justification of the lottery was that the Development Lottery was itself something that good citizens bought into, that the state should encourage. To buy a lottery ticket was to develop the nation. In the newspaper article that celebrated the lottery’s release entitled,

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<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, the Lao state has not handled all vices with the same clear-eyed pragmatism—in early 1980s there were not, for instance, similar efforts to legalize prostitution or card gambling, at least not that I have seen, even as these activities continued. The lottery was a more palatable kind of vice, I briefly explore why below.

<sup>69</sup> The Development Lottery was not the only attempt in the early 1980s to harness apparent selfishness into a win-win situation. On April 1<sup>st</sup> 1984, the state also issued a ‘Savings Lottery’ operated from the State Bank, and open to all Lao people (JPRS 1984a). The savings ‘lottery’ was possibly based on earlier, pre-revolutionary savings lotteries by the Development Bank, but none of the contemporary newspaper articles or reports on it mentioned this fact. In April 1973, the Development Bank of Laos issued a savings lottery “to encourage people to save” (JPRS 1973). A deposit of 500 Kip got one a ticket. Each month there was a drawing with prizes from 500 to 500,000 Kip. As an announcement of the formation of the ‘Savings Lottery’ put it, “The purpose of the savings lottery distribution is to give people in all occupations, in cities and rural areas and in flatland and mountainous areas, a chance to take part in saving capital with the government in order to completely fulfill their political duty. Voluntarily depositing money in the State Bank is a glorious honor. Depositors are considered patriots, to love progress and socialism, and to have absorbed true collective ownership according to the policies of the party and government.” In the later iteration of the savings lottery, each deposit of 100 Kip earned one at ticket. The lottery was drawn every three months, with prizes totaling 30,000 Kip—although it seems as if these prizes increased in the subsequent months. At the time, the 100 Kip deposit was “equal to about one third of the monthly salary of a middle ranking civil servant or public employee” in 1984 (The Economic Intelligence Unit 1985:16-17). Like the Development Lottery, which turned buying lottery tickets from vice to virtue, the state apparently pressured people to buy into the Savings Lottery. A reviewer of Laos’s economy at the time wrote that, “It is clear from official media that informal political pressure is placed on employees to demonstrate their good citizenship by supporting the savings campaign” and “some refugees arriving in Thailand in 1984 have complained of being obliged to deposit scarce cash” (The Economic Intelligence Unit 1985:16-17). The Savings Lottery did not have the same lasting institutional presence in Laos as the Development Lottery. Nevertheless, similar ideas have been implemented since (e.g., Ekaphone 2009; Vientiane Times 2009b; Vientiane Times 2009a).

“To Promote the National Lottery is One of Our Obligations,”<sup>70</sup> the author concluded by noting that, “To continue the nation’s progress, the integrity of the new regime and society, and the happiness of the people, the people of all races should determinedly take part, together, to promote and support the national lottery everywhere, and to make the national lottery a reality which will further serve society” (Pasaason 1983; JPRS 1983b:27). The lottery was thus imagined as a win-win for the nation and for the people. As lottery player put it to me, ‘When the citizens lose, they still win.’

The former justification was that the lottery made the best of a bad situation. Like a drug addiction clinic might suggest methadone as a substitute for heroin, it exploited a similarity of form between the state sponsored lotteries and ‘illegal lotteries,’ presupposing that the two kinds of lottery were similar enough to be substitutable but different enough to make that substitution valuable. The latter justification, in contrast, claimed that the lottery was not just better but good. Rather than emphasizing weening people off all lotteries, the state invited both already committed lottery players and the previously unaddicted to join in and start buying tickets. It emphasized the fundamental difference in ends between the Development Lottery and ‘illegal lotteries,’ and stressed that the value of ‘development’ was so great that everyone should take part.

The Sports Lottery and related one-off lotteries, like the lottery that honored the naming of Luang Prabang as an UNESCO cultural heritage site, are now remembered so poorly because state representatives did not merely promote them but forced citizens to buy tickets. The problem was that, unlike the Development Lottery, these lottery tickets were distributed through civil servant offices, including schools, during the regular course of business. The sellers were

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<sup>70</sup> *song1 seem3 huaj3 phatthnaa2 mèn1 phanthaq1 qan3 nùng1 khòòng3 phuak4 haw2*

frequently the superiors of the buyers, and because they made a percentage or flat rate on each ticket they sold, it was in their economic interest to have their employees buy tickets. Some of the stories published in the newspaper documenting the pressure superiors applied are absurd. The Vientiane Times (2002c) reported on a situation where students were forced to buy special lottery tickets to celebrate National Teacher's Day. One official partially confirmed the story, saying that "it might be true that some teachers threatened to fail students in their final exams if they did not buy the tickets." During the National Assembly meeting quoted above (Souksakhone 2007), one member pointed out the unreasonableness of forcing school children and government officials to buy lottery tickets:

*"Some government bodies, [the minister] observed, consisted of only 20 officials, but they might be obliged to buy as many as 60 tickets between them with no option to return the extras.*

*'If a [married] couple are both government officials, they and their children, if they are students, will all have to buy these tickets to support a special event. This might cost them as much as 300,000 Kip and represents a substantial portion of their salary,' he said.*

A *Vientiane Mai* article, translated into English in the Vientiane Times (2007a), likewise questioned whether "selling lottery tickets to students" was "suitable," and advised that the practice should be rethought. The problem was not just lotteries. Similar models of fundraising have also been criticized. In 2010, Vientiane officials began selling bracelets to raise money for the city's 450th anniversary. Some people apparently complained that they were being forced to buy them. One young man quoted in the Vientiane Times (2010a), Viengkham Souliyavong, had a more positive spin on the pressure.

*I am lucky, as my village just received the bracelets. But we are not being forced to buy them—it's entirely a personal choice. We are being encouraged to buy them though, with officials pointing out that buying just one bracelet can help raise funds to develop the country. Therefore, I do support the idea of the souvenirs, as it encourages young people to love Vientiane, but*

*remain wary of any attempts to forcibly sell them. If possible though, I would like everyone to wear the bracelets when our city celebrates its anniversary. This will create a colourful and vibrant atmosphere in Vientiane and demonstrate our solidarity to visitors.*

Forcing people to buy lottery tickets, while extreme, was not the only kind of promotion of the lottery (and other fundraising efforts) that Lao citizens and representatives of the state found morally problematic. Another lightning rod of controversy for the Sports Lottery was whether the lottery should be broadcast on TV. When Pan talked about the sense that there were ‘too many lotteries’ in the mid-2000s, he mentioned the fact that the drawing of numbers was on TV. When I asked him why the state had stopped airing it he said that broadcasting it was ‘ugly’ (*bò-ngam2*), ‘too open/public,’ and it ‘encouraged people to gamble.’

Ironically, the Sports Lottery had originally been broadcast on television to rebut the other common thread of criticism about the lottery: that it is rigged. These suspicions came to a head in 2002. The Vientiane Times (2002b) reported that people became upset when the extant radio broadcast of the lottery drawing announced the wrong winning number:

*People who bought state lottery on July 25 have not accepted the results of draw ‘361’ that night, saying that they were tricked. They gathered in front of the lottery office on Thongkhakham road on the day after the draw to claim winnings thinking that they had won the first prize ‘391.’ The people thought that they had won because the result 391 had been announced three times on the national radio, according to listeners.... An official who works at the State Lottery Committee said: ‘The mistake from the committee was that the lady who holds the number sign saw number 6 upside-down as number 9 without good communication with the committee that draws the numbers.*

The article continues to point out that people believed the ‘confusion’ was not a mistake but intentional. As one man “who refused to give his name” put it, “the mistake didn’t happen accidentally but was done in order to keep away from 391 which is the mark of the animal the ‘dog’ and is popularly bought by lottery customers.” This accusation led to an immediate decline in sales (Vientiane Times 2002b). A few days later, the paper quoted a lottery seller who said,

“Before the incident, I normally collected about 1.5 million Kip from sales, but today I could earn only 300,000 Kip.” The lottery office, in turn, offered to screen future drawings of the Sports Lottery on TV to encourage transparency.<sup>71</sup> These same screenings were later stopped because they promoted gambling.

In late October 2015, these issues came to a head again. In an effort to reinstall confidence in the lottery drawing, the state planned to broadcast the Development Lottery. I discovered this, as most Lao people did, through vaguely official-seeming but nevertheless uncertain channels. I walked into a barber shop near my house and sat down to wait for a haircut. One of the other men waiting had a piece of paper in his hand and a conversation was under way. The paper was a printout of an announcement from the Lao News Agency’s Facebook feed (see Thai BBS 2015 for a brief summary).

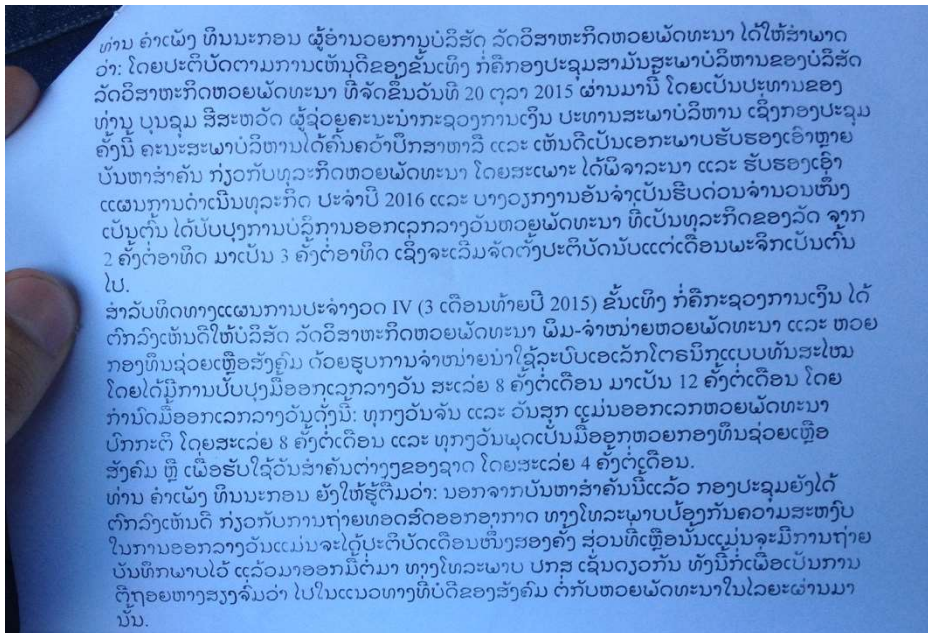


Figure 15: A picture of the announcement that I was passed in the barbershop.

<sup>71</sup> It is not clear from the article cited above which lottery had conducted the drawing, but I believe that it was the Sports Lottery. When I arrived in Luang Prabang for my main fieldwork in 2013, the Development Lottery was not on TV, and the Sports Lottery, which had been televised, had been discontinued.

The announcement had two major news items in it. The Development Lottery was switching the lottery days from twice a week (Tuesdays and Fridays) to three times a week (Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays). While Monday and Friday would host the normal ‘Development Lottery,’ the announcement called Wednesday’s lottery the *huaj3 kòngthùn2 suajlùà3 sangkhom2*, or the ‘Lottery for the Fund for Helping Society.’ The profits for the latter lottery would be earmarked to ‘help society’ generally and to support the celebration of important holidays and events during the year. The second piece of news on the paper was that two times a month, the lottery would be broadcast live on television. On the remaining lottery days, the lottery would be broadcast as well, but not live. The men at the barber shop were skeptical of the announcement, especially of the idea that the profits from the ‘Fund for Helping Society’ were actually going to go to a societal fund. ‘They take it all,’ one man said, using ‘they’ (*khaw2*) to refer both to the state and the lottery distribution offices. ‘The sellers don’t make any money,’ another said, ‘just the people in the office.’

The new lottery plan seemed to be a compromise between those who wanted to increase the lottery’s presence and those who worried about promoting it by broadcasting it. By choosing to broadcast the drawing only twice a month, the lottery office attempted to avoid upsetting the more conservative and anti-gambling parts of the populous and state, as it also increased the transparency and frequency of drawings for those who liked to play. The move backfired and upset everyone. Immediately, most people lost confidence in the lottery. A few days later, I came home to find Mèè Phòòn sitting and watching TV when she normally would be on the street selling tickets. She was ‘not selling tickets anymore,’ she told me. She differentiated the days where they broadcasted the lottery drawing live from those days they did not broadcast it. She said that the days they did not broadcast the lottery on TV, it was a ‘lying lottery’ (*huaj3*



*khiituaq2*); ‘That is how they steal our money,’ she said. Her sentiments were common around town and on Facebook. Many people agreed with Mèè Phòòn that they would henceforth only buy lottery tickets on days that the lottery was broadcast live on television. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that it was difficult to tell which days the lottery would be broadcast. Day to day, the government appeared to stick to no schedule. One night, the problem seemed to reach absurd heights. After hearing all day that the lottery would be broadcast that night, I called a distributor’s office in Luang Prabang lottery to double check. The man told me he had no idea, and neither did anyone else in the office. It was not on TV that night.

During my visits to Vientiane, I had on multiple occasions gone to watch the lottery drawing, which was open to the public. It seemed official and transparent to me. A year before, in 2014, before I awkwardly asked at the Joint-Venture office whether the lottery had been sold to a Thai or Vietnamese businessman, the woman at the desk even gave me a URL through which I could watch the drawing streamed online, live. The link worked for a few months and then broke. But when I told people like Mèè Phòòn that the drawing had seemed legitimate to me, they ignored me, remarking that maybe the state had put on a show or had other ways of fixing it.

The new ‘Digital Development Lottery’ was particularly suspect. The digital lottery equipped sellers with handheld digital devices, or computers on the side of the street. It was attractive for buyers because it offered four-digit lottery tickets with riskier odds. If one bought a four-digit ticket for 1,000 Kip and won, she received 6,000,000 Kip. While the two and three-digit lottery was easy to win, and I won multiple times while in the field, winning the five-digit lottery was almost automatically a big deal. Winners were welcomed into the office and asked to

take an official photograph. When I accompanied one winner, there was a small ceremony and the lottery operators offered us water to drink, and took the winner's photograph.

Because of the potential high stakes, the digital lottery limited, across sellers, how much of any one number might be available. The fact that it tracked how much people bought of each number raised suspicions and many people refrained from buying the digital lottery altogether, opting for the written form, as an American voter might opt for a written ballot in a presidential election. Radio Free Asia picked up on the skepticism at the time (RFA 2016c; RFA 2016a; RFA 2016b; RFA 2016d), and wrote several articles that implied graft among lottery organizers.<sup>72</sup> The authors of the article also pointed out that one leaser of the lottery was the Thai-based Insee Trading Company (a fact that was partly responsible for rumors that the lottery was sold to Thailand). To make things more problematic, the Lao branch of Insee was co-run by Sommalay

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<sup>72</sup> One article reads: "*Drawings in the national lottery, which take place three times each week, often show numbers that vanish from purchased tickets or that are deemed unlucky and are unlikely to be chosen, sources say.*

*The winning number 509 on Oct. 14 this year appeared only as 5 on tickets sold throughout the day of the drawing after large numbers of Lao buyers sought to buy tickets including the 'random number' 09, a resident of the capital Vientiane told RFA's Lao Service.*

*'This number is associated in Laos with the buffalo, a symbol of good fortune, and many people wanted to pick this number,' RFA's source said, speaking on condition of anonymity. 'Machines would not accept it, though, saying that too many of the number had already been sold.'*

*Access to the number, which was unavailable throughout the day, was mysteriously restored only an hour before the scheduled drawing, the source added.*

*In a similar case on Oct. 10, Lao radio announced the winning number of that day's drawing as 134, changing the number only 10 minutes later to 662, the source said.*

*'And last year, the winning numbers for three consecutive drawings at the end of September were 367, 267, and 567,' the source said, adding that the number 67 is commonly associated with the turtle, an animal believed in Laos to bring bad luck.*

*'The Lao people will not pick this number. And even if they use it and win, they won't keep the money, but will give it away to a charity foundation or a temple.'*

*'How is it possible that the number 67 would appear like this three times in a row?' he asked.*

Thammavong, the daughter-in-law of Thongsing Thammavong, the prime minister of Laos from 2010-2016 (RFA 2016b).

Suspicious about the legitimacy of the digital lottery also appeared in the national press. In an astonishingly frank column of *Streetwise*, the Vientiane Times feature where ‘normal’ people around the city are asked about the topics of the day, the editors wrote that when they canvassed people on the street about the lottery, “the verdict was unanimous, something is amiss” (Vientiane Times 2014d). One civil servant was quoted as saying, “I do not buy Lao Lottery anymore because I don’t think it is clear and transparent as you can’t physically see the numbers come up. I hate it as the old numbers often come up and it smells of corruption. I think many people are angry about this. I know that they would like to see something done to rectify the issue.”

As these suspicions swirled, the changes that I had learned about in the barbershop were reversed and the lottery moved again to a two-day-a-week drawing. Mèè Phòòn’s skepticism waxed and waned and, before I left the field again in early 2016 and before accusations against the digital lottery reached their height, she returned to selling lottery tickets. Others seemed to follow suit and to continue buying, even as they claimed that the lottery was full of ‘theft,’ ‘lies’, and ‘corruption’ and even as they questioned whether the lottery actually supported the causes it was ostensibly meant to support. Over the course of these adjustments, lottery fever settled but never went away.

Ironically, the Development Lottery, designed to unite the nation with a shared, moral end, has at times divided the people and the state. Before moving to the next section, I want to briefly reflect on two reasons why. The first is that lottery is a unique type of gambling. It does not, like cards, pit co-present people against one another. The relation between seller and buyer

is imagined as being, on the whole, cooperative and collaborative, not antagonistic. Put simply, their interests are not opposed. A person can even sell a lottery ticket to herself. When the buyer and seller are different people, as they tend to be, sellers often help buyers: they guide them to pick certain numbers, they help them interpret dreams, they wish them luck. Buyers, in turn, often return to their favorite sellers and invite them to post-victory parties when they win. While people do at times judge others and themselves for playing the lottery because it is wasteful, the lottery is not often said to have the capacity to prompt antagonism that is thought to be a central property of other types of gambling for money. It does not make people argue. This explains, in part, the more muted moral sanction of the lottery over and against other forms of gambling, and perhaps why it was the lottery, and not, say, card gambling, that the state first chose to legalize.

But while the lottery does not pit buyers against sellers, it does pit, in a more mediated way, the people against the lottery's operators. This brings me to the second reason the lottery has continued to wedge the people against the state: as I have traced above, even as the lottery has been privatized in some respects, it continues to be imagined as a vaguely state enterprise. This framing of the lottery legitimizes it but also makes the state responsible for its operation. The predominant critical theme is that the lottery is a vehicle for the state to steal from the people. While it is trumpeted as 'good for the nation,' for 'development,' or for 'sports,' it is much more obviously good for the people in power, many of whom are well-known wealthy people who own private night clubs, athletic facilities, and bottled-water companies. These people and their wealth prompt obvious questions: where did they get their money and why did that money not go to 'development,' or 'sports'?

## Sporty Laos

In 2014, Pan organized a lottery to support Luang Prabang athletes heading to the tenth National Games in Oudomxay province. As in the special lotteries I discussed above, Pan had distributed the tickets to individuals in each office; those who sold them earned a percentage of the profit for each ticket sold. At 20,000 Kip each, or about \$2.50 at the time, the tickets were not cheap. The drawing took place with some fanfare at the office of the provincial Department of Sports and Education. Pan hired a band; he bought large amounts of food, beer, and some Johnny Walker whisky; he dug out old lottery-ball randomizers—spinning half-barrels that were rusty and marvelous; and he selected beautiful women from the Sports and Education office to operate the antique equipment.



ລາຍການລາງວັນ			
- ລາງວັນທີ 1 ມີ 1	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດ	100,000,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 2 ມີ 2	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	50,000,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 3 ມີ 3	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	20,000,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 4 ມີ 10	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	10,000,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 5 ມີ 20	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	2,000,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 6 ມີ 100	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	200,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນທີ 7 ມີ 1000	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	100,000 ກີບ
- ລາງວັນຂ້າງຄຽງຂອງລາງວັນທີ 1 ມີ 2	ລາງວັນ	ລາງວັນເງິນສົດລາງວັນລະ	10,000,000 ກີບ

ໝາຍເຫດ : ໃບຫວຍ 1 ໃບໄດ້ຮັບລາງວັນດຽວ ແລະ ຈ່າຍໃຫ້ຜູ້ມີໃບຫວຍຖືກຕ້ອງ ( ກຳນົດຈ່າຍລາງວັນ 30 ວັນ ຖ້າກາຍຖືວ່າສະລະສິດ ).

Figure 16: Lottery Tickets from the Special Sport Lottery in 2014

Before the lottery drawing, Pan walked around the Sports and Education office busily, teaching the women to operate the machines, reviewing how many tickets had been sold, greeting distinguished guests. After watching what he did for a few hours and realizing that I was distracting Pan, I joined the employees at the Sports and Education office and some other guests on a pair of newly built, beautiful, roofed *pétanque* courts. We drank beer and joked about winning the lottery that was soon to be drawn. As often happened at these events, as a foreign novelty, a white man who spoke Lao, I was peppered with high-fives, invitations to come back to the office for future celebrations, and claims of new friendship, ‘love’ and ‘solidarity.’

When we began to move away from the *pétanque* court and toward where they were holding the drawing, one senior bureaucrat became serious. He had bought five tickets, he told one of his coworkers. He stressed that he had done so to support the cause and was disappointed that many other people had chosen not to buy tickets. ‘They must not realize,’ he said, ‘that the lottery is good for all of us—it is for the good of sports, which is for all of us.’ The other man nodded his head in agreement.

In Luang Prabang, people tend to treat ‘sport’ (*kiilaa2*) as a self-evident good. In the United States, athletic activities like running are often a means for raising funds. In Laos, sports are frequently not just the means but the end of fundraising activities. As Creak (2015:242) shows in his recent history of sport in Laos, throughout the 20th century and into the present, sport and physical culture have been imagined as a crucial means for, and measure of, Laos’s modernity and moral standing. Remember that Laos’s two largest national lotteries were aimed at supporting ‘development’ and ‘sport.’

There is some irony in sport’s prominence in Laos. In many ways the “*lack of sporting success (conventionally defined) [has] been the chief characteristic of Lao sport and physical*

culture” (Creak 2015:245). In this section, I focus on the largest exception to this fact: *pétanque*. Over the last fifteen years, *pétanque* has given Laos more success on the international stage than any other sport. In the process, it has morphed in the state’s discourse from another gambling game to be snuffed out, to the country’s national pride and latest craze, and then again to a somewhat ambivalent image of waste, laziness, and consumption. When I ask people in Luang Prabang why the state began to embrace *pétanque*, they point not to a change in policy *per se* but to a change in typification. What happened? The state ‘realized’ or ‘understood’ (*khaw5 caj3*), people say, that *pétanque* was a ‘sport’ (*kiilaa3*). It used to be a game, and now it is a sport.

I divide this section into two parts. In the first, I sketch the historical evolution of *pétanque* from ‘game’ to ‘sport.’ In the second section, I show that the national typification of *pétanque* as a sport is anchored in an image of international competition. I explore other styles of *pétanque* play which are said to go against this image and briefly discuss some of the work people have done to purify these styles of play one from the other.

### **Becoming a Sport**

The rules of *pétanque* are simple. On the money gambling court, the game is either played as singles or doubles.<sup>73</sup> If the players are playing singles then each team has three metal *pétanque* balls; if they are playing doubles than each player still has three balls for a total of six per team. One team starts by placing the little, target ball somewhere on the court. The target ball is called the *bii3* or *muu3* (literally ‘piglet’) in Lao and the *bouchon*, *petit*, or *cochonnet* in French.

The court can vary in size but in Laos, most courts were about ten feet wide and thirty-five feet long. Whoever places the pig throws his ball first. The throws are divided into two broad types: a ‘pointing’ or approach shot and a ‘shooting’ shot. In Lao, the pointing shot is

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<sup>73</sup> And sometimes so-called ‘Canadian doubles,’ where one person plays against two others.

referred to as a *khaw5*, *phuang2*, or an ‘entering’ shot. Its goal is to get as close to the small ball or pig as possible. There are many strategies for throwing a pointing shot. A player might roll the ball along the gravel, toss it in the pig’s general direction, or as in the diagram above, throw the ball high into the air with enough backspin to get it to stop dead in its tracks.

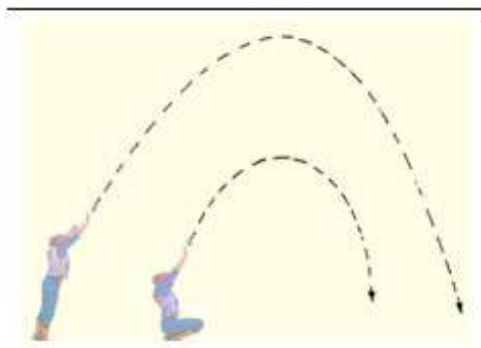


Figure 17: A pointing shot (Images are from *pétanque.com*; Bordsenius 2009).

A shooting shot is designed to knock the opponent’s ball (or, occasionally, the pig) out of the area of play. So, for instance, if my opponent has a ball resting directly next to the pig, and I am thus unlikely to be able to point my ball closer than his, I might choose to shoot at his ball instead of pointing. In Lao, these shots are referred to with the verb ‘hit’ or *tii3*.

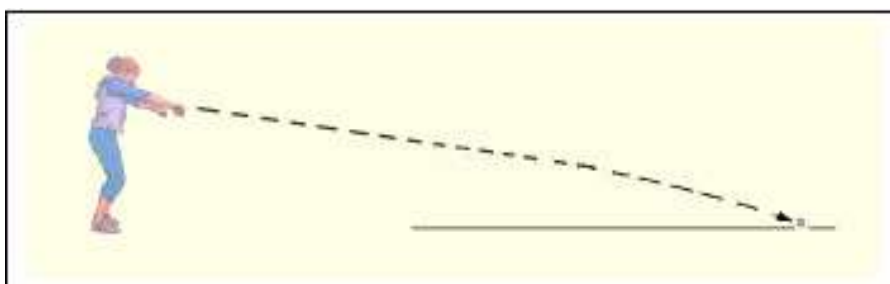


Figure 18: A shooting shot (Images are from *pétanque.com*; Bordsenius 2009)

The first throw of a game is invariably a pointing or approach shot, where the player will try to land one of his larger balls as close as possible to the pig. After this initial shot, and as long as neither the pig nor the metal ball has rolled outside the field of play (and thus ‘died’), a player for the other team takes his turn. That player has choice of pointing his *pétanque* ball as close to the pig as he can or shooting his opponent’s ball out of the field of play. The most impressive and



prized type of shot in the game is a *tii3 kaloo2* (a borrowing from the French *carreau*), which is a shooting shot where the thrown ball knocks out the object ball and then stays in position.

Generally, each team of two will have a division of labor, where one player will *khaw5* (or point) and the other will *tii3* (or shoot). After the second player's turn, the players assess whose ball is closest and the team that does not have the closest ball continues throwing until they do or until they run out of balls to throw. As a team throws, they do not need to alternate players. This means that one player might throw all three of his balls before another player has a chance at his turn. The round continues until all balls have been thrown. A team receives a point for every one of its balls that is closer to the pig than any of its opponents' balls and thus only one team can score each round. If at any point the pig 'dies' (*taaj3*), there are two possible outcomes: if both teams have remaining balls yet to be thrown, then no points are scored, and the round is replayed facing the opposite direction on the court. If one team has already thrown all of its balls when the pig dies, then the other team is awarded a point for each of its remaining balls. If a thrown ball dies then it is removed from the court (or sometimes merely kicked to the side) and cannot score points.

I have found very little documentation of *pétanque*'s history in Luang Prabang.<sup>74</sup> An official history of the sport, written by the Lao Pétanque federation in 2013, notes that the federation was created in 1995. Other documents (including a post on the federation's Facebook page) give a date of 1997 or 1999. A Lao handbook on how to study and teach *pétanque*, published in 2012, begins its history of the game "around 2,000 years" ago with the "Greeks." It ends in France in 1945, at which point, the author(s) writes, the game became quite popular.

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<sup>74</sup> There is assuredly some evidence of *pétanque*'s presence in French language archives, but at the time of this writing I have not accessed them yet.

Most international histories of *pétanque* written in English trace the emergence of the modern game to France in the beginning of the 20th century. Here is an example of a common origin story (Putman 2011:5):

*Pétanque was created in 1907 near Marseilles. The existing game was Boules-Lyonnaise. Like Bocce it featured long courts, large and heavy boules and a multiple step run-up. The legend asserts that a revered Boules-Lyonnaise player crippled by arthritis could no longer stand and deliver the boule with the traditional run up. Aggrieved at seeing the former champion sidelined, his fellow players carried him (in his chair) onto the playing surface. They drew a circle in the dirt around his chair and proclaimed that everyone must now throw from within the circle with both feet on the ground. To compensate for the absence of run-up the court length was reduced by half. Thus Pétanque, from the Provencal 'péd tanca' or 'anchored feet' was born.*

In my interviews and conversations with older people in Luang Prabang, they described having seen people play the game before the revolution. They recounted old French men gathering with Vietnamese officers and high-ranking Lao men (*phuak5 avusoo2*).<sup>75</sup> The story Luung Diisuu told me was typical. I went to his house to look at an antique *pétanque* ball his neighbor had given him. He had bragged about the ball for years, and a friend of his told me to go ask him about it. Luung Diisuu cherished the ball. He kept it wrapped up in a small towel and when he showed it to me he carefully unfurled it on the table as if it were a Fabergé Egg. He told me that around 1968, when he was a student, just a little past ten years old, he would watch older Lao men play *pétanque* behind where the Development Bank now sits. They would gamble for money. The court was rough—not groomed, he stressed, like the courts we see now. It did not

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<sup>75</sup> An article published in 2007 (Ruder 2007), quotes one Lao man now living in Oregon reminiscing about the game “Until the day before, it had been more than 30 years since Nguyen had played petanque, a French game. Back then, in his native Laos, he remembers every court being filled with players and surrounded by even more ardent spectators wagering on the action.”

have well-distributed gravel, it was bumpy with roots and larger rocks. He would watch occasionally, but he never played.

Luung Diisuu told me that after the revolution and up until around 1995, police would arrest you if you played *pétanque*. Only later when *pétanque* “took the form of a sport” (*man2 pên3 huup4 kiilaa3*) did the police stop punishing those who played. ‘Then the state did not say anything,’ he told me. Diisuu began playing *pétanque* a few years after the government relaxed its stance. One day, as he was working, delivering something to an office, he saw some of the workers there playing. When they left, he picked up the balls and practiced for a few minutes. He liked it and in 2003 he began to play regularly at a court with friends. The court had a mix of skill levels, some played casual games and others trained for tournaments like the National Games and the Southeast Asian Games. Every day, Luung Diisuu would go and play and his neighbor, who had played years before, noticed. The neighbor rustled through his old things, found the single *pétanque* ball from years before, and gave the ball to Luung Diisuu. Luung Diisuu cherished it now.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> I told him I would do my best to figure out the ball’s vintage, but when I looked, I found little online.



Figure 19: Luung Diisuu's antique pétanque ball

Luung Diisuu's story of how he became interested in *pétanque* tracks the stories of many people with whom I spoke. The game existed before the revolution; after the revolution, the government banned it and then subsequently embraced it as a 'sport.'

But his story also differs from much of what I heard in that it emphasizes the history of the game, captured in his antique ball. This was not typical, especially among younger people, many of whom seemed neither nostalgic nor interested in how the game was played before. When I tell other anthropologists in the United States about my project, they invariably hone in on the neo-colonial dimensions of the project. In Laos's adoption of *pétanque*, they see revolutionary Lao people adopting the game of their late colonizers (cf. Appadurai 1995). Perhaps when *pétanque* was first banned, the state was particularly concerned about the game's French-ness, but as the discussion of the Development Lottery showed, the state broadly sketched all potential gambling games as 'capitalist' tools of foreign 'enemies.' During my time in the field, the French-ness of the game was rarely live in everyday moments of playing. There were a few exceptions. People would idiomatically tell one another that on the last shot of a

game, ‘The French would not let you take an approach shot,’ and thus goad opponents to aim for a striking shot. More interestingly, *pétanque* balls, similar to many objects of purchase in Laos, were invariably ranked by their country of origin. In order of increasing quality, players ranked Chinese, Thai, and then French balls. People would often talk about how French balls could cost upwards of 300 dollars for a set of three, just as they would complain that Chinese *pétanque* balls might break apart or explode upon impact. As I was writing this chapter, in fact, Dii sent me messages via *WhatsApp Messenger* to see if I could buy him and his office matching, engraved *pétanque* balls. Specifying the weight and the color, he hoped the balls would be both cheaper and of better quality abroad.

People were also aware that some of the best players were French and that the game, in its current form, had originated in France. No one mistook *pétanque* for a Lao game, like *muaj2 Lao* (like Muay Thai) or *katòò4* (rattan ball). It just seemed that it was not any less Lao than most popular sports, like soccer, volleyball, and badminton. And it was obviously more Lao than other sports, like golf or cycling, which exist now only among the very wealthy. In most of everyday life, the French colonial dimension of the game seemed absent.



Figure 20: The Lao P.D.R Pétanque Federation's seal

People were equally unconcerned with the post-revolutionary period when *pétanque* was banned. During formal interviews when I asked direct questions about it, older people like Diisuu would sometimes mention that the government used not to ‘like’ (*makl*) *pétanque* but they underplayed this. When, before the lottery that Pan organized, I went to the Provincial Office of Sport and Education, the office workers dithered about how much to tell me. One man remarked that, almost twenty years earlier, he would grab *pétanque* players and give them a talking-to. He mentioned one player that I knew by name, a man who went on to represent Laos nationally, and said that he once confiscated the man’s *pétanque* balls. The other man in the office, the superior, uncomfortably brushed off the topic, saying that there were ‘no problems now,’ that *pétanque* was a ‘sport’ now.

In interviews people claimed that they played or saw others play after the revolution as early as 1982. I spoke to friends of one now-deceased man, for instance, who before the revolution played with French soldiers and police. After the revolution, he acquired *pétanque* balls from one of his sons who had left for France. He, his other sons who lived with him in Laos, and their friends used the balls to play in the same place where he used to play with the French soldiers. People described the court in those early days as a ‘natural court,’ filled with roots, uneven dirt, and vague boundaries. They told me they were ‘taken in’ by the police a few times and that the process was quick: they were warned, paid small fines, and were spoken to—that was it. Like the men in the office of Sports and Education, they seemed uncomfortable with sharing too much.



Figure 21: A banner in Luang Prabang that reads "Sweating for Sport is Better than Crying for Addictive Drugs."

When I asked explicitly about why the government began to embrace *pétanque*, the answers inevitably went back to the fact that the government ‘realized’ or ‘understood’ (*khaw5 caj3*) that it was a ‘sport’ (*kiilaa3*). For the people who said this, this was never treated as an inane comment. The notion of ‘sport’ is so loaded with positive moral quality in Laos that to claim *pétanque* is a sport, rather than a mere *kêêm3* or ‘game,’ is often to take a real ethical stance on it.

In the conclusion to his book *Embodied Nation*, Creak (2015:242) argues that through the 20th century and into the present in Laos, sport and physical culture have often been equated with modernity, progress, and civilization. Creak points out that the connection between these ideas is rarely made explicit. Rather, when people express ideas like ‘sport is for the good of all

of us,’ there is a sense of self-evidence. Creak charts four dimensions along which this association is often made. First, in Laos, success in sports is often seen as a measure of national progress and ‘national worth.’ Second, sport is seen as a measuring stick for Laos to compare itself with other nations—especially Thailand and Vietnam. As Creak stresses, sport as a measure allows Laos to “metaphorically ‘catch up’ with [other nations] and the world more generally by performing better on the sports field.” Third, sportsmanship is often imagined as being of a piece with other high-character qualities: modernity and manners. Fourth, and overlapping with the first point, Creak notes that “notions of progress have been represented as containing a physical dimension, so the healthy, toned, and muscular form has itself come to symbolize material development and prosperity.”

When I asked the current head of Laos’s *Pétanque* Federation, whom I interviewed in 2014 in his office in Vientiane, what changed from the early days to the present, what made the Lao government realize that *pétanque* was a ‘sport,’ he pointed to the 1995 establishment of the Federation (*pace* the conflicting founding dates mentioned above e.g., Sisay 2002). As he summarized: “Only from 1995 on, did [*pétanque*] become systematized,” he said. “It was systematized, with regulations and [unintelligible], it then had everything, it had it all. Yeah. Tournaments, the National Games. Yeah, [it had] this and that program.”<sup>77</sup> Initially, he said the game was played in whatever way people wanted, on ‘natural courts,’ spotted with roots and bumps. But after the establishment of the Federation, the game became ‘sport.’ The first four provinces active in the Federation were Champasak, Khammouan, Savannakhet, and Vientiane. Luang Prabang was next. In 1997, two years after the Federation was founded, *pétanque* made its

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<sup>77</sup> *mii2 tèl1 kaw4 sip2 haa5 khùn5 paj3 maa2 khaw5 pên3 labop2...man2 khaw5 pên3 labop2 mii2 katiikaa3 mii2 (unintelligible) mii2 ñang3 khopsut2 mot2 qee3...kaan3 khèng1 khan3...qee3 mahakam3 kilaa3 hèng1 saat4 kaan3 khèng1 khan3... qee3 laaj2 kaan3 nan4 laaj2 kaan3 nii4.*



national competitive debut at the Fifth National Games, held at Luang Prabang’s sports stadium. According to one longtime player, because of different levels of familiarity with *pétanque*, the Fifth National Games did little more than demonstrate how it worked to the people in Luang Prabang, who watched as the ‘real players’ competed.<sup>78</sup>

These demonstrations seemed to work. Less than two years after the National Games, in 1999, a place near the previously casual ‘natural court’ in Luang Prabang was flattened out, laid with stone, and converted into a more proper court. The man who owned the land operated the court as a place to play, drink, and relax. He sold beer and food and M150 energy drinks. His timeline was different than the national one. He told me that when he first built the court, the police still hassled him. It was only after the Sixth National Games, held in 2000 in Vientiane, when *pétanque* really became “a national sport” (*kilaa3 hènəŋ1 saat4*) and the police stopped bothering him so much: “Before the police didn’t understand what sport this was, they didn’t know.”<sup>79</sup> After the games in Vientiane, they started to understand. To facilitate play, the man bought eight sets of *pétanque* balls—high quality, French ones, he stressed to me. His court became a place where gamblers and interested athletes joined together. People loved his court, he told me, more than a decade after it had shut down, because he “followed his customers’ hearts.”

Shortly after this man converted the ‘natural court’ into a bar, restaurant, and gambling spot, the state built a competing *pétanque* court at the Kaysone Phomvihane monument in Luang Prabang. With this new court, *pétanque* entered the grounds honoring the country’s most beloved leader. This new court was where Luang Prabang’s athletes were to train and where tournaments, like a national *pétanque* tournament in the spring of 2002, were to be held.

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<sup>78</sup> People gave me conflicting accounts about whether *pétanque* had entered the National Games as a formal event in which one could win medals, or whether there was merely an organized ‘demonstration’ (*saathit1*) of the game.

<sup>79</sup> *tèè1 kii4 han5 tamluat5 bò-khaw5 caj3 vaa1 kilaa3 too3 nii4 mèn1 kilaa3 ñang3 bò-huu4*

When the Kaysone court was first built, one man was assigned to serve as the *pétanque* Federation's representative in Luang Prabang and asked to train the city's players. He said that at the time he knew almost nothing about how to train athletes to play *pétanque*. To learn, he acquired a Video-CD from a coach in Savannakhet that had recordings of French *pétanque* games.<sup>80</sup> He had the young players in Luang Prabang watch the videos repeatedly and learn how to play from them. This continued for months until the Federation found someone with more experience, a coach who had played with French soldiers in the past. The first trainer was asked to stay on as an assistant.

*Pétanque's* evolution in reputation from 'game' to 'sport' was incremental. There were years when the police might raid a court, confiscate *pétanque* balls, or lecture a player for engaging in non-solidary activities. But as is often the case, in the popular imagination, this incremental history is captured by a single moment. That is, in contemporary Laos, the average player almost invariably points to the XXI Southeast Asian Games (henceforth, called the SEA Games) in Malaysia as the moment when *pétanque* became a sport.

The SEA Games are basically the Olympics of Southeast Asia. Occurring every two years and alternating venue from nation to nation, they are a major event in Laos. Laos played in its first SEA Games, the fifteenth Games, in 1989. Ten years later, Vilasone Phikhaykham won Laos its first gold medal at the 1999 SEA Games in Brunei in Taekwondo. In 1999, the Lao National Sport's Committee included hosting the SEA Games in its socioeconomic development plan (Creak 2011:15), and in 2009 this dream was realized when Vientiane hosted the 25th SEA Games.

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<sup>80</sup> It was unclear in the interview if these were 'training videos,' but I got the impression they were merely videos of games being played.

When Laos won its first gold medal, *pétanque* had not yet been included in the Games' program. The state's athletic organizers, however, were already realizing that they might be able to compete in *pétanque* internationally. In the late 1990s, a Lao team went to the World *Pétanque* tournament and finished ninth out of eighteen teams (Khamphone 2006)<sup>81</sup>, in 2000 Vientiane hosted the Asia-Pacific tournament, in which Laos won gold (Sisay 2003). Motivated by these early signs of success, Laos proposed that the sport be brought in as an event for the 2001 Games in Malaysia. The Malaysian Olympic council accepted the proposal (New Straits Times 2000) with the express purpose of helping countries like Laos medal in the games. The honorary secretary of the Council said at the time that *pétanque* was being added in the spirit of competitiveness and egalitarianism (Vietnam Investment Review Ltd. 2001): "The performance of a team depends on the sports selected," a fact which he noted tended to favor "bigger, richer countries." Because *pétanque* is "low cost...can be played anywhere and...is simple to play," he predicted it would "provide medal opportunities for countries such as Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam."

And so it did. In 2001, two young Lao men, Soulideth Sedao, 17, from Vientiane and Saysamone Khamvongsah, 19, from Champasack, defeated the Thai team to win gold in the *pétanque* men's doubles event. In the lead-up to the Games, the team manager had predicted the team would "win at least two gold medals" (Ounkeo 2001a). Although the Lao team came away with one, rather two gold medals, the Vientiane Times still called the gold medal win "a truly monumental victory for Lao sports" (Vientiane Times 2001) and a "big achievement in the history of sport in Laos" (Ounkeo 2001b). Since these 2001 Games, *pétanque* has played an

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<sup>81</sup> The cited *Vientiane Times* article says that this tournament was in France in 1998. The article appears to be a mistake, as the tournament was held in Maspalomas, Spain in 1998, and Montpellier, France in 1999. I could not find additional evidence of when Laos played in the tournament.

outsized role in Laos’s international sporting profile. In the next SEA Games, held in 2003, *pétanque* again was the only competition in which Laos landed a gold medal.

Since this initial victory, *pétanque* has provided a steady stream of gold medals for Laos. In fact, the nation has won a gold medal in *pétanque* at every subsequent SEA Games, excepting the 2015 Games in Singapore where Laos won no gold medals in any event. In the figure below, I have compared Laos’s gold medals for *pétanque* with its medals for all other sporting categories since it joined the SEA Games (note, again, that *pétanque* had not entered the Games until 2001):

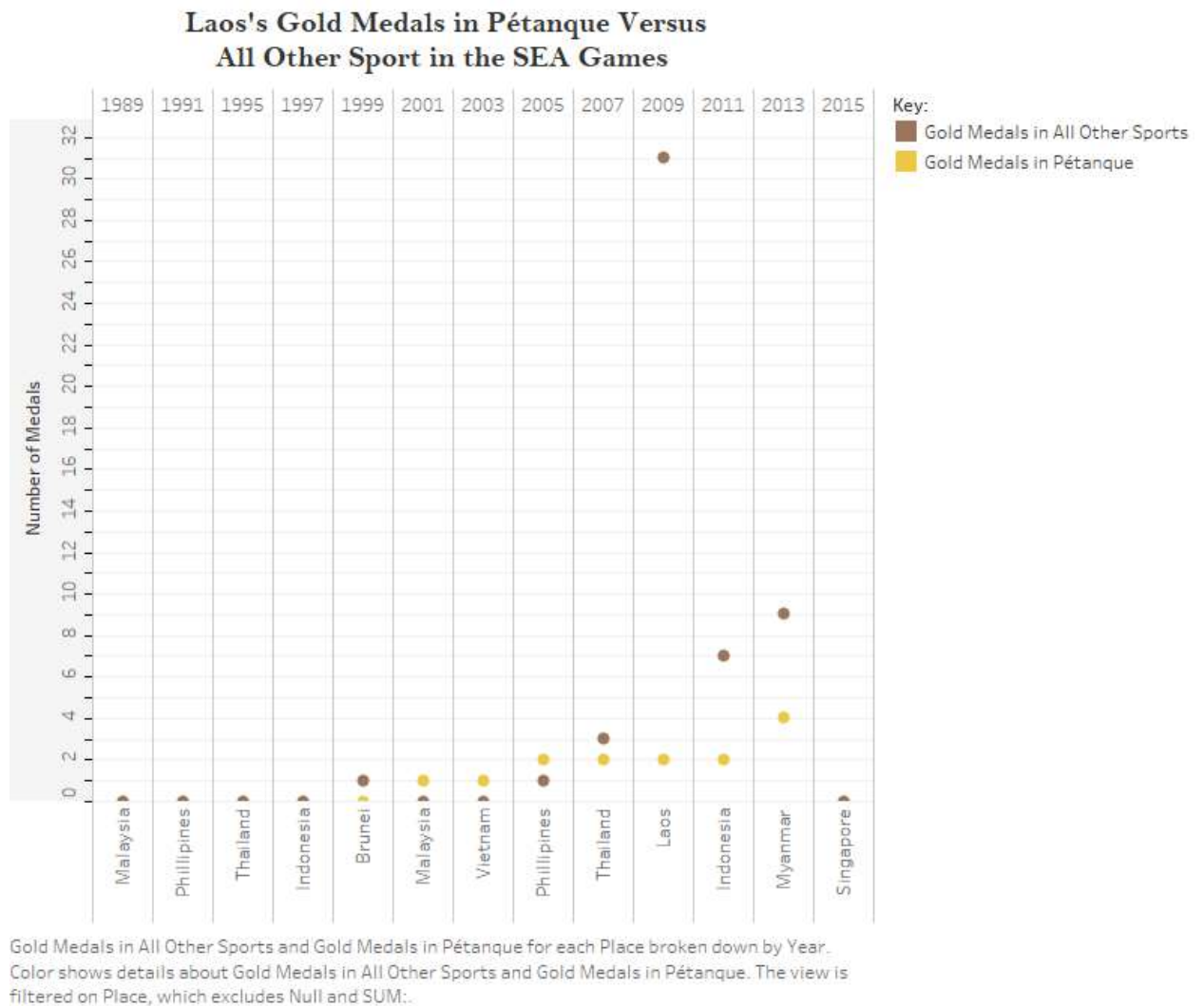


Figure 22: Laos’s Gold Medals in the Southeast Asian Games

The graph reveals 2009 to be an outlier, in that Laos had significant success, winning 33 gold medals in all. 2009 was, not coincidentally, the year that Laos hosted the games. Creak (2017: 161) shows that host nations of the SEA Games inevitably craft advantages so that they win more medals than they would otherwise. Some of the examples verge on absurdity.<sup>82</sup> Given these biases, if you remove 2009's thirty-three gold-medal haul in both *pétanque* and other sports, *pétanque* accounts for more than half of all of Laos's gold medals in the Southeast Asian Games.

When I asked one longtime court owner why the state used to ban *pétanque* playing, he put the issue clearly: “[T]he sport had not yet been born, it hadn't yet entered the SEA Games.”<sup>83</sup> With its medal haul in the Games, *pétanque* legitimated Laos on the national stage and, in turn, *pétanque* was itself legitimized. The once-little game of *pétanque* became a *bona fide* sport, a true *kilaa3*.

## Becoming a Problem

During my fieldwork, it was rare to walk down the street for more than five minutes and not hear the occasional snap of two *pétanque* balls colliding or a cry of excitement or regret after a particularly good or bad shot. In the mid-2000s, several articles were published in the Vientiane Times remarking on the explosion in the game's popularity. In one article titled “Laos bitten by petanque bug,” the authors write that “[s]tudents, office-goers, factory workers, young and old alike can be seen playing the game in the evenings. Sometimes the matches, played under lights,

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<sup>82</sup> Creak (2017: 161) writes: “In 2009, when organizers of the first ever SEA Games in Laos included obscure sports such as fin swimming and shuttlecock while omitting the Olympic disciplines of basketball and gymnastics, leading Malaysian critics dismissed the event as a small and amateurish “community games”. Two years later, rivals cried foul when Indonesia included roller-blading for the first time, sweeping all twelve events and helping to boost its tally of gold medals to a phenomenal 182. In Myanmar in 2013, organizers introduced the national game of chinlone, played nowhere else in the region, as a discipline of sepak takraw. Not surprisingly, the host country collected gold medals in all events that it entered, leaving journalists and officials from rival countries incensed.”

<sup>83</sup> *kilaa3 too1 nii4 man2 ñang3 bò-beet4 man2 ñang3 bò-khaw5 bò-khaw5 qan3 juu1 naj2 siikêem3 thua1 nêl*

go on till midnight” (Sangkhomsay 2006a). In another article titled “Petanque goes on a roll,” the author wrote that “[i]t is becoming more and more common to see groups of animated players gathered around a small pitch up and down the country, watching the path of the spherical metal balls rolling toward their target” (Khamphone 2006). In 2008, another reporter quipped that *pétanque* had become “practically the national sport of Laos” (Phoonsab 2008).

In state media, these reflections on the game’s popularity were tied to hopes in the Southeast Asian Games and dreams of Laos’s success in sports more generally. Having a popular grassroots sport like *pétanque* meant more young athletes and a greater chance to strike international gold. While these hopes infused national policy in *pétanque*, many of the games of *pétanque* people actually played seemed a world away from the SEA Games. Across the courts in Luang Prabang, there were a few paradigmatic moments where people played *pétanque*: the tournament, the office after-work party, and taxi drivers passing time between picking up or dropping off customers. In the rest of this section, I introduce these different ‘types’ of *pétanque* as recognizable contexts and show that while some people draw bright lines between ‘sport’ as a path to national glory and ‘sport’ as afternoon gambling games or after work parties, other people merge these contexts together, like gamblers that hope to achieve some kind of fame and athletes trying to earn some money.

The ‘tournament’ is the most ‘sporty’ style of playing *pétanque* in Luang Prabang in the sense that it most clearly parallels big-time events like the National Games and the SEA Games. This is true across the gamut of tournament types. Even relatively small-time tournaments are marked by pomp and official-esque rhetoric and rules: microphones announcing players, introductory speeches, brackets of teams, team-shirts, and trophies. The first time I encountered a *pétanque* tournament was at the Provincial Hospital’s International New Year’s party (i.e.,

celebrating not the Lao New Year, but January 1st). Two *pétanque* courts were the centerpiece of the party. Male and female employees wore t-shirts embroidered with their teams' names and the hospital bought trophies to award the winners. The competition was intra-office. That is, only people who worked at the hospital took part. Bigger offices in Luang Prabang often have such tournaments. Slightly larger than these intra-office tournaments are the tournaments organized by the city to celebrate the anniversaries of events, like National Day (Sangkhomsay 2010c), or to support a cause. In these latter tournaments, teams tend to be organized by occupation or in reference to a business (i.e., while all members of a team might not work at the same place, usually they will choose one such office and name their team in its honor). These tournaments tend to cater to civil servants and employees of the various 'Joint-Ventures' like, for instance, the lottery, but they also bring in people from many different lines of work. When I was in Luang Prabang, the electricians had a reputation for being particularly skillful *pétanque* players.

Tournaments were sometimes imagined as nested in relation to one another, where smaller tournaments led to larger ones. This structure allowed Laos's Federation to vet players for higher- and higher-level competition, as if the whole nation was playing in one giant tournament bracket. People talked about being able to rise through the ranks by making a good show at a city-wide tournament. Even relatively small tournaments often occasionally doubled as vetting grounds for finding athletes capable of competing nationally or internationally. As just one example, in 2007, the *Vientiane Times* (2007b) reported that the Xayabory police won a tournament to celebrate the 121st anniversary of Labor Day. One reporter said that "during the contest the sports office selected the best players to take part in the games to celebrate the 41st anniversary of Lao sports which the province will host in July."

Corresponding with the official flavor of these tournaments is an ostensive gender equality not usually present in more casual games of *pétanque*. Although there were more men's teams than women's teams participating in each tournament I attended (including the tournament celebrating the Lao Women's Union's foundation that I discussed above), the women's teams were typically treated as equally important, and their trophies were likewise displayed in the government offices' cases just as the men's trophies were. For some women like Maj, whom I discuss in chapter six, participation in both small and large tournaments was a key way in which they understood their own identities: as athletes.

For most people who played in tournaments, however, tournaments were less opportunities to become national athletes than big parties that would—unlike the SEA Games—get smaller and drunker as the day went on and teams were eliminated. People would sit at mixed-gender tables around the court, usually homogeneously populated by their coworkers, and drink beer, eat drinking meats, and endlessly crack sunflower seeds. There were sometimes speeches and musical acts, and, on one occasion, I was even pressured to sing with the band. But these brief moments of collective attention aside, tournaments were generally loosely focused events. When an office's team fell out of the bracket, its employees usually left promptly. Rather than involving big crowds and built-up pressure, the final matches of a tournament were often viewed by a small-ish group huddled around, watching, and cheering for their friends or coworkers.

Much less formal than tournaments were games of *pétanque* played at offices. Almost every government office in the city has a *pétanque* court as did most of those private offices that were physically large enough to house one. Some people, mostly men, play every day after work, and for them *pétanque* functions much like happy hour does in office culture in the United



States. Each of these games is typically played for a large bottle of beer that is then shared among winners and losers, but stakes vary. Carroll (2011:102) describes such games in the late 2000s as part and parcel of the office of the Vannasin Literature and Arts Magazine, a sub-unit of the state's office of the Ministry of Information and Culture in Vientiane. He writes that the games were played primarily by men, some of whom would quickly eat their lunches so that they could spend the hour playing the game: “the *pétanque* court was almost exclusively a male realm.”<sup>84</sup> In the offices that I visited, the male-ness of the courts was apparent, but women did also play and drink, usually on teams with men. Most often, as in mixed-doubles matches in the United States, co-ed teams were matched up against other co-ed teams. Often, younger, more junior women will pour beer for the men and women who are drinking. During larger celebrations, almost everyone in an office might join in. The different skill levels of the players create hierarchies of expertise. Everyday players will often morph into player-coaches, guiding the other players, organizing teams, showing off their skills. It is these experts' time to shine. When I asked people what these after-work—and, on special days, outside-of-work, parties—do, they usually said that the games were for ‘fun’ and, in the process, they built ‘solidarity’ and ‘love.’

Generally, the larger and more inclusive a session of play was, the less likely it was to involve gambling with financial losses. In most bigger parties, the bosses of offices (*hua3 naa5*) will buy beer before any playing happens. The gambling in these cases is beer gambling, but in a

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<sup>84</sup> He writes, “Generally the games were not simply a leisure activity; rather the male Ministry staff members approached *pétanque* as a gambling sport. Competitive male bravado could push the stakes for a game as high as \$3 U.S., which was approximately \$0.90 higher than the daily income of the highest paid Vannasin employee. Lower ranking employees were typically priced out of these higher stakes games and approached the high stakes matches as a spectator sport. The presence of any of the editorial staff members or the Head of the Technical Department in the Ministry compound after 3:30 pm was a fairly reliable indicator of their involvement in that day's high stakes game of *pétanque*. Their success or failure in the game could be easily read upon their faces when they returned to the office to put away their boules, pack up and head home” (Carroll 2011:102).

different sense than playing for who buys the beer. In these cases, people play to see who will drink beer. These are prototypical drinking games, like beer-pong in the United States. Players might clink their *pétanque* balls together, *cap2* or ‘grab’ a bet, to see who can throw a ball closer, or whether a shot will miss. The loser will drink a glass, or a half of glass, depending on the bet. Like the “Sport Days” that Mills (1999:123) discusses, these events are also opportunities for superiors in an office to display generosity. When a person buys beer, this will often be announced to the group, and, at larger parties both involving *pétanque* and not involving *pétanque*, a donor of beer will sometimes display the beer for a photo-op.



Figure 23: This photograph, from a March 7, 2008 photo essay in the *Vientiane Times* shows a business leader gifting *pétanque* balls to a police battalion. The original caption read: “Local businessman Mr. Davone Phachanthavong (right) presents *pétanque* balls worth about 1 million kip to Major Khamkuen Khamkakoun, a representative from C306 Battalion.” Note the beer in the bottom right corner of the photograph.

In contrast to these office games are the games that people play on backyard courts and courts operated as businesses. Take the money-gambling court where I went most. It was owned by a couple who made money selling food and drinks and charging fees to players for each game they played. It was typically described as place people went during ‘free’ or ‘in between time’ (*vêlâa2 vaang1*). ‘You drop off a customer,’ people would often explain, ‘and you do not need to pick them up for a few hours, so you go and kill time’ (*khaa5 vêlâa2*). Rather than happy hour, the games at this court were said to function something like how police officers might use a coffee shop: a place to loiter and spend free minutes or hours. It was said to be populated by guides, drivers, and other people in the tourism industry. The games at this court often involved money, from small to large amounts and this fact gave the court its unofficial epitaph as a ‘gambling court’ (*deen3 phanan2 kan3*). When I first arrived in the field in 2013, games tended to run between 25,000 and 50,000 Kip. By the time I left, in 2016, they were typically for 50,000 or 100,000 Kip. I saw people play for much more and less as well.

Luang Prabang’s changing economy, both its boom and its shift toward tourism, and the state’s lessening of restrictions on social activities such as playing *pétanque* have in concert made places like the money gambling court more popular. The tourism industry has funneled money into the pockets of people like the taxi and mini-van drivers who fill the gambling court. The ‘low season’ for tourists—running roughly from late April through the summer—creates months where some of these people will have little to do, but ‘kill time.’ Weeks where guides do not have customers, where drivers need not pick anyone up. The economic boom in the city has found its way into civil servants’ pockets as well—through their wives’ labor selling things in the night market, through investments in property, or various side-jobs (*viak4 nòk4*). *Pétanque* has drawn in hordes of mostly middle-aged, ethnic Lao men with some expendable income,

although there are many richer or poorer people, or people that identify as being part of one group or another (Hmong, Khmu, Tai Dam, and so forth), that play some. When people explain the game's rise, they often mention how it is easy to play and not extremely expensive. While a set of French *pétanque* balls can cost serious money (say, two or three hundred dollars or the same number of monthly wages), unlike badminton, which was long associated with more wealthy athletes, or the even more expensive game of golf, to play *pétanque* one need not constantly buy new shuttlecocks, repair rackets, or pay for prohibitive green fees. These other games are elite. The golf course, located just outside of Luang Prabang, in particular, has become a symbol of wealth, a game for those high-up in the government, 'big people' (*caw4 naaj2; phuu5 ñaj1*) or 'bosses' (*huanaa5*). Only a few of the regulars at the *pétanque* court had ever played golf, and of those whom had, most had only ever hit balls at the driving range or at the electronic golf range that was built sometime around 2015; they had not played a full round of golf.

While *pétanque* is not an elite sport, however, many small taxi drivers (with tuk-tuks, three-wheelers, or 'jumbos') did not go to the *pétanque* court because, as they told me, they did not have the funds. For them, the court was a place for people who had money, like those who drove, and better yet, owned mini-vans (*lot2 tuu4*). There were also, obviously, distinctions in socio-economic class and status on the court itself—there were big gamblers, 'big people' whom everyone knew were wealthy. Many of them owned multiple vehicles, and in a few cases small companies, like a soccer gambling office and a beer distributor. They generally bet more than others, were known to pay their debts, and would occasionally distribute beer and food after a win and pass it around to friends. One wealthy man, who never gambled for money, would go to the court and buy beer for everyone there. While he rubbed some the wrong way for speaking

‘unenjoyably’ (*vaw4 bò-muan1*), everyone recognized that he had ‘a big heart’ (*caj3 ñaj1*) and wallet and respected him for it. At the other end of the spectrum, there were people who would rarely bet, or if they did, bet small amounts, say, 10,000 Kip because their means were smaller. One man went to the court not to gamble at all but to offer massages to those whose backs hurt from sitting on the benches all day. He did not charge any particular fee but asked people to give him what they felt like offering.

These gambling games and civil servant after-parties have been targeted by some for criticism, as, unlike the tournament, they do not fit what people imagine a ‘sport’ should be. When I told a famous Lao author that I was going to study *pétanque* and the ‘language of sport,’ she said sarcastically, ‘Yeah, *pétanque*’s a sport, they work out their arms as they drink.’ Many people have likewise told me that people use the game’s acceptance as a sport as a ‘cover’ for gambling. One Lao journalist wrote that “Playing sports is a good thing, but if it’s just an excuse to have fun and gamble with your friends, it will end up in ways you do not want. You will waste your money, fall out with your family or possibly have an accident” (Soulivan 2007).<sup>85</sup> “The playing of sports as a front for gambling should be stopped,” a different journalist quipped, lamenting that people would play gambling games out in the open (although writing in the early 2000s, the journalist did not directly mention *pétanque*; see Souphaphone 2003). Other articles lamenting the corruption of *pétanque* came out in the later 2000s, like “Benefits of sport reduced by gambling” (Vientiane Times 2008c) and “*Pétanque* must wait until after work” (Vientiane Times 2009d). One of these articles, entitled “*Pétanque* causing problems” (Vientiane Times 2008a), starts with the simple and straight to the point line that “Playing sport is good for the

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<sup>85</sup> In fact, in my digital copies of publications of Vientiane Times—which are text searchable—all of these warnings are republications from Lao language newspapers, addressed to Lao people.

health,” but then adds that “the playing of petanque has become a problem for many people as they sometimes play constantly for three days, wasting their time and money. Many people gamble up to 10 million Kip on games. The problem is widespread with not only villagers and local vendors playing, but also government officials who play during working hours.”

A symptom of the seriousness of the problem, in 2014, the provincial office in Luang Prabang issued a written policy regulating when and where civil servants should play *pétanque*. The policy had two stipulations: 1) civil servants should only play *pétanque* outside of working hours and 2) *pétanque* courts should be moved away from the street, toward the back of office buildings. The second stipulation was partial insurance for the first—if it was inevitable that workers were going to play during office hours, moving the courts out of sight at least made the games less public and prominent.

These concerns highlight a tension around both playing for beer at the office and playing for money at the gambling court. People worry about the enjoyment of *pétanque* teetering into laziness or sloth, as the game can come dangerously close to overtaking the work that men claim they are merely bookending. I myself sometimes wondered whether my own games at these courts—games of *pétanque* or checkers—were for research or for something else.

The irony, and tension in all of this criticism of *pétanque* is that sometimes the people who play gambling games are the same people who successfully represent in competitions their offices, their villages, their provinces, and the Lao nation. In the national imagination, *pétanque* uncomfortably embodies both a path to glory and a vice. The combination of these two worlds meant that in Luang Prabang, I played with several well-known athletes. One previous winner at the SEA Games, in fact, jokingly hustled me, taking advantage of the fact that I did not recognize him. After a series of perfect shots, he took my 10,000 Kip and we became friends. When we

went to a night club later that same night, people recognized him from his gold-medal-earning play years earlier. Another player, the one who officials had named to me as someone they used to occasionally catch and confiscate *pétanque* balls from, likewise bragged to me about how he had gained some fame from his *pétanque* play: ‘People know my name all the way to Attabeu province,’ he said, referencing a province in southern Laos.



Figure 24: The Court in Luang Prabang During a Tournament to Celebrate the National Day Against Drugs, 2012. The Court is Identified in French and Lao (the Lao is cropped out of the picture). This has nothing to do with the Frenchness of *pétanque*, but is how all of the nearby sports buildings are labeled as well.

Official tournament play and gambling games also overlap somewhat uncomfortably at the stadium where tournaments are held. In 2011, Luang Prabang again hosted the National Games. As part of the preparations, the city built several large sports complexes, including a *pétanque* stadium, mentioned above (Sangkhomsay 2010a; Sangkhomsay 2010a; Sangkhomsay 2010b; Sangkhomsay 2011a). Some of the sports complexes have since, like the lottery, been leased out to private companies (Sangkhomsay 2011b). It was not clear to me during my time in the field if anyone was leasing the *pétanque* court, but it was still used for large tournaments in

the city. On any given day without a tournament, the court was a scene for one or two *pétanque* players to go, practice, and gamble with one another. No fees were collected, and the games lacked the audiences one found at the gambling courts. But nevertheless, there, in a place built to instill national glory, men took part in a style of play that others worried would lead to national destruction and debauchery.

Efforts to purge *pétanque* *qua* ‘sport’ of connotations of sloth, or alcohol, or mere wasting time first became clear to me early in my fieldwork at the International Day Against Drugs *pétanque* tournament in 2012, held at the stadium built for the National Games. I sat around before the tournament began with a man who identified himself as a driver, Khap. Khap and I later became good friends (he was an ‘older brother’ (*qaaj5 hak1*) to me), but at the time we hardly knew one another. When I asked if I could shadow him during the tournament, he first offered that I could be the head of his team. All I would need to do, he said, was pay for the beer, water, and food for my teammates during the tournament—something like five or six hundred thousand Kip in total, or 70 dollars. I politely declined. He then decided he would lead his own team. He paid his team’s entrance fee, and gave me the free shirt that came with registration. The shirt had an anti-drug message emblazoned on it and I promptly put it on over my knock-off Burberry polo. Khap chose the team name, ‘Tourism Team.’ The name was a reference to Khap’s job as a mini-van driver. He would drive foreign tourists out of the city with a Lao guide who spoke a common language with them (usually English), going to the waterfalls, caves, and ethnic villages within one to two-hour range. Occasionally he would drive people to Vientiane in the south or Oudomxay in the north. He did not work for a company at the time, but worked freelance, using a mini-van that he had just purchased with economic help from his family and



his wife's family. Guides or offices that needed drivers would call him up and arrange a time and place for pickup.



Figure 25: What was Left of the Drug Burning at the Pétanque Tournament

I got to know Khap because, as a freelance driver, he had many days without work. Almost every day, he would go to the gambling *pétanque* court to which I went, and play games for money into the afternoon. When I arrived at the Drug-Free tournament, I recognized him as one of the top players. He practiced constantly and presented himself as an athlete. He always wore athletic shirts, and when he had seen me play a few days before, he was quick to coach me from the bench on the edge of the court, to offer me advice on my release, my stance, and my strategy. I asked to shadow him at the tournament because I imagined he might go far in it, perhaps even win it. When I had a chance to interview Khap he told me he dreamed of competing nationally, and maybe even internationally. He had a small gravel patch in front of his house where every

morning he would throw ball after ball, at different distances and from different angles. He said he tried to get in at least three hours of training before going to the court; and would thus begin training when his wife or mother started the morning fire for steaming sticky rice.

Khap was excited about the tournament. His wife and toddler came to cheer him on. As I would learn later, his ‘Tourism Team’ was comprised of two other drivers with whom he always played. Before the tournament began, the three men milled around, practicing while the brackets were set up and their first match-up was assigned and announced on the loudspeaker. When their team’s opponents wandered over, they all warmed-up side-by-side. It was clear that the tourism team was much better than their opponents and in the first round of play, they immediately scored three points. Rather than set-up the next round, one of their opponents furiously walked off to the referees’ table. He came back with the head referee. ‘There was a problem,’ the referee said: Khap’s team was not a real ‘office’ (*hòng5 kaan3*), and they had to be an office to play. The tournament apparently had no official rules stating that participants needed to be affiliated with an office, but nevertheless, the opponent was adamant, repeatedly saying that Khap’s team should not be able to play. After Khap briefly pled his case, the referee caved to the opponent. They told me I had to give back the shirt I was wearing (I offered, and was allowed, to buy it instead). The game stopped and Khap, after grumbling about how his opponent was ‘scared’ (*khii5 jaan4*), loitered around for a moment and then left the tournament, frustrated like a skydiver who, after flying 12,500 feet in the air was told he could not jump, after all, and would have to land with the pilot.

What was the issue with Khap playing? It was not just that he was too good, other players at the tournament were better, as I learned as I met more and more of them over the coming years. Nor was it that he was not part of an office *per se*. As I wandered around I saw other

players who worked for themselves like Khap did. In fact, when Khap had suggested earlier in the day that I lead my own team, I asked the referee to clarify that I could if I wanted to: he said that that would not be an issue. The problem, it seemed to me at the time, was that Khap belonged at a different court. He was not a tournament kind of man, even as he was more successful in tournaments than most of the people there. If no one had complained, there would have surely been no issue, but as soon as his opponent became ‘scared,’ as Khap put it, and wandered over to the referee, Khap’s status as someone outside of the state infrastructure, the offices and organizations that ground tournament play became apparent.

As I show throughout this dissertation, the early, wild days of *pétanque* still haunt it. Even tournaments can seem to blur into something problematic, filled with too much drinking or smoking or money-gambling skill. While the late-socialist state has embraced the game it once banned, this embrace is ambivalent and controlled, and like Khap’s eligibility to enter into a tournament, it is always ready to be revoked.

## **Conclusion**

*“There have been great changes in the actual things, persons, and activities referred to by the traditional concepts of ‘commodity’ and ‘kinsman.’ But the concepts themselves and the relationships between them have persisted. This has permitted Ban Ping to retain the illusion of continuity, to camouflage commercialization, and so to make an amicable adjustment to the modern economic world.”*

*-Michael Moerman (1966:364), writing of Thailand*

Is Laos still socialist? Is the moral economy universal? Is the lottery for development? Is *pétanque* a sport? In this chapter, I have traced these questions. My purposes were two-fold: (a) to outline, in detail, a historical context for the rest of the dissertation, and (b) to argue that the core of the state’s moral discourse over the last forty years has remained similar, even as much

has changed. Just as Bayly (2009:143) remarked of people living in Vietnam, most people in Luang Prabang “do not see themselves as living in a world of defunct socialist values now dead and discredited by their country’s new life of globalized market enterprise.”

In my argument above, I have moved between a number of different kinds of sources—chiefly formal interviews, newspaper articles, and official documents. The result has been an analysis that has tilted toward taking the state’s perspective on itself seriously. In moments, I have also highlighted key tensions that these narratives bring about. Everything, however, has been painted with a broad brush. In the next chapter, I trade the broad brush for a sharp pencil, and explore how people construct these representations interactionally, and reflect on how we should understand the ideologies that guide their making. The key logic I locate is to keep the ‘good’ and elide the ‘bad.’ The same could be said of the Lao state’s representation of its own history. Laos is not post-socialist. Rather, it is forever on the cusp of being post-bad, continuously marching forward to the good ends on the horizon.

## Chapter 3 Good Representations

### Introduction



Figure 26: Buddhist Offerings

This picture captures something good. I took it as parishioners proudly sat nearby and assembled more offerings for an annual village festival—Buun Phavêêt (for discussion and background see Tambiah 1970; Ladwig 2009; and many others). They explained how they made the offerings and emphasized that their principle of construction was ‘beauty’ (*khwaam2 ngaam2*). The mostly older women made themselves look beautiful as well. They put on makeup, adorned themselves in their fanciest jewelry, and wrapped themselves in their best skirts. In making their offerings ‘beautiful’ and in being beautiful themselves, they turned their ‘good’ gifts into something even better, something that would yield even more merit. When I asked if I could take pictures of their offerings, they beamed and told me to take as many as I wanted. When they were done, most of them stood in front of these same objects and posed for their own photos.





Figure 27: Disposal of Offerings

This picture captures something good too. Or at least that is what an abbot (*saathuI*) standing nearby told me. I took the photo a few days after I took the first photo, when the festival had finished and the temple grounds were less beautiful. Most parishioners had gone home, but a few men—monks, novices, and nearby villagers—counted and distributed the donations, and disposed of everything else. The temple grounds felt like the day after a state fair. Plastic bags whirled like tumbleweeds. But unlike a state fair’s grounds that might sit neglected for weeks, the temple was messy for only a moment. The novices swept and bagged everything they saw, including the flowers and decorations from the days before. All that beauty became rubbish. When I saw the trash truck coming, I asked the temple abbot if I could take pictures. ‘Sure. This is a good thing to photograph because it is good thing,’ he told me.

The trash might have been a good thing, but it was not a beautiful thing like the flowers and decorations I had captured a few days before, even though its main components were those same flowers and decorations, some of which had barely wilted. So much had changed: just days before, people had encouraged me to take photographs and they had photographed these decorations themselves, had praised them, and had offered them to monks and deities, raising them up to the tops of their foreheads; now the offerings were squished into trash bags, crammed into trucks, and nonchalantly crushed by the novices that walked atop them. I wrote in my field notes that when the abbot told me it would be ‘good’ if I took a picture of the trash he had hesitated. Why? As in Thailand (McDaniel 2011), people in Luang Prabang often expect the ‘good’ and the ‘beautiful’ to go together. Because the trampled donations were no longer beautiful but still ‘good,’ they were an unusual albeit acceptable subject to photograph. In the abbot’s response, the ‘good’ trumped the beautiful.

This chapter goes beyond temple grounds, photographs, and strict aesthetics to explore the prevalence in Luang Prabang of the ideology that ‘good’ (*dii3*) things are worth displaying, and that displays should be ‘good.’ I use the term *display* broadly and idiosyncratically, not to mean putting a photograph or knick-knack on a wall or mantle but as a gloss for moments of capture where people say or imply that bits of their semiotic output are addressed to a generalized other. As a foreign researcher, I frequently prompted people to *display*, as I took digital photographs, audio-recorded conversations, videotaped events, conducted written surveys, and engaged in ‘interviews’ (*kaan3 samphaat4*). In these moments, people often anticipated and worried—or, more exactly, produced signs of anticipation and worry—about how what they did would later be evaluated as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ by absent others. To explore these issues, I unpack a few moments where my research practices were felt to put people and their written and spoken

words on *display* for future, indeterminate others to read, hear, and evaluate. I make two points. First, I show that in these moments, the worry did not saturate interaction; while people produced ‘good’ representations, they also joked about ‘bad’ ones. Second, I show that people’s concerns seemed to implicate two motivations that are often considered mutually exclusive: a consequentialist worry about the personal repercussions making ‘bad’ representations of the state might bring about, on the one hand, and a worry about the ethics of doing so, with regard to the value of the act in and of itself, on the other.

### **Dramatic Representations**

“To whom am *I* talking, Adrian—*The New York Times*, or your novel, or you?”

– Maya in Arthur Miller’s (1990:157) play *The Archbishop’s Ceiling*

When I brought a written survey to the money gambling court, the regulars at the court acted like I was finally doing worthwhile research. I remember feeling like the survey was an accreditation, similar to my research permission papers from the National University of Laos. Over the past months, I had told many people at the court that I was a Ph.D. student interested in the language and the lifestyle of casual *pétanque* play, but my research topics and methods did not fit with local ideas about what research was. I was too young and too concerned with documenting the relaxed and sometimes coarser side of life. If I was a real researcher, I imagine people thought, I was either lazy because I chose to pass my time at the court, or stupid in choosing how to do my research. ‘Ph.D.s are easier to get in the U.S.,’ a close friend, Muu, once clarified to a man struggling to understand why I was studying the language of *pétanque* gambling.



My survey was different. People seemed to think that it was a more appropriate method for conducting research, much more appropriate than what I had been doing: sitting around and asking questions about how I should make a bet, or where someone worked, for example. The men at the court treated the survey and—for just a moment—me, with corresponding concern. With an eye toward future, indeterminate readers, those filling out the survey and those looking on talked about what they should write in it. Some agreed that their answers should only have ‘good’ ideas, others joked about writing ‘bad’ ones. I, apparently not yet ready to be either a real researcher or, for that matter, a reflective, detached anthropologist, pushed back on the notion that what people wrote should be evaluated at all. Rather than disengage and watch and listen to how people thought the survey should be answered, I pleaded for each individual to not think about their answers in terms of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but merely to write what they thought the ‘truth’ was. A back-and-forth developed. Almost everyone who talked about the survey brushed off my pleas. For them, what was important was whether their answers were good or bad, right or wrong. ‘Write whatever you want!’ I countered again and again. ‘Don’t write that,’ men at the court told one another. No matter how much I struggled to have people forget about what others might think about them or their answers, my survey seemed to bring concern along with it.

The men at the court considered methods like surveys ‘real research’ and thus, worthy of concern. Ironically, this is why foreign researchers studying Laos tend to avoid these methods.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> As one scholar writes of Laos in the late 1970s: “At this point in their history the people in Xa Phang Meuk are too concerned, fearful, and perhaps disoriented to place very much confidence in any outsider, let alone a white American. In a word, the truth of how villagers feel is hard to get at. What truth there is in this description derives primarily from the experience from which it resulted. Questionnaires, surveys, collection of data will never reveal very much of the deeper thoughts and more intimate concerns of the people of Xa Phang Meuk. One rarely gets glimpses of such things by asking direct questions. It is not only that in the present political and social climate direct questions are likely to make villagers uneasy but most often results in answers which it is believed the questioner or government wants to hear. But it is also that direct questioning is alien to villagers simply by happening to be there when they decide to talk about what is important to them. There is little use in trying to rush things. It is as if one were to try to hasten the rains, delay the setting of the sun, or alter any of the other natural phenomena which still

Unlike more casual ways of documenting life, surveys, and other formal modes of investigation prompt people in Laos to worry about what they say; to worry about the state; to worry about nearby civil servants, about their bosses, about their colleagues; and to worry about researchers, the often-mysterious people who enter and exit the scene quickly, for indeterminate, unintelligible, or hidden purposes. To conceptualize this worry, scholars in Laos have repeatedly evoked the dramaturgical metaphor of ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ conversations. While Lao informants might, in ‘front-stage’ encounters say that everything is going swimmingly, over drinks, around meals, and at parties, they joke about their still unpaid government salaries and pensions, the need to bribe officials, and the extent to which state agents arbitrarily wield power.<sup>87</sup>

The metaphor has helped scholars capture what they see as a bifurcated world as it has also helped them identify their object of knowledge: what people ‘really’ think.<sup>88</sup> And so, in

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directly govern so much of life in the village” (Branfman 1978: iv). Recall, of course, what was happening at that time in Laos—many Lao people had good reason to suspect outsiders.

<sup>87</sup> In their introduction to a recent special issue of the *Asian Studies Review*, High and Petit (2013) take this issue head on. They first point out the often-noted “gap between policy and practice” in late-socialist Laos, where “policy as it appears on paper bears little resemblance to implementation on the ground: committees are formed but never meet, funds are established but have no funds, fines are levied but not enforced” (2013: 427). One way that this gap manifests itself, they continue, is in the talk that one finds backstage. In this backstage talk, “direct and open protest is not undertaken often or lightly, but in anecdotes, rumours or gossip, urban legends, jokes and plays on words, officers and functionaries are rendered as morally dubious and potentially dangerous. Lao people enjoy revealing to one another, under the seal of trust and secrecy, tales of the hidden side of the regime, of ‘bigmen’, networks and clienteles competing for the appropriation of resources” (2013: 427).

<sup>88</sup> Those who write about Vietnam, for example, describe the problem in the same terms as Lao scholars (partly because, of course, they are publishing in the same journals and edited volumes and working from the same intellectual heritage—e.g., the legacy of James Scott, discussed below). Turner (2013:400), for instance, discusses how her graduate students deal with the “all-pervasive state apparatus.” They must learn quickly that “they are unlikely to immediately gain important insights from local interviews, especially when accompanied by a state assistant in a white shirt and shiny shoes.” They discover that insight comes from more “enclosed spaces,” she writes, where they can “negotiate access and build trust and rapport” (2013:400). The geographers Scott, Miller, and Lloyd write similarly that in interviews with Vietnamese officials, they had difficulty moving “from discussions of policies, norms or discourses, to actual practices.” In these interviews, they “were often given over-simplified portrayals which tended to brush over discontinuities or local specificities...” (2006:32). As Holly High (2014:90) writes—referencing Herzfeld’s (2014) notion of ‘cultural intimacy’—eventually every “visitor to Laos will be inducted into the ‘cultural intimacy’ of nightmarish stories about the state...” “These stories,” she continues, “form a kind of public secret.”

quiet homes, drinking sessions, and hushed conversations, they search for the ‘backstage’ of life. Daviau (2010:198), for instance, describes such a backstage encounter on a research trip to a former military post where some Tarieng villagers were squatting after being ‘relocated.’ He was accompanied on the trip by a civil servant, a doctor. “During the night,” he writes, “the villagers waited until the doctor fell asleep and dragged me out of my mosquito net, to bring me to the [drinking] jar, where villagers spoke without inhibition about their frustrations and suffering following their move.” Daviau felt the villagers spoke to him more honestly while drinking from the jar than they had earlier when the official was watching. Earlier, they had parroted state rhetoric, but now, away from the prying eyes of the state, they spoke more frankly. He argues that this scene followed a predictable pattern where “informants are generally very cautious in their answers and comments, especially when a researcher is accompanied by officials” (2010:201). Singh (2009:142), in her study of government forestry workers, argues that splits between private and public stances prompt a methodological challenge: How can we elicit frank talk? How can we find the “spaces and times that may be more transparent, or less clouded by state rhetoric...” (2009:142)?<sup>89</sup>

That all the world is a stage and the state is the audience is a classic trope in socialist studies and in the popular imagination of what it is like to live in a socialist state (e.g., Verdery 1996:24; see Lemon 2000 and Yurchak 2006 for discussion). The trope is even written into dramatic works themselves; in Arthur Miller’s *The Archbishop’s Ceiling*, for instance, Adrian,

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<sup>89</sup> Singh (2009:142) shows that people like the Tarieng villagers Daviau encountered, who are obviously disenfranchised by the state, are not the only ones who reveal seemingly more ‘transparent’ stances in private encounters. In Singh’s discussion of the forestry office in the Nakai district, she quotes a woman resting in the civil servant dormitory after a government party. The woman, whom she calls Nang, complained about how infrequent such festive events were: “We only eat three days a year, the rest of the year we do not eat,” she said (2009:161). Nang rarely made such complaints loudly and “some months later, [she] found her restraint in not voicing such statements more publicly would potentially be rewarded” with a promotion. Singh shows that there was a split between Nang’s public and private stances and argues that this split is analogous to splits in the stances of men and women living in Laos generally.

an American writer doing research for a novel, travels to a socialist ‘European capital’ and wonders if his local friends’ house is bugged: “Quite an atmosphere in this house,” he says to the friend, “This density with angels hovering overhead. Like powers always with you in a room. Like God, in a way. Just tell me—do you ever get where you’ve forgotten it?... Is it always like a performance?”

While the dramaturgical metaphor and its analogs (especially Scott’s (1990) notion of ‘hidden transcripts’; which I discuss at more length in chapter four) can often be a helpful shorthand for pointing to aspects of life, perhaps especially of life in socialist states, as an analytic, the metaphor obscures more than it reveals.<sup>90</sup> In this section, I review three reasons why it fits awkwardly in Laos and, in doing so, I telegraph the arguments I make in the rest of the chapter.

First, the simplest reason. Frontstage and backstage are either/or binaries but concern is often not (Lemon 2000:23–24). There are many varieties of display, of performance anxiety, of ‘being on stage’; and there are many varieties of audience, interlocutors, and addressees (Irvine 1996). I have focused on the state here, and worries about it, but other entities can listen and watch and make you feel ‘on stage’: like bystanders, tourists, and the UNESCO Heritage Foundation, to name a few. Rmeet people in northern Laos, for instance, often self-censor their rituals not because of state sanction per se, but because they are ashamed of the lowland Lao seeing them spill blood during sacrifice (Sprenger 2009). Even if the state were the only audience, and state-discourse the only stage, worry is still often gradient. Everyday life in Laos is more onion, with layers of officialdom stacked atop one another, than hog plum, a fruit

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<sup>90</sup> Many scholars, particularly those influenced by linguistic anthropology, have criticized the metaphor. See, for example, Gal 1995; Humphrey 1994; and Mitchell 1990 for criticisms of Scott’s argument; and Lemon 2000 for criticism of the argument’s politics.

composed of either flesh or pit. Stuart-Fox (2006:74) captures these layers when he writes in an article on corruption that “It is said in Vientiane that businesses keep three sets of books: one for the tax office, one for the tax office when it says it wants to see the real set of books, and the real set.” Like the different iterations of the Lao shopkeeper’s ledger that she might bring out from behind the table, Ladwig (2013) also shows that revelations about the state can happen with different intensities, with different degrees of evaluation and detail depending on the context.<sup>91</sup> Worry, concern, or ‘frontstage’-ness is not all or nothing, but rather, it can be ‘set’ to different intensities (cf. accounts of linguistic/semiotic function, such as Jakobson 1960; Jakobson 1956; Silverstein 1993).<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> During his research, Ladwig repeatedly heard a story about monks in a cave that had developed powers, and the government’s apparent attempt to stifle their activities. The story emerged, however, with different levels of detail during different tellings. Ladwig (2013: 3) describes how he first heard the story told:

“...Saysomboun told us that he had heard that government officials had become suspicious of these monks and that, with more and more people were [sic] flocking to the caves, several policemen were sent there. The monks were prohibited to continue their meditation practice and were told to leave the caves. After the end of the story, our group just sat there in silence. Nobody asked a question and we soon dispersed to our rooms. I managed to get hold of the storyteller the next day and asked him where exactly this was supposed to have happened. I was too eager to get to know more about this incident. Saysomboun said that he was not sure himself where this had happened but mentioned that an acquaintance of his had visited the monks a week before the police crackdown and that the story was true. He was uncomfortable with me asking questions and tried to conclude the talk by mentioning that I had been in Laos for almost two years and I knew how the state was dealing with ‘these beliefs in magic and holy monks.’”

Ladwig heard the story again and again, with varying levels of revelation. In the original story, the ‘government’ was referred to generally. In other variations, the storytellers more explicitly refer “to the oppressive force of the state by identifying ‘the police’ as the agent that removed these monks from their caves.” And, in yet other versions “at the very end of the spectrum were detailed descriptions [of] *how* the police did this” (2013: 4). In Ladwig’s analysis, the different levels of explicitness as to what was happening in the storytelling was not merely free variation but a response to the sensitivity of the topic. That is, the late-socialist state is uncomfortable with Buddhist charisma, as such ‘repressed’ traditions “remind the state of a past and a Buddhism that was silenced and repressed, and is still today considered superstitious, irrational and unproductive” (2013:10). As Ladwig shows, these traditions seeped out in different levels at different times.

<sup>92</sup> My argument here is similar to arguments that anthropologists make against the gift/commodity dichotomy: it does not capture the world. But I mean this as merely an analytic point about the ethnometapragmatic world: people often have more than two notions of on or off stage. Where I part ways with those arguments, is in my insistence, expressed later in the chapter, that if we are going to study display we would have to consider local ideologies of what is happening, which might in themselves be binary.

The second reason the frontstage and backstage metaphor is misleading is that the two categories are often simplistically associated with ‘fake’ and ‘real’ feelings, respectively (Humphrey 1994; Gal 1995; Lemon 2000; Yurchak 2006; Yurchak 2008). ‘Sincerity’ and ‘honesty’ are always local metapragmatic notions (Rosaldo 1982; Keane 2002; Carr 2010), built on ideologies about the nature of persons, language, and actions. Even if we were to assume that the commonsense American notion of ‘sincerity’ fit with local Lao ideologies about honesty, lying, and ‘straight talk’ (discussed below, and in chapter four), as in some cases it seems to, my experiences in Luang Prabang complicate any assumption that what is said in private should automatically be considered more revelatory. Lao people often treat public declarations as deeply revealing of character. I support this point later in this chapter, but others working in Laos have argued for similar ideas. Petit (2013: 160-161), for instance, argues that those who are censored in Laos are often themselves committed to the project of censorship, that they believe not just in what they say, but in the ethical goodness of saying it.<sup>93</sup>

Furthermore, as Petit and Holly High<sup>94</sup> (2013: 427) write in their co-authored introduction to an issue on the state in Laos, sincerity is not the sole possession of ‘private’ moments: “[H]orror stories” of the state, “can coexist with no less sincere patriotic statements and a committed defense of national institutions.”<sup>95</sup> As writers on (post-)socialism generally

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<sup>93</sup> He argues, for instance, that the Lao researcher’s first presentation in his example (given in the previous footnote) was unusual insofar as “overt censorship is...rather exceptional, because self-censorship is common” (2013: 161). More broadly, he argues that, according to many state-actors “describing a situation as it *should* be is part of the resolution of problems, whereas highlighting problems has the opposite effect” and that, among those with whom he spoke, this kind of “censorship is both a moral duty and an incorporated disposition...” (2013: 160; 161).

<sup>94</sup> High emphasizes a similar point in her recent monograph, *Fields of Desire* (2014; see Zuckerman 2016). Rather than claim that Lao people are always performing when they say positive things about the state, that they are merely cynical actors, pure resisters, as James Scott and others in the anthropology of resistance might have us imagine, High argues throughout the book that people living in the pseudonymous village of Don Khiaw do not have a single feeling toward the state that regulates them, and that instead, they look toward the state with a feeling of ambivalence.

<sup>95</sup> This is an important inversion of the dramaturgical metaphor, and I argue that it captures some of the examples I discuss below, where the people whom I surveyed and interviewed clearly articulated and implied that making ‘public’ and ‘good’ representations of the state was itself an index of goodness, and ethical character. But it too can

have shown, people often encounter varieties of discourse that appear to be ambiguously suspended between “sincere support or subtle ridicule, or both” (Boyer and Yurchak 2010:185). Rather than unambiguous signs of sincerity, what we often find are ‘debates’ and ‘controversies’ about sincerity (Latour 2005:21–25). For an American example, think of Donald Trump’s infamous comments about groping women that he made on the bus with Billy Bush. Supporters and detractors debated whether such ‘locker-room talk’ was false braggadocio or a revelation of a debauched character. They agreed that the talk was designed to be private, but they disagreed about what that talk indexed about Trump: was Trump ‘putting on an act’ or ‘dropping’ one?

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oversimplify. Sincerity is an impossible enough quality to isolate within a single individual, let alone a country. The issue also raises important questions of research ethics. Taking people’s public statements about the quality of the government as sincere might help government actors and entrepreneurs justify their policies because they can point to research that proves the citizenry supports them. In Lao studies, these issues came to a head during a debate between High (2008) and Baird et al. (2009). In her original article, High argued that resettlement in the cases she studied could not be viewed as a consequence of pure state domination: even though the settlers were clearly coerced to move, they also were committed to the principles the Lao state trumpeted and had “aspirations for a kind of modernity” it offered. Baird et al. (2009) responded with a strong condemnation of High’s argument’s political implications, and its underlying evidence. They attacked her conclusions on a few issues, one of which was that she had drawn them from a naïve methodology, in which she had failed to go beyond the ‘front stage’: “More generally,” they write:

“High’s description and analysis would have benefited from taking better account of how certain discourses are frequently presented within the Lao context. While we cannot know for sure what High’s informant in Houaphan thought, our own experience in listening to similar stories suggests that it is possible that he constructed his comments to her in such a way as to protect himself from possible repercussions from government officials. The informant may have held the understandable concern that his comments and opinions would find their way back to the local authorities. We make this argument because systematic patterns are evident in Laos around how Lao citizens articulate criticism of government policy. In Laos, it is quite common to hear rural people say that they agree with this or that particular government policy, but that they wish it would be ‘better implemented.’ In our different research sites, we have all found that this is often a way for rural people to safely convey the message that they really do not like the policy, while not openly opposing the government’s policies. In the political context of many minority upland areas in Laos, opposing a resettlement initiative can be interpreted as being against the government, something that High’s informant, a recent ward of the state, might have had good reason to be concerned about” (2009: 611-612).

Were the villagers speaking to High really speaking their minds or were they racked by worry and feeding her a line? Is there any way to know? Is it responsible to guess? Often in these debates, we find ourselves under something like the Archbishop’s Ceiling, where the ultimate addressivity of what our interlocutors say is unclear, where people’s real feelings are hazy (perhaps for both themselves and for us), and where truth is impossible to determine.

Finally, the third reason that backstage and frontstage should be discarded as analytics is that the categories encourage a chronotope that misrepresents the heterogeneity of interactions (on chronotopes generally, see Bakhtin 1981). The language of the stage invites us to imagine concern as a sentiment that maps onto discrete and continuous spaces and times. It lures us into thinking about shifts from the frontstage to the backstage like the raising or lowering of a theatre's grand drapes. We have trouble imagining someone standing both frontstage and backstage at the same time. When we can muster the will to do so, the physical trope of the metaphor starts to muddle and mix with the physical scene we are describing. We soon find ourselves in a heap of stages and dressing rooms and pieces of the fourth wall. Of course, the tropes of concern that people themselves use are at times informed by a similar spatio-temporality. But they are not always (Gal 2005), and even when they are, we need to keep our ability to look under the hood and see how people make these tropes visible through time and space. As I show below, the Lao men's concerns about the survey were more oriented toward modality of communication, i.e., writing versus speaking, than they were oriented toward the interaction as a whole.

At the conclusion of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*—a book famous for invoking the dramaturgical metaphor—Erving Goffman (1959:254) reminded readers that the object of the social sciences is social life, not the theatre. The metaphor was a rhetorical device, a scaffold for understanding the world, and “scaffolds,” he quipped, “are to build other things with, and should be erected with an eye to taking them down.” In the next sections, I show what we are left with when this dramaturgical scaffolding is gone.



## Natural Representations

After returning to the United States, I told a fellow anthropologist about my survey. ‘A survey?!’ He laughed and seemed embarrassed for me; as I hurried to explain what I thought I had learned from it, I was also a little embarrassed for myself. Surveys are the opposite of the contextualized and immersed tools anthropologists prize, the antithesis of how we imagine our unique disciplinary methods. They presuppose literacy, emphasize quantifiable and explicit data over and against less articulable experience, and often are filled with naïve, culturally insensitive, and awkwardly translated questions. They embarrass because they promise to achieve a Herculean feat: to convert endlessly complex attitudes, feelings and experiences into simple, packaged facts. Their promise is often left unfulfilled. Rather than clean ‘facts,’ surveys are often filled with jumbles of stilted comments and confusions. While surveys can collect certain discrete bits of information well—like the age of a respondent, date of birth, and so on—and it was partly because of the efficiency with which they can do this that I decided to conduct one in the first place, when researchers use surveys to ask more substantial questions, they are often confronted with apparent problems. Respondents answer based on what a researcher wants to hear, they misremember, they lie. They worry about who might be watching or judging; they parrot truisms. Things go wrong.

The problems anthropologists have with surveys involve the same concerns that the dramaturgical metaphor aims to move beyond: people change how they act when they are being monitored. When pens, microphones, or video recording devices come out, people sit up a little straighter, fix their hair, or start to squirm. This is a fundamental issue in social science and in many disciplines; it is a premise of research design. Psychologists incorporate the notion into their basic methods. Some gloss it as ‘measurement reactivity,’ or the idea that “measurement

results in changes in the people being measured” (French and Sutton 2010:454).<sup>96</sup> Others have coined terms like the ‘Hawthorn effect’ (Landsberger 1958) or ‘social desirability bias.’<sup>97</sup>

In the early days of sociolinguistics, William Labov tightly interwove his methods for gathering linguistic evidence with his theory of how language worked.<sup>98</sup> Labov’s (1997) studies of phonetic details as seemingly ‘small’ as the presence or absence of consonantal /r/ in post-vocalic position might seem radically different from questions of how the state haunts interviews and surveys in Laos, but a quick review shows that Labov’s basic categories exactly parallel the categories of the dramaturgical metaphor. That is, Labov’s notion of ‘formal’ language is to the idea of the ‘frontstage’ as his notion of ‘casual’ language is to the ‘backstage.’<sup>99</sup>

The flaws in Labov’s approach have been well documented in recent discussions in the so-called ‘third-wave’ of sociolinguistics (Eckert 2012). In this section, I briefly point to one of these flaws and discuss how it has been resolved, as a path forward for rethinking concern generally.

For Labov, concern was a methodological hurdle.<sup>100</sup> He aimed to filter out ‘observed’ talk, and access ‘natural’ talk. In “Some Principles of Linguistic Methodology,” he wrote that

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<sup>96</sup> “In sum,” two reviewers of the topic write, “there are a number of studies which provided evidence that people who are asked to complete psychological measures are altered by the experience” (French and Sutton 2010:465).

<sup>97</sup> The latter captures the idea that self-reports yield data “that are systematically biased toward respondents’ perceptions of what is ‘correct’ or socially acceptable” (Fisher 1993:303). That is, when people answer questions, they tend to make themselves and their answers look as good as possible.

<sup>98</sup> In these early days, when Chomskyan ‘grammaticality judgments’ were beginning to dominate linguistics, Labov’s methods for studying language ‘practice’ were just as radical and important as his theories. His goal: to move beyond self-conscious speakers.

<sup>99</sup> Excepting that one notion is a kind of language while the other notion is a kind of scene. This difference in metaphor helped Labov notice things the dramaturgical metaphor obscures, and vice-versa. Labov showed, for instance, that ‘formal’ events were not monologic. Although events like ‘interviews,’ for example, were predominantly formal, they were also heterogeneous events, where casual moments occasionally burst from the seams—in talk to third parties, narratives about dangerous experiences, and casual banter. Labov also showed that such concern is not always about the state. He argued that the American speakers he studied modulated what they said in formal contexts not because they were worried about the ‘government’ per se, but rather because linguistic observers made them self-consciously attend to their speech. For him, speakers’ concerns were about the quality of what they said rather than the consequences of saying it.

<sup>100</sup> The distinction between ‘natural’ talk, on the one hand, and ‘unnatural,’ ‘observed,’ or ‘formal’ talk, on the other, was the foundational distinction in sociolinguistics. As Mendoza-Denton (1999:239) summarizes, early

formal speech is not as interesting for linguistics, because conscious attention to linguistic form functions as an ‘ideology’ from ‘above’ the level of awareness (see Labov 1979) and thus has “sporadic and haphazard effects on linguistic forms” (Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998:13).<sup>101</sup> This led him to pronounce the ‘observer’s paradox’: “To obtain the data most important for linguistic theory,” he (1972:113) writes, “we have to observe how people speak when they are not being observed.”<sup>102</sup>

Just as authors have criticized the ‘sincerity ideology’ that underwrites the notion of ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage,’ so too have authors in linguistics argued that ‘natural data’ is an ideologically loaded category.<sup>103</sup> Of course, calling it ideological does not make it worthless—there is no ‘view from nowhere,’ as, for example, Irvine and Gal (2000:35–36) remind us—but pointing to the ideological basis of a position does highlight the political and moral values that suffuse it.<sup>104</sup> The problem with Labov’s ideology of language, in particular, is that a rejection of ‘observed data’ implicitly denies something of which linguists have become more and more cognizant: all interactions unfold in regard to what speakers think is happening, to whom they

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sociolinguists tended to expect that a formal, observed style of talk was also a standard one, a style that was prestigious, conservative, middle-class, and spoken by older people. An informal, natural style of talk, on the other hand, was understood as a stigmatized vernacular, a style that was innovative, working-class, and spoken by younger people.

<sup>101</sup> That is, because ideology’s effects are sporadic, recorded specimens of ideologically influenced talk are less valuable data.

<sup>102</sup> For criticism of Labov’s use of the notion of attention, see Bell (1984) and a summary of his argument in Milroy (1987).

<sup>103</sup> Bucholtz (2003:405–406), for instance, argues that the preference for ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’ language is best understood as itself a product of historically contingent language ideologies. In the course of Bucholtz’s (2003:406) argument, she identifies multiple ideological assumptions prevalent in sociolinguistic theory, two of which are relevant to this point: 1) that mundane data is better data and 2) that the linguist is “an obstacle to linguistic authenticity.”

<sup>104</sup> In Labov’s case, he has his own ethical reasons for insisting on the value and regularity of vernaculars (cf. Milroy 2001:538), chief of which is that such vernaculars are often the subject of scorn and derision. In the case of scholars in Laos, like, for instance, Baird (2017) and Daviau (2010), who work with populations that are actively being hassled and harmed by the violence of the state, they also have good reasons for their own ethical commitments, commitments that at times force them to consider what someone tells them in public as fake, as addressed to the state, and thus, as worth disregarding. In both cases, however, ‘good,’ moral science risks becoming myopic anthropology, an anthropology that deconstructs what we presume to be ‘bad’ in order to preserve what we presume to be ‘good.’

think they are talking, and who they believe is listening, among other variables (e.g., Duranti and Goodwin 1992). To call one kind of interaction ‘natural’ and another kind ‘formal’ obscures the fact that similar semiotic mechanisms underlie both kinds of interaction, and that the kinds themselves are locally made, emergent, ideologically charged metapragmatic categories. If the fact of being ‘observed’ changes interactions, then how this transformation happens and how we might most accurately describe it should not only be a methodological starting point, but an empirical question in its own right (for example, see the arguments in Speer 2002, and Gordon 2013).<sup>105</sup>

The point here is simple: ‘observed’ interactions are still social interactions, and they are thus subject to the same sorts of laws and open to the same kinds of contingencies.<sup>106</sup> This

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<sup>105</sup> Speer and Huchby (2003:317) make the point well. They write that: “Instead of seeing the presence of a recording device as necessarily contaminating what would otherwise be a pristine occasion of real-world interaction, and rather than worrying over the extent to which participants’ noticing of, making reference to, or otherwise displaying orientations to the fact of their being recorded gets in the way of the ‘authentic’ talk we are interested in gaining access to, we argue that social scientists should investigate precisely what it is that participants are doing when they orient to being recorded: how might what they do in such orientations play a part in the ongoing construction of specific situated interactions?”

<sup>106</sup> Some have come to a similar point regarding the dramaturgical metaphor. In his chapter, “The Backstage of Ethnography as Ethnography of the State,” Petit (2013:144) echoes Boyer (2003), Mazzarella and Kaur (2009), and others who have written about censorship to contend that researchers should not neglect the ‘frontstage,’ but study it, that they should treat worry-filled encounters with state officials not as barriers to knowledge, but as opportunities for participant observation.

He writes: “Identifying what employees are willing to say—what they permit or prohibit, what they appreciate or denounce—sheds light on the very basic mechanisms of the state as experienced from within. Problematic situations such as refusals, bureaucratic harassment, no-reply strategies, denunciations and (self-)censorship paradoxically help to draw an ‘outline’ or ‘contre-jour’ portrait of the state” (2013:144). Petit shows the value of his method with an example in which a Lao researcher seems to forget his duty to self-censor:

“During a seminar at the National University of Laos, a Laotian colleague presented, on behalf of an international joint-research project, a paper in English about a marketplace in the countryside. At some point during his presentation, he mentioned a brawl involving a Lao trader and an ethnic-minority Yao: his analysis showed how everyday disputes can sometimes trigger ethnic solidarity. Suddenly, he was interrupted by a senior colleague and asked not to get lost in details and to come to the facts. The speaker ended in a rush. I learned afterwards that any mention of conflict between ethnic groups was to be avoided in public presentations. The problem was all the more acute, for the speaker held a position in the Party and should have anticipated the problem: if such a text had been published by the university, he would have suffered severe consequences” (2013: 157).

Petit continues to compare the original text of the researcher’s presentation (of which he received a copy) with a revised version the researcher made after the presentation was stopped. The revised version removed a number of apparently problematic details. Petit offers English (translations, presumably) of the two documents. The revisions mostly aimed to eliminate mention of the inter-ethnic conflict at the center of the analysis. For example, the line “...a

argument can seem old hat to linguistic anthropologists, especially after Charles Briggs (1986) so eloquently and influentially argued a similar point about interviews. But I want to emphasize something slightly different than what Briggs emphasized, a difference that might make the difference, as it were, between snickering about the naivety of using a survey and learning something from it. In *Learning How to Ask*, Briggs is less concerned with what we can learn from how informants, collaborators, and friends in the field respond to the tools we import, like formal interviews and surveys, and more concerned with how ethnographers can learn to develop new tools based on already established local metacommunicative genres. The first step of fieldwork, Briggs (1986:29) argues, is to discover local ways of asking, and then learn how to interview in ways that parallel these local ways of asking. This is the titular process of ‘learning how to ask.’

The written survey that I passed around at the *pétanque* court was a very particular way to ask. Rather than cause a series of ‘blunders,’ as Briggs refers to the communicative misunderstandings that fieldworkers often encounter, the survey seemed to fit into a relatively recognizable genre of reporting and public representation for people. In fact, one of the ironies was that as I conducted the survey, I felt as if through this inadequate research method I was finally being understood as a researcher. It was thus the problem of learning not how to ask people but how to listen to their answers.

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market in a rural area may be the place of multi-layered conflict” in the original presentation became “...a market in a rural area may be the place of multi-ethnic diversity” (2013: 159). These censoring edits reveal what topics concerned state actors and they also reveal the nature and manner of that concern.

## Producing Representations

*“After we talk [about this survey], whoever said anything bad, they have to think to themselves, ‘Oh, I wrote something evil, and that is bad.’”<sup>107</sup>*

*-Mùang, survey taker at the money gambling pétanque court.*

Most locals living in Luang Prabang witness and engage with foreigners constantly. This meant that my experience as a researcher was very different from Daviau’s (2010:197) experience, for example, who writes of the villages where he worked in the Annamite mountain range in Attapeu and Sekong that “[n]o matter their status or origin, all outsiders are promptly inspected by the local state military. This political climate prevails today and, as we shall see later, has an important impact on fieldwork.” No official observer accompanied me as I interviewed people or moved around the city. While I stuck out in many of the local places that I hung out, like the *pétanque* court, I did not stick out in Luang Prabang in the same way I did when I travelled to smaller villagers in other parts of the country. In the city, I was a novelty not because of where I was from, but because I had been in Laos for a while, knew the language, and did things most foreigners did not (like play *pétanque* every day).<sup>108</sup>

One consequence of my presence being less unique in Luang Prabang was that it was handled with less explicit concern. When a foreigner comes to your village only once a month or once a year, you might tend to care more about the kind of impression you leave. Similarly, one reason Lao people seem to worry about the state when speaking to foreign researchers is that they do not want to be responsible for having revealed ‘secrets’ or ‘bad things’ about Laos.

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<sup>107</sup> *vaw4 paj3 lèw4 lèw4 lêqø-kaø-phuu5 daj3 vaw4 bòø-dii3 paj3 lêqø-kaø-tòong4 khùt1 qêêng3 vaa1 qaw3 kuu3 vaw4 khwaam2 sua1 lêqø-kaø-man2 kòò1 bòø-dii3*

<sup>108</sup> People were often impressed with my language skills and my knowledge about the region, and treated me as an almost unique encounter for them. I write almost because, after praising me, they would then inevitably compare me and my knowledge with some other foreigner they knew or knew of, who perhaps spoke Lao *and* Khmu, or took a Lao wife, or who had somehow gotten deeper into Lao culture than me.

Because foreigners are ubiquitous in Luang Prabang, because the show runs every day of the year, so to speak, people tend to worry less about this and the state can consequently seem to fade into the background of everyday life. When an adviser visited me in the field, for instance, he remarked as we walked around looking at temples and gambling events, that, contrary to what I was telling him about my dissertation, the state was barely noticeable. This is a common experience for foreigners in the city.

In addition to the fact that people in Luang Prabang tend to be accustomed to foreigners, the men with whom I spoke with at the court, while often not civil servants, were almost always ethnic Lao—or assimilated as such—and relatively well-to-do. Although people in the city did occasionally face the state’s wrath and arbitrary power, in one way or another, most of the people on the court were not victims of the state to the same extent as the Tarieng villagers Daviau studied who were forced to move from their homes. The men at the court were almost always relatively well-to-do people. They had vehicles, they knew people in government, they had enough money to gamble in the city. They did not live in fear every day.

But this experience with foreigners and this relatively well-to-do status do not mean that worry about the state is entirely absent in Luang Prabang, or missing, even if the state’s most arbitrary uses of power tend to happen elsewhere. Nor, for that matter, does it mean that the city itself is not constantly on display: undergoing edits, alterations, and idealizations to ensure that it continues to embody the qualities and goodness that make it a UNESCO world heritage site.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, the relative lack of anxiety about display meant that in Luang Prabang, I had no problem seeing, hearing, and watching practices that might be considered bad, that might be edited out of a document or official account. But, while access was easy, documentation was not.

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<sup>109</sup> This worry, while state-sanctioned and channeled, has a slightly different quality than the paranoia about the state on which Lao scholars have focused.

Often, when I began to ask about these bad topics, when I took out my recording devices, people started to worry, to display concern about what they did and said.

This section explores how and why such concerns emerged. I use two examples, drawn from audio recordings made as people filled out the surveys.

In the first example, several respondents—all non-civil servant civilians (*pasaason2*)—joke and debate whether they should write in the survey that the athletes at the court only talk about ‘fucking’ (*sii5 kan3*). After I review the significance of ‘fucking’—and sex generally—as a topic of concern and censure, I show how survey respondents oriented to the survey. They treated it as a document to be crafted with care; they collaborated and joked about what should be written in it; and they discussed it less as a record or catalog of the realities of what happened on the court *per se*, and more as a representation of the court that is and would be subject to moral evaluation, both by themselves and others. Naively, throughout the interaction, I argued with my survey respondents’ approach. While there was one man—discussed below—who seemed to understand, sympathize, and perhaps even agree with my repeated requests to just write ‘the truth,’ for most people who filled out the survey, it was, *and should be*, less a document of factual record, and more an ostensibly moral text-artifact, one that emphasized the ‘good’ and erased the ‘bad.’<sup>110</sup> I argue that the moralization of the survey was not merely a symptom of a media ideology (Gershon 2010), an ideology about writing, that, perhaps, only good things should ever be written down. Instead, I argue that concerns about the survey expressed a broader ideology, that crafting representations that are ‘good’ is itself a ‘good’ thing

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<sup>110</sup> Of course, notions of objectivity can also be morally loaded.



to do. Similar to the abbot who told me that taking pictures of the trash was ‘good’ because the trash was ‘good,’ these men showed a commitment to making ‘good’ representations.<sup>111</sup>

In the second example, one man writes and reads what he is writing aloud, while other men comment on his responses. I use this example to make two broad points about the nature of the concern the survey seemed to bring about. First, people’s objects of concern were vaguely defined. In their comments, they make it clear that they are not merely concerned about specific state actors auditing their answers in the survey, but they are also more loosely invested in the notion that a ‘good’ person does not make ‘bad’ representations that others might see. In this respect, my examples fit with Petit’s generalization about Laos, where censorship is not merely—or always—a consequence of concern about biographical individuals, but rather where “censorship is both a moral duty and an incorporated disposition...” (2013: 161). This example also shows that the anticipatory concern voiced around the survey was partial—that is, it did not cover the interaction like a blanket, it did not encase it within a single ‘chronotopic envelope’ (Silverstein 2005). This partiality is captured in a simple fact: people seemed obsessed with what went into the surveys I passed out, but almost entirely unconcerned with what they said into my microphone.

### **Lewd Representations**

I drafted my survey on my computer. Phòò Thiang looked it over after dinner as we sat on the floor of the living room by the buzzing television. The survey had eighteen questions. Some required single-word answers: “What is your nickname? (don’t write your real name)”,

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<sup>111</sup> Also, like the trash-example, where the ‘ugliness’ of the trash seemed to prompt the abbot to hesitate, ‘goodness’ was here implicitly sketched as a gradient quality rather than something that was all or nothing.

“On a scale of 1-10, how good are you at *pétanque*?”, and “When you play, what do you gamble for, [literally, what do you ‘eat?’]” Most of Phòò Thiang’s edits corrected awkward phrasings or spelling mistakes, although he also changed the second-person-pronominals I used throughout: *caw4* became *thaan1*, a word he told me was more appropriate for formal, written speech. After a few edits, he seemed pleased, and when I left to print the survey the next day, as mentioned above, I had a sense that people were going to finally think that I was doing research of some interest and consequence, rather than merely loitering around the court, talking, playing checkers, and occasionally betting on *pétanque*.

Although I naively expected that people would answer the surveys individually, not long after I passed them out, people clustered in groups at the food tables on the side of the court. Men read questions and spoke their answers aloud, converting the survey *qua* text-artifact into a sonic object of attention (cf. Cody 2009). Reading aloud and commenting like this made what belonged in the survey an explicit topic of discussion and sanction. Those not filling the survey out began to call out suggestions to others about what to write.

There is a clear theme in the directives that people gave one another: put in ‘good’ answers and omit ‘bad’ ones.<sup>112</sup> Sometimes, the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of potential answers was labeled explicitly, with words like good (*dii3*) and bad (*sua1*). These terms, *dii3* and *sua1* are the terms people in Luang Prabang typically use to ascribe moral value to people, things, and actions. *Dii3* is used in many other contexts as well, in the same way that ‘good’ in English might be used to describe a ‘good’ hammer or a ‘good’ story. My monolingual Lao dictionary gives a sense of *dii3*’s meaning: “beautiful; orderly; correct; ethical; not evil (*bòò1 sua1*); a

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<sup>112</sup> In *Between Two Fires*, Lemon (2000:203–204) found people similarly would stage ideal depictions of life when she took out a camera.

condition of returning to normal, like to get better from a sickness” (ກອບນິວົງ 2010:597).<sup>113</sup>

*Sua1* has a narrower semantic range and I heard it used less frequently than merely *bòø-dii3* or ‘not good.’ When I noticed it, it was almost always in reference to moral quality, whether someone was a good person, say, from a Buddhist perspective, from the perspective of the state, from the perspective of someone whom he or she had just ripped off. For instance, when I asked why there were dogs on the Buddhist temple grounds, a monk used the term to describe the kind of people that might steal the temple’s valuables: ‘there are *sua1* people around,’ he said. At other times during the survey, men left the ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’ of what they wrote or said unlabeled, even as they evaluated it in other ways. One man, for example, advised that everyone should “[Write that we] play for water or whatever (*lin5 kin3 nam2 kin3 naj2*), like mutual construction (*saang5 san3*) together or whatever, write that in the survey.”<sup>114</sup> None of this language is explicitly marked as ‘good,’ but the context of speech, the fact that it is given as prescriptive advice to survey writers, and the more general trend in Lao political discourse to treat *saang5 san3* as a prototypically ‘good’ end do lead me to believe that the man provides the phrase as an exemplar of a ‘good’ answer.<sup>115</sup>

The same man then told people what not to write: “Don’t say that after we play *pétanque* we go and find women, we hire them, after we play.”<sup>116</sup> He was responding to the question: “What topic do the athletes at the court talk about?” and he was not alone in mentioning sex and women as a possible answer to the question; the topic came up again and again. A few minutes after this first suggestion, another man read out the second part of the same question: “Do the

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<sup>113</sup> *ngaam2, riaphòj4, thiùktòong4, sòop4, bòø1 sua1, qaakaanthii1 pèn3 pokkatiq2 dang1 dii3 phañaat4 lèèw4*

<sup>114</sup> *tii3 kin3 nam4 kin3 naj2 kan3 bèèp5 saang5 san4... (unclear)... lèqø-kaø-khian3 saj1 bot2 naq1*

<sup>115</sup> This language is also the kind of language that Petit (2013: 160) argues might produce a rhetorical *déjà vu* for the researcher trying to breakthrough to less self-conscious moments. It is state language and official language.

<sup>116</sup> *jaa1 suu vaw4 daj4 bat2 tii3 kan3 lèèw4 mii2 tèèl haa3 phuu5 saaw3 caang4 tii3 kan3 lèèw4 phuu5 saaw3....*

athletes like talking? What topic do they talk about mostly?” He then continued, answering the question he had read aloud: “They only talk about fucking,” he said.<sup>117</sup> A few people laughed, and a man sanctioned him by invoking my boss: “Don’t write that, [Zuckerman’s] boss is going to yell at him for real, if you write that...If you just [write] jokes and stuff.”<sup>118</sup>

Neither talk about ‘fucking’ (*sii5 kan3*) nor talk about talk about fucking, these men argued, belonged in this kind of document (and perhaps the reader might wonder if it belongs in this kind of document!).<sup>119</sup> The issue of whether people talk about ‘women’ or ‘sex’ while they play *pétanque* might appear to be an issue outside the purview of the state, and perhaps outside the cloud of anxiety the state seems to bring about. It appears much less controversial than, say, corruption among state officials or interethnic conflict. Yet, although talk about sex and prostitution is prevalent and hilarious for many people in Luang Prabang, this same talk is considered crude and unbecoming when mentioned in contexts deemed ‘official.’ Remember, as I described in chapter two, that in the early days after the revolution, ‘prostitution’ was constantly listed alongside ‘gambling’ as a default ‘bad’ sociality. I first noticed the disconnect between how often the topic came up casually and how offensive it was in certain contexts when, after only about six months of living in Laos, before my major fieldwork, I was drinking with some civil servants at a *pétanque* court. I had just been taught a lewd variation of the classic migration song *thaj2 dam3 lam2 phan2*. The original song begins with the line “It’s been fifteen years that we have been far from our land” (*sip2 haa5 pii3 thii1 tai3 haw2 haang1 dèen1 din3*). The crude variation that a friend taught me was “It’s been fifteen years since I lost my virginity” (*sip2 haa5 pii3 thii1 khanòj4 lem1 sia3 tua1*). The words “lost my virginity” or *lem1 sia3 tua1*

<sup>117</sup> *nak1 kiilaa2 mak1 lom2 kan3 bòò1 suan3 laaj3 lom2 kan3 lùang2 ñang3 lom2 kan3 lùang1 tèè1 sii4 kan3*

<sup>118</sup> *jaa1 khian3 daj4 hua3 naa5 daa1 laaw2 thèè4 thèè4 daj4 khan2 khian2vaa1 mok2 vaa1 mak1 paj3 nii4 naq1*

<sup>119</sup> About censorship in Laos generally, see Carroll (2011:56–58).

of the Weird Al-esque parody version of the song are, notably, in a relatively polite register, in conjunction with the very polite (appropriate for the monastery) pronominal *khanòj4*. But the hyper-polite form of the song gave its content that much more bite. When one of the civil servants drinking with me asked if I knew any Lao songs, I belted out the salacious ditty. Expecting a laugh, I was surprised when the men treated my song with disdain. One man immediately scolded me: ‘*that* version of the song is not Lao culture,’ he said. If I was there to learn about Lao culture, I had ‘to rethink what I was doing.’ I still remember feeling confused—and a bit buzzed from all the beer—as he seethed with anger about the song that my friend had taught me so joyfully. The next night, still shaken up, feeling guilty about crossing an unseen line, I asked my friend what had happened. He matter-of-factly said that civil servants ‘don’t like talking about fucking.’

Suggesting that people not write something about sex and prostitution, in this state-like document, was thus *almost* as self-evident as suggesting that one not write about sex in a teaching evaluation. I write *almost* for a reason. While people generally do not talk about the sexuality of their faculty members in the classroom, people on the *pétanque* court do talk about sex. In this sense, the taboo on writing about sex is about the representation of the court in the survey, more than it is about the object of that representation. My official-seeming survey collided with a space—the money gambling court—that was usually not officially represented. When the state represented *pétanque*, it looked at more ‘sporty’ contexts like tournaments and government courts, as I discussed in the previous chapter. My survey brought out a tension. On the one hand, the suggestions that others not write about sex talk in the survey were so commonsense that they were funny. On the other hand, these comments were funny precisely because they had a ring of truth. They reiterated a common understanding of what the court was:

a rough, hyper-masculine space where women were generally not present—barring the other managers at the court and the beer waitresses—but where women were frequently talked about.

Interestingly, two of the younger women who worked at the court made almost identical jokes about sex when I asked them to fill out my survey. They both refused the survey, saying that it was for the men who played *pétanque*, but they also read aloud some of the questions and gave a few answers. “What topic do the athletes talk about at the court?”, one of the women read aloud, “vaginas” (*hii3*) the other said, speaking softly, laughing loudly. There was a pause. I obviously did not hear the joke. The woman that read out the question then continued that I really had to ask the men these questions, or perhaps a *thòòm2* (i.e., *tomboy*) who played.<sup>120</sup> I should talk to someone who really liked to talk. She continued with some laughter, “like Phuumii Hii.”

Incidentally, Phuumii Hii was not just someone who ‘liked to talk’ but someone who was renowned for talking about sex. The second part of the nickname the woman used for him, *hii3*, in fact, is the word for ‘vagina,’ and is used to distinguish him from another Phuumii at the court. Phuumii Hii was again mentioned later when the men filled out the survey as someone who really did talk about sex. Phuumii Hii plays an interesting role in these discussions. He is a biographically individuated figure that, in an absurdist way, concretizes the joke that everyone at the court only talks about ‘fucking.’ He does this merely because others can cite him as a paragon of the sex-talking man: he constantly rattled on about girls and slept with prostitutes frequently, people said, a fact that was made funnier by how pudgy he was. If it was a joke that men at the court talked about sex all the time, Phuumii Hii evinced the partial truth of that joke.

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<sup>120</sup> Note that at the time no women, self-identified as *thòòm* or some other gender category, played at the money gambling court with any regularity; for discussion of the category of *thòòm2* / *tom* see my reflection on Maj in chapter six and Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Sinnott 1999.

Researchers have shown that stereotypic figures of personhood are often reified as ‘local character types’ comprised of ‘clusters of attributes’ (e.g., Zhang 2008:217), which can then be enacted and embodied by biographical individuals. The repeated mention of Phuumii Hii in conversations about sex-talk at the court shows that the opposite process also happens. Specific biographical individuals can anchor stereotypes, as they anchor the stereotype that the court is a place where men talk about women.<sup>121</sup>

But if the court is a place where men talk about ‘fucking,’ as the jokes went, this fact fit awkwardly into the official survey. Both those who joked and those who responded to the jokes presupposed a shared sense that the survey should include only ‘good’ answers, and such talk about ‘fucking’ was not a ‘good’ answer. I vocally disagreed with the men as they said this: I said I did not care if they put ‘good’ or ‘bad’ answers in. I wanted the truth. While arguing with them, I revealed my own ideologies about the purpose of and content appropriate to the survey, as throughout the conversations I insisted that people be ‘honest’ or *vaw4 khwaam2 cing1* about what they ‘really think.’ In response to the man who said people at the court only talk about fucking, I jumped in, “If that’s what people talk about, then write that.” People started laughing, and I continued, “Really. I’m asking [for] the truth. If people only talk about fucking, then write that.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> The court was not the only space where jokes about sex and jokes about talking about sex were common. Jokes about sexual relations were a constant part of my fieldwork and (casual) life in Laos generally. I, for instance, heard what seemed to be as many of them when I would sit in the market with female pork vendors or, as in the example above, when I spoke with the women that worked at the *pétanque* court. This was especially true while drinking beer. Even though sexual joking was not the exclusive topic of male talk, these jokes were clearly understood as belonging to certain kinds of interactions and not belonging to others. Sex jokes were typically considered coarse and impolite (*bòø-suphaap4*), just like the *pétanque* court and the market were imagined to be coarse and impolite spaces. While I discuss this later in the dissertation, it is also worth noting that talk about sex was much more evenly distributed, and accepted, across genders than extra-marital sexual relations were. As I discuss in Chapter 6, while men were often thought to engage in a degree of acceptable infidelity and flirtation, women that did the same were looked on with often extreme scorn.

<sup>122</sup> *gee3 khan2 vaw4 qan3 nan4 khian3 qan3 nan4 loot4 thèè4 naq1 .... bòø-pên3 ñang3 thèè4 naal .... qan3 nii4 mèn1 .... lêqø-thaam3 khwaam2 cing1 naal .... khan2 vaw4 pên3 lùang1 sii5 kan3 khian3 qan3 nan4 leej2*

Other men, in contrast to what I said, sanctioned and corrected the man. One responded seriously that “[The athletes at the court] talk about the game and strategy, how it should be set up and played.”<sup>123</sup> Not, he argued, about “fucking.”

Another man, who had not yet spoken, joined the debate as an advocate for writing about sex, “But here people like talking about having sex with women [*hêt1 phuu5 saaw3*], what are you going to say [about that]?”

“Yeah, then write that.” I told him.

He reconfirmed with me—“I can write that, right?”—and then burst into laughter. What was funny was the boundary-breaking involved, the ludicrousness of writing about people talking about sex in *this* kind of document. One of the original men that had said that you should not write about ‘fucking’ then remade his point, ignoring what I said, “Noooooooo (*bòdò1*)... just write ‘have sex with’ [*hêt1*], don’t write ‘fuck’ [*sii5*] it is way too direct [lit. clear; *cèng3*].”<sup>124</sup>

Throughout the discussions I had with people filling out the survey, I unwittingly played the naïve anthropologist, or the maverick, depending on your perspective. I ignored the local conventions of formal representation and disregarded clines of explicitness. With retrospectively embarrassing vigor, instead of agreeing that the document be polite, I pleaded for people to write whatever they wanted, without regard for its quality. Labov (2006:90–91) often encountered a similar ‘problem’ when he conducted ‘sociolinguistic interviews’—people were worried about being wrong. To counteract it, he, much as I did, “stressed [to interviewees] that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions asked, and that the only object of the questions was to find out how [they] talked in everyday life.” “This point of view was absorbed in varying degrees by the informants,” he continued, “and it was often necessary to correct the tendency of

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<sup>123</sup> *vaw4 lùang1 kêem3 dèè1 lùang1 kaan3 vaang2 kêem3 kaan3 ñang3 nêè1*

<sup>124</sup> *tèè1 vaal hét1 nan4 lèw4 bòø-vaw4 qaql sii4 kan3 nêè1 nòq1 man2 cèng3 phoot4*



some informants to look to the interviewer for corroboration of their own replies.” My voiced hopes for how people would respond to my questions, unlike Labov’s, apparently, had little to no effect. My pleas did not seem to convince, or even interest, most people who heard them and the men at the court mostly disregarded them. On the whole, they were unconcerned with the kind of answers I thought belonged in the document. One man’s reference to my boss ‘yelling at me’ if they wrote bad answers or jokes is telling. It was clear that I did not care about the moral quality of the answers, but surely someone like my boss did. ‘My boss?’ I remember wondering when I first listened to the recording. I did not have a boss per se, nor had I said that I did (I always referred to my dissertation advisors as *qaacaan3* or ‘professors’ rather than ‘boss’ (*hua3 naa5*)), but the idea seemed to fit people’s expectations. People expected that I, a young professional person, would work for someone, and, furthermore, that this boss would care about the moral quality of what was written in the survey, even if I did not. Surely, this boss would agree that their answers should be ‘good’ (*dii3*), and good in two senses of *dii3*: they should respond to the question, on the one hand, and portray and embody expectations of decency and propriety, rather than debased-ness (*khwaam2 sua1*), on the other.

The jokes that people made inverted these expectations, and stand out in that respect. Interestingly, even the jokers tempered what they actually wrote in my survey. Their jokes were in their talk rather than their writing, as the chart below shows.<sup>125</sup> When the advocate for writing about ‘fucking’ finally filled out the survey, he followed the other man’s advice in his word choice. In fact, he went further and eliminated the verb of his utterance entirely. “Mostly,” he wrote, “[people at the court] like to talk about the topic of women” (*baang3 khang1 suan1 laaj3 mak1 vaw4 lùang1 saaw3*). He was not alone in censoring what he actually wrote versus what he

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<sup>125</sup> One exception to this is that the man who wrote athletes talk about “the subject of women” also wrote that for income he *khòð3 nam2 muul qaw3* or ‘asks for money from [his] friends.’ This was clearly a joke.

said. The only other respondent to write about women in the survey similarly wrote that the athletes talk about *phuu5 saaw3*, or, simply, ‘women’ / ‘marriageable girls.’

## What topics do athletes talk about at the court?

<i>sii5 kan3</i> fuck reciprocal ‘fucking’	Should not write
<i>hêt2 phuu5 saaw3</i> do person girl ‘doing women’	Could write
<i>làng1 saaw3</i> story girl ‘the topic of women’	Did write

Figure 28: A cline of ‘clarity’ and ‘goodness’ regarding what to write in the survey

As in Stuart-Fox’s description of the Lao shop owner’s multilayered bookkeeping—the real set of books, the one you give when they ask for the real one, and the really real one—the men who joked and debated about what to write in the survey made manifest a spectrum of explicitness or ‘clarity’ (*khwaam2 cèng3*), as one of them put it. While there was some debate, everyone at the court (except me) seemed to agree that while the topic of ‘women’ was fine to include, sex should not be referred to with the verb *sii5* (‘to fuck’) but with the verb *hêt2* (‘to do’). As outlined in the above figure, ‘fucking’ was ‘too clear’ and should not be written, ‘doing’ could be written, but was not written, and ‘the topic of women’ and ‘women’ were, in the end, actually written as responses. As one moves ‘down’ the chart toward less ‘clear’ forms, there is

not a movement from ‘truthfulness’ to ‘censorship’ like the dramaturgical metaphor might lead us to believe. Many of the stories that men shared about ‘sex,’ broadly, were not so much about women as much as they were about copulation. Instead, movement ‘down’ the chart represents a series of modulations, where the men, prompted by one another and by their notions of what the document deserved, took into consideration the ‘goodness’ of what they wrote.

One of the most interesting things about the survey was the way that, through reading answers and questions aloud, people made what I imagined to be an individual exercise, and which I had loosely presented as such by putting questions addressed to individuals in the survey, into an interactive exercise. They mobilized the text-artifact and thus put their answers out for others to hear, judge, and advise. In doing this, they also made the text-artifact the central focus of evaluation and anticipation of evaluation. Everyone was aware that I was recording the conversations that happened around the survey, with my Zoom recorder prominently in my hand, but, for the most part, the recorder disappeared from people’s focus, dissolving into the (back-)ground as the survey became the figure. This was clear, for example, as people seemed unconcerned—or more accurately, seemed un-self-conscious—about having their talk about ‘fucking’ captured in my recorder. The written word was the focus of their regulation.

One might be tempted to label this pointed attention a consequence of a media ideology (Gershon 2010) where written documents are thought of as being more on-record than other kinds of semiotic capture. Written documents do, in fact and at times, signify more official proclamations than words. My research permission papers, for instance, were much more powerful signs that I had permission than my word was; often before entering a government office, I would first need to craft a written request stating my business (*baj3 sanee3*) that I would then hand over to whoever was speaking with me. In these contexts, paper was more official and

required. But the answer as to why the language within the survey, rather than the language that occurred during the surveying, was an object of worry was not merely a media ideological reflex. In other contexts, in fact, audio recording was considered much more worrisome for people than writing. Many people—especially government workers—allowed me to keep notes on interviews with a pen and paper but did not let me audio-record interviews. The idea being that if I were to violate my promise of keeping what they said anonymous, having someone later hear their voice would be worse than having me merely attribute them as having said something. But then why were people more concerned about the writing in the survey than what they said? Why was it fine to talk about ‘fucking’ but not to write it in the survey?

The answer is that anticipatory concern tends to align with the metapragmatic frame of the event. That is, people attend to what they think the ‘point’ of the activity is. In this case, even though I was audio recording, the discursive core of the interaction was ‘filling out a survey.’ I asked people to *fill out the survey*, and embedded within this question was that I would record them *as they filled out the survey*. In other words, I assume that if one were to ask them, ‘what are you doing?’ they would have said ‘filling out a survey’ not, ‘occasionally reading the survey aloud and making jokes about it.’

This tendency toward attending to and worrying about the metapragmatic frame of an event was crucial for my research. It helped me film so prolifically at the court and was one reason why *pétanque* was a good topic for me to study in the first place. Being a ‘sport,’ *pétanque* felt for people like a natural thing for me to film. Although I was interested in the game, the gambling, and the talk around the court, and I made that clear when I asked people for permission to film, over the months of filming almost every day, it became clear to me that one reason that people were so comfortable and happy to have me film was because neither the talk

nor the gambling was the most prominent part of the event. The game was. No matter how much I told people I did not care if the game was a high-quality or low-quality one, for instance, people still assumed that I was filming to capture a quality game, interested in the sport as a sport, rather than the game as a linguistic, economic and social practice. Filming gambling on cards, on the other hand, was a much trickier affair. In general, only my closest friends would let me film them playing, and the reason was because the core of the activity was considered to be about gambling, something that most people felt should not be preserved—both because they were worried about their own accountability for having taken part and because of the prevalence of semiotic ideologies like that of the abbot I discussed at the beginning: only ‘good’ things should be captured, especially for a foreigner. Unlike skill in *pétanque*, skill in card playing was not a publicly prestigious thing to have. People would often deny they even knew how to play when I asked them. Following this, it would have been absurd to say that I wanted to film card players because they were ‘really good,’ and I only imagine that that sort of comment would have left everyone embarrassed. To prove the point, it was much easier to film cards at funerals and baby showers, where the event itself was embedded in a larger frame of being Lao culture, a way to encourage ‘guarding the house’ (*faw5 hùan2*; see chapters four and nine). Filming cards at the funeral was okay because it was thought of as filming the Lao culture of funerals, and the so-called ‘good house’ (*hùan2 dii3*) where the corpse lies after death.

Although when I filmed *pétanque*, people would at times regulate their own and others’ behavior to make it appear more ‘good’ by, for instance, mentioning that I was filming when someone passed money won from a bet to someone else, or tell others to ‘speak well,’ the ‘badness’ around *pétanque* games was often eclipsed, ‘erased’ (Irvine and Gal 2000), and tucked out of awareness enough for filming to be acceptable. In contrast, casual card playing’s

associations with ‘badness’ was too central to the understanding of what was happening to slip out of focus.

Broadly speaking, the element that concerned people when I asked if I could record them was often not so much the empirical realities of whether what I was planning to capture—with audio, video, or the written word—was ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ but rather was whether the overarching metapragmatic frame of the event that I was explicitly capturing was ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ During recording, actions that seemed to not be the purpose of collection, likewise, slipped from view. That is, the ‘type’ of the event mattered and influenced the focus of people’s concern.

### **Ethical Representations**

Attention to the survey as a written document was a tendency, not a rule, however. In this section, I trace a second example. In it, there is again a discrepancy between what people write and what they say, but one man does explicitly point out that I am also audio recording the interaction, even as he jokes about what should not be written in the document. He tells the person writing to watch what the man says in reference to the recorder, even as he makes jokes within the recorder’s range about the man ‘sleeping in prison’ if he mentions ‘politics.’

The example consists of a conversation primarily among three Lao men—Mùang, Thaa, and Suulii—and me. The men were in their mid-forties. Mùang and Thaa both identified as ‘drivers,’ although neither worked very often and both spent most of most days at the court. Suulii worked as a private electrician, and lived with his parents, wife, and their young child. At the time of the recording, I knew Suulii much better than Mùang and Thaa. I met him years before when he had come over to drink beer with an ‘older brother’ that I had. As we were drinking, he tried to help me fix my—eventually doomed—electric toothbrush charger, and he

had been helpful to me ever since. He was exceptional in his frankness and willingness to talk to me at length about whatever I asked. He and I would often joke that the money gambling *pétanque* court was our ‘office.’ Out of all the people who completed the survey, he seemed the least concerned about whether what he wrote was ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ and that stance comes up in this conversation when he echoes my pleas to Mùang and Thaa, explaining to them what it is that I mean when I say I just want them ‘to write the truth.’

I use the example to make two points. First, moments of display are not always monolithic. Often reflexive communicative actions that strive to construct a display as ‘good’ co-occur with communications that appears to slip from awareness, to be erased. Second, the concern about what went into the survey had a vague, amorphous addressivity. It was both oriented to specific potential overhearers—the Lao state, the U.S. government, my boss—and aimed to everyone at once. I argue that the vagueness of the survey’s addressivity is part of its effect: it was a representation addressed to everyone and no one and, in that, it was also a representation for the self. As Mùang puts it explicitly, writing good things in the survey is, in and of itself, an ethical duty for the individual: a ‘good’ person does not make ‘bad’ representations that others might see.

When the transcript below begins, I had recently handed Mùang and Suulii the paper survey, and Thaa had apparently not taken one, perhaps because he had just wandered up, or perhaps because I asked him and he did not want to do it; I cannot determine why from my recording or notes. Throughout the conversation, Mùang reads out his questions and answers, and Suulii and Thaa comment. When Mùang reads, he speaks with a markedly contrastive cadence that is obvious upon hearing the recording; the speech rate is slower both in between lexical items and within lexical items, as vowels are elongated. I mark this cadence as ‘reading’

and ‘writing intonation’ below. What I mark as ‘writing intonation’ was often extremely slow, much slower than ‘reading intonation’ because Mùang spoke at the pace that he wrote. As is clear from the transcript below, this often gave Thaa long pauses in between Mùang’s speech to easily insert commentary about what Mùang was writing as he wrote it.

Mùang begins by reading aloud the same question I discussed above: “What topics do athletes talk about on the court?” In lines 1a-c, he formulates what his answer might be. In line 2, Thaa says “[You’re] really stupid.” It is not clear exactly what Thaa was referring to, as no one responds to it, but Thaa was presumably commenting on Mùang’s deliberation about what to write.

**Mùang**

1a) *nê1 mak1 mak1 mak1 lom2 kan3 nèw2 daj3*  
 "Yeah, what do [they] normally talk about?"

1b) *qee3 kaø-thamadaa3 nii4 haw2 lom2 kan3 nii4 kaø-bø-mèn1 vaal khuu1 tò1 suu5 han4 naa1 haw2 toong4 pùk2 saa3*  
 "Yeah, usually we talk about this...don't [we]...your opponent, that's it, we need to deliberate [with them]"

1c) *qee3 mèn1 lèw4 mèn1 lèw4*  
 "Yeah, that's right, that's right"

**Thaa**

2) *caa4 thee5*  
 "[You're] really stupid."

Mùang does not respond to Thaa and begins to write his answer, reading aloud each word as he writes (and what he says does match his writing in the document itself, word for word). At this point, there is some talking in the background of the interaction not directly related to my argument.<sup>126</sup> Suulii jokes to someone else about what name he was writing in the nickname

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<sup>126</sup>

**Mùang:**

3) (*reading cadence*) *naj3 vèlèaa2 [3.3 second pause] tii3 buun3*  
 "When playing pétanque, [we]..."

**SuuLii:**

4) (*parallel conversation*) *faaw2 thua1 lèqø-sù1 ling2 nòq1*



section of the survey (I asked the respondents *not* to write their real names). Thaa says something about coming to Luang Prabang that is perhaps addressed to Mùang, but partly unintelligible.

As Mùang continues writing, Thaa then inserts himself twice into the conversation, pre-judging what Mùang will inscribe onto the paper. Thaa's comments mark clear anticipatory concern—both about the quality of what Mùang is planning to write, and about how others might respond to it. In line (7), for example, just after Mùang speaks (and presumably writes) 'deliberate' (*pùk2 saa3*), Thaa challenges Mùang to tell him what he is going to write next: "Deliberate about what?" he asks. As Mùang continues with the nominalizer *kaan3*, which I have here translated as 'the topic,' Thaa again inserts himself into the conversation. He tells Mùang that if Mùang talks about politics he is going 'to die,' and then adds, continuing through some laughter, that Mùang will "sleep in prison."

**Mùang:**

6) (reading cadence) *pùk2 saa3*  
"...deliberate..."

**Thaa:**

7) *pùk2 saa3 ñang3*  
"Deliberate about what?"

**Mùang:**

8) (writing cadence) *kaan3*  
"...the topic..."

**Thaa:**

9) *pùk2 saa3 kaan3 mùang2 laø-mùng2 taaj3 léqø* [(this bracket notes overlap) *paj3 lùang1 kaan3 mùang2*  
(h) (h)]

"...[if you write] the topic of politics, then you are going to die...[if] you [talk about] politics, haha"

(Mùang continues writing, for now ignoring Thaa's interference with his task.)

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"Wait a second, your name is monkey?"

**Thaa:**

5) *kham2 thaam5 vaa1 vaa1 nèw2 daj3 qiik5 vaa1 mùng2* (difficult to hear) *maa2 mùang2 luang3...*  
"What other questions are there, about you [i.e., Mùang] coming to Luang Prabang..."

**Mùang:**

10) (*writing cadence, simultaneous with above line*) [caø-khaw5  
"...of approach shots..."]

**Thaa:**

11) (*h*) (*h*) *nòn2 juu1 khuk1 (h) (h)*  
"[You'll] sleep in prison, ha-ha."

**Mùang:**

12) *nêê1*  
"Hey!"

**Mùang:**

13a) (*writing cadence*) *lùù3 [2 second pause] lùù3 [1 second pause] ca-tii3 (normal cadence) nêê1 khan2*  
*vèèlaa2 tii3 buun3 vaw4 pùk2 saa3 kam3 lang2 khaw5 bòò1 tii3 bòò1 ... (unclear) nòq1*  
"...or [2 second pause] or [2 second pause] striking shots. See, when you are playing *pétanque* you  
deliberate about whether you are making approach shots or striking shots."

13b) *nêê1*  
"See!"

13c) *léqø-kaø-qaan3 tòò1 paj3 (reading cadence) suan1 laaj3 khaø-caw4 mak1 vaw4 lùùang1 ñang3*  
"And to read on, (reading cadence) what do they mostly like to talk about?"

**Thaa:**

14) *mm vaw4 dii3 dii3 daj4 nòq1 qaat5 siang3 vaj2 daj4 haa1 nii4*  
"Speak well here, he's audio recording you, too, [you] cursed guy."

**Mùang:**

15) *qoo1 kaø-tòong4 vaw4*  
"Oh, [that's obvious that] I have to speak [well]."

**Thaa:**

16) *qee3*  
"Yeah"

In line (12), Mùang addresses Thaa's flip comments with the sentence final particle *nêê1*. One often hears *nêê1* as part of constructions aimed to curb a child's bad behavior and Mùang uses it to take a critical stance on Thaa's comments in lines (7) and line (9) and their implication that Mùang might write something worthy of government sanction. In line 13, Mùang continues to write and speak aloud that athletes at the court "deliberate" about "whether they should make approach or striking shots in the *pétanque* game." He dutifully works on the survey as Thaa teases him, playing a kind of straight man to Thaa's paranoid jokester.

After line (13b), in which Mùang criticizes Thaa's antics again with the particle *nêêl*, he then turns back to the survey and reads part of the same question aloud. "And to read on," he says, "what do they mostly like to talk about?" As soon as Mùang reads out the question, Thaa again inserts himself into the discussion and guides Mùang to attend to how what Mùang writes might be evaluated. Thaa can insert himself in part because of affordances in Mùang's language. That is, the fact that he is speaking slowly using a reading intonation. Thaa also exploits grammatical openings in Mùang's language. He engages in what I have called elsewhere, a bit tongue in cheek, second-pair-part-poaching (Zuckerman 2016), in which he capitalizes on the presence of a question, or other first-pair-part, asked aloud as an opportunity to enter into dialog; here, when Mùang says, "What do they mostly talk about?," Thaa jumps in. Thaa goes beyond merely speaking when Mùang reads aloud questions, or at natural, 'transition-relevance places' (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Sidnell 2010:42-43). In line (9) above, for instance, Thaa does not wait for Mùang to finish his utterance, let alone a lexeme, but instead springboards off Thaa's use of *kaan3*, the nominalizer, and completes the utterance. Like a natural language processor, Thaa, constrained but not determined by what has come before, guesses what will come next. After listening to the recording multiple times, it started to sound to me like a scene from a movie where an angel and devil, miniature and perched on alternate shoulders, debate what the protagonist should do next.

Thaa's speech in line (14) is comprised of three intonation units (Chafe 1987:53–70), broadly defined, and each unit does its own interactional work. The first *mm vaw4 dii3 dii3 daj4*, or "Speak well here" directs Mùang to be careful about his speech. *Dii3 dii3* is a reduplicated, adverbial form of *dii3* or good. *Dii3 dii3* is often used in imperatives that directly address someone to do something with propriety; *nangl dii3 dii3* or sit well, for instance, is often used to

tell people to sit in a polite manner (either on the knees or with the feet folded inward and backward) as, for example, people told me to do many times during long Buddhist chanting sessions when my twisted legs had tired themselves out of the right position.<sup>127</sup> In this first intonation unit, Thaa is reminding Mùang to speak with both care and propriety, to speak with a sense of concern. The second intonation unit, *qaat5 siang3 vaj2 daj4*, or “he's audio recording you, too” likewise reminds Mùang that I am audio recording and that I will preserve (*vaj4*) the recording. Finally, Thaa's third intonation unit in the line, *haa1 nii4* or “[you] cursed guy” insults Mùang, presumably for both planning to not “speak well” and for not knowing that I am recording.<sup>128</sup>

In combination, Thaa's three-part utterance guides Mùang to speak “well,” reminds him of my recorder, and, by implication, chastises him for having spoken, or for being about to speak—the tense is underdetermined—badly, like a ‘cursed’ person. There is a revealing difference in the structure of this three-part utterance in line (14) with Thaa's warnings in line (9) earlier, where he says “...[if you write] the topic of politics, then you are going to die...[if] you [talk about] politics, haha.” In line (14), Thaa points to the recorder as the reason that Mùang should “speak well.” In line (9), by contrast, Thaa does not mention the paper survey, even as he foregrounds the consequences of writing about taboo subjects within it.

Why does Thaa not mention the survey in his directives to Mùang in line (9) but mention the recorder in line (14)? I argue that the unmentioned survey and the mentioned recorder is not an accident of speech but symptomatic of a broader pattern of engagement men at the court had

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<sup>127</sup> I often heard *dii3 dii3* used, for example, in the kind of didactic routines Shohet (2013) describes in Vietnam.

<sup>128</sup> *Haa1*, the form Thaa uses here is literally a “curse” word, that is, it is a word that curses someone else, but it is one that is used freely among friends and clearly not taken as offensive in this context. It is often combined with a coarse third-person title like *bak2* (masculine) and *qii1* (feminine), and appears throughout this dissertation (see chapter eight for more discussion).

with the survey, in which they tended to orient to it as a presupposed object of concern, rather than the audio recording. That is, the omission of the survey in Thaa's directive to Mùang is partly a function of its obviousness as an official representation, its given-ness as a text-artifact to be read by others. People note the unexpected, the literally remark-able, and the fact that I was recording what the men said was thus note-worthy.<sup>129</sup> Nevertheless, when Thaa points out that it is capturing Mùang's speech, Mùang does not seem surprised. In fact, he implicitly claims that he already knows. He points out the obviousness of having to monitor what he says. In line (15), he responds back to Thaa, *qool kaø-tòng4 vaw4*, or "Oh, that's [obvious] that I have to speak [well]." In this line, Mùang uses the sentence initial discourse marker '*qool*,' which in related forms functions as a Luang Prabang-specific factive particle, used in situations where the speaker corrects a false assumption that a previous speaker has made. Thaa's false assumption here, which Mùang corrects, is that Mùang was going to say something bad. Mùang also uses the verb of obligation, *tòng4*, meaning 'must,' 'should,' or 'need,' to highlight that 'speaking well' was the obvious and necessary thing to do in this situation.

At this point in the conversation between Mùang and Thaa, I join in, unwittingly, playing the part again of the amoral truth-seeker. In line (17), I argue that no matter how obvious it was to Mùang and Thaa that they should speak well in the presence of my recording, that they could say whatever they wanted. Mùang appears to misunderstand me. He implies in his response (in line 18) that what I mean is that I can cut anything bad from the recording. This

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<sup>129</sup> While above I rejected the idea that writing is, as a medium, any more prone to produce evaluative concern in Laos, I want to hedge this slightly. Speaking and writing have different semiotic properties. Speaking is no different when a recorder is on than when a recorder is off. That is, the process of recording need not have an effect on the production of speech, per se. Writing, on the other hand, almost automatically aims toward a slightly longer duration than the fleeting voice. When we speak, it is as if we are always writing with an inkless pen. The recorder puts ink in the pen; and while this ink might make it easier to judge one's own handwriting, to change one's lines, dots, and circles, it does not, in and of itself, change the stroke. This property of speech means that recorders can be used clandestinely out of the animator's awareness. In writing, clandestine capture would always be absurd. Recorders can be left on, they can linger, and they can capture until they slip into the background.

misunderstanding is telling. The notion that only ‘good’ things should be on record here is so strong, that my mention that he can speak badly implies not that I do not care if ‘good’ or ‘bad’ things are in the recording as I tried to articulate, but that I have the ability to fix them later.

**CZ:**

17) *vaw4 bòø-dii3 kaø-daj4*  
"You can speak badly."

**Mùang:**

18) *phòø-vaa1 qaat2 tat2 juu1 nii4 duu1*  
"Because [he] can record and cut it."

**Thaa:**

19) *vaw4 bòø-daj4 vaw4 bòø-dii3 bòø-suphaap5 daj4*  
"You can't speak [badly], you can't speak badly and impolitely."

**CZ:**

20) *fang2 thuk1 mùù2 daj4 maa2 talòt4 nêl*  
"[I] hear it every day, I come all the time."

**Another speaker:**

21) *maa2 talòt4 (h) (h)*  
"He comes all the time (h) (h)"

**Mùang:**

22a) *lùang1 bòø-dii3 laaw2 paj3 pa... hak2 tat2 laaw2 paj3 lee3 laaw2 paj3 tat2 qòøk5 qêêng1 dòøk5*  
"The bad stuff, he will delete it, he will remove it himself, you know."

22b) *bòø-pên3 huang1 vaw4 paj3 lòt4*  
"You don't need to worry, just talk."

22c) *vaw4 paj3 loot4 lèèw4 ... laaw2 tat2*  
"Just talk...He will delete [it]."

The conversation continues along these lines for a few more seconds. I tell the small group of men that they can write what they want and people insist to one another that I will cut the ‘bad’ parts from the surveys and the recording and only keep the ‘good’ parts. My comment that I come to the court ‘all the time,’ and thus, that people should not worry about putting anything ‘bad’ into the survey or the recorder reveals yet another misunderstanding. No one responds to my comment with a substantive rebuttal, but a few people audibly laugh. In line (22), Mùang repeats that I can just delete the ‘bad’ stuff. He is clearly not worried about me seeing or hearing

‘bad’ things at all. His evaluative concern seems not to be about me at all, but about what belongs in the kind of document the survey is, in official recordings. Within this logic, it makes sense that I am working as an editor, removing the bad stuff, cutting all mentions of politics, all jokes, all talk of ‘fucking.’

During my time in the field, people did not always treat me as a harmless conduit who would cut out the bad things from my research. After returning from the field and while writing this chapter, I asked Dii, with whom I began the dissertation and my closest friend during my time in the field, why people were sometimes concerned about letting me interview them. I asked him in the early stages of writing, in an effort to refresh my memory, as if the brief question-and-answer session over WhatsApp might remind me of my once-overpowering sense of what was happening while I was in the field. I expected he would give me the answer that is so common in the research on the state in Laos, and which I sensed strongly at moments in Luang Prabang: that people were scared of interviews because they did not want to say something against the state, that if they said something bad, they would, like Thaa said, ‘sleep in prison.’ That was not what he told me. Instead, he reminded me of another fear people had: me. In a 45-second audio message, this is what he said:

*We’re worried you will interview in a way that you will ask for the Lao people’s secrets, you know. Like you’ll go tell the CIA (audible laughter), like you’re a spy. They’re worried you’re [a spy]. Why? So that you can have people in your country come into Laos, it [would be] easy, see, for you to know all the particulars of the Lao people, for you to come in...and what...seize [our land], like that. It [would be] easy, you see. And, so, they don’t let you interview them. They are worried you will go publicize [what you find] over there, this is how Lao people are.<sup>130</sup>*

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<sup>130</sup> *haw2 jaan4 mung2 samphaat4 bèp5 thaam3 qaw3 khwaam2 lap1 khòong3 khòong3 phasason2 khon2 laaw2 naa1 nòq1 qaw3 paj3 haj5 ... CIA han5 naa1 (h) bèp5 mung2 nii4 mèn1 nuaj1 sòt5 nèem2 nòq1 khaw2 khii5 jaan4 mung2 nèew2 nan4 nòq1 jaan4 mung2 qaw3 paj3 pèn3 khòd5 muun2 nòq1 phua2 ñang3 phua2 thii1 vaa1 si-haj5 khon2 juu1 pathêêt4 mung2 nii4 naa1 khaw5 maa2 juu1 naj3 laaw2 nii4 naa1 ngaj2 sii4 saa1 huu4 cut2 phisêêt5 khòong3 khon2 laaw2 mot1 lèw4 pèn3 nèew2 nii4 nèew2 nii4 nòq1 viithii1 kaan3 khaw5 haa3 lùt3 vaa1 viithii1 kaan3 thii1 vaa1 siø-bèp5 vaa1 mèn1 ñang3 khwaam2 maaj3 man2 ñùt1 siø-saa4 man2 ngaaj2 siø-saa4*

The worry—as Dii put it in his message—was that I would reveal things, capture secrets, and disseminate them (*pheej3 phèèl*). As I listened to him speaking, I remembered a debate that he and I once had. I had asked him a similar question while in the field—concerning why people were sometimes hesitant to talk to me—and he had given me a similar answer, that some thought I worked for the CIA.<sup>131</sup> At the time he refused to say that he was one-hundred percent sure that I did not. To convince him, I showed him my beaten, fading Michigan student ID, as I had many times before; the picture on the ID was starting to peel back and some of the information had been scratched off from years in my wallet. I thought the ID’s condition would make it more convincing. ‘Of course,’ I said, ‘they could have made this ID for me as a fake, that would not be hard, but,’ I continued, ‘if they had made it, would they have made such a shitty one, fading picture and all?’ Unconvinced, he said he did not care whether I was CIA or not. We were friends, and he cared for me as a friend.<sup>132</sup>

No matter how transparent I tried to be, most people were fundamentally uncertain about where exactly what they told me would travel. I was an enigma. The lurking figure here is, obviously, the history of the American War in Vietnam and Laos, which people often mention even if only rarely do they show resentment toward Americans because of that history. Sure, it was unlikely that the U.S. would invade Laos again, or, more unlikely still, that the U.S. government would care that the men at the *pétanque* court used a vulgar term for coitus in a

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*khaw2 kaø-leej2 bò-jaak5 haj5 mùng2 samphaat4 nòq1 khaw2 jaan4 mùng2 qaw3 paj3 pheej3 phèèl juu1 phuun4 nòq1 lèqø-khon2 laaw2 pèn3 nèew2 nii4 siø-saa4*

<sup>131</sup> Lemon (2000: 230) notes that her own anthropological materials often looked like methods for surveillance.

<sup>132</sup> Dii told me he did not worry about me like other people worried, that the people who worried the most about me were those who worked for the state, ‘civil servants’ (*phuak5 phanakngaan2*), like policemen and soldiers. They were scared of giving up secrets, of me spreading bad things about the government, and scared about their own relations with state-actors, that they might be caught violating the high standards of propriety that they brought upon themselves.



written survey, but such concerns were still mentioned and gestured toward. They were still cited as a reason to be concerned about talking to me. The concerns were not limited to my involvement in the CIA. People would also sometimes joke with me—in the tone that a daredevil might joke about the possibility of a fatal fall or crash—that if I put ‘bad’ things out there about Luang Prabang, that if I wrote these bad things, or showed videos of people doing them, or talked about them to others in the U.S. or elsewhere, that the city’s status as a UNESCO heritage site might ‘collapse’ (*tok2*) and all of the prosperity and development that had rushed into the city would thus go away. The ‘goodness’ of the city was what kept people coming, it was up to them to make sure that ‘goodness’ maintained.

My boss, the state, UNESCO, one another, themselves. That is, if anticipatory concern is, as I argue, defined by a worry about how something will later be ethically evaluated by another actor, the identity of this actor is often unclear and generalized.<sup>133</sup> In this respect, the survey—and other observational practices—brought about an evaluative anxiety quite different from, say, the ‘evaluation regimes’ like those that Chumley (2013:181) discusses among Chinese art students. In Chumley’s examples, “subjects of evaluation stand in proximity to some object of work [and] in front of the authorized evaluators and a small audience of ratifiers: think of elementary-school science fairs and corporate presentations, where authorial subjects stand next to models or PowerPoint presentations and narrate them for evaluators and audiences.” Rather, the survey invokes a ghostly, future-oriented anticipation of evaluation that is more akin to Foucault’s (2012b:202) description of the workings of the Panopticon. The Panopticon is not like the science-fair judge standing closeby, but a security camera that may or may not be plugged in.

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<sup>133</sup> Singh (2012:139) shows how ambiguity about who is in authority is sometimes cultivated in Laos: “What has emerged is an increasingly sophisticated concealment of the real authority, especially from international donors who are attempting to institute sustainable forest management in Laos.”

“Who” (if anyone) is in the prison’s tower and this person’s purposes, Foucault argues, are both inconsequential. “It does not matter what motive animates him,” Foucault writes, “the curiosity of the indiscreet, the malice of a child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher who wishes to visit this museum of human nature, or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing.”

The ambiguity around exactly who is observing and the murkiness about what the consequences of ‘bad’ representations might be, hints that avoiding concrete sanctions and punishments, while a serious concern, was not all that was at stake for people filling out the survey. Their mentions of ‘sleeping in prison’ and ‘my boss’ point to a more general ethical concern about making ‘good’ representations. As he was completing his survey, Mùang made the idea explicit: “After we talk, whoever said anything bad, they have to think to themselves, ‘Oh, I wrote something evil, and that is bad.’”<sup>134</sup> With this, Mùang invites people to think and reflect on what writing ‘bad things’ means for their own characters. He implies that a good person is partly defined as someone who makes good representations in the right contexts. As my opening example to this chapter suggests, this sense goes well beyond surveys and the court. One of the best things someone in Luang Prabang can say about someone is that he or she ‘knows who is a big person and who is a small person’ (*huu5 phuu5 ñaj1 phuu5 nòj4*), and how to modulate depending on the situation. A contextually flexible propriety allows someone to meaningfully communicate intimacy and respect, freedom and restraint. From this perspective, the survey prompted a moment for people to display this dimension of their characters, to show

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<sup>134</sup> *vaw4 paj3 lèw4 lèw4 lêqø-kaø-phuu5 daj3 vow4 bòø-dii3 paj3 lêqø-kaø-tòong4 khùt1 qêêng3 vaal qaaw4 kuu3 vow4 khwaam2 sua1 lêqø-kaø-man2 kòòl bòø-dii3.*

that they knew how and when to make ‘good’ representations and when to joke about being ‘bad.’

Crucially, there is evidence that this ethical understanding of why one should write ‘good’ things in the survey was not in opposition to, but apiece with, the worry about how vaguely defined others might evaluate and sanction what they wrote. Thaa makes this evident when he both tells Mùang what not to write because he will ‘sleep in prison’ and curses Mùang and his character for possibly writing these ‘bad’ things. Here, the sense of how others might see, and sanction, travels with a sense that making the survey into a ‘good’ thing is an end in and of itself. This is not an unfamiliar idea in ethics. Adam Smith (1880) narrates how the sense of an impartial spectator can be internalized as a kind of moral compass; more recently, ethicists have also argued that the capacity to take a ‘third-person perspective’ is crucial to understanding ethics, and that the movement from a narrow sense of ‘what should I do?,’ to a more universal sense of ‘what should one do?’ is constitutive of it (see Keane 2015:63–67 for discussion). But there is a commonsense idea in moral philosophy that acting because of fear of sanction is diametrically opposed to acting because of moral reasons. As Kant (1998) argued, to be moral, an act cannot just conform with duty, it must entirely be *from duty*. The repeated censures and sanctions where people told others not to write anything bad, and the countless other similar sanctions I heard during my research, suggest that the commitment to writing in the survey was simultaneously a commitment to jump through the state’s hoops and an ethical commitment to making good representations in times that require them. That is, writing ‘good’ things in the survey was treated as an index of both a commitment to duty and a concern about the consequences of duty’s dereliction. To paraphrase Garfinkel’s (1967) insight, the men at the court had their own ‘good’ reasons for the ostensibly ‘bad’ records they handed back to me.

This commitment is clearly distributed not only across moments, mediums of communication, and spaces, but across people. Civil servants, for instance, were expected to better embody the state’s ethical discourses, and were often more committed to them, than private citizens—even if such private citizens had their own ideas about the importance of ‘good’ representations in other contexts. I conclude this section with a few notes about Suulii. In his comments during the survey, he seemed to disentangle the duty to make good representations for their own sake from doing so to avoid sanction. In this way, he sounded more like the typical moral philosopher than his fellow survey-takers.

At one point during the back-and-forth with Mùang and Thaa, as I was asking people to not worry about whether what they said was good or bad, I suggested the following absurdity: “The truth,” I said, “is [never] bad.”<sup>135</sup> There were two immediate responses. First, one man, unidentifiable from the recording, asks rhetorically whether I want the “real bad stuff or the playful bad stuff.”<sup>136</sup> Second and shortly thereafter, Suulii clarifies what I had meant to the others who were present: “Just say the truth,” he said, “your thoughts and experiences.”<sup>137</sup> Just a few moments before, Suulii had said something similar: “No need to worry about [the survey], alright? This is just the thoughts of each person, it’s nothing to worry about.”<sup>138</sup> Unlike his

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<sup>135</sup> *khwaam2 thèè4 kaø-bòø-mèèn1 bòø-dii3*

<sup>136</sup> *qaw3 sua1 thèè4 lêqø-qaw3 sua1 lin5*. He says this using two parallel constructions, *sua1 thèè4* (literally ‘truly evil’) and *sua1 lin5* (literally ‘playfully evil’). This response implicates a question that has hovered around my discussion so far. In many of the lines I quoted above, people are joking. But to what extent do jokes involve serious ethical commitments? In earlier comments, where people told others not to write bad things, almost no one explicitly said whether they were joking or not. They laughed as they talked about writing ‘fucking,’ and the one man that said that my boss would yell at me did refer to other people’s talk as ‘jokes’ (*khian3 vaa1 mok2 vaa1 mak1 paj3*, he said, or “writing these jokes”), but the talk itself had, perhaps not surprisingly, no ‘explicit performative verbs’ (Austin 1975) for joking, like, for instance, *vaw4 jòøk5 or vaw4 lin5*. Nevertheless, the men’s comments about the ‘bad’ things they might write in the survey were clearly at least candidate-jokes, that is, they were possible jokes insofar as they were taken as funny. But if these were only candidate jokes, were they articulating actual worries?

<sup>137</sup> *qaw3 khwaam2 cing1 maa2 vaw4 naa1 khwaam2 maa3 naq1 khwaam2 khit1 khwaam2 hèn3 khòòng2 too2 qêêng1*

<sup>138</sup> *kaø-bòø-pên3 ñang3 nòq1 qan3 nii4 mèn1 khwaam2 khit1 khòòng3 tèè1 laø-khon2 sùù1 sùù1 naa1 bòø-pên3 ñang3 naa1*

fellow survey-takers, he never tells anyone to omit things for their own sake, he never censures someone because bad things do not belong in the survey. Rather, he encourages them to write what they think. This fit with how Suulii acted more generally. He was always ready to talk to me about things that others were less willing to talk about, and he did so in relatively ‘official’ environments, like the thirty or so minutes he once spent repeating *khamdaal* or, broadly, ‘curse words’ into my recorder. I remember people giggling as he wrote the worst of them down. But I never got the sense that Suulii was doing it for the laughs, as others sometimes did when they taught me dirty words. Rather, he did it with the seriousness of a teacher. This did not mean that Suulii was completely unconcerned with the possible consequences of writing some ‘bad’ things in the survey.<sup>139</sup> At one point in the recordings, in which some other men and Suulii discuss what they would write in the survey’s ‘occupation’ field, Suulii makes clear that he would be concerned about consequences. “How do you make money, if you don’t have a job,” one man read my survey’s question aloud. “Sell meth,”<sup>140</sup> his friend responded. “Write playing *pétanque* is your job!”<sup>141</sup> another man chimed in. “If you really sell meth, then just write that,” I said. This is where Suulii added, sarcastically and knowingly to me: “Yeah, the cops won’t pick you up immediately, right?”

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<sup>139</sup> Regarding censorship generally, Kenney-Lazar (2016) provides an example of the effects of providing a ‘bad’ answer. He describes the 9<sup>th</sup> Asia-Europe People’s Forum, which was “to provide an ‘open, dynamic, and inclusive’ space for ‘meaningful and practical discussion for change.’” Kenney-Lazar describes how state workers were ‘planted’ throughout the event and “at the end of presentations, [these] government spokespeople stood up and delivered rosy speeches about national development and progress.” One woman remained and explained how a rubber company had acquired villagers’ lands and forests without compensating them and that villagers were upset that they could no longer farm the land and forage the forest, becoming reliant upon wage labor for their income.” (2016:1–3). The woman was subsequently harassed, sent intimidating text messages, and visited at her office by officials.

<sup>140</sup> *khaaj3 jaa1 maa3 siqø-qaq1*

<sup>141</sup> *vaa1 tii3 buun3 pêñ3 qaasip2 leej2*

## Conclusion

George Herbert Mead (1934:63–68) long ago argued that the ability of a human person to hear her own voice encourages her to respond to it as others respond, to arouse in herself the same sense that her voice arouses in others, and eventually, to come to an understanding and ability to use significant symbols. For Mead, it was such an experience of hearing oneself as others hear you, that led to the reflective individual, and communication generally. Without referencing Mead, the psychologist George Mahl (1972) put a similar hypothesis to the test. In a chapter entitled ‘People talking when they can’t hear their voices,’ Mahl studied (among other variables) how people spoke when they were wearing headphones with masking sounds that made it impossible to hear their own speech. Participants, he found, changed how they spoke with the headphones on. Most shifted toward a “lower social status dialect”; some claimed that the noise “induced relaxation, a state akin to daydreaming, relief from reality and self-criticism” (1972:227; 261).

Mahl’s findings were central to Labov’s later claim that, as sociolinguists searching for the best data, we needed to make our subjects not attend to what they say.<sup>142</sup> When they were reflexively aware of what they were saying, Labov’s argument went, the data were ruined. As I reviewed above, many scholars who have used the dramaturgical metaphor have taken a similar position. Treating the state as a methodological hurdle, their goal has been to uncover what people are too self-conscious to say when someone is watching.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Mahl’s study has since been criticized, notably by Bell (1984:149) who, after re-analyzing Mahl’s data and Labov’s interpretation, argued that “it is the subject’s awareness of his *addressee*—the interviewer—which proves stronger than the ‘pure’ attention factor itself.”

<sup>143</sup> Like an ecologist trying to understand the forest floor, they sweep away the leaves, the brambles, and the rotting logs. This practice both illuminates and obscures. They learn about the soil and the creatures that live underneath this brush, sure, but they also change the nature of the object they are studying, and, if they forget about the bits they removed, they only gain a very limited view of the ecology of the forest as a whole. For those who are working to fight the destructive and inhumane policies and practices of government and business, such attention to explicit resistance is sometimes necessary (for examples in reference to ‘land grabbing,’ see citations within Baird 2017). But

These arguments clash against recent discussion in the anthropology of ethics in interesting ways. We might begin by asking, does concern about filling out the survey implicate ethics, as recent anthropologists understand ethics? On the one hand, such concern clearly involves reflexivity, a notion that has been central to defining the ‘ethical.’ As people filled out the survey, furthermore, they made clear that they were guided by notions of what was ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and that the choice of writing ‘good’ things in the survey was itself a ‘good’ choice and, in turn, made by a good person.<sup>144</sup> But, at the same time, people also seemed to be parroting discourses of the state, and doing so, in part, because they worried about what would happen to them if they did not. This worry about external sanction is the kind of sentiment that James Laidlaw (2002), for example, has asked us to look away from when we explore ethics. He cites the anthropological obsession with this worry as in part a legacy of the Durkheimian understanding of morality, in which morality is “framed as a question...of what are the collectively sanctioned rules and how do they come to be obeyed (or not)...[and thus] becomes just another dimension of the master-problem of Durkheimian sociology, the explanation of how ‘social control’ is established over unruly individual behavior” (Laidlaw 2013:22).

Concern about the survey likewise cuts across Jarrett Zigon’s (2008:17–18) influential contrast between morality and ethics. On the one hand, Zigon defines morality as “a kind of habitus or an unreflective and unreflexive disposition of everyday social life. This embodied morality, is not thought out beforehand, nor is it noticed when it is performed. It is simply done.” The notion involves, he continues, “those public and institutionally articulated discourses, such

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for those who are trying to understand, not change, the life-worlds of people living in Laos, such moments of glimpsing the ground are not any more or less interesting than the leaves that cover it.

<sup>144</sup> I am not intending to imply that the use of the words like ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ or ‘evil’ are, in and of themselves, in English or in Lao, self-evidently diagnostic of ethics or morality (cf. Whiteley 1960; Zigon 2008:12).

as those of an organized religion or state structures, of what is considered, by the speaker of this discourse, as right, good, appropriate, and expected.” On the other hand, he defines ethics as a “kind of reflective and reflexive stepping away from the embodied moral habitus or moral discourse. It is brought about by a moral breakdown or problematization. This occurs when some event or person intrudes into the everyday life of persons and forces them to consciously reflect upon an appropriate ethical response.” Thus, according to Zigon, morality and ethics are tied with notions of institutionalization and reflexivity, respectively.

What, then, is the concern about the survey? The examples in this chapter show that making things fit within a ‘moral’ system can itself involve significant reflexive work, and force us to recognize, as Keane puts it, that sometimes, “following rules *is* what the virtuous life consists in” (2015:19).

Of course, only ‘sometimes.’ One of the things that a focus on moments of display and anticipatory concern in Luang Prabang brings out prominently is the partiality and contextual emergence of ethical stances. As I found over and over again in my research, what is considered ‘good’ and ‘bad’ changes across interactions and actors as well as within them. In this respect, Petit (2013: 161) appears partly correct in writing that “censorship is both a moral duty and an incorporated disposition [in Laos]...” The maintenance of a ‘good’ public image of society was often taken as a sign of ethical character, but not all the time and not always in the same way, even among actors ostensibly committed to the state’s moral project.

In this chapter, I have outlined how we should understand concrete moments of evaluation: as products and producers of the metapragmatic contexts and frames in which they occur. I have stressed that in Luang Prabang, labeling events in the best light is often itself an ethical practice. This has obvious consequences for evaluations of moral economy, as such



evaluations are subject to the same meta-ethical processes. I describe these consequences in detail in chapter five. In the next chapter, however, I dive deeper into the question of consistency of evaluation and character and show another way in which making positive moral evaluations is itself evaluated. Namely, I argue that avoiding face-to-face conflict tends to be treated as a more important sign of character than being consistent in one's evaluative stances on other people and their actions.

## Chapter 4 Inconsistent Evaluations

*“Human life is...only a perpetual illusion; men deceive and flatter each other. No one speaks of us in our presence as he does of us in our absence. Human society is founded on mutual deceit....”*

*–Blaise Pascal (Pensées: 32).*

### Introduction

Phòò Thiang’s older half-sister, Paa, was sick. Phòò Thiang told me that the ninety-three year old woman was lying in her house, naked and alone, as she neared her end. He said that her daughter and the daughter’s husband did not yet want to include him or keep him informed. When they needed him, he told me, they would call and so he spent the day working around the house—chopping scrap boards into firewood, cleaning edible river-weed for drying out in the sun—and waiting for the inevitable news of his older sister’s death.

As Phòò Thiang waited, Mèè Phòòn told me that dying like Paa was her biggest fear. Paa was dying with an empty quiet, not an abundance of people and Buddhist merit-making. Mèè Phòòn pitied what were sure to be Paa’s final moments. She feared that, ultimately, her own children might be as callous and careless as Paa’s daughter and that her own death might be just as austere, cold, and lonely.

At around nine in the evening, Phòò Thiang received a call from Paa’s daughter, Thii, who told him that Paa had died. Phòò Thiang bickered with Mèè Phòòn about whether he should go to Paa’s house that night, and the sounds of their bickering floated into my room through the open-air gaps in the structure of the house. She told Phòò Thiang to wait until morning. It was too late and too dangerous to make the two-mile trip alone on his motorbike, she said. He yelled that he had to go and left abruptly. He spent the cold night alone sitting next to Paa, who was no longer breathing and covered in a white sheet. Paa’s daughter, Phòò Thiang told me the next morning, sat in the structure away from the corpse and watched her children as Phòò Thiang lit

incense and tended a candle. To pass the time, Phòò Thiang played solitaire—a game that I had taught him a few weeks before and which he adopted as a tool for testing winning lottery numbers. He would draw a card from the deck before playing, and if he won the following hand, it meant the card's number might be a winner.

The next morning, I went early to Paa's house and spent much of the next three days and nights there—filming, talking, and resting—as the funeral, and the festivities preceding and following it, unfolded. From the beginning of the festivities to the end, other mourners blamed Thii, Paa's daughter, and her husband, Kham, for almost everything the funeral lacked. The couple was subject to what seemed like pervasive ethical evaluations and the growing consensus was that as Phòò Thiang, Mèè Phòòn, and their friends and relatives worked hard making merit, spending time with Paa's corpse, and monitoring the funeral's expenses, Kham and Thii did little for Paa or her funeral.

Here is a list of some of the complaints, in no significant order, that others made about the couple during and after the funeral:

- i. *Thii did not shower and had dirt caked to her neck, she did not have a bathroom at her house, and she felt uncomfortable wearing the traditional Lao skirt, the sin4.*
- ii. *Kham hunted eels instead of participating in much of the funeral activities.*
- iii. *Kham ordained as a novice monk not to make merit for his mother-in-law but to get money. Furthermore, even though he had ordained multiple times before, he knew none of the Pali chants necessary to perform the ordination ceremony.*
- iv. *Thii did not re-light or generally pay the proper attention to the incense near Paa's corpse, which must be continuously lit during the days leading up to the funeral. This was a symptom of her more general habit of not spending time near the corpse.*
- v. *Kham and Thii were too affectionate with their dogs. They slept next to them and fed them absurdly expensive food, fit for humans.*

- vi. *Kham embezzled money meant for buying stringed lights for Paa's casket and brought broken lights back to the house.*
- vii. *Thii threw out Paa's nice clothes, as Paa had defecated in them. This meant that Paa's corpse lay naked leading into and shortly after her death. This was symptomatic of the fact that Thii generally did not clean Paa or tend to her physical appearance.*
- viii. *Kham was addicted to methamphetamines and used all of his money to buy the drugs rather than care for the family.*
- ix. *Thii continued to feed her child formula exclusively, even though he was already three years old.*
- x. *Kham stole money generated by funeral gambling, which was supposed to pay for the funeral expenses.*
- xi. *When no one else was nearby, Thii pocketed (and did not record in the ledger) money that was donated to the funeral by other mourners.*
- xii. *As others worked, Thii slept or cared for her dogs, her children, and the ducks she raised for sale—she was unconcerned with the goings on of the funeral.*

I heard variations of each of these criticisms multiple times. They were relayed as undisputed facts, which pointed to a more general conclusion: Kham and Thii were unethical, immoral people (*khon2 sua1, khon2 bòø-dii3*). My host parents said that once the funeral was over, they would no longer visit Kham and Thii; they would no longer help them. Salina, my host sister, put it even more forthrightly: now that Paa was dead, Kham and Thii were no longer even family (*khaw2 bòø-mèèn1 phii1 nòòng4 lèèw4*).

Everyone at the funeral seemed to share the opinion that Kham and Thii were 'bad' people. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, no one spoke with Kham and Thii as harshly as they spoke about them. Salina never told Kham and Thii that they were no longer family; Mèè Phòòn never revealed to them that she feared her own children would eventually act like them; and Phòò Thiàng never explicitly accused them of embezzling money. Conflicts between my host family and Kham and Thii did bubble up but evaluations of Kham and Thii never reached the same

intensity when Kham and Thii were present. Rather than a relatively stable ethical stance taking place across interactions, I found that my host family and their friends produced somewhat predictable evaluative gaps between what they said *with* versus *about* Kham and Thii.

In this chapter, I explore these gaps and highlight the pervasiveness of similar interdiscursive inconsistencies in ethical evaluation and stance-taking in ordinary life. I focus particularly on talk with and about Kham, Paa's son-in-law. This talk revolved around a set of stringed, colored lights that were to be draped over Paa's casket, the money for which people suspected Kham had embezzled, as criticism (vi) above relates. There are clear gaps between what people said to Kham as he fiddled with the lights and what they said about him after he left. 'To his face,' Salina calls Kham 'stupid' (*caa4*) for not testing the lights while at the store, but after he leaves, she surmises that he had not been stupid, but rather had been corrupt, intentionally bringing broken lights so he could keep the communal funeral money earmarked for them. 'To his face,' my host parents' neighbors, Moo and Sii, gave Kham advice and ostensibly believed his story, while after he left, they bemused that they 'didn't know about' what really happened and were 'afraid' that Salina was correct in suspecting him. In interviews weeks later, when Kham was absent, Salina proclaimed that Kham was 'corrupt' and Moo bluntly summarized what had happened: "He took the money and then brought some old [lights] back. Curse him."

This chapter confronts methodological problems similar to those in chapter three, but from the vantage of a radically different kind of material. In chapter three, I reflected on how men at the *pétanque* court reacted to moments of display, like my survey. I argued that putting the best light on issues—such as, what people talk about at the court—was itself often part of an ethical commitment to making 'good' representations. I used this fact to criticize distinctions

between the ‘frontstage’ and the ‘backstage’ of life, and assumptions about sincerity that often travel along with the distinction. In this chapter, I reflect on less ‘state’-esque interactions, and show that similar issues emerge within them. That is, the problems of the dramaturgical metaphor also haunt accounts of interactional (in)consistency, like James Scott’s notion of the ‘hidden transcript.’ The relative sincerity of an evaluation, I argue, is not always clear for the analyst who attends to concrete interactions. In fact, is usually not. To tackle this problem, we must attend to how people like Salina, Moo, and Sii draw lines between, for instance, what they really mean and what they say just to be polite. I show that in Luang Prabang such line drawing is often itself an ethical practice.

### **Surviving Evaluations**

Much of the criticism of Kham and Thii concerned how the couple used and accounted for money. Paa was poor and landless when she died and Phòò Thiang blamed Kham and Thii. Thii, he said, liked to party and drink (*lin5 laaj3 kin3 laaj3*), games of cards and beer, mostly; and Kham liked to free-base crushed-up methamphetamine pills, four to five pills a day. As we sat talking a few weeks after the funeral, Phòò Thiang said that he could see Kham and Thii’s tendency to *lin5* and *kin3* (literally ‘play’ and ‘consume’ or ‘eat’; see chapters five and six for more discussion) in how they celebrated the birth of their most recent son. Phòò Thiang went to the boy’s post-partum party (*qòòk5 dùan3*), but left in a huff—“I wasn’t happy with [Kham and Thii], because, they’re poor and they...they spent so much [on the party]” (*bòø-phòò2 caj3 nam2 khaw2 qool ... phòqø-vaa1 khaw2 thuk1 ... lêqø-kin3 laaj3*). At the time of the shower, Paa, Phòò Thiang continued, was still sick. They needed to think of her, save money for her, instead of spending so much money on the party. As their knowledgeable uncle offering advice, he told

Kham and Thii this before the baby shower, but they didn't listen—they even, he said, hired a band. He was sick of talking to them about it; they would not change their ways. He didn't know why—*jaal khaw2*, he said, “forget them.”

When I interviewed Mèè Phòòn, she similarly characterized Kham and Thii's spending as disproportionately lavish. Playing with the most common two-word phrase for poverty, *thuk2 ñaak4*, she quipped that the couple were not *thuk1 ñaak4* but *thuk1 ngaaj1* or “poor, but living easy.”

While I was prone to think about Kham and Thii's poverty as a hindrance to taking proper care of Paa, worth considering when judging them, as I learned again and again in conversations and interviews, the general assumption was that Kham and Thii were not bad caretakers because they were poor, but poor because they were bad caretakers, because they spent money on Kham's methamphetamine habit or their dog's exorbitantly priced food rather than a new skirt (*sin5*) for Paa. Such causal depictions of the relation between the goodness of a person and his or her monetary success were common in my conversations in Luang Prabang.

They also resonate with broad threads in Theravada Buddhism, in which, as Reynolds (1990:62) puts it, “adherence to *dhammic* norms is conducive to the production of wealth.” Reynolds (1990:68) clarifies that these threads of Theravada Buddhism might surprise many as they go against popular assumptions of *dhamma* where “it has been assumed that the idea of renunciation entails a wholly negative evaluation of wealth.”<sup>145</sup> The logic is, as Keyes (1983a:858) writes, that “because the possession of wealth can be seen as indicative of previous

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<sup>145</sup> Cf. Reynolds (1990:68) continues: “The fact is that Theravada interpretations of *dhamma* have, from the very beginning, incorporated a more or less positive valorization of wealth, including material resources, monetary resources, goods, and services.” Similar positive valorization of wealth is very much alive in Laos. See also Spiro (1966).

merit, a positive value is attached to the accumulation of wealth.” Loss of wealth, likewise, is often considered a sign of lack of merit.

Similarly, people said that Kham and Thii had caused their own economic and social poverty, not from actions in a past life (or at least, no one explicitly said this to me) but because of their actions in this life. As one article in a Lao newspaper generally put the idea, “Those addicted to gambling and drugs are always to blame for their poverty” (Vientiane Times 2004a).<sup>146</sup> The black dirt caked onto Thii’s skin, the physical closeness of her dogs to her children, the sense that the couple ‘treated their dogs better than their children,’ Kham’s lack of decorum at the funeral’s ceremonies—for many I spoke with, these were both the causes and consequences of the couple’s moral debauchery

A week after Paa’s funeral finished, I interviewed Thii at her house and she mentioned different causes of her poverty. Her father had been a ‘straight talker,’ she said, a sincere, good man, and because of this, he never made any money. Rather than claiming that wealth and ethics went hand in hand, Thii claimed that her father was too good to make money. Now, because she was poor, no one, including my host-parents, wanted to spend time with her. “That,” she explained to me, “is the way Lao people are. They do not like you if you are poor.”

Kham and Thii’s house exhibited the couple’s poverty clearly and starkly. Houses are one of the most important symbols of wealth in Laos generally, and their house lacked things that many in Luang Prabang have come to expect; it was a house that people said looked *nòòk4* or ‘country’ even though it was not far from the city center (*nòòk4* means literally outside, i.e.

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<sup>146</sup> Lucien Hanks (1972:101) wrote that in Thailand, “People speak not only of expiating sin through suffering but, when misfortune strikes, ‘running out of merit.’” He quotes one woman’s story of her neighbors: “Thim and Chum were poor, gambled and drank a lot. They pawned their land to my father as security for a loan, and then they could not repay. They moved away when they lost their land. Chum liked to live a sporting life and spend his money. He had fun as long as it lasted.” Hanks summarizes, “These gamblers had fared well in proportion to their virtue; unhappily, merit did not suffice for a whole lifetime.”



outside the city, but has negative connotations of ‘backwardness’). The land on which the house sat was not Thii’s or Kham’s, or even Paa’s, but was owned by a neighbor who let them live there for free because he ‘pitied’ them (as Thii put it in our interview). Kham, Thii told me, occasionally brought the neighbor wild eels he hunted as gifts for his generosity. Thii, Kham, Paa, and Paa’s husband had moved to their current home three years before, and prior to that, they had lived on another plot the man owned. By the time of Paa’s funeral, and long after her husband had died, Kham and Thii had built two open-air structures on the new land and had dug a hole for the bathroom. The bathroom remained unfinished, even though work had begun a few years before, and I heard multiple people complain about this as they wandered past the hole in the ground and into the woods to relieve themselves.

In Luang Prabang, one’s own house is the ideal place to die. “Blessed is the virtuous Mandarin who breathe[s] his last among his folks,” Thao Nhouy Abhay wrote in the 1950s, (De Berval 1959:145). Whenever possible, people bring dying family members from the hospital to the home before their hearts stop. Stonington (2012:843) describes a similar practice in Thailand:

*The home is sacred and familiar. It is safe and warm. It has a long history of purity, because it has been blessed by monks in many ceremonies, and it has been the site of a lifetime of good deeds and devoted love. In the same way that the hospital has accrued metaphysical pollution over time, the home has accrued goodness. There have been no bad deaths to produce polluting or dangerous elements and if there had, the family would have moved away long ago and sought out a sacred place for their home.*

In Laos, people draw parallel ideal typical distinctions between home and hospital, but Paa’s death makes stark that not all houses are perfect ‘ethical locations,’ infused with the same qualities that make them conducive to a good death. Partly because of the ‘dirty’ state of Paa’s house and her own person at the time of her death, many felt that her house was not a good place to die and worried that Paa’s death was not a good death. As Mèè Phòòn had put it to me before

the funeral started, while Paa died at an old age and naturally (normally, signs of a ‘good death’), the fact that she died in squalor and mostly alone was frightening, so much so that it made Mèè Phòòn herself worry about her future and her relations with her children. ‘I’m scared I will die like that,’ she told me.

Among ethnic Lao people, death is followed by a period of mourning at the house of the deceased. During this period, the house is called the *hùan2 dii3* or ‘good house.’ The cremation, or what we might think of as the funeral ‘service’ (the *songsakaan3*) happens anywhere from one day to a week at Luang Prabang’s central (and privately operated) crematorium. The intermediate time is spent at the ‘good house.’ Relatives, neighbors, and friends visit as much as they can—ideally, spending all night at the house—talking, watching movies, gambling, and ‘guarding’ the corpse (I discuss this in detail in chapter nine). Thus, Paa’s house was not merely the scene where Paa had died but the staging of her funeral.



Figure 29: Structure A of the house, full of monks<sup>147</sup>

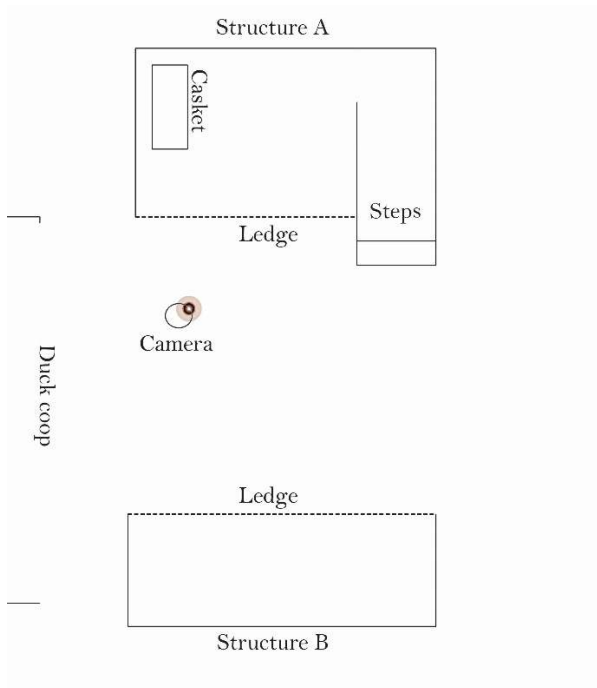


Figure 30: A diagram of the house

<sup>147</sup> As with many of the images in this dissertation, I have distorted this image to preserve anonymity.

But the house was in disrepair, and the funeral's surroundings reminded people of how poor Paa had been while she was living. Mèè Phòòn made this clear to me before I even saw the house. When I asked her if I could film the funeral—a question that is, perhaps surprisingly for many readers, generally responded to in Laos with an enthusiastic 'Yes!'—Mèè Phòòn hesitated. She was uncertain, she told me, not because my camera's presence might sully the sacred event, but because she was ashamed at the thought of documenting—and thus, being associated with—such a poor and derelict place. Like the men who filled out the survey at the *pétanque* court, Mèè Phòòn had a strong sense that ugly things like Kham and Thii's house were not worthy of capturing with video or a camera. She said she did not want me leaving Laos with the notion that that sort of place represented a Lao home or Lao culture. She eventually said I should ask Phòò Thiàng, who told me to *thaaɟ1 loot4* or 'Go ahead, film,' and so I did.

People still commented on how 'dirty' (*khii5 diat5*) the house was even after a hired woman had cleaned it for the funeral. When I first arrived, I casually surveyed the property with my little host-sister, Salina's daughter, the nine-year-old ran ahead of me, excited. As we passed behind Structure A, the girl pointed to piles of toys scattered on the roof, broken, rusted, and discolored. 'Look!' (*beng1*), she said with a tone between amazement and disgust. Even after Phòò Thiàng had rented some cooking equipment for the funeral food preparation, the house still lacked essentials (spoons, condiments, bowls, et cetera). At one point, for instance, when I asked Salina if she knew where I could find a cup for instant coffee, she scolded me, 'They don't have cups; this house isn't like our house, Charlie.' A sense of dearth pervaded.

The infrastructure of a 'good house' or *hùan2 dii3*—the food, movies, sleeping areas, and bathrooms—is supposed to help draw and keep a crowd over the course of the funeral.<sup>148</sup> Paa's

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<sup>148</sup> Why do people want a crowd? To guard the house against malevolent spirits, to keep the deceased from feeling lonely, to console and support the deceased's kin, to manifest the deceased's social network, to make more Buddhist

house, by all accounts, did not have a crowd. Phòò Thiang sat alone next to Paa’s corpse the night she died, in Structure A, as Kham and Thii slept forty feet or so away in Structure B. On the second night and final night of the *hùan2 dii3*, only three people—Phòò Thiang, Salina, and I—slept next to Paa’s corpse. We alternated staying awake, relighting the sticks of incense, and tending to the candle that was meant to burn continuously. During the *songsakaan3* the following day—that is, the funeral procession and cremation—there were not enough men to lift the casket.

The lack of people at Paa’s funeral haunted it. Some said the lack of people at Paa’s *hùan2 dii3* was because Paa herself did not have many connections. For most of the past five years, she had not left her bed because she could not walk. As I mentioned above, Thii said that no one came because the family was poor, and Lao people did not like poor people or want to be near them (cf. High 2014:105).<sup>149</sup> Whatever the reason for the lack of a sufficient crowd, my host family did try to gather people. Salina invited a man that she had been courting—along with a few other friends who never showed up—and Phòò Thiang and Mèè Phòòn invited, among others, Moo and Sii, their neighbors and good friends, who had also spent a significant time at Kham and Thii’s house the year before, when Paa’s husband died.

Most visitors to a funeral will offer money to the deceased (*kin3 thaan2 nam2*). Phòò Thiang sat next to Paa’s corpse throughout the *hùan2 dii3* in part to keep Paa company but also to receive these offerings. People would hand him bills of mostly Lao Kip. As in other funerals, Phòò Thiang would tap the money onto Paa’s casket to get her attention and then tell her corpse

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merit for the dead and for the living—these are just a few of the reasons people mention when asked. I explore these reasons in detail in chapter nine, but for now all you need to know is that there is a consensus that having a crowd is good.

<sup>149</sup> *phuu5 daj3 bòø-mii2 lêqø-khacaw4 mak1 bòø-maa2 juu1 phuan1 nam2 huu4 qaql phuu5 thuk1 phuu5 ñaak4 lêq1*

who was giving how much money and ask her to bless that person. He would then write the amount and the giver's name in a ledger.

I asked Phòò Thiang why he was the one in charge of watching and handling the donated money, as opposed to say, Thii, who lived at the house. He first said that he was in charge because he was the only one who knew how to talk to Paa, to tap on her casket, and to ask for a blessing in the right way. Suspecting that was not the only reason, I pushed slightly, and Phòò Thiang admitted that he also sat there because when people gave donations to Thii, she would not write the donations down and instead put the money in her pants pocket, stealing it away for her own purposes.

In part to control embezzlement like this, every donation that is made to the house and every one of the house's expenses *should* be recorded in the funeral ledger, in this case a flimsy school notebook that stayed near the corpse. The ledger is more for producing a transparent account of the funerary money than for serving as a memorial of who went to the funeral and how much they gave. In this respect, funerary ledgers differ from ledgers of other events. For baby showers, weddings, and other parties, for instance, people often keep their ledgers.<sup>150</sup> When I asked people why they kept these ledgers, they said that it was so that the next time the person had an event you could give that much or more cash to the giver, but never less. Funerals, by their very nature, preclude such strict and balanced reciprocity, and the money given during them is literally, first and foremost and as Klima (2002) highlights, a gift to the dead. While the dead can repay these gifts by, for example, providing the asked for blessings, they cannot do so in the same manner as the living.

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<sup>150</sup> See Mariani (2012) for discussion of weddings and wedding gifts in Vientiane and how they are sometimes discussed as vehicles for corruption.

A week after the funeral, I asked Thii if I could see the ledger recording the funerary gifts. She told me that she had thrown it out, and it was probably rotting in a pile of trash somewhere on the property. Admittedly, I first suspected that she was nervous about my auditing the ledger, that she was concerned I was checking to see if she had embezzled any money. Phòò Thiang had already told me that Thii never recorded the donations she received, and I thought that this was yet another tactic of deception, that she was lying to me. Clearly, part of me had begun to see Thii as my host-family saw her, to question what she told me, and suspect her of thievery. But when I told Phòò Thiang that the ledger was gone, he was neither surprised nor outraged; he said he did not care, that such ledgers were useless after the funeral. The ledger was not a sentimental object, and in this respect, he did not fault Thii for throwing it out as it had no more use.

But the flimsy notebook ledger, useless to Phòò Thiang after the funeral, was of the utmost importance to him during it. It was a mechanism he used for limiting the graft that he saw all about the funeral. Throughout the funeral, he was almost single-mindedly occupied with controlling this graft. He repeatedly counted and checked the basket of donated money. He put to memory various funeral costs, citing them off effortlessly weeks later when I asked him about how much he paid for the bottles of water or the rented chairs. Even the way Phòò Thiang gave Kham money to buy lights for Paa's casket hinted at suspicion and a desire to keep things 'clear' (*cèèng3*).

### **Interrupted Evaluations**

Phòò Thiang sat near the casket in which Paa had just been interred. Holding a 50,000 Kip bill in his hand, he impatiently called out "Who's going to buy these lights?!" (*qaw4 phaj3*

*qiø-paj3 sùù4 naq1*). Like the candle that one should keep burning near the corpse, the lights Phòò Thiàng spoke about were meant to illuminate and ‘beautify’ the casket (*hêt1 haj5 man2 ngaam2*), and iconically index Paa’s continued presence. The lights should stay draped on the casket during the days preceding the cremation, ideally blinking on-and-off, or *ñaap4-ñiip4-ñaap4-ñiip4*, as the Lao ideophone captures it, throughout the day and night. As Phòò Thiàng called out for someone to buy the lights, his granddaughter, Salina’s eldest daughter, stood near him with her hands outstretched, offering to relay the money over to whomever. But Phòò Thiàng jerked the money away from the little girl and told her he wanted to know who was going to buy the lights first before handing over any money and so he held the money until, eventually, Kham approached the platform of the house and Phòò Thiàng stood up and met him at the platform’s edge. He handed Kham the money and suggested that the ‘Chinese’ market down the road might have the blinking lights. He told Kham to hurry and then promptly returned to the ledger and recorded that he gave Kham 50,000 Kip to buy the stringed lights.

Two hours later, Kham returned with the lights and discovered they were broken. As Kham plugged them in and out, he cursed the Chinese vendor he had bought them from. He then left the scene, presumably to buy new lights. Sii, Salina’s friend, and I began talking about what had just happened. My camera, balancing on its tripod, continued rolling.



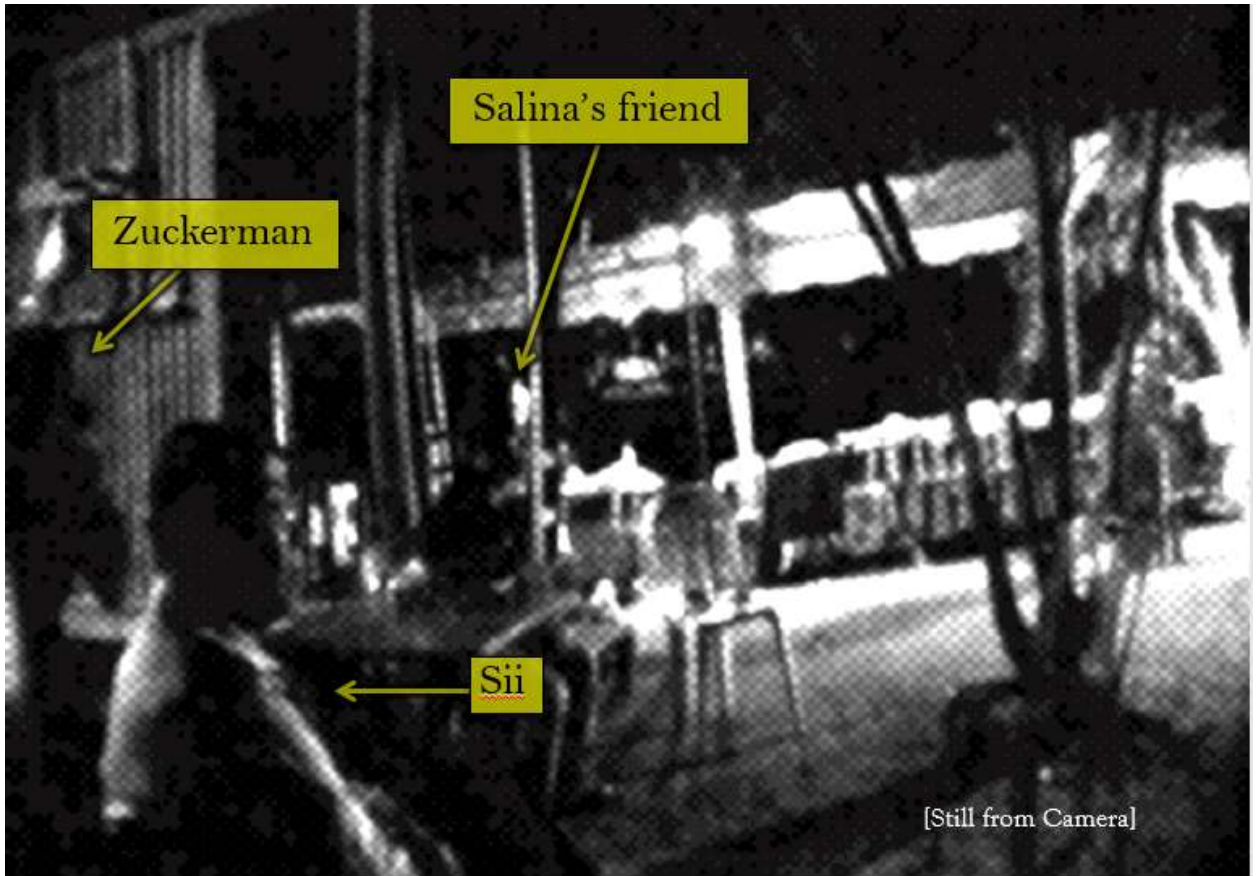


Figure 31: Sii, Zuckerman, and Salina's Friend

The night was dark now, and Sii and Salina's friend sat on rented plastic chairs on the ground outside of Structure A. I sat cross-legged on the edge of the open-air structure's platform floor, still 'guarding' (*faw5*) Paa's corpse, as Phòd Thiàng had told me to do while he rested at home for a few hours. A movie was playing in the background, although no one was watching it. Instead, all three of us looked off in the distance, toward Structure B where Kham and Thii's children napped with some of their dogs. Sii said he did not like how close the children and dogs were, that it might make the children allergic, and Salina's friend remarked, alluding to the expensive cuts of meat that Kham and Thii fed the dogs, that the couple treated their dogs better than their children. No one else was in earshot. The night was dark and cool and the pace of the conversation reminded me of sitting around a campfire in America.

During one of the conversational lulls, I asked Sii if Kham had gone to buy new lights. As I asked, Salina’s friend, who had wandered up to the front of Structure A only a few minutes before, and therefore had missed seeing Kham discover the lights were broken, turned back and looked toward Paa’s casket, and asked a follow up question:

**Salina’s Friend**

8.1) *paj3 sù4 maa2 lèqø-bòø-hung1 vaa3*  
 “[Kham] bought [the lights] and they didn’t light-up?”

**Sii**

8.2) *sù4 faj2 ñaap4 ñiip4 maa2 nii4 nêê1 vaa1 man2 khaat5 mot2 lèw4 vaa1 san4*  
 “[He] bought blinking lights, he said they all broke, he said that.”  
 (Sii says this as he turns and points with his left hand to the broken lights still strung around the casket.)

**Salina’s Friend**

8.3) *qaaw4*  
 “Wow.”

**CZ**

8.4) *maa2 lèw4...bòø-daj4...=*  
 “...he came...but didn’t”

**Sii**

8.5) *saaj3 bèèp5 daj3 man2 qaw3 qan3 khòng3 kaw1 maa2 qan3 nii4 kaø-thò1 daj3*  
 “What kind of lights were they? [Kham probably just] brought old ones, how much do those cost?”

**CZ**

8.6) *lèø-kaø-laaw2 vaa1 laaw2 sù4 juu1 han5 dêê1 saj1 daj4*  
 “He said [that when] he bought them [at the store, they] worked.”

**Sii**

8.7) *(h) (h)*  
 “ha-ha.”

**Sii**

8.8) *qoo3 saang1 vaw4*  
 “Ohh, [he] can really talk.”

In this moment, Sii subtly questions whether Kham had even bought new lights, or just brought some old ones and pocketed the cash. He never directly says that Kham had done anything wrong. He first frames Kham’s claims that he had bought the lights and that they had broken with reported speech markers (in line 8.2). Sii could have plainly said that Kham bought the lights and that they broke from a power surge but instead, he uses two *verbum dicendi*—both an

initial *vaal* and a final *vaal san4*—to frame these facts as Kham’s words, to orient to them as talk rather than fact, to keep their epistemological ground in focus. The framing of the speech as reported speech in combination with the apparent unbelievability of the story appear to have been enough that Salina’s friend recognized a judgment.<sup>151</sup> In line **8.3**, he aligns with Sii’s incredulousness when he responds with “*qaaw4*.” *Qaaw4*, which I have translated as ‘wow,’ is generally used to register surprise or disbelief, and here points to something unspecified and suspicious in the recounted tale.<sup>152</sup> Sii next asks, rhetorically, what kind of lights Kham had actually bought, were they old ones, perhaps? “How much would those cost?” he continues, with the implication that the lights were cheaper than the 50,000 Kham claimed. In line **8.6**, when I mention that Kham had said that the lights worked at the shop, before he brought them back to the house, Sii, rather than agreeing with Kham’s claim, responds in line **8.8** by saying that Kham can “really talk” (*saang1 vaw4*). By presenting Kham’s words and treating them as a product of Kham’s ability to ‘talk’ rather than a recounting of actual events, Sii insinuates that Kham stole the money.

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<sup>151</sup> Speakers often use reported speech as an opportunity to directly embody and portray the prosodic, phonetic, and moral characteristics of whomever they are quoting (i.e., in so-called ‘direct reported speech,’ cf. Besnier 1993; Besnier 2009; Hill 1995), but Sii does not voice the qualities of Kham’s speech as he talks. Instead, he presents Kham’s words with a normal prosodic cadence.

<sup>152</sup> A similarly functioning *qaaw4* often co-occurs with *lèw4*, ‘already’ as in *qaaw4 lèw4*.

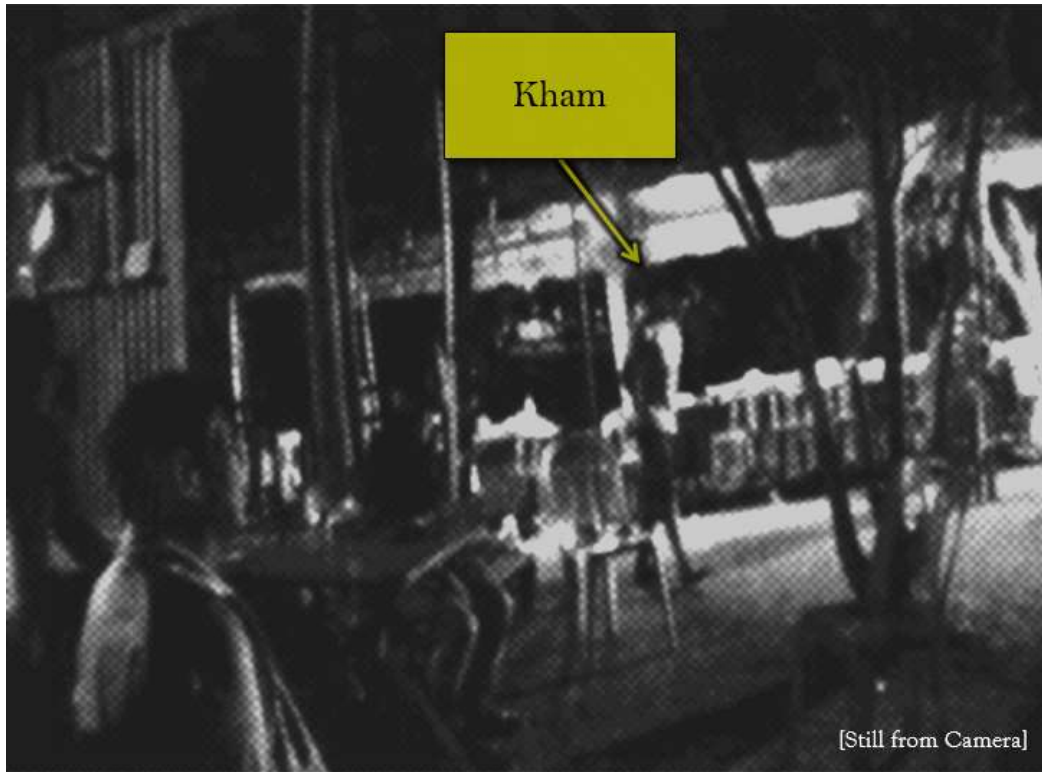


Figure 32: Kham entering the scene

As Sii chuckled and finished line **8.8**, we heard Kham’s voice come from behind Structure A. He hadn’t left yet. He was walking along the side of the house and saying to a friend that he needed to buy a better brand of lights this next time. We went silent and turned toward him as he talked. Had he heard us talking about him? He hadn’t seemed to.<sup>153</sup> Nevertheless, even when I watch this moment on my monitor at home, I get that feeling that comes when someone enters the room as you are speaking about them; when the care with which you habitually handle a person’s ‘face’ crashes against the carelessness with which you talk about them as an absent, third person—a ‘non-person’ as Benveniste (1971) put it.

What is this feeling? Why did everyone quiet when Kham approached? Anthropologists have studied this issue most directly under the banner of ‘gossip.’ Because ‘gossip’ and related

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<sup>153</sup> After Kham passed, Sii and the other man resumed talking about him: “[He] pays more attention to his dogs than his kids.” The other man said: “Yeah.” Sii chuckled.

ideas in different languages are local metapragmatics, embroiled with negative connotations (and thus disagreements about where and when they should apply), gossip is impossible to delimit fully (Haviland 1977; Besnier 2009).<sup>154</sup> At its analytic core, however, seems to be a concern with presence and absence. Saying that something is gossip often presupposes that the same conversation would be (more) inappropriate, rude, or vulgar if the person being gossiped about were present. Gossip is what you say *about someone* not what you say *to someone*. As Gluckman (1963:313) puts it: “The main moral norm is that you must scandalize about an opponent behind his back, if your allegations are at all open, to his face, you must be delicate and never give him ground to state that you insulted him. For insults of this kind, if open, make impossible the pretence of group amity.” In form, gossip can range in its cruelty, performativity, addressivity, and structure (see Lempert 2012 for discussion of (in)direct performativity and addressivity). Gossipers have many tools for talking trash: They can explicitly impute bad things about specific others or more vaguely imply such things as Brenneis (1984:494) describes Fiji Indians doing during *talanoa*, and as Sii and Salina’s friend did just before Kham entered the scene.<sup>155</sup>

While anthropologists studying gossip have gravitated toward moments of gossip *qua* revelation, where people wield cruel facts and rumors about absent others, conversation analysts have tended to focus on the care with which people treat those who are present.<sup>156</sup> Their interest

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<sup>154</sup> Many anthropologists that have studied gossip have been drawn to functional explanations. This has led to debate, most famously between Max Gluckman (1963; 1968) and Robert Paine (1967; 1968) who argued about whether gossip was, among other things, a means for strengthening ‘unity’ or a means for people to achieve their own interests. Anthropologists have been drawn to understanding the function of gossip in part to contradict the many academics and local populations that talk about it as if it does nothing in regard to more on the record, and instrumental, forms of talk. As with ‘phatic communion’ (Zuckerman, 2016), the ‘for its own sake,’ ‘aimless,’ and ‘inconsequential’ qualities of gossip have drawn many anthropologists away from gossip’s truth value and toward its ‘social effects.’

<sup>155</sup> In *Talanoa*, quotatives also play a part: “the relative opacity of talanoa texts and the systems of indirect reference sustained through the *bole* [i.e. quotative] construction help to make speakers less than fully culpable for their commentary” (Brenneis 1984:494).

<sup>156</sup> Their conclusions parallel Adam Smith’s reflections on interaction. Smith (1880:Part VI, Section II, Para. 15) wrote that humans have a “natural disposition to accommodate and to assimilate, as much as we can, our own sentiments, principles, and feelings, to those which we see fixed and rooted in the persons whom we are obliged to

is partly rooted in Goffman's discussions of 'face.'<sup>157</sup> While Goffman repeatedly points out that people do, on occasion, attack others' 'faces,' he emphasizes that non-aggression is the norm. Often, people agree with others not because they are passionately committed to their opinions, but because they care about defending pleasant sociality itself. Pomerantz (1984:60) showed this in her research on assessments (see also Stivers, Mondada, and Steensig 2011). She found that when someone made an assessment, the person with whom he or she was speaking would tend not only to agree but to upgrade it. That is, when one speaker said, "...Well, anyway, ihs-ihs not too co:ld," the speaker's conversational partner followed with: "Oh it's warm..." When another said, "It's really a clear lake, isn't it." the speaker's conversational partner added, "It's wonderful." In those cases where the second speaker did not agree, he or she tended to frame his or her disagreement as partial or qualified. The 'preference structure,' as conversation analysts refer to it, was toward agreement. The exception that Pomerantz found was telling: when the first speaker made a self-deprecating comment, his or her interlocutor tended to disagree with it. For instance, one woman said, "...but it's not bad for an old lady," and her interlocutor responded with "You're not old, Grandma."

When Goffman (1967:5-6) introduced 'face' as an analytic, he built on discussion of "the Chinese conception of face" (he cites Hu 1944; Yang 1945; Smith 1894; Macgowan 1912 and mentions Mauss (1925) for the "American Indian conception"). That discussion was itself part of a long history of essentializing how East and Southeast Asians think about prestige, social interaction, and dissemblance. Scholars in Laos and Thailand have treated 'face' (*naa5* in Lao)

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live and converse a great deal with." This disposition, he continued, "is the cause of the contagious effects of both good and bad company."

<sup>157</sup> Goffman (1967:42) wrote that "It seems to be a characteristic obligation of many social relationships that each of the members guarantees to support a given face for the other members in given situations. To prevent disruption of these relationships, it is therefore necessary for each member to avoid destroying the others' face."

as a trope for understanding what they see as a broad pattern of conflict avoidance in Lao and Thai culture.<sup>158</sup> Herbert P. Phillips (Phillips 1966:79), a ‘culture and personality’ researcher who conducted fieldwork thirty-one kilometers northeast of Bangkok in a village called Bang Chan, commented “Bang Chaners are highly motivated to conform while in the direct presence of others.” Joseph Westermeyer (1973a:743), a psychologist who during the late 1960s studied opioid addiction, *amok* attacks, and assassinations in Laos wrote, “[P]oliteness, reserve, and indirect confrontation through intermediaries are the Laotian norms for [interpersonal] relations.” While most academic work on pragmatics, politeness, and conflict avoidance in Thailand and Laos is written respectfully, these discussions, my own included, risk bolstering orientalist generalizations about the prevalence of superficiality and dissemblance in social interaction among Thai and Lao people.<sup>159</sup> Much as Lemon (2000) shows that Roma have been racialized as ‘natural performers,’ in moments, Lao and Thai sociality seems to morph into a surface without substance, a realm where the Gricean (1976) maxim of quality is thrown out the window.

This problem is made even stickier because, at times, Thai and Lao people themselves articulate similar metapragmatic ideas.<sup>160</sup> “Ordinarily,” Phillips (1966:79) wrote, “this [superficial agreement] is not intended as a form of duplicity. Villagers are quite sincere (and probably correct) when they say: ‘People are much happier when you agree with them and tell them what they want to hear.’” When I asked people in Luang Prabang why they did not broach

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<sup>158</sup> Ukosakul (2005:117) writes that “to be polite in Thai social interaction implies maintaining one another’s ‘face,’” and Bilmes (2001:189) likewise comments that “anything that promises to disrupt group harmony can be considered damaging to Thai face.”

<sup>159</sup> Embree (1950: 187) writes: “To tell a lie successfully, to dupe someone else, is praiseworthy in Thai culture—a tradition that, no doubt, has not been without utility to the nation in its foreign relations. It is not so praiseworthy to have one’s lie discovered, however, and one so discovered invites any punishment he may receive. There are many sayings bearing on the point, and many of the popular stories collected by Le May reflect an admiration for the man or woman who can successfully deceive another. It is shameful to be caught, but clever to succeed; and the moral of many of the stories and sayings is that one should always be wary.”

<sup>160</sup> As Bilmes (2001:187) records, “Thais openly acknowledge that they place a higher premium on saying pleasant things that make the hearer feel good and avoiding unpleasant things in conversation.”

this or that opinion or evaluation, many gave me formulas that sounded like what Max Gluckman (1963:313) wrote about gossip, quoted above: insults, accusations, and evaluations should not be made openly because they destroy the pretense of amity and solidarity.<sup>161</sup> Whereas some readers might view the silence of Moo and Salina’s friend as a kind of ‘dissimulation’ of their opinions, in Luang Prabang, people generally found honest articulation of suspicions and opinions to be much more aggressive and problematic. The desire to interact smoothly and without conflict, they told me, should overtake the desire to broach a topic or ‘speak straightly’ (*vaw4 khwaam2 sùùl*).<sup>162</sup> Repeatedly, I heard that if you cannot escape going ‘near’ someone with whom you are upset you should resist your urge to criticize them, so as to avoid ‘yelling,’ ‘noisiness,’ and ‘offense.’ One should ‘observe’ an interlocutor’s bad actions but not bring them up to him or her or try to convince them to change. As a Lao etiquette manual advises, ‘When you see someone doing something that you do not like, do not criticize them out loud except if [that person’s action] will affect society as a whole, [if it will] then tell them politely.’<sup>163</sup> Implicit in this manual’s advice, as in much of what people told me more casually in Luang Prabang, is a notion that the *ethics of interaction*, of handling others with care and kid-gloves, should supersede the need to voice *ethical stances within interaction*, whether judgments or suspicions.

In all of these discussions, the goal that is promoted as most important is smooth non-contentious interaction. As Philips (1966:30) wrote of Thailand in the 1960s, in contemporary

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<sup>161</sup> Of course, as Gluckman was aware, such a preference for maintaining a pretence of group amity varies across persons, situations, and cultures; nevertheless, it is strikingly common to handle people differently depending on whether they are copresent and absent.

<sup>162</sup> “Failing to conform to the group’s expectations invites criticism and disrupts the social order. This is loathsome to the Thai. Therefore, each person does his best to behave in ways that preserve social harmony” (Bilmes 2001:188).

<sup>163</sup> The author writes, “ເມື່ອເຫັນວ່າໃຜເຮັດຫຍັງຜິດ ເຖິງວ່າເຮົາບໍ່ມັກ ກໍ່ຢ່າອອກບາກຕິຕຽນ ຍົກເວັ້ນແຕ່ຈະເປັນ ຜົນເສຍຫາຍແກ່ສວນລວມ ເຮົາຈຶ່ງຄໍອຍເວົ້າໃຫ້ຄວາມເຫັນຕາມສົມຄວນ.”



Luang Prabang, “the volatility of a dispute is what is often most feared...”<sup>164</sup> This volatility is often spoken about in idioms of ‘noisiness’ (*khwaam2 nan2*). Gambling’s propensity to bring out such anti-social sociality is perhaps the principal feature of gambling that people find so troubling.<sup>165</sup> When I asked Phòò Thiàng, for example, why he did not broach the issue of missing money with Kham and Thii, he said: “I didn’t want to say anything because, if I said anything, it would just cause noisiness” (*qan3 nii4 haw2 bòø-jaak5 vaw4 ñòòn2 vaa1 han5 vaw4 lèèw4 siø-nan2*). Maybe, he continued, if Kham and Thii had some sense [of right and wrong], he would have said something to them. But,” he continued, “people with sense (*khwaam2 huu5*) wouldn’t steal the money in the first place. Forget (*jaal*) them,”<sup>166</sup> he told me, gesturing away from his body as we sat chatting a few weeks after Paa had died.

From this perspective, certain patterns of dissemblance and contradiction are not ethical failures but signs of virtue. The ideal is to be someone capable of ‘letting things go’ (*qot2 qaw3*). But it is not merely that inconsistency or never being ‘truthful’ is valued in Laos. As Phòò Thiàng’s comments imply, while Kham and Thii are not worth the ‘noise’ that comes with broaching uncomfortable subjects, some people are worth outrage and ‘straight’ talk. Many in Luang Prabang share this sentiment that one can and should talk ‘straight’ to those about whom

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<sup>164</sup> Here is the entire quotation: “Because the volatility of a dispute is what is often most feared one rarely hears of any actual argument accompanying the disagreement; instead villagers say, ‘We had a few words and he left. That’s all.’”

<sup>165</sup> The once-Prime Minister of Laos Katay D. Sasorith makes a connection between sound and discord clear in the end of the following passage, in which he compares two games: “Card players are often said to be rude people with whom it is difficult to get along, people even whose behavior is apt to be brutal. Not every card game ends in a brawl, but still it not infrequently happens that a player disappointed in his hopes blames his partner for the mistakes he made in terms wholly unrelated to courtesy. *Phay-tong*, the game that is popular all over Laos, differs in this from other games for it is played in a curiously serene atmosphere. It gives rise only to the joyful shouts of ‘Song! Song!’ from the lucky winner when he has collected all the cards he requires for winning. Apart from this, few gatherings are as quiet and discreet as a gathering of *phay-tong* players” (De Berval 1959: 198).

<sup>166</sup> *jaal* does not literally mean forget, but ignore. Nevertheless, I think that the English ‘forget them’ has a similar emphasis on intentionally ignoring and not thinking about someone. The Lao, *lùùm2* or more literally forget, is often talked about as a less voluntary act, which comes from a loss of feeling over time, cf. the pop song *hak1 bòø-lùùm2* or ‘Unforgettable Love.’ I have the gestural information because this interview with Phòò Thiàng, like most of the interviews cited in this chapter, was video-recorded.

one cares. This is clear in an example I explore in chapter eight, where I track the dissolution of a man named Muu's friendship with his *siaw1* or 'peer' group. As Muu's relationship with the group frayed, Dii, who was closest to Muu, repeatedly confronted him and told him to change how he behaved. I spent many nights drinking beer and listening to Dii harangue him about learning to be a better teammate in soccer and to accept (*hap1*) the opinions and sentiments of their other friends. These conversations ultimately, as Dii complained to me months later, failed to make Muu change. Dii stopped being friends with Muu. Afterwards, when they did interact, Dii and Muu spoke more politely and Dii no longer criticized Muu. When I was leaving for the U.S., I invited both men to my going-away party. Muu came with another friend, whom I had not invited, and the pair stayed for a short time, drinking beer. Muu and Dii interacted politely. But after Muu left, Dii and others told me that Muu had brought his uninvited friend not for company, as I had assumed, but for protection. 'He was afraid,' they said, 'that we would beat him up' (*man2 jaan4 haw2 tii3 man2*). This fear and the tension between Muu and Lai had been invisible to me, cloaked in the polite cheersing of beer and the persistence of high-fives. For Dii, and many people I asked in Luang Prabang, telling people what one really thinks is reserved for those whom one loves deeply.<sup>167</sup>

At Paa's funeral, almost everyone produced predictable evaluative gaps between what they said with Kham versus about him. People were generally agreeable toward Kham. They politely called him 'older brother' or 'child,' they shared cigarettes with him, and they thanked him for the—quite frankly delicious—river eels he brought back. There were, however, differences in the extent to which people treated Kham respectfully when he was present. These

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<sup>167</sup> When I asked Dii directly why he did not broach a related uncomfortable topic with a mutual friend, he said he liked to 'observe' (*sang3 kêêt5*) how people act, and save this knowledge for later to guide his opinions of people and how he interacts with them.

differences show that issues of directness, conflict avoidance, and ‘speaking straight’ are not automatically resolved but negotiated by people. I highlight these differences with a pair of two related examples. The examples reveal two broadly distinct types of interdiscursive inconsistency: one, a more or less pure contradiction of stances and the other, a minimization of a stance.

### **Present Evaluations**

My camera ran in front of Structure A for over five hours. The video allows me to trace how the lights—and the evaluations regarding how Kham purchased them—emerged as a topic of conversation. The lights first appear in the recording twenty-four minutes after Phòò Thiàng gave the money earmarked for them to Kham. At this point, a group of monks are where Phòò Thiàng was sitting, and guests are attending to their chanting. A hand enters the camera frame, grasping the lights. The hand, presumably Kham’s, passes the lights to one of Paa’s relatives who is sitting with his hands in a prayer position (the *nop1* or Thai *wai*), listening to the chanting. After receiving the lights, the man stands up and slowly drapes them around Paa’s casket. The monks continue to chant. As the man fumbles with the lights, he occasionally crouches downward toward the monks, minding that this is a momentarily taboo arrangement of bodies—he so high, the monks low. The lights do not work even when plugged in—and the man briefly leaves the scene. When he re-enters, he bows three times, sits, and continues listening to the chanting, apparently resigned to have Kham deal with the lights later.

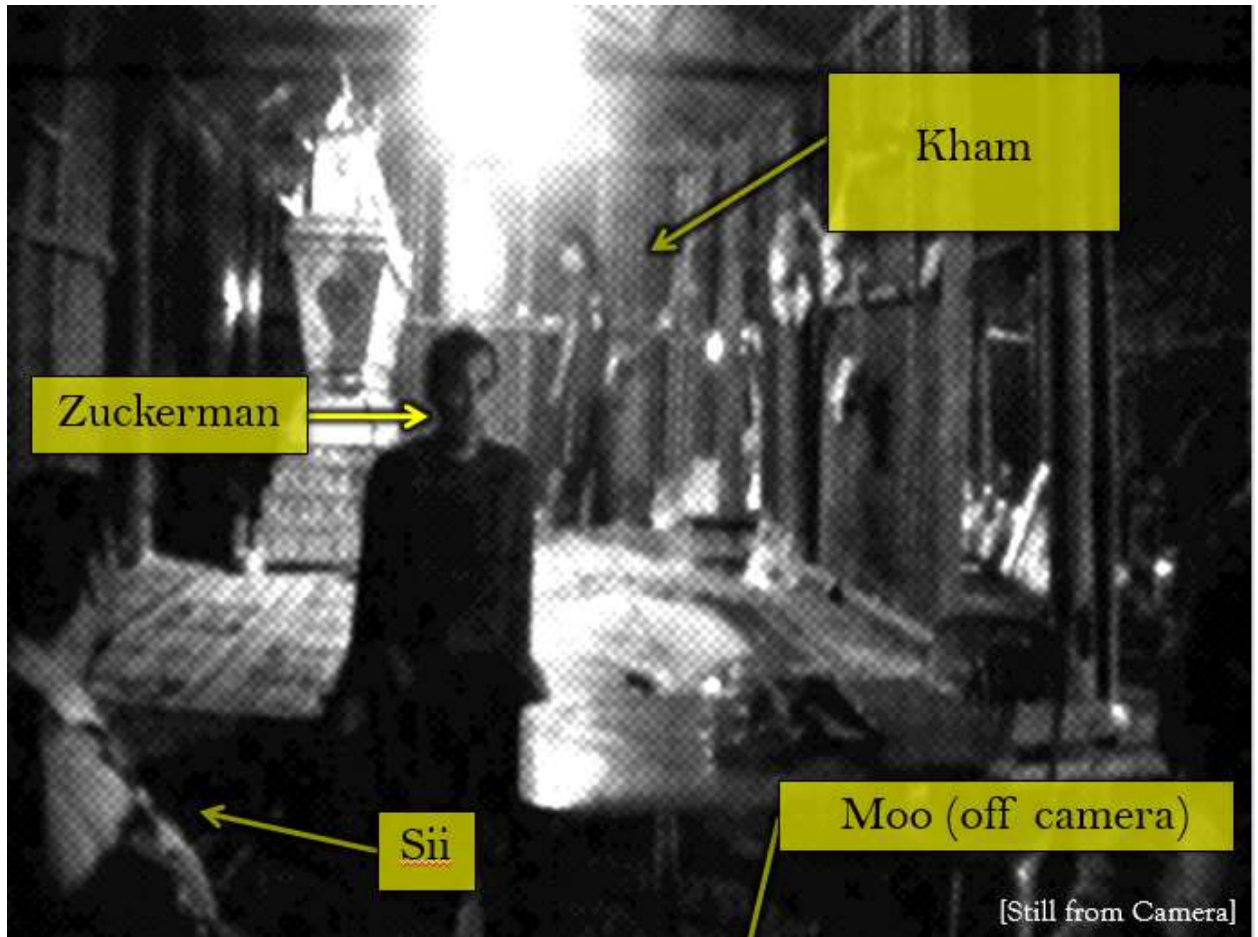


Figure 33: Kham fiddling with the lights

Almost two hours later, the monks had left and I sat on the platform of the house chatting with Sii and Moo, Sii’s wife (the image above captures the scene). With a headlamp on his forehead that he used to hunt eels, Kham stood behind me and fiddled with the lights, tangled and untangled them, plugged and unplugged them, and eventually, spoke:

**Kham**  
 1.1) *qee3*  
 “Yeah...”  
 1.2) *sên5 siap5 nii4 bòø-daj4 naq1*  
 “So, the lights can’t be plugged in?”

Kham draws our attention. I turn but sit quietly and Sii and Moo respond as he continues to fiddle with the lights.

**Moo**

1.4) *qan3 daj3 kòq1*  
“What’s that?”

**Kham**

1.5) *faj2 sii3 nii4 naq1*  
“These lights”

1.6) *siap5 nii4 man2 kaø-thùng3 juu1 daj4 sam4*  
“The cord will reach the outlet.”

**Moo**

1.7) *pên3 ñang3 bòø-siap5 san4 naq1*  
“Then why don’t [you] plug them in?”

**Kham**

1.8) *laø-lèèw4 laaw2 pên3 ñang3 ñang2 bòø-siap5 sam4 qaq1*  
“Then why didn’t [the other man] plug them in?”

**Moo**

1.9) *man2 bòø-mii2 hua3 tii3*  
“The cord probably doesn’t have a plug, right?”

**Sii**

1.10) *mii2 hua3 siap5 qaq1*  
“Does it have a plug?”

**Moo**

1.11) *man2 bòø-mii2 hua3 siap5 tii4 qaj5*  
“The cord probably doesn’t have a plug, right, older brother [i.e., Kham]?”

**Sii**

1.12) *luuk4 kaø-lòng2 siap5 lòng2 beng1 san4 vaa1*  
“Child [i.e., Kham], you should plug them in and try, then.”

**Kham**

1.13) *ñang3 vaa3 bòø-khaw5*  
“Why aren’t they working?”

**Sii**

1.14) *bòø-khaw5 nòq1*  
“They aren’t working, huh?”

1.15) *man2 khaat5 lèèw4 tii4*  
“They’re broken, right?”

There are no signs of suspicion, distrust, or judgment in Moo’s and Sii’s questions to Kham.

They refer to him politely with kinterms (Moo calls him ‘older brother’ and Sii calls him

‘child’), and offer patently helpful—albeit obvious—advice and questions: “plug them in”; “[do the lights] have a plug?”<sup>168</sup>

Moo, Sii, and I again begin to chat with each other and Kham resumes what he was doing before—fiddling with the lights, tangling and untangling them, plugging them in and unplugging them. As Kham works, he occasionally comments about the broken lights—twice to himself and once to someone on the phone. There is more than a minute between each of these lines:

**Kham**

Time: 1:44:18:

3) *paa khon2 ciin3 nii4 man2... faj2 sii3 khaat5 man2 maa2 khaaj3 haj4 kuu3...*  
“What, this Chinese guy, he sold me these broken lights.”

Time: 1:45:30:

4) *qaw4 kuu3 vaa1 faj2 sii3 nii4 vaa1 saaj3 khaat5 laaj3 kuu3 vaa1*  
“What, these lights!... The cord is really broken.”<sup>169</sup>

Time: 1:46:38:

5) *qooj3 khit1 qòòk5*  
“Oooh, think!”<sup>170</sup>

These ostensibly ‘self-directed’ comments crescendo over a three-minute period until, with a fourth comment, Kham again draws Moo and Sii to talk to him about the lights:

**Kham**

6.1) *qòòj ciin3 nii4 khit1 paj3 khit1 qòòk5 khoot4 phòò1 mùng2 qeej ...hung1... khaan4 vaw4 dii3*  
“Oh, this Chinese guy, I understand now, fuck his parents, wow, I’m too tired to speak politely now.”<sup>171</sup>

**Sii**

6.2) *(h) (h) khaw2 pên3 ñang3*  
“Haha, what happened with him?”

**Kham**

6.3) *lòòng2 mùù4 kii4 kaø-daj4 hung1 dii3 dak2 bat2 maa2 hòòt4 phii4 lêqø-man2 saaj3 khaat5 mot2*

<sup>168</sup> The obviousness of the advice is partially visible in the sentence final particles used in 1.12—as *san4 vaa1* seems to imply a matter-of-fact quality to the action.

<sup>169</sup> There is evidence that this mention on the phone also functions to display the discovery of the lights for us sitting there. Kham says the line as he is looking at the lights and talking on the phone. He has not mentioned the lights yet to the caller, only that he is “working at home.” He does not return to talking about the lights before he hangs up.

<sup>170</sup> He says this as he is staring at, and fiddling with, the lights.

<sup>171</sup> The recording is unclear, and different people who listened to it for me heard Kham say slightly different things. But these differences aside, everyone was sure that Kham was yelling about the Chinese vendor who sold him the lights.

“I tried [the lights] a second ago and they were flashing perfectly, then I got here and they’re all broken”

**Sii**

6.4) *nê1 khaw2 hêt1 khaaj3 saaj3 sòt5 lèw4*  
“See, he sold already broken lights.”

At this point, Salina walks closer to Structure A and into the interaction.

**Salina**

6.5) *leqø-man2 bòø-daj4 naq1 qan3 nan4 naq1*  
(walking into the frame of the camera) “So the lights don’t work, huh?”

**Kham**

6.6) *khit1 qòòk5 khit1 pên3 nòq1 mm*  
(to himself) “Way to think, jeeze!”

**Salina**

6.7) *lêqø-man2 bòø-daj4 sam4*  
“And the lights don’t work, right?”

**Kham**

6.8) *bòq1*  
“Nope.”

**Salina**

6.9) *paj3 pian3 paj4*  
“Go change them, go [now].”

6.10) *paj3 pian3 kòòn1 paj3 sùu4 qaw3 maj1*  
“Go change them before [we] need to buy new ones.”

**Kham**

6.11) *pian3 ... pian3 nèw2 daj4 man2... phen1 kaø-pit2 haan4 kòòn1*  
“Change them? How am I going to change them? He, he closed the store already.”

**Salina**

6.12) *paj3 sùu4 lèw4...khaw2 khaaj3 juu1 saj3 san4 naq1*  
“[Where did you] buy...Where did they sell you the lights?”

**Sii**

6.13) *bòø-pit2 thua1 dòòk5 phòq1 vaa1 bak2 qan3 nan4 bòø-khaaj3 kaan3 vên3*  
“No, they’re not closed yet, because that guy he doesn’t sell during the day.”

**Kham**

6.14) *naa5 naa5* [landmark name] *nii4 naq1*  
“No, [the guy] in front of [landmark name]”

(talk continues)

I have presented the full conversation in *Appendix A: Broken Lights Transcript*. As will quickly become clear if you choose to read that transcript, a lot happens during the short interaction. In the rest of this chapter, I draw bits and pieces from it to contrast how Moo and Sii

speak to Kham with how Salina does. As I wrote above, their approaches broadly exemplify two varieties of interdiscursive gaps we might find across interactions, just as they also exemplify two varieties of locally recognizable character in Laos: the ‘polite person’ (*khon2 suphaap4*) and the ‘yeller’ (*khon2 mak1 haaj4*). Moo and Sii, acting politely, did not leave any noticeable hints or Hansel and Gretel-like crumbs to the epistemic and ethical positions they took later. They left no evidence that I could find within the interaction itself to support a claim that they had a ‘hidden transcript,’ to borrow Scott’s (1990) term, but instead, they studiously avoided implying that Kham had done anything unseemly. Salina, in contrast, played the somewhat straight-talker. She signaled that she was critical of Kham as she spoke with him, even if her hints were indirect, muted with a softened stance and hedges like ‘I’m just kidding.’

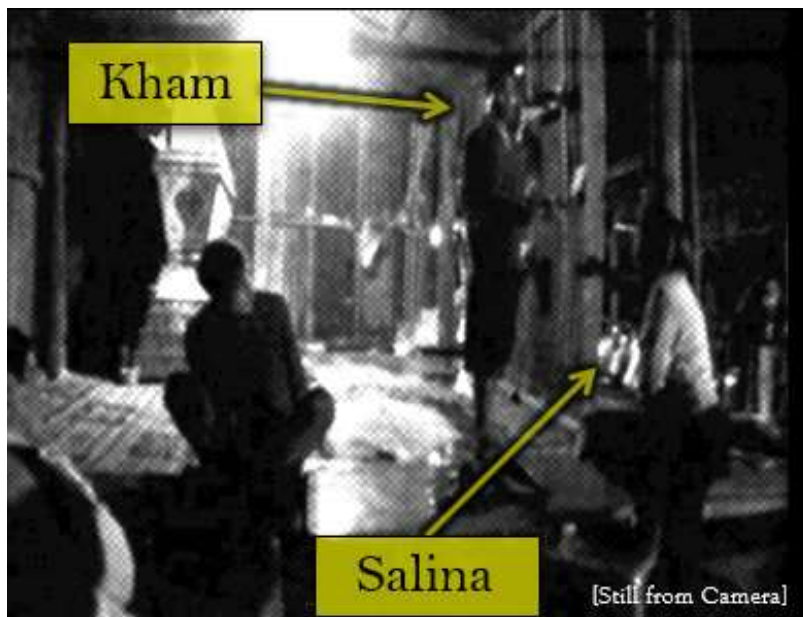


Figure 34: Salina enters the scene

Let me begin with Salina’s evaluations of Kham. While Kham blames the Chinese vendor for cheating him, Salina repeatedly assigns blame to Kham for being stupid, for not looking at the lights, and for wasting money. For example, in line 6.19, as she bends down to pick up something off the ground she says *qooooo caa4* or “Oh, stupid.” She says this at a lower volume



than she had been speaking before, in what we might as English speakers call a mumble or ‘under her breath,’ and Kham, who is also speaking, does not appear to hear. She follows the comment shortly after in line 6.21 with a frustrated response cry, *qooj4*, oriented to Kham. She uses this same cry again in line 6.30, when she says “*qooj4*, [I] don’t know anymore, [you] went to buy [the lights] but didn’t test them.” This same theme appears in 6.75, when she says: “You didn’t look at [the lights at all], did you?” In 6.65 and 6.73, she highlights that the money was wasted and lost. By line 6.84, Salina has already given Kham more money to buy another set of lights. Just before he leaves to buy them, Salina warns him to “test them well,” adding, “if [you] don’t test them well and they don’t work, watch out!”

Salina is very clearly unhappy with Kham. The *ohs*, *qooj4s*, and frustrated warnings paint a picture of an angry woman. However, almost none of her criticisms of Kham or her signs of frustration put the main crux of Kham’s story in doubt. Kham’s claim that he bought the lights new at a store run by a Chinese businessman goes unquestioned. Salina does not accuse Kham of having stolen money, but only for being stupid and for not ensuring that the lights worked before he brought them back to the house.

The one exception is telling. In 6.47, she accuses Kham of lying about how much the lights cost, but as soon as she says this, she immediately backpedals:

**Salina**

6.45) *thòò1 daj3 saaw2 haa5*

“How much, 25?”

*(Kham walks up toward Salina, in front of casket, as she searches through her purse for money just in front of structure A)*

**Kham**

6.46) *qee3*

“Yeah.”

**Salina**

6.47) *khii5 tua2 tii4*

“You’re lying, right?”

**Kham**

6.48) *qee3 paj3 sùù4 qaw3 lee2 mèè4 san2 naq1*  
“Go buy [the lights] yourself, if that’s [what you think]”  
(*Kham looks away toward the wall as he says this*)

**Salina**

6.49) *caang3 kaø-bòø-paj3 vaa1 jòòk5 sùù1 sùù1*  
“[I wouldn’t go] if someone paid me...I was just kidding.”

**Kham**

6.50) *mm*  
“That’s right”

**Sii**

6.51) *(h) (h)*  
“ha-ha.”

**Salina**

6.52) *kaø-haj4 jòòk5 daj4 laø-bat2 bòø-jòòk5 dèè1 kaø-qio-muan1 nang1 ngaw3 ngaw3...juu1.*  
“[You] have to let [me] joke, when we are not joking are we going to have fun, just sitting here quiet and sad?”

**Kham**

6.53) [*Salina*] *dang2 diaw1 lêqø-nii4 nêq1*  
“Salina is the only one being loud, now.”

**Moo**

6.54) *bòø-mii2 khon2 laaj3 haj5 man2 jòòk5 dèè1*  
“There aren’t many people, let her joke!”

After Kham responds to her, saying that she should go buy the lights herself (in 6.48), she tempers her accusation by saying that she is “just joking.”<sup>172</sup> Salina’s explicit reason for her joking is interesting in that she points to the fact that the funeral would not be ‘fun’ otherwise. As I describe in chapter nine, one of the reasons people say one wants a crowd is to keep the family of the deceased happy. In line 6.54, Moo corroborates Salina’s claim that she was joking and the purposes behind it and asks Kham to ‘let her joke’ because there are not many people. In doing this, Moo plays a kind of peacemaker (6.54).

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<sup>172</sup> To claim that one is joking like this is often used as a way of anticipating or responding to someone having taken offense—jokes are supposed to be accepted as such, and to accept something as a joke displays one’s cool-heartedness (*caj3 jên3*) and relative impenetrability to taking offense (see Zuckerman 2016). A week or so after the funeral, for example, during a very long and involved gossip session about Kham and Thii over dinner at my house, one of my other neighbors looked at me and told me that Lao people like to ‘joke’ (*vaw4 jòòk5*) and speak ‘for fun’ (*vaw4 muan1*), seeming to anticipate that I might think the gossip was too mean-spirited.

Moo and her husband Sii, in fact, played peacemaker like this throughout the interaction, deflecting blame from Kham and orienting to practical solutions for the fact that they do not have working lights. In this respect, Moo and Sii's approach contrasted with Salina's. When Kham first cusses out the Chinese vendor, for example, Sii supports this reading of what happened and suggests (in line **6.5**) that the vendor "sold already broken lights." In lines **6.13** and **6.16**, Moo and Sii, respectively, suggest that Kham might still be able to exchange the lights, because the shop that he bought them from might still be open, and when it turns out that Kham bought them somewhere else—that is, not where Sii thought he had bought them—Sii acknowledges (in line **6.18**) that that place has already closed, thereby bolstering Kham's point that he can no longer return the lights.

In line **6.37**, Kham suggests (apparently as a joke) that the lights broke because Paa, laying in her casket, had judged that she did not like their color. Moo (in line **6.38**) laughingly agrees with this idea, saying that "it hurt [Paa's] eyes, it hurt [Paa's] eyes." In line **6.78**, likewise, Moo implies that it was not Kham's fault that the lights were broken, because they worked when Kham first brought them to the house. When it turns out that they had in fact not worked when he first plugged them in at the house (line **6.79**), a fact which Salina highlights multiple times, Sii offers that the lights probably broke because they were flooded with electricity when they were plugged in (line **6.81**).

Unlike Salina, both Moo and Sii do not blame Kham for not more thoroughly investigating the lights before buying them. It is telling that the only utterance either of them says that might be construed as criticism or contradiction (Sii's line **6.23**), is followed by some backtracking (cf. Drew's 1998:297 discussion of 'defensive detailing'), which works to absolve Kham of blame:

Sii

6.23) *paj3 léqø-lòng2 ... paj2 léø-lòng2 vaj4 dee4*  
“Once you go, test [the lights], once you go test [the lights] for sure.”

**Moo**

6.24) *khaw2 lòng2 haj5 [lèw4 naa1 khaw2 lòng2 haj5 lèw4 dèl léø-caw4 qòk5 maa2 lon4 khaat5*  
*léqø-caw4 daj4 sùl1 maj1*

“They tested them there for you and you came here and they were inundated and broke here, and now you will go buy more.”

**Kham**

6.25) [*kaø-lòng2 bat2 nii4 daj4*  
“[I] tested [the lights] this last time.”

**Sii**

6.26) *man2 maa2 khaat5 juu1 phii4 nêl*  
“The [lights] broke here.”

**Moo**

6.27) *man2 maa2 khaat5 juu1 phii4 dèl*  
“The [lights] broke here.”

**Salina**

6.28) *mùu4 kii4 nii4 mêp2 lèw4 san4 naq1*  
“So, they were just working fine?”

**Kham**

6.29) *bòø-mêp2 cak2 bat2 leej2 qaq2*  
“They didn’t work at all [here].”

In line 6.23, Sii tells Kham that he should “test [the lights] for sure” when he buys the next set, implying that Kham had not tested them, or at least tested them thoroughly enough before. Then Moo in line 6.24 reminds her husband that Kham had tested them already and Kham agrees. The couple then take this telling of the event as fact in their next turns of talk, reiterating to Salina that the lights broke at the house, not before, at the shop (lines 6.25-6.27), thereby defending the notion that a) Kham could not return the lights because it was not the Chinese shop owner’s fault and b) that the lights did in fact work at some point. In the latter two lines, Moo and Sii mirror one another’s stances with a perfect poetic parallelism (Du Bois 2007; Lempert 2008), repeating each other word for word, only differing in the nearly synonymous factive sentence final particles *nêl* and *dèl* (see Enfield 2007a for discussion of the particles).

## Absent Evaluations

After the *Broken Lights Transcript* ends, Kham disappears from the scene. Salina, Moo, and Sii debrief slightly. Everyone thinks Kham has left the house to buy lights. This is ten minutes before the scene with which I began, when after Salina and Moo wandered off, and Salina’s friend wandered up, Kham reappeared just as we were talking about him.

**Salina**

7.1) *bòø-vaa1 sùù4 dòòk4 faj2 mot2 sòòng3 kòq2 bòø-beng1 bòø-hung1 ñang3 nòq1*  
“Wow, he bought two sets of lights and didn’t look [at them], they didn’t work at all.”

**Sii**

7.2) *luuk4 qan3 nan4 lêqø-luuk4 kheej3 laan4 kheej4 laaw1*  
“That kid, that’s her son-in-law?”

**Salina**

7.3) *qee3*  
“Yeah”

**Moo**

7.4) *luuk4 kheej3 kan3*  
“The son-in-law”

**Salina**

7.5) (unintelligible)

**Sii**

7.6) *(h) (h)*  
“ha-ha.”

**Salina**

7.7) *...qaw3 khòòng3 khaat5 khòòng3 man2*  
“...he just took one of his own broken lights [and brought it here].”

**Moo**

7.8) *jaan4 juu1*  
“I’m afraid [that’s probably right.]”

7.9) [unintelligible]

7.10) *siø-qaw3 maa2 siap5 lêq1 tang4 bòø-hung1 vaa3*  
“Was (he) going to come and plug it in and just have it not work?”

**Salina**

7.11) *bòø-huu4 bòø-huu4 nam2 leej2*  
“I don’t know, I don’t know what (he was thinking) at all.”

7.12) *luam2 taa3 tii4 naqø-[Paa]*  
“Do your eyes hurt [from the lights], Paa?”

**Sii, Salina, Moo**

7.13) (h) (h) (h)  
(laughing together)

This interaction starts with Salina criticizing Kham in the same manner she had when he was present: the implication being that he irresponsibly did not inspect the lights to see if they were broken when he bought them at the store. Her criticism changes, however, in line 7.7, when Salina says that Kham probably just had broken lights already lying around and brought them as if he had bought them. Rather than retort that the lights had actually broken here, as she did a few minutes earlier, in line 7.8 Moo says that she is “afraid” (i.e., she ‘suspects’) that Salina is probably right. In line 7.12, Salina directly addresses Paa’s corpse: “Do your eyes hurt [from the lights], Paa?” Everyone laughs.

A week after the funeral, when I interviewed Sii and Moo at their house, Sii retold the story of the lights with skepticism:

**Sii**

9.1) *man2 qaw3 ngen2 paj3 sù4 lòt5 faj2*  
“[Kham] took the money to buy lights”

9.2) *lòt5 faj2 ñaap4 ñiip4 ñaap4 ñiip4*  
“The kind of lights that twinkle on and off.”

9.3) *cak2 man2 lèw4 man2 paj3 sù4 lù3 vaa1 sù5 sam2 hù3 bat2 nii4 qaw3*  
*khòng3 kaw1 khaw5 maa2 thamqit2 naa1*  
“I don’t know about what he did after that... Did he go to buy lights? Did he buy them?  
Or did he bring some old broken lights, instead?”

9.4) *man2 vaa1 faj2 khaat5 mot2 pên3 qan3 nan4 man2 vaa1*  
“[Kham] said that that the lights broke [there], that’s what he said happened.”

9.5) *man2 paj3 sù4 maj1 maj1 han5 khòj1 daj4 han4 nê1*  
“Then he went to buy some new ones, which worked.”

In these lines, Sii, as he did when he spoke with Salina’s friend, invites me to draw my own conclusions, laying out ‘the facts’ in a way that encourages suspicion, but without putting any one interpretation—beyond lack of confidence in an interpretation—on the record. In line 9.3, he says explicitly that he does not know about what Kham actually did or was thinking (*cak2 man2 lèèw4*). This phrase, along with the similar *bòø-huu4 nam2 man2 lèèw4* or ‘I don’t know what he/she was thinking,’ crops up in conversations frequently as both a means for avoiding taking an explicit stance on others’ intentions or characters and as a preface for taking such a stance. When I asked Phòò Thiang, for example, why Thii would pocket the donations that people gave without writing them down in the ledger, he responded: “I don’t know what she was thinking” (*bòø-huu4 nam2 man2 lèèw4 qan3 nan4 naq1*). Likewise, Salina herself used a variation of this phrase in 7.11, above, when Moo asked her what Kham’s end strategy was in bringing broken lights to the funeral: “I don’t know, I don’t know what (he was thinking) at all.”<sup>173</sup>

This turn of phrase, and in particular, Sii’s comment that he “doesn’t know about Kham,” highlights the kinds of evaluative and epistemic gaps at the heart of this chapter. Sii’s claim is an epistemic claim that invites us to imagine that what we have heard is only a partial truth, that one can ‘not know’ what is happening in other’s minds, only suspect them. Sii uses the claim to explicitly not take a stance on whether Kham was telling the truth but, in so doing, he takes such a stance.<sup>174</sup> Sii’s contention that he does not know what Kham did parallels other ‘opacity claims,’ i.e., claims that one cannot know what is in another’s mind, common, for instance, in

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<sup>173</sup> During the funeral, the phrase was used frequently. One of Thii’s aunts, for example, criticized Thii for quickly changing out of her traditional skirt (*sin5*), saying “What kind of person are you? I don’t know what you’re thinking anymore, Thii.” In this latter case, the conversation then continued as Thii wandered away to put her *sin5* back on, moving to the edge of earshot, and as Moo and Mèè Phòòn suggested to one another what kind of person Thii might be: Moo said a “forest person,” a description laden with notions of dirt and social coarseness; Mèè Phòòn suggested Thii was “not a full person.”

<sup>174</sup> A similar phrase can sometimes have similar functions in conversations in America, e.g., ‘I don’t know about this guy.’

Melanesia. As Keane (2008a) argues, following Rupert Stasch (2008a), although such claims have historically been taken to be signs of and about local psychology, they are perhaps just as much political insofar as they implicate not just whether people *can* guess what others are thinking but their notions about whether they *should*. This explains how one’s apparent access to what was happening in another’s head or heart might shift. While Salina, for instance, says she does not “know” what Kham was thinking in 7.8, implying a broad opacity principle, in an interview later she tells me that she does know what Kham was thinking: “He wanted money, [that’s why] he said he couldn’t change [the lights at the store], haha” (*man2 jaak5 daj4 ngen2 vaw4 pian3 bòø-daj4 (h) (h)*).

Returning to the interview with Moo and Sii, by saying that he does not know what happened with the lights, Sii’s epistemic claim implied an ethical one. Instead of going ‘on record’ in accusing Kham, or going ‘on record’ to defend him, he sketches the story in a subtle, perhaps, ‘infra-ethical’ mood.<sup>175</sup> The frequency of such claims to ‘not know about somebody’ hints that the act of evaluation is itself subject to evaluation; that people like Sii at times anticipate being evaluated regarding their evaluations, and withhold strongly worded claims so as to *know* what another person really did or was really thinking (cf. Brenneis 1984).

Although Sii begins the interview evaluating Kham relatively subtly, shortly thereafter Sii, Moo, and I speak as if we, in fact, do know what Kham did and why he did it. After line 9.5 above, I ask Sii, elaborating on the implications of what he had just told me, if he remembers the extent to which Kham had acted *as if* he did not know the lights were broken (*hêt1 khùù2 khùù2*), evoking the minutes Kham had spent behind us, fiddling with the lights, tangling and

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<sup>175</sup> Compare his response to when I asked a friend, also called Sii in this dissertation, if he had heard the gossip circulating about a local monk. The friend, enraged, defended the monk explicitly and asked me whether the people spreading the gossip had any proof.



untangling them, plugging and unplugging them, and repeatedly responding as if he had just discovered that they were broken. Moo had gone to the bathroom and just as I was trying my best to quote Kham cussing out the (perhaps imaginary) Chinese vendor that sold him the lights, she re-entered the interview space. Sii starts to explain that Kham, a methamphetamine addict, would be able to “talk really well.”

**Sii**

9.9) *khan2 man2 kh...khaw2 kin3 jaa3 lêq1 khaw2 kaø-vaw4 kêng1 han5 lêq1*  
“If he... if someone takes drugs then he’ll be able to talk really well.”

**Moo**

9.10) *qee3*  
“Yeah”

**Sii**

9.11) [*phòø-man2 maw2 dii3 qaql*]  
“Cause their high...”

**Moo**

9.12) [*vaw4 kêng1*]  
“[They] talk really well”

9.13) *ngen2 man2 kaø-qaw3 vaj4 man2 kaø-qaw3 qan3 kaw1 khaw5 maa2*  
“He took the money and then brought some old [lights] back”

**Sii**

9.14) *qee3*  
“Yeah.”

**Moo**

9.15) *haa1 man2*  
“Curse him.”

In contrast to Sii’s subtly-put suspicions of Kham’s honesty, Moo spoke more frankly and confidently about what Kham had done. In line **9.13**, she does not hedge with epistemic markers, but rather, tells the story as if it were accepted fact: “He took the money and then brought some old [lights] back.” Sii agrees with Moo’s assessment in line **9.14** with a simple affirmative.

When I spoke to others after the funeral about the lights, they voiced similar epistemic assuredness, as if there was no doubt as to what Kham had done. Mèè Phòøn had not even heard

about the lights during the funeral itself, yet when I started to ask her about them in an interview, and told her that Kham had bought them and that they were broken, she immediately assumed that he had pocketed the money. Salina, likewise, told me that Kham had definitely stolen the money.

“Corruption” was what Salina called it when I interviewed her a week later, using the English rather than the Lao, *kaansòðlaat4 bangluang3* (Salina did not speak English, but I guess that she was familiar with the term from Thai media). As Salina said this, her friend, a Thai national living in Laos, was sitting nearby. She put it bluntly: “In this town, there’s corruption all of the time” (*baan4 nii4 corruption talòòt5*). Like the corrupt civil servant who uses a road project to siphon money to his friends, they surmised that Kham had used the broken lights as a front, a way to embezzle money for himself. “He,” Salina said, was “good at lying.” Her choice of the word ‘corruption’ was not surprising, or coincidental, as many people in Luang Prabang with whom I spoke saw connections between the economic embezzlement that happened among family and friends and the embezzlement that happened in the political and business world. Kham’s lying, unlike the lying of politicians, however, was assumed to have a single telos: quenching his methamphetamine habit. When I asked Salina why Kham did the things he did, she retorted incredulously:

**Salina**

10.1) *qaaw5 sên1 caw4 beng1 khon2 bòø-qòòk5 sam2, beng1 khon2 bòø-pên3*  
“Wow! So, you don’t know how to judge people, huh? You don’t know how to observe people?”

**Zuckerman**

10.2) *qee3*  
“Yeah”

**Salina**

10.3) *naa1 kaankatham2 man2 kaø-ñòòn2 man2 kin3 jaa1*  
“He acts the way he does because he does drugs.”

Like Moo and Sii, Salina associated Kham’s dissembling as a sign of his desire for drugs, and his willingness to misrepresent everything he does to achieve that end. Moo, Sii, Salina, and Phòò Thiàng saw his ‘corruption’ and judged it for the greed it evinced, but, as I have shown above, they did not combat it with frankness, or ‘straight talk’ (*vaw4 khwaam2 sùù1*). They did not request the money back from Kham or make a big scene. Instead, they managed it and did their own dissembling, maintaining a clear evaluative gap between how they spoke to him concerning the lights and how they spoke about him. Here is a juxtaposition of some of their varying stances on Kham when he was present versus when he was absent:

	As Kham ‘discovered’ the lights were broken, and they spoke with him	In later interviews, as they spoke about Kham
<b>Moo</b>	"The [lights] broke here"	"He took the money and then brought some old [lights] back. Curse him."
<b>Sii</b>	"The [lights] broke here"	"I don’t know about what he did after that... Did he go to buy lights? Did he buy them? Or did he bring some old broken lights, instead? [Kham] said that that the lights broke [there], that’s what he said happened."
<b>Salina</b>	"You didn’t look at [the lights at all], did you?"	"He brought old [lights] and took the money and said he bought them anew, he then took money from me and bought new ones again."

Figure 35: What Moo, Sii, and Salina said about Kham versus to him

Salina prided herself on her ‘directness,’ and was often talked about by others as being, like her mother, Mèè Phòòn, a bit of a ‘yeller.’ So much so that my neighbors jokingly asked me whether I was ‘scared’ to live in the house. When I asked her about Kham and the lights, Salina claimed this dimension of her personality strongly and without my explicit raising of the subject: “If something is worth yelling about, I yell,” she said. Salina did, in fact, speak harshly to Kham. In

the interview, she remembered that she had called him ‘stupid’ (*caa4*). “I scolded (*daa1*) him,” she told me, and stressed that this ‘scolding’ made it so that Kham would not dare steal money from her again. But this directness had its limits: her ‘scolding’ was barely whispered, and it seemed unlikely that Kham had heard her. Salina recognized some of these limits. At the funeral itself, she told me she did not want to drink any beer because she was worried she wouldn’t be able to ‘resist the urge’ (*got1 qaw3*) to talk ‘straight’ to Kham and Thii, and in the interview a week later, she told me that although she never called Kham *qaaj5* or ‘older brother’ even though she technically should, she also did not use the dis-honoric title *bak2* to Kham’s face, even though she used it freely behind his back. Her Thai friend chimed in: “If you are in front of his face, you can’t call him *bak2*, you can’t say that, you’ll lose discipline (*maalañaat4*), but if you are behind his back, then you can say it freely.” That is, even though Salina was a ‘straight talker,’ there were still clear evaluative gaps in how she spoke to Kham and how she spoke about him. All of her criticisms of Kham (except for the ‘joke’ that he was lying) took Kham at his word. She did not criticize him for having embezzled the money in an act of corruption but for being stupid insofar as he did not inspect the lights more carefully. That is, the actions being evaluated from one scene to the next changed, even as the quality of the evaluation—the anger and outrage involved—stayed similar. In this sense, Salina left clues to the stance she took after Kham left.

In contrast to Salina, the straight talker, perhaps some readers might view Moo and Sii as conniving in their dissimulation of their opinions of Kham as they spoke with him. But in Luang Prabang, people generally found personalities like Salina’s to be much more aggressive and problematic. Moo and Sii’s evaluative inconsistency, in fact, matched how the couple had explicitly described and valorized their way of handling conflict. They even advised me to take

their lead and stressed on several occasions that I should not broach issues of possible ‘corruption’ explicitly with suspected parties. When, for instance, we discovered that the envelope I gave them for a party had 50,000 less Kip in it than I had originally put in it, and when it became clear that the person I had entrusted with the envelope had taken some of the money, they told me I did not need to say anything, and made a point of telling me I should not bring it up with the person I suspected of stealing the money. It would just, they said, lead to ‘noisiness.’ One should observe and remember such events, they said, without broaching them. Likewise, when I asked them explicitly about why they had not said anything about the lights, Muu responded that her desire to not be *nan2* or ‘noisy’ outweighed her desire to talk ‘straight.’ Sii agreed.

## Conclusion

*The overriding inclination of the Ban Chaner is to separate the encounter itself from that which precedes or follows it; psychologically, they are independent and unrelated experiences.*

*-Herbert P. Phillips (1966:79) on Thai Peasant Personality<sup>176</sup>*

Let me return to our silence when Kham entered as we spoke about him. Moments like this silence make plain that evaluations are, like all kinds of action, contextually sensitive utterances, shaping and shaped by their co-textual surrounds. Simply put, and as Adam Smith (1880) repeated in his discussions of morality, when people evaluate themselves and others in

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<sup>176</sup> Here is the entire passage: “It is perfectly clear, as was demonstrated in the earlier discussion, that Bang Chaners are highly motivated to conform while in the direct presence of others. Often there is over-conformity when in such situations villagers become overly solicitous to what they think are the needs of others. However, the hallmark of Thai social relations is that there never is any certainty that such face-to-face contacts will take place, or if they do take place, that the conformity which exists during the direct encounter will be sustained once the contact has ended. The overriding inclination of the Ban Chaner is to separate the encounter itself from that which precedes or follows it; psychologically, they are independent and unrelated experiences. The typical Bang Chaner excels at the art of indicating agreement with people-responsiveness, cooperativeness, and compliance with their verbal requests and orders—and then once the situation has been concluded, doing precisely what he wants, often the exact opposite of that which he had agreed” (Phillips 1966:79).

perceivable ways, they are attuned to how such evaluations might be read. In monitoring whether Kham was or was not present as Sii spoke about him, Sii anticipates that his evaluations will themselves be evaluated, taken as slights, or distasteful ‘straight talk.’ When Kham is present, Sii’s negative evaluations of him go absent, and this practiced inconsistency performs Sii as a recognizable ethical figure: a ‘polite’ man who avoids social ‘noise,’ whose silence is a virtue.

Characters like Salina, who tend to ‘yell’ and cause ‘noise’ rather than ‘resist the urge’ are troubling for many people in Luang Prabang. But ‘polite’ people like Sii and Moo are more troubling for those interested in understanding ethical issues in social life. Characters like Salina maintain a similar evaluative force across interactions, modulating their stances slightly, but leaving Hansel and Gretel-like crumbs to the epistemic and ethical positions they will take later. Characters like Sii and Moo force the analyst to deal what appears to be a radical interdiscursive gap, a mismatch of stances, a shifting self.

Much of moral philosophy has been built on the idea that such inconsistency is inherently immoral. Kant, with his categorical imperative’s almost-pathological universality surely comes to mind. There are many reasons why moral philosophers find such inconsistency troubling, but one reason, and the one I focus on here, is the way in which inconsistent acts, evaluations, and positions trouble assumptions about the consistency of character. Namely, the idea that people are influenced, or worse yet controlled, to take on positions, or act in a certain way, as a function of context, unsettles theories of humans as moral decision makers, suspended in a liberal sense of freedom.

Recently, many so-called ‘situationists,’ championing a psycho-philosophical approach to ethics, have attacked traditional moral philosophy on this issue. They have highlighted how seemingly inconsequential aspects of a situation effect one’s ethical decision making. As Kwame

Appiah (2008:39) summarizes, these ‘situationists’ have produced mountains of papers showing that “a lot of what people do is best explained not by traits of character but by systematic tendencies to respond to features of their situations that nobody previously thought to be crucial at all. They think,” he continues, “that someone who is, say, reliably honest in one situation will often be reliably dishonest in another.” Why do these situationists think this? Because in their studies, they found repeatedly that seemingly frivolous things, like the smell in the air, can affect how people make moral decisions. One study, for instance, argued that “you were more likely to get change for a dollar outside a fragrant bakery shop than standing near a ‘neutral-smelling dry-goods store’” (2008:41). For some of these situationists, there is no *there* as far as character is concerned. Instead, humans are the product of their immediate external environment.

For similar reasons, ethical theories that place heavy emphasis on interaction—that is, those theories that rely on detailed studies of the way people engage one another and themselves, sometimes as captured by audio or video equipment—are often accused of demolishing the stability of character (Keane 2015:110).<sup>177</sup> Anyone who studies the same people interacting over a range of contexts inevitably encounters interdiscursive gaps like those above, gaps that are often invisible or swept away in, say, elicited narratives during interviews. As such studies have shown, and as common notions of ‘peer-pressure’ attest, people are prone to verbally, physically, tacitly agree to values, positions, and actions in one moment that they might vehemently disagree with in another. Erving Goffman made this point more starkly than most, a fact that led the moral philosopher MacIntyre to accuse him of having “liquidated the self...” Even though Goffman uses the dramaturgical metaphor, and rhetorically exploits the ideology of sincerity that often travels with it, he repeats throughout his work that he is not claiming that ‘backstage’

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<sup>177</sup> Keane writes that these interactional theories are sometimes read as reducing “the whole business of ethical life to mere appearances” (2015:110).

communication is less calculated, that “surreptitious communications are any more a reflection of the real reality than are the official communications with which they are inconsistent...” (1959:169). Rather, he portrays a world where theatre is the proper metaphor because almost every act is oriented toward its eventual interpretation. In this world, humans—like Sartre’s ‘attentive pupil’ who is too busy looking attentive to attend to anything (1959:33)—are “concerned not with the moral issue of realizing [moral] standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized” (1959:251).

Ethical theories that place an emphasis on interaction are also prone to notice that humans often go silent when we might expect them to make their stances known. In a recent article, Singh and Dave (2015) ask a provocative question that impinges on this problem: what is the mode and mood of killing animals? Can we, they wonder, see ethical principles or stances in the way a slaughterer leads an animal to death, wields a knife, or slits a throat? Implicit in this question is a hypothesis that moral stances might exist across contexts and that the small things people do in ordinary life—their moods and modes, so to speak—might signal these perduring stances, especially when people encounter the things those stances are about. Such a hypothesis entails that, for instance, Donald Trump’s comments on the bus with Billy Bush about women might ooze out when he talks to those same women; that an environmental activist might hesitate a bit each time he steps into a car, or takes a disposable plastic bag at the grocery store.

However, moments like the silence that arose when Kham walked by, remind us of the limits of this hypothesis. They remind us that although evaluation and reflexivity are constant dimensions of ordinary life, specific evaluations often do not endure but go absent or emerge unevenly. Rather than a repetition of unvarying stances on, for example, the killing of animals, how to treat or talk about women, or ‘resistance,’ when we look carefully at what people say and



do across interactions, we find that ‘life taken as a whole’ is filled with innumerable interdiscursive gaps.

What are we to make of such gaps? Must we conclude, like Goffman perhaps, that people do not inhabit consistent—or at least consistently visible—ethical positions and stances? Are we left with a stripped down theory of a “self that can have no history” (MacIntyre 2010:221)? Forced to admit that “morality,” as Besnier (2009:97) writes in his study of gossip in Nukulaelae, “is also contextual...”? Or can we find another way out of this epistemological pickle?

James Scott offers a language for talking about this problem, but not, I argue, a tenable solution. Over the course of Scott’s *oeuvre*, he identifies three domains, or perhaps genres, of interaction: the ‘public transcript,’ the ‘hidden transcript,’ and ‘infrapolitics’ (see especially, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990)). Arguing against a strong form of hegemony, he claims that subordinate groups have not internalized their oppressors’ values, but instead learned to dissimulate their true opinions when they interact with these oppressors. When in their oppressor’s company, subordinates thus praise their tyrants and humble themselves. Scott calls this style of interaction the ‘public transcript.’ When those powerful people are absent, on the other hand, people relax and another ‘transcript’ emerges which Scott calls the ‘hidden transcript.’ The ‘public’ and the ‘hidden transcript’ often include ideological contradictory stances: the ‘public’ transcript might declare a man to be ‘the best kind of man,’ while the hidden transcript might scream that he is a ‘piece of shit.’ Often during relatively public events the ‘hidden transcript’ seeps into the ‘public transcript,’ and the product is *infrapolitics*. Infrapolitics, he writes, “is a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors” (1990:19). It consists of winks, nudges, and nods.

The existence of infrapolitics acts like a filter on Scott's entire project. It allows him to claim that resistance is never absent, but merely 'dialed down' when the relatively powerless encounter the powerful, transmuted from open contention to 'foot-dragging' and other forms of subtlety. If a thorny problem for the anthropology of ethics is whether ethical stances are consistent across interactions, the logical form of Scott's argument offers a possible answer: Perhaps, at some deeper level, people are not inconsistent after all. Perhaps, they leave signs of their ethical stances sprinkled across all interactions. If we can find an infrapolitics, maybe there is an infra-ethics too.<sup>178</sup>

The form of Scott's argument is much like the dramaturgical metaphor, and suffers from many of the same flaws (Scott was, of course, influenced by Goffman (e.g. Scott 2008:25; 1990:57). As linguistic anthropologists like Susan Gal argue, and as I reviewed in chapter three, even moments of 'sincere' and 'true' speech—moments that Scott stresses—are constructed and mediated by linguistic ideologies (1995:409). Scott's theory might be more palatable to moral philosophers like MacIntyre, who pine for consistency of purpose and value, but it is clearly too simple, too loaded with assumptions about sincerity, interiority, and socio-economic power to account for all human interaction, where neither 'true' opinions nor power relations are clear-cut. Furthermore, it does not do justice to the vicissitudes of interactions.

In relation to one topic or another, say the quality of a boss or the importance of eating together, ethics is, in fact, sometimes absent. Rather than settle with a theory like Scott's, which assumes which 'transcripts' are real and which are dissimulations, and argues that ethical character is pervasive even when it appears fractured, I argue that analysts should highlight people's own accounts and explanations of inconsistency, and study them as ethnographic

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<sup>178</sup> Scott might find the substitution of 'ethics' for 'politics' amenable, cf. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1977)

objects (Heywood 2015; Carr 2010; Berliner et al. 2016; Lemon 2000). One can observe how people themselves hierarchize interactions, how actors turn ‘flat’ worlds (Latour 2005) into interdiscursive landscapes with peaks and valleys of ‘real’ and ‘polite’ interactions with inevitable uncertainty about and negotiation of which is which. This requires recognizing that consistency is—like many other phenomena—both an empirical question about people in the world, and a characteristic that itself is subject to ethical evaluation.

Moo and Sii gave me such a local theory of the ethics of evaluation when they told me not to broach the subject of missing money with potential suspects, or explained why they tended to remain quiet themselves in such situations. For them, as for many others, the *ethics of interaction*—as locally understood—tended to take precedence over the suspicions and judgments of the moment, say, that Kham was a liar, a bad mourner, or a methamphetamine addict. Moo and Sii, unlike Salina, did not leave any noticeable hints or crumbs to the epistemic and ethical positions they took later. They left no evidence within the interaction itself to support a claim that they had ‘hidden transcripts.’ But they justified this absence as itself a sign of virtue, of consistency of character, of being able to let things pass.

Accounts like these—justifications for interdiscursive inconsistency that prioritize the smoothness of an interaction over the ‘truth’ of talk—are clearly not transparent windows onto actual practices, or what’s happening in people’s minds, but ideologically infused, metapragmatic explanations and justifications for what people do. That is, these notions—like claims of ‘sincerity’ among Protestant converts (Keane 2007:208) and the notion of ‘constancy’ in Jane Austen’s writings (MacIntyre 2010:183, 242–243)—do not merely unfold during communication but are about communication and thus influence it.

Charles Stafford (2013:112) recently wrote about the need for anthropologists to not look merely at where negative evaluation happens, but where it does not happen:

*Just as my field notes are filled with accounts of people judging their relatives, neighbors and friends rather harshly, so too are they filled with accounts of people refraining from saying what could all too easily be said. The tension between these two kinds of reactions to what other people do is surely an important site where ordinary ethics is played out, perhaps especially in rural communities where people live at close quarters with others for decades at a stretch.*

Stafford is right to point out salient non-judgment as a common locus of ethical work. But, in analogy with the difference between a stretch of silence and an ‘unfilled pause’ in conversation analysis—the latter being a pregnant, meaningful quiet—we are still left with the problem of distinguishing a merely absent negative evaluation—one that was never likely to be made—from a meaningfully absent negative evaluation. To distinguish these, we must not import a theory of sincerity, but still look toward the perceivable signs actors make, either in the initial moment where an evaluation is meaningfully absent, or in later figurations of this moment during conversations, debriefings, or interviews. As Lempert (2013) has recently argued, theories of ‘ordinary ethics’ that claim that morality is immanent in all interaction miss the many ways that people make moralization relevant or irrelevant in the things they do. With theories that blanket ‘interaction’ as the locus of morality, we risk missing the moments where people make particular types of ethical evaluations intentionally present or absent. Even in situations as ethically weighty as theft at a funeral, ethical evaluation is still sometimes made absent in the face of events that seem to call it out.

In the next chapter, I move back to the *pétanque* court and distinguish two ways people refer to economic types: generically and specifically. My argument builds on this chapter in two respects. First, I show that Moo and Sii’s preference for not making ‘noise’ or causing

‘arguments,’ parallels generic criticisms of gambling for money: people say they do not like money gambling because it causes trouble, it makes people lose the ability to ‘resist the urge’ to argue, and it invites antagonistic face-to-face interaction. Second, I show that the distinction between generic propositions and specific propositions matters, in part, because the two types of referentiality differentially implicate those who are copresent, and thus, afford different kinds of evaluations. That is, how people evaluate gambling for beer and gambling for money is subject to the same contextual contingencies as evaluations of Kham.

## Chapter 5 Clear Distinctions

### Introduction

Twenty minutes into our interview, Buun contrasted two types of gambling on *pétanque*. “*tii3 kin3 bia3* [or gambling for beer],” he said, “means whichever person wins... whoever wins or loses, you drink together. But when you *tii3 qaw3 ngen3* [or gamble for money], the winner puts [the money] in his pocket and flees.”<sup>179</sup>

As I outlined in the introduction, the lexemes Buun used to describe gambling for beer and gambling for money—*tii3 kin3 bia3* and *tii3 qaw3 ngen2*—are key terms for *pétanque*-playing men in Luang Prabang, Laos. For these men, the terms organize contests into two discrete types, types distinguished from one another both by their material prizes (beer or money) and by their purported ends and aims: Beer gambling is for ‘solidarity,’ for ‘love,’ and for ‘good sociality.’ Money gambling is for money, cash won at the cost of friendship.

Historically, anthropologists privileged local terms like ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money,’ often adopting them as quasi-analytics. But, over the last few decades, this approach, which pits lexemes against one another—the gift against the commodity, sharing against giving, cows against cash—has gone out of style. Joel Robbins summarizes the decline as something that “always happens to ideal typical distinctions framed in binary terms.” “[O]ver time,” he continues, “criticisms [pointing] to the lack of pure types in reality soon [begin] to crowd the field” (2008:47–48). And so they did.

Critics of pairs like these argued that rather than look at local terms, categories, and contrasts as models of society, we should look through them and toward how people ‘negotiate’

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<sup>179</sup> *tii3 kin3 bia3 nii4 maaj3 khwaam2 vaa1 phuu5 daj3 tii3 daj4 nõq1 tii3 tii3 phaj3 tii3 daj4 tii3 sia3 kaø-kin3 nam2 kan3 tèl caø-tii3 qaw3 ngen2 kan3 nii4 tii3 daj4 lêqø-kaø-caø-saj1 thong3 soong5 nii3 leej2*

such ‘ideal types’ in practice. In this chapter, I focus on ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ *qua* the ‘types’ once thought so important. I critique both earlier work that privileged local contrasts, often unreflexively, and this newer research that has, in turn, criticized that work. I argue that neither of these approaches has thought carefully enough about language or language use. Both traditions have tended to treat terms—and the notions to which they refer—like ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ as found-objects, rather than the products of concrete interactions in which people refer to both types of events and actual events.

I divide this chapter into four sections. In the first section, I distinguish between two ways people use ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ in referential practice: as part of propositions with *generic reference* and as *labels for relatively specific conduct*. I show that this distinction is central to debates in economic anthropology: namely, the debate surrounding the distinction between ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities.’ In the second section, I review the content of generic propositions about gambling for beer and gambling for money and show that when people predicate about the two types, they tend to emphasize similar traits. I then argue that generic reference, because it is not directly about any one event, affords moral stance-taking at a distance from actual events and thus allows people to present themselves as someone with clear stances without implicating others. In the third section, I move to examples where people use phrases for gambling for beer and gambling for money to label specific practices. I show when players put games ‘under a description,’ they often do so with interactional purpose. Finally, in the last section, I consider why ‘beer’ and ‘money’ *qua* generic objects have come to anchor the distinction between these two ends. I briefly locate these two kinds of objects historically and socio-culturally. Whereas gambling for money is imagined as producing wealth for some that they can then carry away from the interaction, gambling for beer is imagined as a practice of

pure consumption, in which money and time are exhausted, and beer is ingested, for the production of social relations.

## Generic Distinctions

Put simply, a generic proposition is a proposition that refers to not a specific object, idea, or delimited set of objects, but a class of objects or ideas as such. Generic propositions are contrastable with the ironically vague notion of specific propositions. That is, propositions that refer to more delimited entities, or groups of entities, real or imagined.<sup>180</sup> For the purposes of my argument, generic propositions are about *types* while specific propositions apply such *types* to events.

To exhibit the concept of generic reference, Lyons (1977:194), in the first volume of *Semantics*, gives an example with—what else—lions: “The lion is a friendly beast.” Lyons explains that this sentence, when uttered in the right context, “may be used to assert a generic proposition: i.e., a proposition which says something, not about this or that group of lions or about any particular individual lion, but about the class of lions as such.” The same sentence could also, in a different context, be uttered as a specific proposition. Imagine you are standing ten feet from a lion’s cage and the trainer beckons you to get closer. ‘Don’t worry,’ he says about the lion in the cage, ‘the lion is a friendly beast! It’s Smokey, the bear on the other side of the zoo that you should worry about.’

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<sup>180</sup> In opposition to generic reference, and propositions that make generic reference, Lyons lists a wide variety of kinds of reference and propositions: singular and general (he notes that general reference is related but different from generic reference), definite and indefinite, collective, and distributive. These distinctions do not matter for my argument here.



Generics have been a thorny problem in philosophy and semantics and recent research in cognitive development by Gelman and Leslie, among others, has shown that they are a fruitful and interesting topic to study.<sup>181</sup> Historically, however, generics have not been focused on by linguistic anthropologists. In the *Companion to Linguistic Anthropology* (Duranti 2004), for instance, no one mentions them. Of course, linguistic anthropologists do study overlapping phenomena under different terminological umbrellas. In thousands of articles, books and conference papers, they have shown how people use language to construct, perpetuate, negotiate, and resist cultural categories.

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<sup>181</sup> Why is the topic so thorny? This recent research has pointed to a few reasons. First, genericity, as we might call it, does not appear to be an unambiguous feature of grammatical forms. As Gelman (2010:102) writes, “there is no one-to-one mapping between form and meaning...”. In English, “[g]enerics can be expressed with a variety of linguistic forms, and every kind of NP that is used to express generics can also be used to express nongenerics.” The lack of a set of particular grammatical forms to signal genericity has made the notion less salient, and more difficult to study. Second, generics are susceptible to variable truth conditions, and the stringency of these truth conditions appears to vary along with different kinds of generically referred to objects and things and the properties assigned to them. As Leslie (2012) explains, generics vary in their scope over members in a class. If we accept that ‘bears are aggressive,’ for example, we generally do not think that the existence of a few docile bears undermines the generic truth of the statement. The utterances “ducks lay eggs” and “a lion has a mane,” as Leslie (2012) puts it, are “more forgiving still; these generics are true even though only the mature members of one gender possess the relevant properties.” Strangely enough, even though the only ducks that lay eggs are female and the only lions with manes are male propositions like ‘ducks are female’ and ‘lions are male’ are said to be incorrect. Some generic propositions are even less true of the average member of a class: “we accept ‘mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus’, even though fewer than one percent of mosquitoes carry the virus, while also rejecting ‘books are paperbacks’, when over eighty percent of books are paperbacks” (Leslie 2012; see Brandone et al. 2012).

Much of the new research on generics has focused on how children learn to use them, and whether either generic or specific reference might be the unmarked form—if there is such an unmarked form—of referential practice. In pursuing the topic, researchers have recognized two apparently contradictory facts. On the one hand, learning to use generics seems to be a much more challenging task than learning to refer to specific objects in the immediate environment. That is, generics appear to “pose a potentially daunting task for child learners. In order to acquire generic NPs, children must hold in mind abstract referents that are not fully present in the naming context, recognize that generics are simultaneously broad in scope yet admitting of exceptions, and deal with formal linguistic cues that are varied and inconsistent” (Gelman 2010:103). This position that generics are more complicated than specifics, and would thus emerge developmentally later than specifics, is more or less received wisdom. In tension with this received wisdom, recent research has noticed that the languages they have studied tend to have more grammatical resources designed for signaling specific reference than for signaling generic reference. That is, singular reference, not generic reference, appears to be more frequently ‘marked’ or ‘markable’ with grammatical forms (Leslie 2015:19–21). Gelman writes, “I can signal that an NP is specific by prefacing it with a possessive (‘my dog’), pointing to a specific instance (e.g., pointing to a particular dog), using a deictic (‘this dog’), situating the instance in a particular time point (‘the dog woke me up in the middle of the night’), and so on. Generics may simply be anything that is left over—anything that is not marked as specific, in other words.” This cross-linguistic tendency seems to upend the received wisdom and has created much excitement in research on generics.

The few linguistic anthropologists who have studied generics have shown the topic's analytic worth. Mannheim (in Mannheim et al. 2010) has collaborated with Gelman and others to explore how generics work cross-linguistically and Koven (2016:1) has shown how Franco-Portuguese storytellers use generic forms to “‘jump scale’ between reportively narrating single events and nomically asserting general ‘timeless’ types and principles.” Koven’s analysis is particularly interesting in that she connects the notion of generics with some core discussions in linguistic anthropological theory.<sup>182</sup> For instance, linguistic anthropologists have repeatedly documented the semiotic processes that enable deictically grounded interactions to take on a universal, tenseless quality. Many argue that this happens most thoroughly in rituals, in which, as Stasch (2011) puts it, “a poetically dense” communicative event, broadly understood, figurates the macrocosmic order in microcosmic action (e.g., Kuipers 1990; Keane 1997; Silverstein 2003).<sup>183</sup> Koven’s analysis makes clear that such ‘jumping scale’ or imagining of the world ‘beyond’ is often also done through referential means as when people, for example, jump from talking about the lions in front of them to lions generally. Attention to such obvious, but often unreflected-upon, referential processes might give crucial insight into how actors produce effects of scale (see Carr and Lempert 2016). Attending to when people use generics is also helpful for understanding another classic topic in linguistic anthropology: identity. Generic and specific propositions often make the categories of identity explicit in a way that ‘social indexicals’ like a ‘fricative voice gesture’ (Harkness 2011), a variant of /r/ (Labov 1997), or a Samoan ergative marker (Duranti 1994) do not. By following when such propositions refer to specific people, say, ‘that American,’ versus generic classes of people, say, ‘Americans,’ and by studying how people

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<sup>182</sup> Koven explicitly relates generics to Silverstein’s (1993) notion of ‘nomic collaboration.’

<sup>183</sup> Kuipers (1990:4), for example, shows how Weyewa rituals on the island of Subma drew on a variety of semiotic devices to “deny [the rituals’] situated character.”

move from one kind of proposition to another, scholars can track when identity-types become reified and essentialized.

Of course, linguistic anthropologists have long used generic propositions as data, but they have tended to treat them as objects to look through rather than to look at. The default has been to focus on the more implicitly metapragmatic dimensions of language. Many linguistic anthropologists, in fact, seem to have an aversion to formal semantic (rather than broadly pragmatic or semiotic) categories like generic and specific reference. At least since Silverstein's (1976) classic essay on 'shifters,' there has been an overall trend toward treating 'semantico-referential' or denotational meaning as a kind of enemy territory, a land populated by semanticists and formalists rather than those who are interested in language's socio-cultural effects. This trend is clear from linguistic anthropology's lack of an agreed-upon vocabulary for talking about distinctions within semantico-referential meaning. As I show later in this chapter, however, the distinction between specific and generic reference is not enemy territory. The two kinds of reference are, in fact, interesting precisely because they afford distinct kinds of pragmatic meaning and thus fit with linguistic anthropology's long-held and theoretically justified interest in non-denotational meaning.

### **Political Economic Distinctions**

More to the point of this chapter than generics' value for linguistic anthropology, the notion of generics has much to offer economic anthropology. While generics have not received reflection, *per se*, in economic anthropology, they have long composed some of the sub-field's central data. Along with participant observation, generic propositions about what things are like,

how they work, and so on, have been the oil in many an ethnographic or theoretical monograph's engine.

Generic propositions are appealing for anthropologists in part because the propositions are extracted easily from their contexts of speech. Without much work, they can be removed from the semiotic webs of meaning that made them appropriate or inappropriate during the event of speaking in which they were recorded, captured, and taken as 'texts' to be neatly (re)incorporated (or reco(n)textualized) into essays and dissertations (on the notion of 'texts' see Bauman and Briggs 1990; Urban and Silverstein 1996). In other words, generics tend to be more mobile and quotable than specifics, less deictically anchored to the event of speaking in which they were originally uttered. Anthropologists have an easier time exemplifying locals' opinions on, say, gambling for money by quoting someone commenting on gambling for money generically—'Gambling for money is bad.' Specific utterances like, 'Are you sure you want to play for money? Because I was thinking we would gamble a few bottles of beer,' do not have the same self-evidence. Even in this paragraph, as I am using the utterance to show the indexically anchored quality of specifics, I am tempted to add more details around it—to explain that the man was hesitant to gamble for money, that he was being polite, that he was dropping hints while trying to avoid causing offense.

Generic propositions are also useful for anthropologists because they are stackable and, by their nature, can serve as referential containers for the countless specific propositions anthropologists hear in the field. Often, anthropologists make generic propositions about generic propositions, e.g., 'the Lao say gambling for money is bad.' To support and explicate his theory of spheres of exchange, for instance, Bohannan (1959:497) wrote that the "Tiv say that it is 'good' to trade food for brass rods, but that it is 'bad' to trade brass rods for food, that it is good

to trade your cows or brass rods for a wife, but very bad to trade your marriage ward for cows or brass rods.” This referential habit is not just an old-timey anthropological tick that contemporary anthropologists have left behind. Even as many contemporary anthropologists have become allergic to writing in the ‘ethnographic present’ (see Fabian 1983), they continue to deploy generic quotations.<sup>184</sup> Take two recent Society for Economic Anthropology book prize winners. In *Coffee and Community*, Lyon (2011:6) writes that “Juaneros strive to educate their children to save them the backbreaking labor and daily toil that **they say** characterize their own lives as *campesinos* (small-scale farmers).” In *Global Outlaws*, Nordstrom (2007:135) writes, “**Police say** they aren’t as likely to bust pharmaceutical smuggling as they are narcotics.”<sup>185</sup>

Another appeal of generic propositions for anthropologists is perhaps more obvious: when informants utter generics, they do the generalizing work for you. On the face of it, there is no easier pathway to ‘social structure’ than to ask informants to reflect on that social structure and the types, classifications, and kinds that make it meaningful. ‘Are gambling for beer and gambling for money different?’ ‘How does buying in the market work?’ These questions ask for comparisons of ‘types’ *qua* kinds. In the most painless of circumstances, respondents oblige. They chart axes of economic and ethical value that separate distinct forms of exchanges, they provide contrasts of events based on culturally salient qualities—like, in Luang Prabang, ‘politeness,’ ‘fun,’ and ‘noisiness.’ They point toward other salient or culturally important types. The resulting data are often both explicitly metasemantic, insofar as informants gloss what a term means, and explicitly metapragmatic, insofar as they describe what the practice to which the term refers does pragmatically—e.g., ‘when you gamble for beer, it makes friendship.’ These

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<sup>184</sup> The ‘ethnographic present’ might more accurately be named the ‘generic’ or ‘nomic’ style.

<sup>185</sup> Emphasis added. The attentive reader will find that I use this trick in this dissertation as well; I stack strings of reported speech together, abstracted and genericized, to capture a feeling I had of the predictability of answers and ideas.

answers can feel magical for an anthropologist. You can sense Malinowski's satisfaction as he describes how Trobrianders discuss *gimwali* or 'barter,' "In the course of ethnographic investigation," he wrote, "[Trobrianders] give clear descriptions, almost definitions of *gimwali*, its lack of ceremony, the permissibility of haggling, the free manner in which it can be done between any two strangers. They state correctly and clearly its general conditions, and they tell readily which article may be exchanged by [it]." (1922:190).<sup>186</sup>

Because generic propositions were the most apparently direct evidence for understanding cultural classification and 'native' models of society (see, for example, Durkheim and Mauss 2010), because they seemed to make such models manifest, early anthropologists privileged them.<sup>187</sup> Some anthropologists disagreed about the completeness or partiality of what locals noticed, but most seemed to agree that one task of ethnography was to elicit native representations in language and to gather them in artifacts like the Ambrym kinship diagram<sup>188</sup> that Levi-Strauss (1949:126) reproduces in *The Elementary Structure of Kinship*. Mauss, for instance, cited one such generic proposition when he quoted a letter from the Maori man, Tamati Ranaipari. In the letter, Ranaipari was answering questions from the ethnographer Elsdon Best. One of his answers began, "I will now speak of the *hau*" and continued to describe what the *hau*, generically conceived, meant both semantically and pragmatically (Best 1903:439). In the letter,

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<sup>186</sup> In the next paragraph, Malinowski (1922:190) hedges, writing that some dimensions of the exchange are beyond the Trobriander's 'theoretical grasp.' "Such generalisations," he writes, "the ethnographer has to make for himself."

<sup>187</sup> Criticizing one such anthropologist, Paul Bohannan (1955; 1959), Agha (2017:324) writes that Bohannan's "inadequate attention to discursive data create[d] insuperable difficulties: Bohannan reifies discursively mediated sortal kinds as inscrutable mental models ('ideas' about 'things'), transforms contextually appropriate registers of transactional conduct into something called 'spheres of exchange,' and, lacking any concept of the social domain segmentation of enregisterment, essentializes 'The Tiv' by implying that all of them (all 800,000 of them?) shared the same mental models ('ideas') of 'exchange.'"

<sup>188</sup> "Primitive thought," Levi-Strauss (1949:127) wrote after introducing the diagram, "is not incapable of conceiving of complex structures and apprehending relationships." About the diagram, the anthropologist who collected it, Deacon (1927:219), wrote in a letter that "It is perfectly clear that the natives (the intelligent ones) do conceive of the system as a connected mechanism which they can represent by diagrams... The way they could reason about relationships from their diagrams was absolutely on par with a good scientific exposition in a lecture room."

Ranaipari proceeded, as Mauss put it, to give “completely by chance, and entirely without prejudice, the key to the problem,” the problem on which Mauss fixated throughout *The Gift*. The *hau* became the centerpiece of the essay. It was a local type that seemed for him to capture a global human obsession: the obligation to reciprocate.

As Mauss’s reflections make clear, when informants, friends, and acquaintances use generics, they often generalize about life like anthropologists do; this blurs the boundaries between ‘our’ models and ‘theirs,’ between analytics and ethno-metapragmatic categories. Mauss embraced this blurring and used the *hau* as both datum and analytic. Lévi-Strauss (1987:48) later criticized him for this approach and wrote that, while reading Mauss’s essay, one gets the feeling that Mauss is confused about his task, unsure of “whether he must draw a picture of indigenous theory, or construct a theory of indigenous reality” (cf. Sahlins 1972:154). Subsequent anthropologists have, often unreflexively, followed Mauss’s lead and taken local categories and elevated them into partial analytics.<sup>189</sup> One could write about many of the key forms of ‘exchange’ in exchange theory in the same way that Parry (1986:466) writes about ‘reciprocity’: “[T]he notion of reciprocity has been used so uncritically that it is often unclear whether what is being described is a matter of empirical fact, indigenous theory or anthropological assumption about the nature of human behaviour....”

### **Gift / Commodity Distinctions**

The confusion that Parry describes especially plagues the distinction between ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities.’ Anthropologists have written too much about gifts and commodities for me to

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<sup>189</sup> I write “Mauss’s lead,” but he was by no means the first to do this.

thoroughly summarize all their arguments here.<sup>190</sup> Rather, in this section, I use the topic to make one point. I argue that the property that makes economic types like ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities’ bad analytic categories—the tension around their application—makes them useful, interesting, and important for the people we study.

Scholars have defined gifts and commodities in numerous ways. One of the more influential anthropological definitions, made even more famous when Marilyn Strathern (1988) adopted it, is Gregory’s. Gregory (1982:47) defined gifts and commodities not as particular things but as things exchanged in particular ways.<sup>191</sup> Thus, for Gregory, a commodity is a thing used in a commodity exchange and a gift is a thing used in a gift exchange; money can be a gift, homemade jam can be a commodity. In broad strokes, the two types of economy are different from one another because they take contrastive social forms and have contrastive ends,<sup>192</sup> but throughout his book, Gregory distinguishes gifts and commodities on several related axes. Carrier (1995:10–11), in a similarly titled and similarly spirited monograph written more than a decade later, isolates three of these axes as central:

- i. The degree to which those who are exchanging things are obligated to do so. Those exchanging things in gift exchanges are obligated to*

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<sup>190</sup> See Kockelman (2006) and Agha (2011) for discussion of the semiotics of commodities.

<sup>191</sup> “It is important to stress,” he wrote, “that it is not the natural attributes of the thing exchanged which determine whether or not an exchange is of the gift or commodity form. Paper money,” he continued, “can assume a gift form in certain social contexts...” (Gregory 1982:47).

<sup>192</sup> As he puts it, “commodity exchange establishes objective quantitative relationships between the objects transacted, while gift exchange establishes personal qualitative relationships between the subjects transacting” (1982:41). This definition resonates both with Mauss’s (1925) discussion of gifts and with Marx’s discussion of commodities. In fact, Gregory was very much trying to combine Mauss’s and Marx’s approaches, the anthropological and the political economic (1982:213). Like Mauss, Gregory’s notion of gift-exchange stressed the exchange’s capacity to form moral obligations between people, and to blur the line between people and things. Like Marx, Gregory stressed the alienation inherent in commodity-exchange. For Marx (1867:320), one of the commodity’s prominent traits was its tendency to invite an unnatural fetishism, a set of “grotesque ideas,” marked by a misrecognition of “the mutual relations of the producers” as a “social relation between the products [of their labor].” Gregory’s notion of commodity exchange captures the same idea: that, in commodity exchange, the relations among objects, rather than people, are foregrounded, and that people, in turn, are alienated from their objects.



*exchange with one another, while those exchanging things in commodity exchanges are relatively free to exchange or not exchange.*

- ii. ***The degree to which the exchanged things are linked to those who are exchanging them.*** *In the case of gifts exchanges things are strongly linked to the individuals exchanging them, in commodities this linkage is weak.*
- iii. ***The degree to which those who are exchanging things are linked or obligated to one another.*** *In the case of gift exchanges, the individuals exchanging are in lasting relations to one another, in commodity exchanges, their interaction is limited to the exchange itself.*

Gregory's book struck a nerve in anthropology. While some anthropologists lauded it, many others criticized it for relying on ideal types that too starkly divided gifts from commodities. In Appadurai's (1986:11) influential introduction to *The Social Life of Things*, for example, he slams Gregory and others for exaggerating and reifying the distinction between gifts and commodities. In another influential essay, Jean and John Comaroff (1990:211) take issue with parts of Appadurai's argument but note that his criticism of Gregory and similar work is one of his essay's virtues: "For one thing," they write, "[Appadurai] does away with the misleading opposition between gifts and commodities." Over time these criticisms stacked up and the distinction between gifts and commodities, as Robbins (2008:48) summarizes, "came to seem naïve to many anthropologists, and having faded to gray...largely dropped out of the literature..."

What exactly do anthropologists find naïve about the distinction between gifts and commodities? For one, most anthropologists dislike that the distinction is sometimes used to define entire societies and economies, i.e., gift-economies and commodity-economies. For them, this is a relic of an old way of thinking about cultures as bounded units.<sup>193</sup> Many anthropologists

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<sup>193</sup> It was this usage, in fact, that Robbins had in mind when he remarked that the distinction had "faded to gray." The usage has roots almost as deep as the distinction between gifts and commodities itself, burrowing back to Mauss

also take issue with how the dichotomy is used to describe distinctions within societies. They point out that there are no pure ‘gifts’ or ‘commodities’ in the world and emphasize that the distinction foolishly treats a blurry reality as if it were clear-cut.<sup>194</sup> Appadurai (1986:6), for instance, railed against approaches that searched “fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things.” His solution was to discard one half of the binary completely—‘gifts’—and treat everything (in the broad sense of the word ‘thing’) with the ‘social potential’ to be put into a ‘commodity situation’ as a commodity.<sup>195</sup>

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and Marx. It has most commonly taken the form of someone saying that the capitalist West has a commodity economy and groups of people in Melanesia, or some other ‘traditional’ place, have a gift economy. This tendency to group societies based on gifts and commodities is perhaps Appadurai’s (1986:11) central problem with the gift and commodity distinction. Many of the sources of the “exaggeration and reification of the contrast between gift and commodity” that Appadurai (1986:11) lists seem to implicate such a view: “the tendency to romanticize small-scale societies; to conflate use value (in Marx’s sense) with *Gemeinschaft* (in Tönnies’s sense); the tendency to forget that capitalist societies, too, operate according to cultural designs; the proclivity to marginalize and underplay the calculative, impersonal and self-aggrandizing features of noncapitalist societies.” Ferguson (1988:495) reads this element of Appadurai’s critique as a direct attack on Taussig’s (2010) *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Taussig’s is a book which brings Marx’s clear eyed, positivist view of *the real* nature of gifts and commodities to bear on anthropological problems, and Ferguson writes that it “is flawed by a grand dualist distinction between, on the one hand, ‘the precapitalist mode of production,’ characterized by reciprocity and a ‘use value orientation,’ in which production and exchange are aimed at ‘satisfying natural needs’; and, on the other hand, ‘the capitalist mode,’ characterized by exploitation, an ‘exchange value orientation,’ and the never-ending quest for profit.”

<sup>194</sup> Miyazaki (2013:41) writes that “Generations of anthropologists have repeatedly sought to demonstrate the blurred distinctions between gifts and commodities.”

<sup>195</sup> He defined ‘commodity situation’ as a context in which a thing’s “exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (1986:13). As others have pointed out, one problem with Appadurai’s argument in principle is that he merely passes the terminological buck, so to speak, from the notion of ‘gifts’ to the notion of ‘non-commodity state’ or to different kinds of commodities. “The result,” Gregory (1997:46) writes, “is a contradictory theory of commodity-as-everything and commodity-as-something; the *commodity* is both a *genus* and *species*. The only way he is able to differentiate his concept is by employing a diverse group of adjectives in a totally *ad hoc* way: ‘primary’ commodity, ‘specialized’ commodity, ‘bulk’ commodity, ‘enclaved’ commodity, ‘specialised’ commodity, etc.” In making his argument, Appadurai constructs an “asymmetrical and hierarchical relationship between the two poles” of the opposition, or what is called a relationship of *markedness* (Waugh 1982:299). A commonly cited example of markedness is the man/woman opposition. In the old, problematic sense—and these oppositions are often problematic—man meant both *human* and male. The term ‘man’ could thus encompass the word ‘female’ or be used in opposition to it. In using the notion of ‘commodity’ as the umbrella term for all exchanged goods, Appadurai marked off various kinds of gifts and non-traditionally capitalist commodities, requiring that they be clarified with adjectives. As Tsing (2013) notes, the end result of Appadurai’s attempt to avoid the gift and commodity distinction is not surprising, as often those “analysts who reject the gift-versus-commodity contrast use the capitalist commodity as a foil against which to explore non-capitalist social relations.”<sup>195</sup> In other words, the heart of the opposition—the ends and sociality associated with the type of exchange—usually remains partially intact, even as the habit of referring to it changes.

Neither of these broad criticisms—that gifts and commodities should not be used to define societies or that the two terms oversimplify actual exchanges—applies cleanly to Gregory’s and Carrier’s arguments about gifts and commodities. Gregory explicitly claimed that entire societies should not be classified as either gift-based or commodity-based and Carrier argued similarly.<sup>196</sup> Both authors have said, furthermore, that they are not claiming that gifts and commodities exist in the world in pure form. Rather, they argue that the terms are helpful analytics, heuristics, and diametrically opposed ‘ideal types.’<sup>197</sup> Carrier (1995:189), in particular, emphasizes the analytical character of his categories and distinguishes himself on this point from Mauss:

*As I introduced ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ in Chapter 1, the pure gift and the pure commodity, like the pure gift relationship and the pure commodity relationship, are polar terms that define a continuum along which one can place existing transactions and relationships. I need to stress the analytical nature of these terms. Because he presents them in the context of empirical descriptions of different societies at different places and times, Mauss roots them in concrete phenomena. However, I have preferred to treat them as ideal types and to assume that their applicability to concrete cases is problematic.*

In this passage, Carrier touches upon two important questions, which implicate deeper reasons for why anthropologists find the use of ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ problematic: (1) what is the status of these terms, i.e., are they analytics or non-scientific terms? And, relatedly, (2) what are they for?

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<sup>196</sup> Gregory (1997:50) wrote, “I have never used the distinction between gifts and commodities to classify societies and nor have I ever suggested that ‘we’ are to commodities as ‘they’ are to gifts. Such an approach is anathema to me.” Likewise, Carrier (1995:204), in the second to last paragraph of his book, writes the following: “I do not claim that there are no differences between modern Western societies and societies of the gift, of *Gemeinschaft*, of mechanical solidarity, of status and all the rest. There are differences, and they are striking. However, it is too easy to become beguiled by those differences, to elevate them to the level of essential, opposed identities. The allure of absolute difference, of the distinctiveness of the modern West from all the rest, makes it hard to see similarities among different types of society, just as it makes it hard to see differences within a single type.”

<sup>197</sup> They also, as I mentioned above, define gift and commodity exchanges functionally, that is, by the kinds of sociality they produce, not in reference to any pre-defined actually occurring conduct: say, the fact that something called ‘money’ is being exchanged, or whether an object is wrapped.

First, as to the status of the terms, brief reflection shows that they are hybrid technical and intuitive terms, what we might call partial analytics. ‘Gift’ and ‘commodity’ are not just random words. Like ‘ritual,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘ethics,’ they are some of the most valuable turf in anthropological theory.<sup>198</sup> Being the person who controls them through defining them is a boon to one’s career, one’s fame, and, assuredly, one’s sense of accomplishment. They are also common terms in the ordinary life of the anthropologist, who uses them both in non-technical ways and to gloss roughly equivalent terms in other languages.<sup>199</sup> While Carrier treats the application of these terms as inherently problematic, anthropologists often use the terms without compunction.

The quasi-analytic status of ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities’ means that in debates about them, analytic definitions like Gregory’s and Carrier’s often collide with more intuitive habits of reference. Laidlaw (2000:620) makes the problem explicit. He argues that Gregory’s definition is “counter-intuitive because it rules out good examples of gifts.” As he continues to explain, “the set of processes and relations identified in this definition is not that denoted by the English word ‘gift’ or its equivalents in other Indo-European languages, including that of Gregory’s own informants in India.” To bolster his argument, Laidlaw lists several easily recognizable ‘gifts’ that do not fit Gregory’s definitions: a toy to a friend’s child, a donation to charity, a drink bought for a friend who does not share it.

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<sup>198</sup> If they were exclusively technical terms (like, say ‘legisign’) then if a scholar found them unhelpful, she would just use other terms rather than waste time arguing against their application to empirical cases.

<sup>199</sup> The translation of these terms from foreign languages create another theoretical problem. Take, for example, a passage from Bohannan (1955:60), in which he equates equates the Tiv system with a common dichotomy in anthropology:

“The gift may be a factor designed to strengthen the relationship, or even to create it. There are several Tiv words for ‘gift,’ the examination of which would require another article the length of this one. For our purposes, it is primary that any of these ‘gift’ words implies a relationship between the two parties concerned which is of a permanence and warmth not know in a ‘market,’ and hence—though ‘gifts’ should be reciprocal over a long period of time—it is bad form overtly to count and compute and haggle over gifts.”

Close attention to the debates around gifts and commodities shows that many scholars who have explicitly critiqued the dichotomy as simplifying the world have been perhaps just as miffed by the fact that Gregory's 'gifts' and 'commodities' do not look like the things we tend to refer to as 'gifts' and 'commodities.' In an essay called "Alienable Gifts and Inalienable Commodities," Daniel Miller (2001:91-93), for instance, argues against the gift and commodity distinction by "systematically revers[ing] what have come to be conventional ways of talking about the gift-commodity dualism." He does this by showing that what we intuitively call 'gifts' are often alienable and what we intuitively call 'commodities' are often inalienable. This trick gives the appearance that gifts and commodities are simultaneously what they are and what they are not, licensing lines like the following from Anna Tsing (2013:22): "[N]ot only do self-described gifts and commodities nestle beside each other," Tsing writes, "but they also incorporate each other's characteristics, change into each other, or confuse different participants about their gift-versus-commodity identities."

The issue, as Laidlaw described it, can be reframed in terms of generic and specific reference: Gregory's generic definitions of 'gifts' and 'commodities' cannot account for specific, intuitively felicitous identifications of 'gifts' and 'commodities.' Laidlaw's point is well taken, but it immediately raises another question: should capturing such emic, felicitous acts of reference in analytic definitions really be the goal? Don't we know enough about language to know that such a goal will inevitably elude us (see Wittgenstein (2009) for discussion of similar problems)? Whatever our definition, we are bound to stumble upon intuitive 'gifts' that have been mistakenly sieved out by that definition; likewise, there will always be that lurking possibility that an informant, a colleague, or a friend might point to an object that our definition has deduced is a full-blown 'gift' and say, 'that's actually a commodity' (cf. Sapir's (2001)

discussion of Two Crows). What do we do then? Do we argue? In debates about how words should or should not be applied, we are often left like Marx's economic alchemist, fetishizing the world that humans have created, interrogating the chemical composition of a diamond in search of its value.

Rather than trying to search for what 'gifts' and 'commodities' are, it is much more fruitful to try to understand what the terms *qua* types and communicative resources do. This brings me to the second question: What are 'gifts' and 'commodities' *qua* lexemes for? Why and with what effect do people use the terms to refer to conduct? Like Anscombe (1979; 1957) pointed out, and as Enfield and Sidnell (2014; 2017; see also Sidnell 2017) have recently argued, an act of labeling an event, of putting conduct 'under a description' often emphasizes certain responsibilities, intentionalities, expectations, and moral stances. In other words, the act of referring to conduct as a particular type of thing is often politically, morally, and pragmatically charged. Examples are everywhere in this dissertation; I showed, for instance, in chapter two that the state's shift to referring to games of *pétanque* as instances of 'sport' is locally imagined as the moment when the state began to accept the game as a moral type of sociality. What's in a name? Often a lot.

It is not difficult to see that 'gift' and 'commodity' carry quite the moral and political charge. The terms have traditionally been used in the service of broad critiques of the contemporary economy, like in Marx and Mauss. Appadurai recognized this moral and political charge in his justification for calling everything a commodity rather than a gift. Following Bourdieu (1977) and Simmel (2011), he argued that a broad use of commodity helped reveal "the calculative dimension in all...forms of exchange [e.g., gift-exchange, barter], even if [those exchanges] vary in the form and intensity of sociality associated with them." He rejected using

‘gift’ as the general term for things for the inverse reason: the term ‘gift’ invoked the idea of the ‘pure gift’ (see Malinowski 1922:177–180; Malinowski 1966:40–41; Parry 1986; Laidlaw 2000) and thus inevitably obscured the “calculative dimension [of] societies that are too often simply portrayed as solidarity writ small” (1986:12).<sup>200</sup> Other related economic types carry similar moral and pragmatic force. As I mentioned in chapter one, some of the most influential voices in the field (Torday 1929; Radcliffe-Brown 1929; Evans-Pritchard 1931; cf. Dalton 1966; Tambiah et al. 1989) spent years worrying over how they should refer to the payments that a groom’s family would give to a bride’s family before marriage. ‘Bride-price’ was unsuitable because, as Evans-Pritchard (1931:36) wrote:

*...it encourage[d] the layman to think that ‘price’ used in this context is synonymous with ‘purchase’ in common English parlance. Hence we find people believe that wives are bought and sold in Africa in much the same manner as commodities are bought and sold in European markets. It is difficult to exaggerate the harm done to Africans by this ignorance.*

In these examples, and in the countless others that could be cited, anthropologists recognize that their choice of specifically referring to an economic exchange with one ‘type’ or another implies and sketches the mood, ends, and purposes of that exchange. Thus, to call an exchange one type or another is to make a political move that might be contested. As anthropologists, I argue, our job is to watch this contestation, not decide which moves are which. As I show in the rest of the chapter, such watching reveals that people in Luang Prabang are dexterous at using types of

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<sup>200</sup>Many anthropologists of Melanesia have argued that local ideologies of exchanges and patterns of distinguishing one exchange from another, emphasize the ‘gift’-like dimensions of exchange (an argument that is similar to the broad separation of gift-societies or gift-economies I discussed above). In *The Gender of the Gift*, Marilyn Strathern plays with this idea for a purpose in complete distinction to Appadurai’s, even as she similarly uses the fact that gift and commodity are a fundamental anthropological dichotomy to rhetorical effect. She refers to the Hagen economy as a ‘gift’ economy to remind the reader to envision a real difference: “Imaging that one might characterize a whole economy in terms of the prevalence of gift exchange as opposed to one dominated by commodity exchange opens up conceptual possibilities for the language that conceives of a contrast between them. Thus,” she continues, “one can manipulate received usages of terms such as ‘persons’ and ‘things’ or ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’” (1988:19).

economy—namely ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’—for pragmatic and moral effect, even in those moments when they appear to be just repeating generic models of culture or labeling what is in front of them.

## Gambling Distinctions

Let me return to the interview with Buun with which I began. Buun and I spoke as we sat on a bench and vaguely watched a series of money *pétanque* games unfold in front of us. Twenty or so minutes in, he contrasted ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ in the way I quoted above. “*tii3 kin3 bia3* [or gambling for beer],” he said, “means whichever person wins... whoever wins or loses, you drink together. But when you *tii3 qaw3 ngen3* [or gamble for money], the winner puts [the money] in his pocket and leaves.”<sup>201</sup> After Buun finished speaking, I began to ask a follow-up question—“So then you think that playing for money is...”—when Buun cut me off, “[It’s] not good!”<sup>202</sup>

In this section, I unpack two points, both of which impinge on this brief moment with Buun. First, people utter generic propositions about ‘gambling for money’ and ‘gambling for beer’ in mostly consistent ways in interviews and casual conversations. That is, most people seemed to agree about the differences between the two kinds of gambling. Second, people tended to treat these moments of speaking about the categories generically as invitations to take a moral stance.

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<sup>201</sup> *tii3 kin3 bia3 nii4 maaj3 khwaam2 vaa1 phuu5 daj3 tii3 daj4 nòq1 tii3 tii3 phaj3 tii3 daj4 tii3 sia3 kaø-kin3 nam2 kan3 tèl caø-tii3 qaw3 ngen2 kan3 nii4 tii3 daj4 lêqø-kaø-caø-saj1 thong3 soong5 nii3 leej2*

<sup>202</sup> **Me:** *cang1 san5 caw4 khit1 vaa1 tii3 kin3 ngen2 nii1 =*

**Buun:** *=bòø-dii3*



I begin with the language of talking about the contrasts, that is, the lexemes themselves. The most official way to refer to the game *pétanque*, and the way people refer to it in most documents and newspaper articles, is to use approximations of the French form *pétanque*: *péêtang3* or *péêtòng3*. More commonly, however, people used the form *tii3 bun1* or *tii3 buun3*. This is a simple verb-object predicate. *tii3* is the verb for ‘hit’ and *bun1* or *buun3* is a nominal for ‘ball’—an apparent borrowing from the French *boule* in which the final /l/ became [n]. *tii3* in this construction is sometimes replaced with the verb *lin5* or ‘play,’ i.e., *lin5 bun3* ‘to play [with] balls’ or ‘to play *pétanque*.’ When speaking about the contrast in gambling types, people tended to omit the nominal *bun1* or ‘ball’ and use one of two verbs to mark the gambling of stakes: *qaw3*, ‘take,’ or *kin3*, ‘eat’ or ‘consume.’ Thus, *tii3 qaw3/kin3 ngen2* is used for ‘gambling for money’ and *tii3 qaw3/kin3 bia3* is used for ‘gambling for beer.’ The construction has other permutations. At times, people replaced *bia3*, or ‘beer,’ with the more general word for ‘alcohol,’ *law5* or with the brand of a particular beer, e.g., Heineken or Beer Lao. I have represented the most common lexemes for the types in a matrix form.<sup>203</sup>

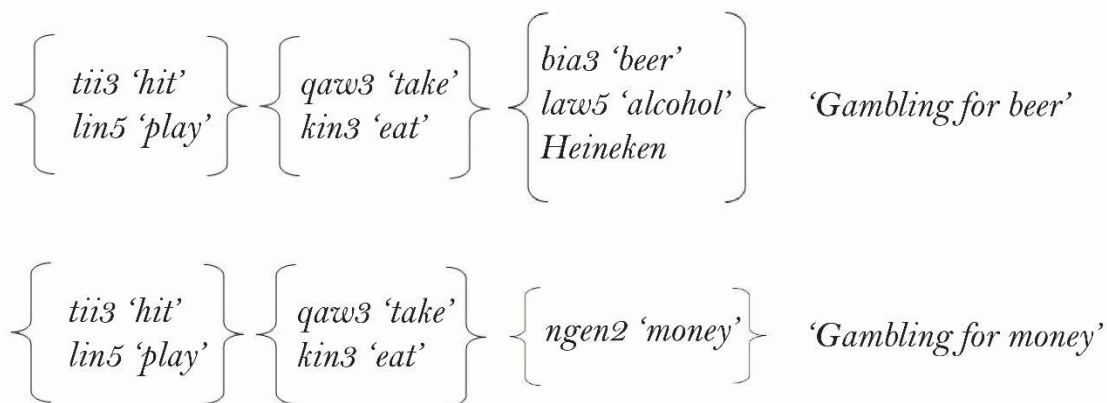


Figure 36: How to refer to the two kinds of gambling

<sup>203</sup> This matrix does not exhaust the possibilities. For example, people often leave off the initial verb and add the post-verbal, reciprocal form *kan3*, e.g., ‘taking/gambling beer together,’ ‘taking/gambling money together.’

Of course, this matrix is only the product of my work as an analyst, a tool for me to help fix the forms I am talking about and to maintain consistent glossing of those forms in the dissertation. *Pétanque* players themselves have not drawn the matrix for me, and while some of these players might have agreed that the various possibilities are equivalent, ‘different ways of referring to the same type,’ it is also obvious that people use these different forms to achieve different ends and produce different effects. I show in the next section of this chapter that the use of *kin3*, ‘eat’ encourages a different logic than *qaw3* or ‘take,’ and I show in chapter seven that, likewise, *tii3* and *lin5* have differential affordances which people occasionally mention and exploit.

In my interview with Buun, he used a variety of these forms:<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> As the transcript makes clear, Buun used a combination of the verbs *qaw3*, or ‘take,’ and *kin3*, or ‘eat’ to refer to the two types of exchange, and he appended the reciprocal *kan3* onto ‘gambling for beer.’

- 1    *tii3 kin3 bia3 nii4*                      *maajkhwaam2 vaa1 phuu5 daj3*  
      hit eat beer Deictic.Proximal means COMP who.ever  
*tii3 daj4 nòq1*  
      hit win Polar.Q

“Gambling for beer means whichever person wins, right...”

*tii3 tii3*  
 hit hit

“...[disfluency]...”

*phaj3 tii3 daj4 tii3 sia3 kaø- kin3 nam2 kan3*  
 whoever hit win hit lose Topic.Linker eat together

“...whoever wins or loses, you drink together...”

*tèè1 caø- tii3 qaw3 ngen2 kan3 nii4*  
 but irrealis hit take money reciprocal deictic.proximal

“...but, when you gamble for money...”

*tii3 daj4 lêqø- kaø- caø- saj1 thong3 soong5 nii3*  
 hit win and topic.linker irrealis put bag pants leave  
*leej2*  
 without.ado

“...the winner puts [the money] in his pocket and leaves.”

Buun uses these lexemes<sup>205</sup> with generic reference; that is, he uses them not to refer to any particular game, but rather, to refer to types of games *qua* types.<sup>206</sup> In fact, during interviews and casual conversations with me, most *pétanque* players spoke of types rather than concrete events.

<sup>205</sup> Following standard usage, I use lexeme to describe both single and multi-word forms that appear to congeal as a unit.

<sup>206</sup> Cross-linguistically, generics have not found to be grammaticalized and there does not seem to be a way of grammatically ensuring a generic reading in Lao (although perhaps further investigation might reveal certain regularities among some generics, like the use of irrealis *ca-*). Although the distinction between ‘quantified statements’ and ‘generics’ is fundamental for some of the new wave of experimental researchers, the same researchers also show that the two notions are related insofar as people tend to remember quantified statements as if they were generics (Leslie and Gelman 2012). Thus, for the purposes of my basic argument, whether a form uses quantifiers like ‘most’ (*suan1 laaj3*), or habitual, aspectual markers like, ‘tend to’ or *mak1* is unimportant to determining whether I treat an utterance as generic.

As Buun does here, they would often present me with neat, parallel lines about the two generic types—gambling for beer is like X, gambling for money is like Y.

These generic filled answers are, in part, unsurprising. Some of my interview questions invited people to make broad-brush comments. Sometimes, in fact, I would ask them directly to ‘compare gambling for beer and gambling for money.’ But I argue that the ease with which they contrasted the two types is itself evidence of the level of the types metapragmatic regimentation. My questions about other lexemes, categories of economy, or sites of exchange sometimes yielded no answers. They fizzled like bad spells or short-circuiting lights. When I asked one woman, for instance, about the differences between how people spoke at two different markets, she looked at me quizzically: ‘They’re the same,’ she said. Perhaps every anthropologist has once felt like they asked people to compare not just apples and oranges, but 12-pt font books and 13-pt font books, things that are not saliently different enough to make a difference. This experience, often awkward and embarrassing, fits with what Krifka et al. (1995:11) find regarding generics. For a generic to function as a generic, they write “it must be semantically connected to a ‘well-established kind....’” They show their point with two sentences:

- (a) ‘The Coke bottle has a narrow neck.’
- (b) ‘The Green bottle has a narrow neck.’

While we understand (a) as a reasonable generic sentence, (b) makes less intuitive sense. ‘Green bottles’ are not a kind we recognize, and so to talk about the color as having a particular kind of neck is peculiar.

Gambling for beer and gambling for money were not the only salient types of *pétanque* play. For one, as I mentioned in chapter two, tournament play is a nationally promoted, morally charged type, and people talked about such play as its own more serious style of *pétanque*. The

same is true with ‘practicing’ (*kaan3 sòòm4*), which would usually involve a man, alone on an empty court, repeatedly throwing striking shots from different distances. People also sometimes talked about playing without stakes, playing for ‘free’ (*lin5 laa4 laa4*) or for ‘fun’ (*lin5 muan1*), but it is difficult to emphasize enough how uncommon stakeless games were, how rare it was to see people play without wagering. At the money gambling court, players would sometimes play stakeless games to warm up for another game or while they waited for others to arrive before a night of playing for beer, but such games were rarely treated as an activity worth doing in and of itself. When I tried to organize games without stakes, I had difficulty finding anyone to play.<sup>207</sup> The ubiquity of betting goes beyond *pétanque*. When I first arrived in Luang Prabang in 2010 to teach English, I played cards with a friend of mine and two of her friends who prided themselves on not being gamblers and not drinking alcohol. But even though we staked no money or beer on our card game, we still bet that whoever lost a hand needed to drink a full glass of water. The game did not last long before we all quit, concerned about hyperhydration.

Besides beer, *pétanque* players wagered a variety of consumables: non-alcoholic drinks, goat meat, clams. They would often use lexemes parallel to *tii3 kin3 bia3* to describe these games. *Tii3 kin3 nam4*, or ‘gambling for water’ (broadly understood to include any liquid besides alcohol, such as actual bottled water, iced tea, M150 energy drinks, and cans of Birdy Iced Coffee) was perhaps the most common non-beer or money substance mentioned. But I also heard people refer to games as *tii3 kin3 Phò* (i.e., Vietnamese- style noodle soup), *tii3 kin3 khaw5* (i.e., rice or a meal), and *tii3 kin3 maa3* (i.e., dog meat).

People also sometimes referred to games as ‘gambling games’ using the form *phanan2*. Although I have translated *tii3 kin3 bia3* and *tii3 kin3 ngen2* throughout this dissertation as

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<sup>207</sup> Many sports in Laos are like this but not all. While it might be equally difficult to find a golf game without a wager, the five-on-five games I played of basketball never had any stakes nor did anyone mention the possibility.

‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for beer’ respectively, *phanan2* (or the nominal, *kaan3 phanan2*) is a closer semantic equivalent to the word ‘gamble’ in English. The relation between gambling for beer and gambling for money and *phanan2* is one of markedness (Waugh 1982). That is, *phanan2* is sometimes used to refer to both gambling for money and gambling for beer.<sup>208</sup> At other times, it is used to refer exclusively to gambling for money and in opposition to gambling for beer. To do the opposite and refer to just gambling for beer, as opposed to gambling for money, the form must be modified, i.e., *phanan2 bia3* or ‘wager for beer.’ In the sense, *phanan2 bia3* is marked and *phanan2* money is unmarked. I have represented the contrast in the figure below:

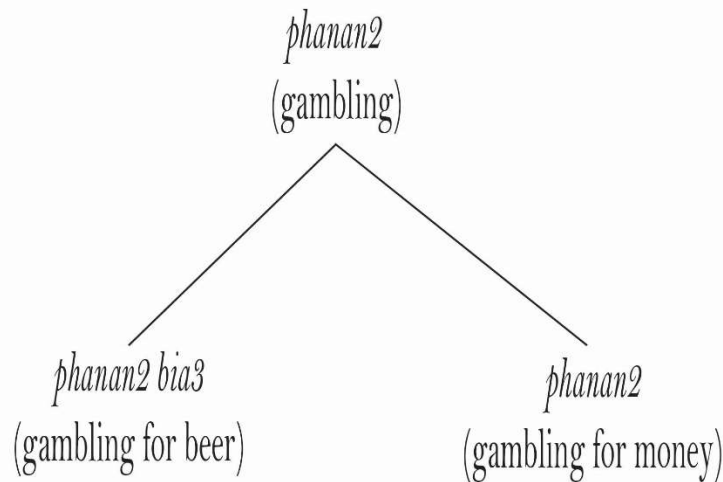


Figure 37: ‘Gambling for beer’ is marked vis-à-vis ‘gambling’ *phanan2*

Although gambling for beer and gambling for money were not the only salient types of *pétanque* play, they were the *most* salient types. This is evidenced by the frequency with which they were

<sup>208</sup> This inclusive, broader form is found in a translated into English comment captures in the Vientiane Times (2002; emphasis added): “Sometimes my friends use a little money and bet on the game because they want to enjoy the excitement. Sometimes they buy the winner a Pepsi! But I don’t like to do this. It is still a form of **gambling**. I just watch for enjoyment. I am going for Argentina and Italy because they play very well and I like every footballer in each team.”

mentioned and by the extent to which in conversation they were treated as the most natural way to distinguish games. During an interview, for instance, one mini-van driver who spent his off-days at the money gambling court told me that when he drove tourists around the countryside to smaller villagers he often saw people playing *pétanque*. “What do they play for, I asked him?”

5.1) ZUCKERMAN

*khacaw4 kas-            tii3 kin3 n̄ang3 dēē1*  
 they    topic.linker   hit   eat   what   request.particle

“What do they play for?”<sup>1</sup>

5.2) DRIVER

*khacaw4 kas-            bèèp5 khòòj5 khít1 vaa1    kas-*  
 they    topic.linker   like   I        think COMP    topic.linker  
*tii3 kin3 law5    kin3 bia3 laaj3 kwaa1*  
 hit   eat   alcohol   eat   beer   more   comparative

“They...I think [they] gamble for alcohol and beer much more.”

5.3) ZUCKERMAN

*tii3 kin3 ngen2 bòø-    mii2 juu1 thèèw5 nòòk5 han5*  
 hit   eat   money NEG   have   at   road   outside   deictic.distal

“[They] don’t gamble for money out there.”

5.4) DRIVER

*tii3 kin3 ngen2 bòø-    mii2 thèèw5 nòòk5 bòø-    mii2*  
 hit   eat   money NEG   have   road   outside NEG   have

“[They] don’t gamble for money out there, they don’t.”

At this point in the interview, the driver and I had not yet discussed gambling on *pétanque* or beer and money gambling. But my question about what people play for prompted him to name gambling for beer as a type. In line 5.2, the man uses the comparative *laaj3 kwaa1*, or “much more” presupposing that they gamble for beer more than they gamble for something else. While

*laaj3 kwaan1* is not always used to compare one thing against a discrete second entity, in line 5.3, I draw out the implication that they do not play for money and he, without skipping a beat, repeats what I said. This is only a small but I think telling example of the extent to which gambling for beer and gambling for money are the most salient types of gambling on *pétanque*. It captures the general fact that when people speak about *pétanque* styles, these are the types to which they tend to orient. Often, for instance, when I asked someone whether they liked to play for *pétanque*, he would respond by saying that he ‘liked to play for beer.’

Gambling for beer and gambling for money are also the only two types of *pétanque* stakes that people used to distinguish courts from one another.<sup>209</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I adopt this referential practice and call one of the courts the ‘money gambling court’ because that is how people often referred to it, using either a *tii3 kin ngen3* construction or the noun phrase *deen3 phanan2* (‘gambling court’).<sup>210</sup> People used this construction to distinguish the money-gambling courts from ‘beer gambling courts’ (*deen3 kin3 bia3*). When, for instance, I was interviewing a woman who had worked as a beer-server at a beer gambling court and then moved to serve beer at the money gambling court, I asked her whether the two courts were similar. Before this moment, we had referred to the courts by name, but when we spoke about differences between the two courts she distinguished them in terms of the types of stakes patrons tended to play for:

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<sup>209</sup> I overstate this somewhat, as the *pétanque* stadium is sometimes referred to as a ‘tournament court’ (*deen3 khèng1 khan3*).

<sup>210</sup> They also would sometimes refer to it with the owner’s name or by mentioning its location.



6    *man2 kas-            khùu2 kan3            tèt1 vaa1    man2 taang1*  
 it    topic.linker same reciprocal but COMP it    different  
*bèp5 too3 nan4            khacaw4 tii3 kin3 bia3*  
 like thing deictic.distal they hit eat beer  
*nii4            too3 nii4            tii3 kaanphanan2 n̄ang3*  
 deictc.proximal thing deictic.proximal hit gambling what  
*nèè1*  
 factive.particle

“They were mostly the same, except one difference was that at that [court] people *tii3 kin3 bia3* but at this [court they] gamble [for money] or whatever, you see.”

Finally, a crucial piece of evidence that the two types of gambling were particularly salient for *pétanque* players is that when I asked players about the types, most gave startlingly similar responses.<sup>211</sup> Here is how one man in his early 40s, the son-in-law of the owner of a beer gambling court, distinguished gambling for beer from gambling for money during an interview. It was the middle of the day and the court was empty; we sat at one of the concrete checker-board tables that would surely be filled that night with merry-makers, drinking and waiting for their turn to play.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> One of the goals of this chapter is to show the consistency of these themes. In this sense, this section is out of fashion. Modern cultural and linguistic anthropologists are usually more attracted to variation than homogeneity as an object of theorization. Questions about, say, the ways that people negotiate dominant ideologies, resist homogenous discourses, or produce idiosyncratic readings of culture are much more appealing to most anthropologists, and more likely to receive external funding, than questions about the extent to which ideas, stereotypes, and opinions are homogenous amongst a (roughly delimited) group of people. This is partly because homogeneity was a key concept for anthropology historically, and partly because the notion of a relatively homogenous culture continues to lurk as an assumption amongst many of us, a vestige of the dead, but never formally exorcised, culture concept. For example, Malinowski (1922:23) wrote, “First of all, it has been to be laid down that we have to study here stereotyped manners of thinking and feeling. As sociologists, we are not interested in what A or B may feel *qua* individuals, in the accidental course of their own personal experiences—we are interested only in what they feel and think *qua* members of a given community.... So, the third commandment of field-work runs: Find out the typical ways of thinking and feeling, corresponding to the institutions and culture of a given community, and formulate the results in the most convincing manner.” Like the experimental musician who has memorized the melodies and principles of composition that guided her predecessors and is now breaking the rules, in our articles, books, and grant applications, we search for the unexpected.

<sup>212</sup> In the following transcript, I have elided my own questions to save space.

Son-in-Law of Court Owner

*tii3 kin3 bia3 sia3 kas- daj4 kin3 duu1*  
 hit eat beer lose topic.linker acquire eat factive.particle  
*(h) daj4 kas- daj4 kin3 (h) (h)*  
 (laughter) win topic.linker acquire eat (laughter)

“[When you] *tii3 kin3 bia3* you lose and you still eat, haha, you win and you eat, haha...”

*tii3 kin3 ngen2 sia3 lèq- sia3 leej2 bə- daj4 kin3*  
 hit eat money lose and lose without.ado NEG acquire eat  
*daj4 (h) (h)*  
 acquire (laughter)

“...[Whereas when you] *tii3 kin3 ngen2* you lose and you just lose, you don’t get to eat, haha.”

*tii3 kin3 bia3 mii2 tē1 muan1 ... man2 kas- bēp5*  
 hit eat beer has only fun ... it topic.linker similar.to  
*saang5 san3 muu1 khuu1*  
 constructing friendship

“...[When you] *tii3 kin3 bia3*, there is only fun. It’s like building friendship.”

*man2 daj4 khwaam2 hak1 khwaam2 phēng2*  
 it acquire love love

“It yields love.”

*lèq- baang3 thua1 haw2 mii2 viak4 mii2 ngaan2 haw2 maa2 suan2*  
 and sometimes we have work have work we come invite  
*kan3 tii3 nē1 lom2 kan3 tūm1*  
 reciprocal hit factive.particle talk reciprocal more

“And sometimes, if we have work, we can invite each other to come and continue the conversation [from work]”

man2 caø- qan3 nan4 paj3  
 it irrealis thing deictic.distal go

“It’s like that.”

tii3 kin3 ngen2 mü2 tēē1 qan3 nan4 siø- phit2  
 hit eat money has only thing deictic.distal irrealis disagree  
 kan3 man2 bōø- muan1 pēn3 kaan3 phanan2 nēē1  
 reciprocal it NEG enjoy copula gambling factive.particle

“tii3 kin3 ngen2 only yields that stuff: it makes arguments, it’s not enjoyable. It’s gambling.”

On the survey I distributed, discussed in chapter three, I also asked people to compare the two kinds of gambling and was given similar answers. The chief theme was that gambling for money was about money, gambling for beer was about building social relations. One man wrote, “*tii3 bun1 kin3 ngen2* is really different, [people who] *tii3 bun1 kin3 ngen2* tend to fight, [whereas] *tii3 bun1 kin3 bia3* only involves love, and involves people mutually constructing together.”<sup>213</sup> Another man wrote, “*tii3 buun3 kin3 ngen2* is different from *tii3 kin3 bia3*, especially insofar as *tii3 kin3 ngen3* involves taking money and putting it in your pocket, when you *ti3 kin3 bia3*, on the other hand, even if you lose you eat and produce solidarity.”<sup>214</sup>

Many of these responses stress not the material stakes of the exchange *per se* but the purpose of the activity. They focus attention on the ultimately moral question of ‘What is a game of *pétanque* for?’ ‘What is its rationality?’ in Weber’s language (1978). ‘What are its ends?’ in the language of moral philosophy. Note the resonance between the beer and money gambling distinction and the ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ distinction as outlined in Gregory and Carrier.<sup>215</sup> Like

<sup>213</sup> ຕືບູນກິນເງິນນີ້ ມີຄວາມແຕກຕ່າງກັບຫຼາຍ ຕືບູນກິນເງິນມັກຜິດກັນ ແລະຕື... ບູນກິນເບຍມີຄວາມຮັກແພງ ກັນຫຼາຍແລະສ້າງສັນຫຼາຍກ່ວາ

<sup>214</sup> ການຕືບູນກິນເງິນຕ່າງກັບການຕືກິນເບຍ ເຊັ່ນ: ຕືກິນເງິນແມ່ນການ ... ເອົາເງິນເຂົ້າຖົງ. ຕືກິນເບຍແມ່ນ [illegible] ຊື່ນ ເສຍກໍໄດ້ກິນສ້າງຄວາມສາມະຄີ

<sup>215</sup> This definitional distinction, furthermore, resonates with other distinctions that people make across contexts in Luang Prabang, distinctions between, say, ‘buying’ (*sùu4*) and ‘help-buying’ (*sùu4 sòj1*), ‘international lotteries’ and ‘the development lottery,’ ‘lending money’ and ‘entering a rotating credit association,’ ‘winning the lottery’ and ‘celebrating winning the lottery,’ ‘gambling in secret’ and ‘gambling at a baby shower.’ While each of these distinctions (all of which I touch on in this dissertation) has its unique properties, they share a common logic. Each

the gift and commodity distinction, the distinction between gambling for beer and gambling for money is often framed as a distinction between doing something for the formation of social relations, for ‘solidarity’ and ‘love,’ and doing something to acquire the objects involved, for ‘money.’ Sometimes, as men spoke about the differences between the two types of gambling they used the language of ‘goals’ and ‘targets’ (*paw3 maaj3*). Others sketched the difference in ends using the form *phua2*, meaning ‘for.’ As one man wrote in my survey, “*tii3 kin3 bia3* means to play for (*phua2*) friendship, for (*phua2*) drinking beer, it does not mean you are playing to lose or win. *Tii3 kin3 ngen2* [in contrast] means to play for (*phua2*) losing or winning because if you lose, you lose money and if you win, you win money. There is no playing around [in gambling for money], everyone is trying.”<sup>216</sup>

As the last part of this answer implies, the different ends were also spoken about as yielding different types of sociality. People frequently distinguished the types in reference to this fact, that money games were serious while beer games were ‘fun.’ There was less ‘pressure’ (*khwaam2 kotdan3*) in gambling for beer. As another man wrote, “*tii3 bun1 kin3 ngen2* makes you feel pressure because its goal (*paw3 maaj3*) is to win so that you can take the money. When playing for beer you can play in a relaxed way, because mostly it is your friends who you know, and whether you win or lose you drink/win (*kin3*) together.”<sup>217</sup> Another man told me in an

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distinguishes those economic types aimed at profiting at the expense of social relations from those economic types aimed at building such social relations. While some people—for example, men or women who did not play (especially women married to frequent *pétanque* players), or people speaking with a concern toward state policies (like Buun, described below), or monks—would collapse or reject the distinction in regard to *pétanque*, and frame the game as inherently wasteful, and the ‘same,’ no matter what people were wagering, those same people would generally accept analogous distinctions in other dimensions of life. That is, they might say that beer and money gambling are ‘all the same,’ but not argue that ‘buying’ an object and giving someone money in exchange for an object in a kind of ‘helping’ relation, were the same thing. I return to these variations below.

<sup>216</sup> ການຕີບຸນ ຕີກິນເບຍ ໝາຍເຖິງ ການຕີເພື່ອມິດຕະພາບ ເພື່ອກິນເບຍ ບໍ່ໝາຍເຖິງ ການແລ່ນຊະນະການຕີກິນ ເງິນ ໝາຍເຖິງ ການຕີເພື່ອ ແລ່ນຊະນະ ເພາະວ່າ ຖ້າເສຍ ຈະເສຍເງິນ ແຕ່ຖ້າໄດ້ກໍໄດ້ເງິນ ຈະບໍ່ມີການຫຼິ້ນ ທຸກໆຄົນ ຈະເຮັດແທ້

<sup>217</sup> ການຕີບຸນກິນເງິນ ແມ່ນສ້າງຄວາມກົດດັນ ໃຫ້ແກ່ ຕົນເອງເພາະມີເປົ້າໝາຍວ່າຕ້ອງຊະນະເພື່ອເອົາເງິນ ການຕີບຸນກິນເບຍແມ່ນຫຼິ້ນໄດ້ຕາມສາບາຍ ສ່ວນຫຼາຍແມ່ນໝູ່ຄູ່ກັນ, ຮູ້ຈັກກັນ, ໄດ້ເສຍກໍໄດ້ກິນນ່າກັນ

interview that while he loved to play the role of the striker (*kaan3 tii3*), i.e., the one who tries to knock away opponents' *pétanque* balls, he only played as a striker during beer games; during money games, when the stakes were higher, he took the less pressure-filled role of the one who made approach shots.

People often also distinguished the two types of gambling based on the kinds of characters who engaged in them, as I described briefly in chapter two. Sometimes, they did this in relation to personality characteristics. The two kinds of gambling were said to require distinct kinds of 'hearts' (*caj3*) and many who were said to be very good beer-gamblers were said to not 'have a capable enough heart' (*caj3 man2 bòø-daj4*) to play for money. But people also made distinctions between the types based on profession. Beer-gambling was said to be what civil servants (*phanakngaan2*) did, money gambling was for tourist drivers. As one man, a civil servant put it, "There's only a tiny number of civil servants who play for money."<sup>218</sup> The logic was that those who were civil servants would find the potential antagonism of money gambling distasteful and unbecoming of their role as a moral socialist actor—it was 'not suitable' (*bòø1 khùù2*), people would say.

While there was a general agreement as to the outlines of the two types of gambling—what they were for, who tended to engage in them, how they worked—people evaluated them differently.<sup>219</sup> Some people told me matter-of-factly that playing for money was always bad, while others tempered this broad evaluation and said that each type had a context in which it was suitable. Across this variation, there was a pattern: when most *pétanque* playing men spoke about gambling for beer and gambling for money generically, even as they disagreed in the force of

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<sup>218</sup> *kaø-mii2 suan1 nòòj4 sut5 phannakngaan2 tii3 kin3 ngen2*

<sup>219</sup> See Mayfair-Yang's (1994) discussion of *guanxi*, especially her chapter on '*guanxi dialects*' for what appears to be a similar moral tilt even as she does not describe it in such terms.

their evaluation, there was a sense that gambling for beer was a better thing to do, in an ethical sense, even if they did not like to do it. This pattern, in other words, was a kind of moral tilt. This was most evident in the fact that almost everyone drew a line in the sand between those with whom they would not gamble for money, because doing so would be unethical, and those with whom they would. Usually, people said they would not gamble for money with close friends or relatives. The logic behind what they said was much like the narrow moral economic logic I discussed in chapter two in relation to Sahlins's and Evans's arguments about 'primitive economy.' Others took a more universalistic logic and said they would not gamble for money with anyone.<sup>220</sup>

Those who spent the most time at the money gambling court gambling for money tended to frame money gambling as less distasteful, say more amoral rather than immoral, when they spoke about it. Take, for instance, how one man, a civil servant and regular at the court, weighed the positive and negatives of gambling for beer and gambling for money. As is clear from the below, he preferred money gambling even as he recognized beer gambling's positive qualities.

**Civil Servant**

7.1) (lip smack) *suan1 laaj3 khòj5 kaø-mak1 tii3 kin3 ngen2*  
 "(lip smack) Mostly, I like gambling for money."

**Zuckerman**

7.2) *mm pèn3 ñang2*  
 "Mmhm, why?"

**Civil Servant**

7.3) *phòq-vaa1 nùng1 maa2 lèw4 tii3 kin3 ngen2 lèw4 man2 caø-bò1 maw2*  
 "Because, first of all, when [you] play for money you don't get drunk."

7.4) *caø- bò1 sia3 sukhaphaap4 lèw4 kaø- lin5 paj3 daj4 dè1 sia3 dè1 kaø- jaa1 man2*  
 "You don't lose health, as you play, you win, you lose, it doesn't matter."

7.5) *khan2 haw2 maa2 tii3 kin3 bia3 khuuø-mù4 khuuø-mù4 laaj3 man2 sia3 sukhaphaap4*  
 "If I come and gamble for beer every day, all the time, [I'll] lose my health."

**Zuckerman**

7.6) *kin3 laaj3 phoot4 qaql*

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<sup>220</sup> I explore these issues more in chapter seven.

“Drink way too much, huh?”

**Civil Servant**

7.7) *mèèn1 léq1 tèè1 baang3 khang2 haw2 kaø-tòong4 tii3 kin3 bia3 saang5 san3 kap2 muu1 kap2 khuu1 dèè1*

“Yeah, that’s right. But if sometimes I have to go gamble for beer to have fun with friends, [then that’s what I do].”

**Civil Servant**

7.8) *naa1*

“It’s like that.”

**Zuckerman**

7.9) *caw4 piap4 thiap4 thang2 sòong3 qan3 nan4 caw4 piap4 thiap3 pèn3 nèèw2 daj3*  
“If you were to compare the two, how would you compare them?”

**Civil Servant**

7.10) *man2 kaø-dii3 khòongø-laø-jaang1 dii3 bòon1 vaa1 sommut2 vaa1 tii3 kin3 ngen2 haw2 kaø-daj4 ngen2 haw2 kaø-daj4 ngen2 maa2 saj1 thong3 haw2 dèè1 paj3 samaat4 sùu4 nèèw2 qiùn1 daj4*

“Each one has its own good qualities. Imagine that I am gambling for money, I’ll win money, I’ll win money to put in my pocket. I can go buy other things with it.”

7.11) *khan2 haw2 tii3 kin3 bia3 haw2 kaø-tòong4 cong1 ngen2 paj3 sùu1 bia3*

“If I am gambling for beer, I have to take my money out [of my pocket] and buy beer.”

7.11) *sia3 qan3 diaw1*

“[There are] only losses [with gambling for beer].”

7.12) *léq2 bat2 nii4 cut2 dii3 vaa1 tii3 kin3 bia3 dii3 bòon1 daj3 dii3 bòon3 vaa1 nung1 maa2 haw2 daj4 saang5 san3 kap2 muu1 kap2 khuu1 nòq1*

“And then the good part about gambling for beer, where is that? The good part is first that I get to build friendship with my friends. Right?”

7.13) *daj4 khwaam2 samakhii2 kap2 muu1 kap2 khuu1 daj4 khwaam2 hak1 khwaam2 phèng2 nòq1 phàn2 mitsahaaj3*

“You get solidarity with your friends, love, right? Friendship and comradery.”

7.14) *khan2 haw2 tii3 kin3 ngen2 nii4 cut2 qòon1 cut2 sia3 man2 nêè1 sia3 bòon1 vaa1 khan2 haw2 kin3 ngen2 muu1 muu1 kaø-cépø-caj3 haw2 mm qan3 nii4 haw2 kaø-tii3 lèkø-lék1 nòdjø-nòdj4*

“If I play for beer, the bad part, the losing part of it is that if you win [lit. eat] your friends' money you hurt their feelings. I...mm...to [avoid this] I just play for a little bit [of money].”

7.15) *mii2 cut2 dii3 kap2 cut2 sia3 khùu2 kan3*

“It has good and losing characteristics too.”

Note particularly how, in line 7.14, the man recognizes that he has to be careful in gambling for money with friends, and to “play for a little bit [of money].” Many people at the money gambling court took a similar position as him. It was very rare, however, for me to hear that they would play for money with anyone, for any amount. The clearest instantiation of this that I ever

heard was from an older man, around sixty years of age, who rarely gambled for money but was constantly at the court. As I interviewed him, he lay in a cloth hammock tied between two trees near where people parked their cars. He could not drink beer for health reasons, he told me and so he only liked to play for money. When I asked him whether there were some people with whom he did not wager money, he said more directly than I had heard up to that point or since: “I eat everyone’s money, that’s me.”<sup>221</sup> Later, when I asked him why others believed that they should not eat their friends’ money, he explained that they were worried it would ruin a relationship, but he also noted that he knew some good friends (*siawI*) who would eat each other’s money and then go right back to treating each other to meals. “Some people, they are friends, but they claim that no one is related to money and gold”<sup>222</sup> (cf. the Nuer phrase ‘money has no blood’ (Hutchinson 1996)). He stressed that it was not that he disliked the people with whom he played, but that he felt emotionally down the middle, neither hating nor truly loving anyone. He also made a point to say that he only played for small amounts. “It’s not that I want to win lots of money,” he said.<sup>223</sup>

The regularity in metapragmatic glosses of the two types of gambling—even as stances upon them vary both within and across individuals—is a testament to their status as cultural touchstones, anchors for talking about types of socioeconomic ends and aims. Furthermore, while there was not moral homogeneity, for almost everyone with whom I spoke, there was a *moral tilt* toward treating gambling for money as not always ‘bad’ *per se*, but something that someone should not do with everyone, something with ethical limits. Across interviews, generic propositions about gambling seemed to work like on-ramps to evaluation. Men move naturally

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<sup>221</sup> *kin3 mot2 khòj5 qaq1*

<sup>222</sup> *baang3 khon2 kaø-pên3 siaw1 kan3 juul tèl1 vaal ngen2 kham2 bòø-mèen1 phii1... nòng4 phaj3 ngen2 kaø-kin3 kan3*

<sup>223</sup> *bòø-mèen1 vang3 qaw3 ngen2 laaj3*



from describing the practices generically to evaluating them. This was partly because of my questions. I asked them about how they tended to play and which types of gambling they preferred. But I argue that it was not just that I asked evaluative questions. Remember the quotation with which I began this section from Buun, who interrupted my question about his opinion——“So then you think that playing for money is...”——with a clear ethical stance, a plea of sorts to get on record “[It’s] not good!” I did not get the same sorts of responses to questions I asked about whether people liked coffee or not, or whether they tended to shop at one market or another. Rather, because gambling for money and gambling for beer so strongly index aims and ends that are thought to impinge on ethical issues, taking a stance on the types themselves is sticky work (on ethical 'stickiness,' see Mathias 2017).

As the next section shows, generics make that work somewhat easier. They allow players to paint a simple moral dichotomy between events that are for sociality or for money and to take broad stances on that dichotomy in a way that does not so directly figure or typify their social relations with real people, during real games. Much like people were hesitant to talk to Kham to his face as they spoke about him, generics afford a degree of referential distance from the world, a distance that retained the possibility that individual games might not fit well into one type or another. Even when I interviewed people next to a *pétanque* court where everyone was gambling for money, generic propositions allowed people to take negative moral stances on gambling for money without necessarily judging the games in front of them. In taking such stances, players not only described generic categories, but they implicitly positioned themselves as particular kinds of figures, with particular kinds of proclivities—the good family man, the dutiful civil servant, the risk taker who likes to gamble for money.

## Specific Distinctions

When I pressed *pétanque*-playing men to give me ‘examples’ of the differences between money gambling and beer gambling, they were sometimes hesitant to do so. Of course, it can be difficult to come up with examples on the spot, but often when I asked these questions, we were sitting at *pétanque* courts, where nearby people were concurrently playing and gambling on *pétanque* for beer and money. To typify those ready-at-hand games, to highlight their qualities, to point out their features, would be easy.

This hesitancy about evaluating specific practices, and thus specific individuals, is clear from an interview I did with a man named Lam. We sat at the money gambling court on one of the concrete checkerboard tables. Lam had been a novice and then a monk for years. He learned English at the temple and then became a tourist guide; at the time of the interview he was working with his family to run a hotel. He was constantly at the money gambling court, but he did not like to play for money. He spent his days there watching people play, chain-smoking cigarettes, and gambling for money on soccer games. As we sat talking, people were playing games for money behind us. Lam said he did not like gambling for money, and I asked him why:

**Lam**

8.1) *pên3 phòø-vaa1 qan3 nan4 naa1 man2 tii3 kin3 ngen2 mak1 thiang3 kan3*  
“It’s because of that thing. When you play for money, [people] like to argue.”

**Zuckerman**

8.2) *mak1 thiang3 kan3 naq1*  
“They like to argue?”

**Lam**

8.3) *qee3 mak1 phit2 kan3*  
“Yeah, they like to bicker.”

**Zuckerman**

8.4) *mak1 phit2 kan3 qaq1 bèèp5 mii3 toø-jaang1 bòò3 mii2 lùang1 vaw4 haj5 khòj5 fang2 bòò3*  
“They like to bicker? Do you have an example? A story you could tell me?”

**Lam**

8.5) *khòj5 bòq1...qoo1 juu1 deen3 [redacted] bèèp5 caw4 hên2 nêl1 kha-caw4 mak1 phit2 kan3 nêl1*  
“I...Like at the [old *pétanque* court], like you’ve seen! They liked to argue, you know.”

**Zuckerman**

8.6) *caw5 vaw4 lùang1 haj5 khòj5 fang2 dèè1*  
“Can you tell me a story about that?”

**Lam**

8.7) *paphêêt4 bèèp5 khòj5 bòø-mak1 thiang3 kan3 khòj5 bòø-mak1 nòq1 tii3 kin3 ngen2 lèèw4 mak1 thèèk4*  
*mak1 thiang3 kan3 lèèw4 naa1 khòj5 daj4 caw4 daj4 juu1 khòj5 bòø-mak1*  
“It’s like this: I don’t like arguing. I don’t like it, you know. [If] you play for money, people like to [bicker over which ball is closer], they like to argue like, ‘I won, you won.’ I don’t like it.

In lines (8.1) and (8.3), Lam says that he does not like (*mak1*) gambling for money because it ‘tends to’ (*mak1*) make people argue.<sup>224</sup> After I ask for an example, a story he might tell illuminating this, he reminds me of what I had “seen” at the old money gambling court (to clarify, the court we were sitting on had recently been forced to relocate, and he pointed to its old location). Lam does not seem to have any particular event in mind when he tells me to remember what I have seen, or at least, he does not point to any particular event. Rather, he is generalizing that arguing tended to happen at that court. When I ask again for him to tell me a story about arguing he had seen, he returns, in line (8.7), to speaking about money gambling generically. Throughout this interview, which again occurred as people were gambling for money only a few feet away, Lam never refers to the games happening nearby nor does he even refer to the games that generally happened at the court where we were then sitting. Instead, he appears to studiously avoid speaking of gambling for money in a way that directly relates to where we are sitting. This tendency to keep negative evaluations at a distance, so to speak, is analogous to what I described in chapter four, and what others have found regarding gossip. Brenneis (1984), for example, has shown how Fiji Indian gossipers use indefinite reference and other resources to create what he calls “a very opaque kind of referentiality,” a fact which, among other things, licenses evaluation without worry about revenge from those about whom you are talking. Something similar happens

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<sup>224</sup> The same form *mak1* can mean both ‘tend to’ or ‘like to.’

in these interviews in Luang Prabang: generically meant ethnometapragmatics are not only easy ways to generalize about activity, but good objects for stance-taking because the connection between them and spatio-temporally individuated events and people is not inevitable. This is particularly important for a person that might want to distance himself from money gambling as a generic practice, but not from the people who casually do it.

In this section, I show a contrastive evaluative affordance of specifics. Using specific forms of the lexemes ‘gambling for beer’ and ‘gambling for money’ to describe concrete interactions in which the participants are nearby can put their action ‘under a description,’ and in so doing, can work to evaluate others and to change how they are acting.

I will begin with specific references to gambling for beer. While people were drinking beer and playing *pétanque*, it was common to hear them remind one another that they were playing for beer. People would say this especially to correct others’ presuppositions about what a game of *pétanque* was for. As a man took money out of his wallet, for instance, and complained about having ‘lost so much money,’ another might say, ‘don’t worry, we are just playing for beer.’ Likewise, when I complained about my own bad play or apologized to my teammates, people would often respond by saying that I did not need to worry because we were ‘playing for beer, playing for fun.’

Here is a more extended example from a video recording I took of a series of beer gambling games at a court down the street from my house. The game consisted of men in the neighborhood, ranging in ages from mid-twenties to almost sixty years old. After each game, the losing team paid 10,000 Kip to the collective funds, physically collected in a ceramic mug sitting on a bench near the side of the court. That money went to buy beer and ice from the man who

lived across the street and operated and maintained the court and who usually joined in on the games.

One of the players in the game had a habit of lifting his left leg up slightly from the ground when he took a striking shot. After that player made a nice shot, a younger man waiting to play on the bench complained that the player had lifted his leg and thus violated the rules.<sup>225</sup> In response, another man defended the player who had raised his leg by pointing out that they were playing for beer:

**Defender of the Player Who Had Raised His Leg**

9) *qoo3 ñok1 khaa3 qiø-pên3 ñang3 nòq1 tii3 kin3 bia3 nòq1*  
“Ohh, what’s the problem with raising [your] leg? [We are] gambling for beer, right?”

When I asked a research assistant with whom I transcribed the game what this meant<sup>226</sup>, he reframed the comment within the contrast between gambling for beer and gambling for money.<sup>227</sup>

**Research Assistant**

10.1) *khwaam2 maaj3 vaa1 tii3 kin3 bia3 laaw2 ñok2 khaa3 kaø-daj4*  
“It means that [when] gambling for beer he can raise his leg”

10.2) *qee3 khan2 thaa3 vaa1 tii3 kin3 ngen2 nii4 ñok2 bò-daj4*  
“Yeah, if [they were] playing for money, he couldn’t raise his leg.”

About a minute after the initial moment in the game, yet another person came to the leg-lifter’s defense saying, ‘we all have times when we lift our legs.’ The player who had lifted his leg initially then repeated the sentiment that lifting one’s leg was fine because it was a game for beer.

**Player Who had Raised his Leg**

11.1) *bòl ñòk2 kaø-bòø-pên3 ñang3 tii3 muan1 sùùn1*

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<sup>225</sup> This was clearly a kind of dose (Zuckerman 2016).

<sup>226</sup> I said, *kaø-diaw1 vaa1 khwaam2 maaj3 kaø-pên3 bèèp5 tii3 kin3 bia3 ñok2 khaa3 kaø-daj4 nòq1*

<sup>227</sup> It seems, in fact, that at the time my research assistant thought the players were playing for money. This is another example of how specifics and generics are not encoded in the formal structure of the statement. The *nii4* in line 10.2, in fact, seems to be a deictic pointing to the current game.

“No, lifting [your leg] is not a problem, [we] are playing for fun.”

11.2) *tii3 kin3 law3 kin3 bia3*  
“[We] are gambling for alcohol and beer.”

Such descriptions of the activity at hand highlight the ends of the activity, and thus, make claims about what is or is not appropriate. Claiming that one cannot lift his leg in a game for beer is like repeatedly pointing out that the tip of a friend’s foot has gone over the line in bowling or calling a silly foul in a game of pick-up basketball. One might refute such acts by saying, ‘this is not a tournament,’ or ‘we are just playing for fun.’ Referring to games as ‘gambling for beer’ games affects the situation. It is a tool people use to convince others, and, as such, it settled the matter in this beer-gambling game.

Because people whom I did not know well sometimes assumed I would not understand beer-gambling and its associated ends, in anticipation of starting a game, men would often mention the material and social stakes to me. One civil servant for instance, who took me to gamble for beer with his friends with whom he gambled every night, explained to me in detail how everything would work on the motorcycle over to the court. ‘Every game that you lose,’ he said, with some awkwardness, ‘you have to pay 10,000 Kip. But the money will go toward buying beer that we will drink together.’ On the motorcycle, my face looking toward his back, I nodded my head knowingly and he repeated himself, an apparent attempt to pre-define the specific games we were about to play. Even though the games would use money, he stressed, they were not going to be *for money*.

Just as people wielded lexemes meaning ‘gambling for beer’ to define their interactions, so too did they wield lexemes meaning ‘gambling for money.’ One example, which I have described elsewhere (Zuckerman 2016; 2017), happened during a money-game in which I was playing. As my partner took a shot in the game, an audience member who was betting against us

yelled out and attempted to distract him. After the scream, the audience member scampered back to his seat and my partner told me to hit him “on the lips” with the *pétanque* ball I was holding. “Hit him on the lips,” the audience member called back, “he is the one talking.” Shortly thereafter, my partner walked up to the audience member and further scolded him:

**My Partner in a Money Gambling Game**

- 12) *taa3 bòø-mii2 qaql lin5 kin3 ngen2 nii4 naql hét1 hoo kaø-vaw4 dui3 dui3 kaø-vaa1 san4 naql*  
“[What], you don’t have eyes? [We] are playing for money here and you yell ‘hoo!’ Is that ‘speaking nicely,’ [is that what you] are [trying to] argue here?”

My partner’s argument was that because this was a money-gambling game, such hijinks should not be allowed. Another audience member who was betting against my team heckled my partner and accused him of being upset because he was “losing money.”

**Other audience member**

- 13.1) *nêê1 sia3 ngen2 lêq1 caj3 haaj5 daj4 nòq1*  
“Look, [he’s] losing money and he’s upset, right?”

- 13.1) *sia3 ngen2 lèw4 caj3 haaj5 daj4 hên2 naql*  
“He’s losing money and he’s upset, do you see it?”

By specifically referring to the game he was engaged in as money-gambling, my partner made it clear that he was seriously upset about the breach of rules. He also, however, as the other audience member made clear, opened himself up to criticism about being overly concerned with money and thus getting angry because he was losing it.

Obviously, labeling gambling types with specific propositions also happens when the person doing the labeling is not involved in the game. Take, for instance, another money gambling game and the conversation that happened between two audience members, Bot and Phuumii Hii (or ‘Phuumii Vagina,’ as I described him in chapter three), both of whom were betting on the game. The betting formations of the match contradicted the explicit picture that people often mention: that *siaw1*, or close friends, should not gamble for money against each

other or *kin3 ngen2 kan3* ('eat each other's money'). Both Bot and Phuumii Hii were separately betting against one of their *siaw1* playing in the game. This betting, this 'gambling for money' was explicitly referred to twice during a string of matches. The first time, Bot and the *siaw1* he was gambling against were bickering with one another when someone else watching the game laughed and called out that the two *siaw1* were "eating each other's money." The comment highlighted the apparent mismatch between the public friendship between the two men and their economic practice and invited others at the court to laugh at it. Later in the same game, the issue was pointed to even more explicitly. Again, Bot and his *siaw1* began to bicker and again, someone called out that they were gambling for money. This time it was Phuumii Hii. He noted that Bot and his *siaw1* had even made a pledge, sealed with a handshake, that they would no longer gamble for money with one another:



14.1) **Phuumii Hii**

*qaaw4 kuu3 hèn3 suu3 cap2 mùù2 vaa1 suu3 bòø- kin3*  
 hey I see you(pl) grab hands COMP you(pl) NEG eat  
*ngen2 kan3 san4 suu3 kaø- ñang2 kin3 ngen2*  
 money reciprocal thus you(pl) topic.linker still eat money  
*kan3*  
 reciprocal

*(pointing at Bot and another man)*

“Hey, I saw you two shake hands and say that you wouldn’t eat each other’s money (i.e., bet for money), but you’re still eating each other’s money.”

14.2) **Bot**

*bak2 qan3 nan4 kin3 ngen2 mùng2 san4*  
 bare.title thing deictic.distal eat money you(sg.) thus  
*naq1*  
 factive.particle

*(pointing at the player Phuumii Hii is gambling against who is also Phuumii Hii’s siaw1)*

“That guy’s eating your money”

14.3) **Phuumii Hii**

*man2 siø- cap2 mùù2 kuu3*  
 he irrealis grab hand 1st.person.bare

“Did he shake my hand?”

14.4) (laughter)

14.5) **Phuumii Hii**

*caw4 tòòng4 cap2 mùù2 vaa1 bòø- qaw3 ngen2 kan3*  
 you need grab hand COMP NEG take money reciprocal  
*thèè4 thèè4 qan3 nii4*  
 true true thing deictic.proximal

“You need to shake hands if you really aren’t going to gamble for money”

Here Phuumii Hii and Bot take each other to task for betting against their respective *siawl*. The example is packed full of details that show how gambling for money *qua* moral economic type can put relationships, ideas, and ethical principles into relief. For one, the interaction makes clear that at some point, Bot and his *siawl* decided to pledge that they would not ‘gamble for money’ anymore, perhaps after a previous argument. Such a pledge, reminiscent of Dii’s plea for me to not ‘gamble for money with friends’ with which I began the dissertation, legislated the two men’s future play around generic types of economic behavior, and presupposed that such behavior can be meaningfully distinguished from other types. Notice also Phuumii Hii’s claim (in line 14.3) that his own eating of his *siawl*’s money does not matter because the pair never pledged to not do so with a handshake.<sup>228</sup> Thus, the implication goes, he is less of a hypocrite than Bot. This brings me to another point. The men accuse one another of eating their respective *siawl*’s money as if it were a problem. In the two moments I reviewed above, in fact, the labeling of their gambling as ‘gambling for money’ or *kin3 ngen2 kan3*, emerged in response to Bot and his *siawl*’s bickering. The application of the type seems to put into relief—that is, to emphasize and concretize—the type’s capacity to make people, even friends, bicker. As it did this, it also evaluated those to whom it was directed.

In many of the instances where people specifically referred to events as beer-gambling or money-gambling that I found in my recordings, there seemed to be a persuasive dimension to the referential act. People did not aimlessly identify their games, they did not neurotically organize them into money and beer gambling ‘bins’ (on ‘binning’ see Enfield and Sidnell 2017) as a numismatist might organize his coin collection. Rather, they tended to use the lexemes in

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<sup>228</sup> While such a relationship usually happened more organically, this official, ritual initiation of relationships is not uncommon. Muu (described later in the dissertation), for instance, told me that he wanted to take me to where he was born and have us *puk4 khèèn3* to formalize our *siawl*-ship.

conjunction with other forms to evaluate how others were acting or to convince them to act differently. But even as they often ‘did things’ (Austin 1975) with the words they used, the performative force of such referential acts of naming beer and money gambling games varied in intensity. That is, in some moments, such acts of reference were clearly felt to do something, whereas in other moments their use faded into the background as an obvious sign, a kind of redundancy. One factor that seemed to encourage such salience was whether the actors involved in the game to which people referred were in earshot. As I showed above, when actors were present, naming the game in which they were playing could be read as a commentary on the kind of sociality in which they were, had been, or aimed to be engaged, i.e., such referential acts could sketch whether the game was something fun that was being done for fun or something serious being done for money.

While I emphasized in the previous section that one affordance of generics was that they allowed people to take strong moral stances on gambling without necessarily implicating individuals, co-present or not, generics did not lack this capacity entirely. They could also work as vehicles for moral evaluation of specific people, not just generic acts. Like the public reprimands of Tibetan Buddhist disciplinarians who sketch low-resolution figures of those who did wrong, a generic can “speak to all because it speaks to no one” it can make one “begin to wonder, Is he talking about *me*?” (Lempert 2012b:114). At times at the court, in fact, I had a sense that people were uncomfortable making strongly worded generic evaluations about money gambling because of this capacity. It felt as if I was asking them to loudly discuss why healthy eating was important as we sat in a booth at McDonald’s surrounded by people enjoying hamburgers.

## Objective Distinctions

In this section, I reflect on what makes beer and money intuitive as shorthand for contrastive ethical ends. That is, how is it that the distinction between gambling for *beer* and gambling for *money qua* a distinction between ends has come to seem natural? What logic do these socially constructed materials afford?

First, some notes about beer in Laos. During my early fieldwork, the Beer Lao brand of beer dominated the field.<sup>229</sup> The brewery for Beer Lao was founded in 1973 as the ‘Lao Beer and Ice Factory.’ After the revolution, the new Lao government acquired the company as a state enterprise, and in 1993, it changed the company’s name to Lao Brewery Company and partially privatized it, leasing approximately 50% of state’s stake to the Thai firms of Loxley Public Company and Italian-Thai Public Company.<sup>230</sup> In 2002 and 2005 the investors changed again, as Carlsberg Asia Company Limited and TCC International Company Ltd each took over twenty-five percent and then, three years later Carlsberg acquired TCC’s shares (Annez, Sarakosas, and Vandenberghe 2001; Andersson and Kokko 2013). In 2006, Beer Lao made up around 99 percent of the beer market in the country. When I arrived in the field the early 2010s, its dominance in Luang Prabang was still clear. Most everyone I knew preferred to drink Beer Lao over other beers, complaining that other brands like Tiger made their urine smell weird or gave them a headache.

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<sup>229</sup> Holly High {Citation} writes: “Beer Lao is one of the most well known and emotionally elaborated commodities currently produced in Laos. Jingoistic television advertisements explicitly link the product to nationalist sentiments by featuring images of symbols of Lao-ness such as That Luang (a large and striking stupa in Vientiane, widely considered a national symbol) and a wrist tying ceremony. Indeed, Beer Lao can be observed playing an important role in rural rituals such as weddings, Buddhist festivals, and New Year celebrations. Beer Lao is undeniably embedded in heartland Laos. The company, however, has recently been partially sold to foreign interests: Carlsberg now owns 50 percent, while the government of Laos retains 50 percent. The sentiments that surround Beer Lao, then, must be understood in terms of a nationalism that is taking shape within the context of globalization.”

<sup>230</sup> Annez, Sarakosa, and Vandenberghe (2001:12) write, “Laos can claim the Lao Brewery as one of the most successful examples of their economic policy and of the program of privatization of state-owned enterprises.”

Beer Lao, felt as Schopohl (2011:263) writes, like “one of the most potent national symbols” (cf. Manning and Uplisashvili 2007). Its influence on *pétanque* and other sports is particularly salient, as the brewery has printed its seal on *pétanque* score boards, hosted tournaments, and used *pétanque* athletes in the Southeast Asian Games as spokesman in its commercials (see Sisay 2007; Souknilundon 2009). When I first arrived in the field, Lung Diisuu, the older man with the antique *pétanque* ball whom I described in chapter two, would shout out that he had ‘hit it like the [Beer Lao] commercial’ (*tii3 khoosanaa2*) each time he made a really nice striking shot. In Luang Prabang, beer drinking became especially popular in the early 2000s, as the tourism boom gave people more expendable income. Compared to rice whiskey, beer is still quite expensive (around 7-10 thousand Kip for a 640ml bottle), and drinking it in large amounts continues to be a form of conspicuous consumption—although it is significantly cheaper than the liquor (namely Johnny Walker) that more elite Lao people drink. Beer Lao thus seems to index a mix of modernity and nationalism, acting as a sort of semi-prestigious mid-point in between high-end and high-class liquors and cheap, often home-brewed, nameless kinds of rice whiskey.

In Luang Prabang, Beer Lao’s star appears to be fading somewhat. In 2008, the Lao state began its second joint enterprise with a beer brewing company, Lao Asia Pacific Breweries, which eventually in 2017 changed its name to Heineken Lao Brewery Company, Ltd. By the time I finished my fieldwork in early 2016, the new brewery’s Heineken had become a hit in Luang Prabang, and many of my friends who once swore they loved Beer Lao more than any other beer started to drink Heineken exclusively.

Whether people are drinking Heineken or Beer Lao, beer is probably the third most dominant medium of sociality in Luang Prabang, next to food and money. Drinking beer together

is said to produce bonds of friendship and is cited as evidence of friendship. Men often expressed the closeness of their relationships with me and with others through idioms of sharing beer, e.g., ‘we are good friends, we drink beer together all the time.’ Even newspaper articles trying to warn the public about the dangers of drinking make the socially productive nature of drinking beer explicit. One article, translated from the Lao language paper’s into Laos’s English-language Vientiane Times (2006), records: “Going to parties and drinking with friends and colleagues is what many prefer to do in order to sustain relationships and form new ones.”<sup>231</sup> Another article, celebrating one charitable young man’s choice to do other things besides drink beer with his free time and money exhibits the logic that beer creates friendship even as it fights against it:

*Some young people in Vientiane are going against the trend and changing their sometimes selfish ways by sharing a little happiness with those less fortunate in society.*

*These generous individuals are spending their birthday money or spare cash to buy food and gifts for disabled people rather than spending the money on beer and partying.*

*Vientiane Times caught up with Mr. Sisavath, a young man who celebrated his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday this month. He said that spending money on drinking with friends from the office or with fellow students is a good way to make friends, but it’s by no means the only way (Amphonephong 2011).*

*Almsgiving, releasing fish or buying food for disadvantaged people are better ways to spend money and bring happiness to others,’ he suggested.*

Both the idea that drinking alcohol can produce social relations and that there are healthier ways to do this, are found in variations across the world. I follow Manning (2012:14–15) in not treating alcohol as either a cultural construction or a technical determinant (cf. Douglas 2013). With that said, people in Luang Prabang themselves think that one reason alcohol is such a good

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<sup>231</sup> Recently, there has been much concern about the prominence of beer in Lao sociality (see Pansivongsay 2003; Pongkhao 2005; Souksavanh 2006; Leukai 2006; Ounkham 2014).

social lubricant is that it has properties which, among other things, make one have more fun, dance, sing songs, and enjoy life. When I asked one forty-year-old man, for instance, why friends pressured each other to drink (as I describe in chapter eight), he began by saying, “because if you don’t drink and you still come hang out with friends...” then paused for a moment as if spending time without friends without drinking was alone enough of a contradiction, until finally adding, “[If] you don’t drink beer, it’s not fun.”<sup>232</sup> Alcohol’s properties are also what makes it dangerous for a *pétanque* player looking to gamble for money. One reason beer gambling on *pétanque* is sometimes said to be less serious is because as people get drunker, even if they have a brief window where the alcohol increases their skill, as many claimed to have, they eventually become worse at playing the game.

Another property of beer that is crucial to the idea that beer gambling is distinct as a type of moral economy from money gambling is that it can be ingested. Because the beer that is bought is drunk together during the four corners of the event, the event is imagined as exhaustive, not productive, of economic value. In other words, for the players in the game, gambling for beer does not produce anything valuable beyond sociality itself. In beer gambling, players sacrifice their money and their time ostensibly in the name of the people with whom they are playing. I return to this issue in a moment when I describe the language of eating in relation to gambling, but for now I want to return to something I mentioned in chapter two: there are two major sub-types of beer gambling that are elided in normal speech: gambling for who buys beer and gambling for who drinks beer.

In the former type, the stakes are usually counted in either bottles of beer or money. For instance, each player on two three-person teams might bet one large bottle of beer. After the

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<sup>232</sup> ñòòn4 vaal1 too3 bòø-kin3 leqø-too3 maa2 lin5 nam2 muu1 ... lêqø-caw4 bòø-kin3 bia3 man2 kaø-bòø-muan1

game, each player on the losing team would thus purchase three bottles of beer and all six players would drink this beer together out of glasses, and usually as they continued to gamble for more beer. Because gamblers tended to want to eat snacks and to drink their beer with ice, the stakes were frequently counted in Lao currency, say 10,000 Kip (or about \$1.25 at the time), equal to the value of more than a bottle of beer. After each game, the money was collected in a basket, cup, or some other vessel. If they were playing at a formal beer gambling court, it was used to pay the bill which would come at the end of the night. If they were playing at a backyard court, someone would take the money to the store to buy beer.

In the latter type of beer gambling, in contrast, people gambled to see who would drink beer. While they had many varieties of doing this, players tended to bet on particular shots rather than entire games, ‘if the ball I am about to throw gets closer to the small ball than your ball,’ a player might offer to an opponent, ‘then you’ll drink a glass; if not, I’ll drink.’ Notice here that the logic is that the loser drinks beer, whereas in the former kind of beer-gambling the loser buys the beer. In this kind of gambling for beer, the beer might be paid for in a variety of ways. At an office party, for instance, the higher-ups in the office might purchase beer for the party and distribute it for everyone to drink. At other times, players might take turns buying a few bottles. But these events of just playing for who drinks beer without any financial stakes were proportionally rare. More often than not, the two kinds of beer gambling were combined. Players would gamble for who was going to buy the beer *and* gamble for who would drink it.

There are not lexemes in Lao that distinguish these two sub-types of beer gambling, one from the other and while one can always explain the idea—‘we will bet to see who drinks a glass of beer’—the lexeme *tii3 kin3 bia3* ambiguously captures both styles. Furthermore, even though most of the games of beer gambling that people played daily took the form of betting for who



would buy beer, gambling to see who would drink beer was talked about as a somewhat purer form of beer-gambling, which anchored the associated ends of the type itself. Like the ‘pure gift,’ it was imagined as an uninterested activity. When people talked about gambling to see who would buy beer, furthermore, they often elided its fundamental asymmetry. While a skilled player might not actually need to pay for any beer during a night of drinking, people spoke in broad strokes about gambling for beer as if the economic losses balanced out, as if it were a kind of ‘generalized reciprocity’ (Sahlins 1972). ‘I win this time, you win next time,’ was the pervading idea.

Now, some notes about money.<sup>233</sup> Unlike in many parts of the world, people in Luang Prabang rarely, if ever, talk about cash money as if it is inherently bad (for review of this tendency, see Parry and Bloch 1989a).<sup>234</sup> Luang Prabang is not similar to, for example, Aegean Greece as Papataxiarchis (1999:163) describes it insofar as “modern money,” “especially in its paper form,” is not imagined as a “negative moral and symbolic force,” something that is “filthy, stinking, and has no ‘value,’” and which, after touching, makes a person need to wash his or her hands. Lao alms-givers famously march money-trees to the Buddhist temples to give as offerings (see Tambiah 1970). During special events, hosts will fold money into triangles and put it in a bowl with candy, then throwing it up to have it rain down upon the guests. Such money is lucky and should be removed from circulation to yield even more money for the person who possesses it. When I went on a trip home, Mèè Phòòn asked me to bring her a bundle of U.S. coins to make a necklace. Likewise, she was ecstatic when I found a shop in Luang Prabang that sold chocolate gold coins that she could pass out to monks as alms.

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<sup>233</sup> For description of Lao currency and its symbolism, see Tappe (2007).

<sup>234</sup> As Kirsch (1975:190) writes, “Money can be used to gain merit, hence is not intrinsically evil.”

The Lao government has long struggled with the fact that the citizenry prefers currencies besides Kip. This attitude is a legacy of the Kip's history of value crashes and inflation, and the subsequent large denominations of Laos's bills (100,000 Kip, or about \$12.50 USD, is currently the largest bill). To encourage people to use Lao Kip, the state has put songs on the radio that sing the praises of 'using Lao money' and painted billboards with the same message on the side of the road. But while in Xayabury province, in a town bordering the Thai border, the young woman in the market did not know how to convert the toothpaste I wanted to buy from Baht to Kip, in Luang Prabang Kip was the standard form of currency used for most purchases under \$50. When people talked about the prices of more expensive items like cellular phones, real-estate, or vehicles, they tended to use either Baht or U.S. dollars. Following this, *pétanque* bets were almost exclusively talked about in terms of Kip—I saw only a handful of high stakes games played in Baht.<sup>235</sup> This meant that most of the bets were made for amounts of money that fit the Kip's denominations—50,000, 100,000, et cetera.

While an unofficial mantra in some threads in the anthropology of money has been, as Maurer (2006:19) cheekily puts it, that “money’s baaaaaaaaaad,” after Parry and Bloch’s (1989:19) edited volume on the topic, many anthropologists shifted toward understanding “particular ways of representing” money and the heterogeneity of “monetary practices” (e.g., Znoj 1998).<sup>236</sup> When Akin and Robbins (1999: 4) wrote their introduction to an edited volume on money in Melanesia, they bucked this trend somewhat. Rather than emphasize the cultural

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<sup>235</sup> By contrast, bets on international soccer games, while often just as small as bets on *pétanque*, took place in Baht; I had the sense that that choice both indexed the cosmopolitan nature of soccer betting and that the websites the bookies ran their bets through were Thai websites.

<sup>236</sup> Hutchinson (1996:102) writes, for instance: “One cannot predict a priori how money will be conceptualized and incorporated by other peoples. Hence, to assume that ‘global’ processes of ‘monetization’ or ‘commodification’ follow some universal logic is not only to distort historical realities but deny the creative potential of other peoples and cultures.” (See also Hart 1986; Keane 2001; Lemon 1998; Zelizer 1997 and Maurer's review of the topic in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*)

flexibility of interpretations of money, they offered some properties that currencies, broadly understood, tend to have. Alongside liquidity, divisibility, transportability, and concealability, they mention that as a general rule currencies cannot be consumed (and cite Simmel 2011 on this point).<sup>237</sup>

Of course, in Laos, as in many other places in the world (e.g., Hayano 1989; Newman 2009), people talk about money in an idiom of consumption, even if they don't actually eat it. More generally in Luang Prabang, *kin3* is used in many ways that go beyond physical ingestion into the body.<sup>238</sup> Many of these meanings involve the acquisition of money<sup>239</sup>: to earn a salary is to *kin3 ngen2 duan3*, to charge interest on a loan is to *kin3 dòòk5*, and to take or make a profit is to *kin3 kamlaj1*. In a variety of games, *kin3* can mean to 'win' or 'achieve' something, whether a series of games, a game, or a round; in snooker, players use *kin3* to refer to potting a particular ball. In some constructions, *kin3* can also mean 'to expend' or 'consume' a substance or even time.<sup>240</sup> In these cases, *kin3* takes on a contrastive meaning with the examples above. Rather than describing the acquisition of objects (in analogy to the ingestion of food into the body, perhaps) it describes 'things' being used up (in analogy with their digestion). *kin3 vêêlaa2*, for example, means to take or spend time and *kin3 nam4 man2* means to consume gas. This consumptive sense is also used to describe the habits of people. Mèè Phòòn, for instance, would sometimes

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<sup>237</sup> Robbins and Akin (1999: 38) argue that, following from this fact, currencies' meaning thus lies in their circulation.

<sup>238</sup> Tambiah (1969:425) pointed out that villagers used the verb *kin3* in culturally and linguistically similar Northeast Thailand to refer to a wedding and the wedding feast, i.e., *kin3 dòòng3*. While I did not notice any of the sexual connotations of the verb for eating that Tambiah did, people in Luang Prabang do use a similar vocabulary to discuss weddings. There are some jokes that this leads to confusion, like, for instance, a joke showcased in a video on youtube.com in which the bride misunderstands the matrimonial use of *kin3 dòòng3* and mistakenly thinks that she will have to do a lot of eating at her wedding (ໜີບອຽງ n.d.).

<sup>239</sup> In these contexts, the verb of acquisition *daj4* or 'to acquire' can be substituted for *kin3* and often is (see Enfield's 2003 discussion of the polyfunctionality of *daj4* for discussion of its broad functional range).

<sup>240</sup> It may be worth noting that Lao people also have a few other terms that can be used for consumption, the often rude *satèèk5* (used for animals and also as a 'low' form reserved for friends and enemies, but usually no one in between) and *san5* (used with novices and monks).

complain about Salina by saying that all she did was *kin3 kin3 kin3*. This was not a criticism of Salina’s diet; it was a criticism of her lifestyle and her tendency—as Mèè Phòòn saw it—to go out drinking, spend money, and waste time.<sup>241</sup> Although *pétanque* players sometimes claim that *kin3* is less literal than the verb for ‘take’ (*qaw3*) when referring to money gambling or the verb for ‘drink’ (*dùùm3*) when referring to beer gambling, *kin3*’s use in these contexts did not strike most as particularly tropic.<sup>242</sup> Rather, it inhabited a kind of middle-ground, where people intuited that *kin3*’s expanded use was normal but not core to the term’s meaning.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Holly High (2014:40) has documented that *kin3* is similarly often used to refer to the sketchy acquisitions of state actors. She talks about the phrase *kin3 nam4 caw4* or ‘eat with you’ as a generic form for referring to corruption. As one man put the idea, “we do not eat with [the state], they eat with us. That’s all.” While I never heard *kin3 nam2 caw4* used in Luang Prabang in the idiomatic way that High describes, *kin3* was often used in contexts of corruption like when, for example, people accused others of ‘eating too much’ (*kin3 keen3 paj3* or just *kin3 laaj3*) from the government or when they used the phrase *kin3 nam4 kin3 naj2*—a parallelilistic construction that means something like ‘drink water and stuff,’—to refer to money for ‘whatever.’ A friend of mine from Luang Prabang used the latter phrase as a way to bribe a Vientiane police officer when the two of us were pulled over while riding around the capitol city on his motorbike. He said something like, ‘why don’t you just take thirty thousand Kip for *kin3 nam4 kin3 naj2*.’ The officer agreed, my friend handed him a 50,000 bill, and the officer gave him 20,000 change.

High (2014) also highlights the positive associations of ‘eating’ in Laos, and the strong sense that it is an activity that produces the substance of friends and family (Carsten 1995; 1997). She argues that the simultaneous existence of these positive associations and eating’s more negative associations of corruption, exploitation, and the parasitism of the state, reveals a central ambivalence around the activity of *kin3* or ‘consumption.’ But as I wrote in a review of High’s book (Zuckerman 2016:215), she shows little evidence that the ambivalence of eating is about ingestion itself, and I found little evidence of this in Luang Prabang as well. Compare, for example, Laos with Solo as Siegel (1993:193) describes it, where eating “indicates the inadequate suppression of desire,” and where “people thus prefer to eat separately and, when together, either abstain or ‘turn to one side’ and eat as though they were alone” (Zuckerman 2015: 215). Rather than ambivalence about ingestion, it seems that in both Don Khiaw, where High worked, and in Luang Prabang, where I worked, the ambivalence around the notion is about problematic asymmetric flows from providers of food (or money, or whatever one is eating) to consumers, where either someone is not giving what they should be giving, or eating too much.

<sup>242</sup> Note that people usually elide the latter distinction between eating solid foods (*kin3*) and drinking (*dùùm1*; except when correcting foreigners) and it is common to refer to consumption of food, drinks, and medicine, and even the freebasing of methamphetamines all with *kin3*. Some people considered *qaw3* or ‘to take’ a more literal and occasionally corrected me when I said *tii3 kin3 ngen2* or *tii3 kin3 bia3*. The two women who worked at the money gambling court, whom I mentioned in the last chapter, commented that I should have used *qaw3* rather than *kin3* in my questions about the style of play. They corrected me both because no one literally ‘ate’ money when they gambled, that is, no one put a bill in their mouth and chewed, and because, furthermore, I did not use the ‘more correct’ Lao word *dùùm3* or ‘to drink’ liquids which is in opposition to *kin3*, ‘to eat,’ solids. People’s occasional corrections of my survey and speech notwithstanding, in general I was just as apt to hear people talk about ‘eating money’ or ‘eating beer’ than ‘taking money’ or ‘taking beer,’ and I tended to favor the *kin3* form in my own speech. In answers to my survey, people matched my use of *kin3* in their answers.

<sup>243</sup> Much Lao humor is based on breaking apart these kinds of forms. One joke, for instance, plays on the use of bottle as a classifier for beer. The jokester asks, *caw4 kin3 bia3 caw4 kin3 cak2 kèw4* or ‘When you drink beer, how many bottles do you drink?’ When the respondent says a number, the jokester plays off his earlier use of ‘bottle’ (or *kèw4*) in his question, and replies with the punch-line: ‘ooh, that’s impressive, I can’t *kin3* glass bottles, I can only *dùùm3* the beer inside them.’

I focus on the term because *kin3*'s polysemy licensed a number of turns of phrases about gambling for beer and gambling for money that otherwise might not be able to be put so succinctly. Players sometimes expressed the idea that there are no losers in beer gambling with the phrase that when you *tii3 kin3 bia3*, even when you lose (*sia3*) you 'win'/'eat' (*kin3*). *Kin3*'s polysemy also helped players elide the distinction between playing to see who 'wins' (*kin3*) beer and playing to see who drinks (*kin3*) beer, as both 'winning' and 'drinking' might be referred to with *kin3*. Likewise, in descriptions about gambling for money, the form *kin3* ambiguously captures both potential outcomes of a money bet, both the acquisitive and the consumptive—the winner wins (*kin3*) money just as a civil servant 'eats' a salary while the loser 'eats' (*kin3*) money the way a motorcycle 'eats' gasoline.

*kin3* also bolstered how *pétanque* players spoke about *pétanque* play generally. From the perspective of some (especially some wives of frequent players; I discuss this in chapter six) *pétanque* was entirely consumptive. Like Mèè Phòòn describing Salina's partying, from this vantage the game was a kind of 'eating.' Playfully manipulating and representing this idea, players across the city distributed—through Facebook and WhatsApp messenger—different images of a pot of *pétanque*-ball-soup. One player even printed one of these images and taped it to the side of the money gambling court's beverage refrigerator. The joke was that this soup was both what a frequent *pétanque* player spends his days 'eating' and the only thing his wife would want to cook for him after he did so. For everyone who showed it to me, the image of the presumably dirty broth and the teeth cracking *pétanque* balls floating alongside tomatoes and lettuce was utterly hilarious.



*Figure 38: A picture of pétanque ball soup; a similar photograph was printed out and taped to the money-gambling court's refrigerator.*

The idea that *pétanque* as a whole, no matter what one is gambling, is consumptive rather than productive, contrasts with the generic image of gambling for money as an activity aimed at procuring money, in which, after the game, the winner puts his winnings in his pocket and flees the court, a final anti-social punctuation to an anti-social activity. In this latter caricature of money gambling, money is excised from the situation rather than consumed. These two images of money gambling—as consumptive vs. productive—imply different ends and appear to reproduce the beer and money gambling distinction at a different logical level. Likewise for the distinction between gambling for drinking beer and gambling for buying beer, as the latter is viewed as crass at a formal office party, where drinking large amounts of beer is almost always

encouraged. These sets of distinctions, when ripped from their contexts of articulation and juxtaposed, one next to another, resonate with what Irvine and Gal have called *ideologies of differentiation* (Irvine and Gal 2000).<sup>244</sup> Specifically, they together form a structure of *fractal recursivity*. Fractal recursivity, as Gal defines it, is a semiotic process “best characterized as repeated application, by a positioned observer, of what is considered by participants the ‘same’ qualitative distinction at many levels of inclusiveness, creating (roughly) self-similar categories of contrast” (Gal 2016:92). Building from this work, it seems clear that an account sensitive to the distinction between generics and specifics might deepen the notion of ‘repeated application’ in this definition. For example, in Luang Prabang the distinction between beer gambling and money gambling is clearly the most salient of the distinctions *vis-à-vis pétanque*; and the dichotomy appears to ideologically ‘anchor’ (Gal 2016:96) the process broadly. As I showed above, one index of this salience is people’s capacity to talk about the distinction generically. I expect that, generally, ‘applications’ of an ideological contrast at less salient levels of inclusiveness would tend to be done with specific propositions, rather than generics.

Returning to the issue of consumption, the generic contrast between gambling for beer and gambling for money emphasizes the capacity for beer, over and against money, to be physically, not just metaphorically, consumed. Gambling for beer converts money into beer and then exhausts that beer within the spatio-temporal horizon of the game (cf. Presterudstuen 2014). This exhaustion is itself a kind of sacrifice to the people with whom one is playing and drinking (see Strathern 1988:294; Munn 1992; Reed 2007).<sup>245</sup> In money gambling, when a winner leaves the scene he brings the money he won along with him. It has been eaten but it can be eaten again.

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<sup>244</sup> See especially, Gal’s extensions of this analysis to what she calls ‘metaphoric’ contrasts like ‘public’ and ‘private’ (2005:24; Gal 2016).

<sup>245</sup> Like Akin and Robbins (1999), anthropologists in Melanesia have long emphasized how consumption and exhaustion of non-currency valuables like beer can destroy and produce social relations.

He can put it in his pocket, give it to his family, or use it to buy beer to drink with other people. Money gambling thus gains is imagined as if it is done only for the money; beer gambling is imagined as if it takes place entirely for sociality in itself (cf. MacIntyre 2010:188–190 and the notion of 'internal' and 'external goods').

## Conclusion

*The ideals of public order which I have discussed are conventional rhetorical devices in terms of which negotiation and decision-making can be carried forward. The ends which the villagers have in view may vary greatly from person to person, and may in some cases have little to do with any notions of the commonweal, but the social order is negotiated in terms of these opposed ideals. This is the vocabulary which makes statements about public order intelligible and morally recognizable.*

- Jack Bilmes (1998:54) on Northern Thailand

In the introduction to this dissertation, I described a game of snooker I played with Sii. The game was for beer and for money. We bet 50,000 Kip but split the pot: 20,000 of the winnings went to a collective fund for things to ‘*kin3*’—beer, spicy meats and vegetables sold outside—and the fees for using the table. The other 30,000 Kip went to the winner to do with what he pleased. Such hybrid games were common. In fact, while above I have quoted players’ neat picture of gambling for money as a game of pure wins and losses, a degree of hybridity was more or less the rule. Only very rarely was there not some kind of commensality after a game for money gambling. By duty, the winner of a money game, after being paid, bought drinks for the loser, sometimes an alcoholic drink like a beer but more often than not a bottle of water, a sports drink, or, when oranges were in season, a glass of fresh squeezed juice. Losers would occasionally demand drinks from their opponents, and while winners sometimes complained or



said that they would only buy the loser an inexpensive bottle of water, I never saw a winner completely reject such demands. At times, they went the other way and took part in more general redistribution: buying waters or beer for almost everyone at the court. Never explicitly stated in these terms, money bets still had these little gifts almost baked in.<sup>246</sup>

Beer gambling also incorporated properties of money gambling. Most notably, the exchange at the end of beer gambling games was mediated by cash. Players did not carry around beers, ready to exchange them as a game concluded; they bought them with Lao currency after games, usually from a third party, and then opened them up and passed them around. Players also often described the stakes of beer gambling in monetary terms. Rather than say each game was for ‘a bottle of beer’ (*phuu5 laø-kèèw4*), a beer gambler might say that a game is for ‘10,000 Kip’ (*phuu5 laø-sip2 phan2*). The money was not pocketed but collected off to the side, in a basket, tray or bag. At a beer gambling court, for instance, people put the money in a small, suspended bucket tied to one of the court’s roof’s support beams<sup>247</sup>; at the snooker hall we hung our bills, folded in half, on the wire score board. Once money was paid into the collective space it was earmarked and converted into ‘beer money’ (*ngen2 bia3*) soon to be conveyed into beer, snacks, and other incidentals (cf. Nuer ‘money cattle’ as described by Hutchinson 1996).<sup>248</sup>

As people gambled for beer through a night, as they bet more bottles per game and the beer money grew large and beyond their capacity to drink, beer gambling debts also came to resemble money-gambling debts. This was particularly true when one team lost repeatedly, and

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<sup>246</sup> I played international draughts (a variety of checkers) with one man, Hian, almost every day for months at the money gambling court, always for 10,000 Kip a game. I rarely won and everyone at the court knew it; Hian was overweight and a popular joke was that when I left Luang Prabang to go home, he would lose his paunch. In the beginning of our playing together, Hian would offer me a drink after he beat me. By the end, I just grabbed one from the money gambling court’s refrigerator.

<sup>247</sup> One man even quipped “give alms” (*tak2 baat5*) as he put his 10,000 Kip in the bucket.

<sup>248</sup> Hutchinson (1996:98) summarizes such practices: “Nuer incorporated money into a weighted exchange system in which cattle remained the dominant metaphor of value. This was not simply a process whereby cattle were progressively ‘commodified’ but, rather, one in which commodities were also cattle-ified.”

thus, asymmetrically paid for beer. Large debts of, say, three cases of beer or about forty dollars that might be accumulated over a night were sometimes forgiven. Long after my argument with Sii, for example, we played snooker again and bet a bottle of Johnny Walker on the game. After the game, we moved from the snooker hall, where they did not even sell whiskey, to a *pétanque* court. I rode with Dii on his motorcycle and on the way told him to stop at a convenience store because I wanted to buy the whisky. He told me not to buy it, that I did not really need to. I lied and said I needed to stop at the store anyway. While inside, I bought a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label (the cheapest of their whiskies). Dii had waited outside for me with his bike, and when he saw me he said he understood why I bought the bottle anyway: because I wanted to prove that I would. We met Sii at the *pétanque* court and he was taken aback. He said that he would save ‘the bottle’ for my going away party a few months away and even upgrade it from Johnny Walker Red Label to Johnny Walker Black Label (a more expensive bottle). A few months later, he brought a bottle to my going away party. Sii and my games had escalated in stakes to that bottle, and after I gave it to him, he made pains to preserve its earmarking as something to share with me, and, in saying that he would upgrade it, treated my payment as not something he had won, but a kind of gifting. It was clear from how he acted, and how Dii advised me, that they would have forgiven me had I not paid for such a thing. But someone else might not have. Winners of beer gambling games do at times demand winnings such as that bottle of whisky and things became contentious (as I describe in chapter eight). People recognized that beer gambling had the capacity to shift into higher and higher stakes like that bottle and to even morph from games staking cash earmarked for beer to games staking cash to keep. These latter games would sometimes involve pure money bets or hybrid bets like those I

made with Sii in the first example. People sometimes referred to the latter hybrid bets as wagers for water or beer ‘with honey’ in it (*nam4 pheng5*).

Confronted with the apparent hybridity of real games, it is tempting to conclude that beer gambling and money gambling *qua* types are ‘gradable opposites’ (Lyons 1977:271). In a sense, they are. That is, as analysts we can compellingly divide up the different games that have, at one time or another, been referred to as ‘gambling for beer’ or ‘gambling for money’ along several gradients. We might diagram the range from beer gambling to money gambling as I have done below, as a gradient from gambling to see who drinks beer, to gambling to see who buys some (relatively small amount of) beer, to gambling to see who buys many beers (or a bottle of whisky), to gambling for beer and money, to gambling for some money, to gambling for a significant amount of money. In this diagram, as we move further from the left to the right, the potential gain of playing in a game increases.



Figure 39: Gambling for beer and money as gradable opposites<sup>249</sup>

Or we might treat the two categories as having internal gradients, which track one another, as I have presented in the second diagram, in which the organizing principle is value risked. From this perspective, gambling for small amounts of money and small amounts of beer have more in common than either has with gambling for lots of money or lots of beer.<sup>250</sup>

<sup>249</sup> I have put gambling for beer and money in this diagram, but obviously, depending on the amounts involved, such a game might move to the left or to the right.

<sup>250</sup> From yet another perspective, games for lots of beer money, like the game I played with Sii for the bottle of whisky, are the ‘purest’ form of beer-gambling because they risk the most valuable sacrifice.

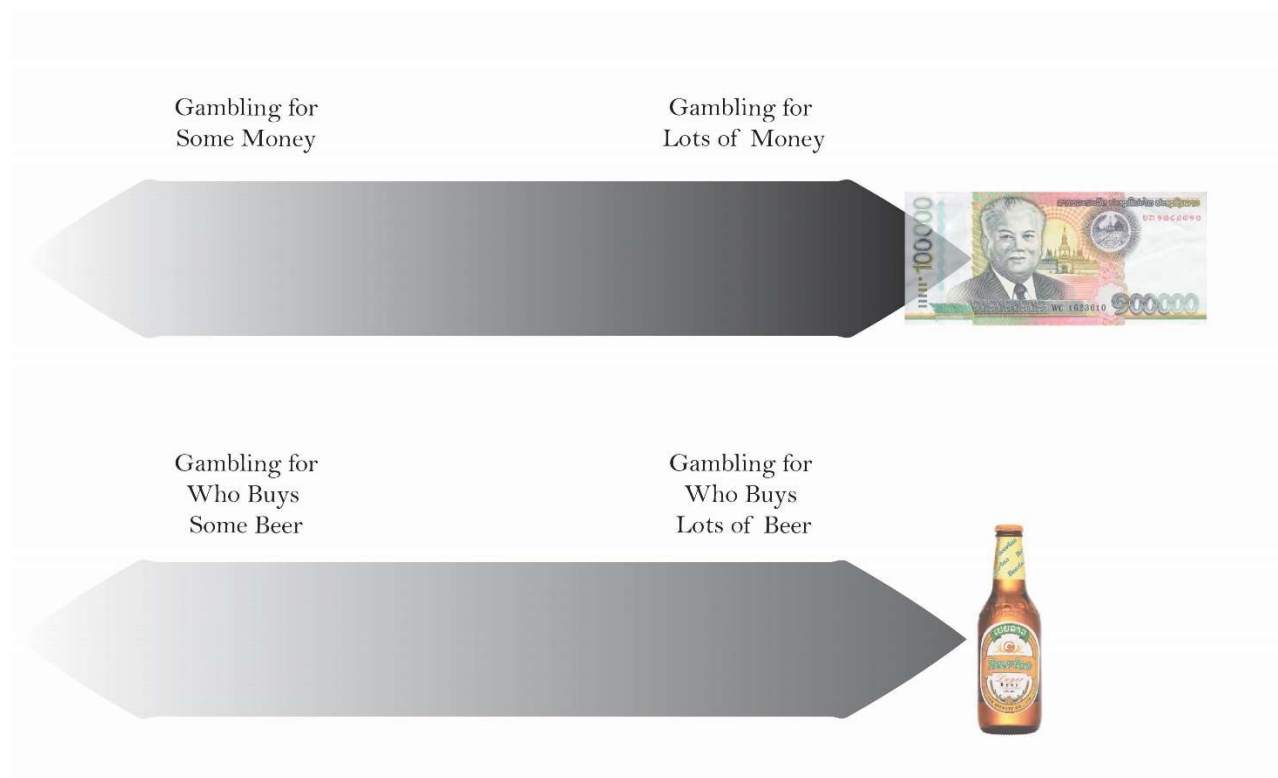


Figure 40: Gambling for beer and money as parallel gradable types

*Pétanque* players themselves implicitly do grade the categories like this at times; they use modifiers like ‘real gambling for money’ (*tii3 kin3 ngen2 thèè4 thèè4*) and they downplay their money bets by saying that they are just playing for ‘a little bit’ (*lin5 nòj4 diaw1*; cf. Sapir 1944). In newspaper articles, likewise, journalists warn against the problems of those games furthest to the right in all the diagrams above, noting that games staking smaller monetary value do not yield as many problems (Toren 1989).<sup>251</sup>

These diagrams are illuminating because they capture the range of things risked during games and possible logical structures that might order that range, but in most explicit propositions about gambling for beer and gambling for money, like those I have cited above, this gradience is erased. When Dii, for instance, told me not to gamble for money with friends on the

<sup>251</sup> One English language article in the *Vientiane Times* (2008) writes, “Gambling is illegal and it’s the duty of police to arrest gamblers, especially heavy betters, because it’s another source of social problems.”

motorcycle ride home he implied that our complicated wager might be reduced to just ‘gambling for money.’ In many propositions using the lexemes described in this chapter, in fact, the world of gambling is treated as a neat separation between two non-gradable types, a difference between pure sociality and economizing, between what one does with friends and what one does with strangers, between good and evil. Dividing the world like this is rhetorically effective, even if it might seem naive.

My focus on the explicit lexemes *tii3 kin3 bia3* and *tii3 kin3 ngen2* here might come off as equally naïve. If linguistic anthropologists know anything, it is that much of what manages and regulates interaction is implicit. *tii3 kin3 bia3* and *tii3 kin3 ngen2* are metapragmatic tools to define situations, but they are not the only tools. Rather, as many have shown, interaction is comprised of innumerable metapragmatic signs, little metacommunicative ‘play bows’ (Bateson 1972) and ‘contextualization cues’ (Gumperz 1992), defining the situation and how others are acting within it. I turn to some of these signs throughout the rest of this dissertation, but as I do, I emphasize the distinction between such signs and the explicit acts of naming that I have presented in this chapter. There is a temptation for us as analysts to collapse the former relatively implicit evocations of ends into latter key lexemes (used in both generic and specific propositions; see Enfield and Sidnell 2017), but doing so collapses the metapragmatic and ethical force of doing so. We might consider the problem as analogous to debates about the prevalence of racism in America. Almost everyone in America agrees and will say that ‘racism,’ generically, is a bad, immoral thing, even those people whom you or I might deem ‘racist.’ Where people in America disagree, and where most of the political fights occur, however, is in regard to which specific communicative acts, institutional structures, or people meet the threshold of being ‘racist.’

In the next chapter, I further explore the dynamic between the wasteful, consumptive dimensions of playing *pétanque* and the social world beyond the court. More specifically, I trace how in Luang Prabang economic wastefulness itself is gendered. Lao women rarely played any forms of *pétanque* that risked economic stakes—whether beer to buy or money to take home—and many young wives and mothers understood their ‘cheapness’ (*khi5 thii1*) in regard to non-familial social relations as not a negative but a positive characteristic, thereby inverting the moral logic of the distinction between beer and money gambling. Chapter six’s argument is a bridge to chapter seven, in which I move beyond generic types of gambling and explore communicative acts of betting as gendered, performative, and ethical acts.

## Chapter 6 Gendered Savings

There is an often challenged, but inevitably mentioned, line about gender in Southeast Asia. In comparison to other regions in the world, scholars say, Southeast Asian women have higher status.<sup>252</sup> As evidence of this, scholars mention that across Southeast Asia, women tend to have economic power. Women, not men, “are usually the ones who deal with money and control family finances and often become traders” (Errington 1990:5). In this chapter, I outline the gendered dimension of economy in Luang Prabang and explore how it is manifested in relation to another moral economic type: controlling or ‘holding’ *kam3* the household’s finances. In the first section, I review some of the literature on gender and economy in Southeast Asia. I then show that when discussing controlling the family’s finances, women who were married to *pétanque* players tended to portray men as compulsive spenders and to portray themselves as fiscally responsible homebodies who watched over their family’s money.<sup>253</sup> In the second

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<sup>252</sup> In a series of edited volumes and articles, scholars have both repeated this line and pointed out, with varying degrees of urgency and outrage, that it says little about life on the ground (Van Esterik 1982; Atkinson and others 1990; Ong and Peletz 1995; Steedly 1999). “What,” Mary Steedly (1999:439; internal citations removed) asks, “is the relation between gender representations and gender experience? How does gender imagery affect women’s status and opportunities, and how is it used to represent other kinds of power relations? What does the frequently noted downplaying of gender differences suggest regarding attitudes toward alternative sexualities?” These rhetorical questions, a few lines from a whole paragraph of questions that Steedly asks, point out that the broad conclusion that women have a higher status than normal in Southeast Asia is, upon closer inspection, vague and inconclusive. Of course, the line begs the question: what exactly does ‘high status’ mean?

<sup>253</sup> It is worth noting that there is one domain outside of the home itself where most of the women married to *pétanque* players said they would or would like to spend significant money: the temple. In fact, just as women dominate petty trading at the markets, so too do they dominate alms giving to the temple. Each morning, women and some men line up on the road where monks pass by with sticky rice, and at times candy or money or other prepared food. As each monk or novice walks by, the givers take a clump of the rice, raise it toward their foreheads for prayer, and plop it into the monks’ begging bowls. The general assumption is that on non-religious days one woman can successfully give alms on behalf and to the benefit of her entire family. This kind of giving is clearly not understood as wasteful in the sense that buying beer is. In fact, although intuitively people often treat Theravadin society as if it were against the accumulation of wealth, in Luang Prabang wealth is frequently treated as a means for future and sign of past ethical action as much as an obstacle to gaining karma. As Reynolds (1990:69) put it, “Wealth always provides both an opportunity for a new expression and cultivation of non-attachment and a temptation toward the kind of antithamnic self-indulgence that leads to increased entrapment in the web of world existence” (see McDaniel 2011). In the 1960s, Halpern (1964:102) captured one example in which money and merit were seen to balance off one another: “Money for construction or major repair of a wat building is lent at interest rates of only 5 per cent, and on rare occasions, at no interest. The lender, in both cases, obtains merit by not charging

section, I turn to how this idea—intuitive for many—relates to dynamics and tensions between *pétanque* players and their wives, often portrayed as a sitcom-like battle between a profligate husband and his angry wife. In the third section, I show how gendered expectations about proper economic behavior in part explain both the absence of women on the money gambling *pétanque* court and the prominence of men: the court is a relatively public place for wasting time and money and talking about sex, practices that conflict with the most common generic figure of the good, married Lao woman and emphasize one way of being a risk-taking man.

### Gendered Savings

*“...when both husband and wife are traders, there is often grudging masculine recognition that the women are better operators because they are less likely to be distracted, impoverished or, indeed, infected by whisky, gambling and girls along the way. The household finances are safer in feminine hands.”*

*-Andrew Walker on Lao Traders (1999:160).*

In a book on the power of women in rural Laos, Ireson (1996:60) describes the typical economic roles an ethnic Lao woman might take: she receives a portion of her family’s inheritance; cares for aging parents; engages in “gardening, small animal raising, forest gathering, textile and other craft production, and marketing”; and while not “the sole financial decision maker[.]...[.]” she

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the normal rate.” Giving to the temple is sometimes very explicitly said to yield economic returns, not merely in the next life, but in this one (Keyes 1983b). The logic is simple. Gifts to the local Buddhist community build merit and wealth, and not only do they contribute to the “wealth of the community, but [they] simultaneously [contribute] to the wealth of the individuals who perform them” (Reynolds 1990:66). When one gives, one receives merit in response, and the result is increased luck in business, in lottery tickets, and in life, both this and the next. As Spiro (1966:1171) put it of Burma, such expenditures do not evidence imprudence, but are themselves investments. Giving money to the monastery and its representatives is thus doubly in line with what are thought to be the good woman’s ends. She both takes care of the family spiritually and responsibly looks after the family’s economic wealth. Interestingly, many of the young women to whom I spoke did not actually give daily alms, but left this position up to the older women in their wives—grandmothers, mothers, older sisters. They were home with their young children or too busy to wake up that early. Nevertheless, alms giving was a large part of the images they constructed of themselves and of others. When they did give, they would at times do so lavishly, with gifts directly to the temple and post images of their giving and their beautified bodies, on Facebook. My male friends, in contrast, did this rarely, and were more apt to post pictures of themselves drinking, eating, and relaxing on vacation.



“keep[s] the family money and [is] responsible for everyday financial management of the household.” In this chapter, I focus on the latter of these activities.<sup>254</sup> When I asked women why they controlled their family’s finances, they said that men spent too much money to responsibly *kam3* (literally hold, like in a fist) family money. One female *pétanque* court owner passionately outlined the issue:

*Wow, men they can’t save. They see money and—they can’t even see money! If they have lots of money, they take it and they go and play (lin5) and waste it. If they don’t play pétanque then they will play something else. They’ll go play with girls! Oh, these men! There are no men that can hold (kam3) [their families’] money. They cannot hold [the money].*<sup>255</sup>

She stressed that the difference was visible in how men and women paid when they ate or drank together at a restaurant. ‘Men want to pay evenly,’ she said, and, by implication, competitively. “Hey!” she voiced a man speaking to another man, “If you buy two cases, I’ll buy two cases.”<sup>256</sup> “Not like us (*haw2*) women,”<sup>257</sup> she said, ‘we have to think about our families.’ “Men, they don’t think at all.”<sup>258</sup>

In this section, I focus on this widespread ideology that women are fiscally responsible because they ‘think about their families’ and that men are irresponsible because they think about themselves and their friends. I show that ‘holding’ (*kam3*) the families’ money indexes a broader set of gendered expectations about how women and men do and should handle money. I then walk through some interactions in which women treated whether or not a woman ‘held the

<sup>254</sup> Of Thailand, Muecke (1984:464) writes that “Wealth in the form of jewels and money has traditionally been a resource over which women have had control. Thai women are so commonly reported as having responsibility for petty trade and the management of the household economy that I will not take the time reiterate the point here.”

<sup>255</sup> *Qaaw4 phuu5 saaj2 nii4 man2 thònn4 bòø-daj4 nii4 man2 hèn3 ngen2 lèqø-man2 hèn3 bòø-daj4 nii4. mii2 ngen2 laaj3 siqø-man2 kaø-qaw3 paj3 lin5 nèèw2 ngen2 mot2 bòø- lin5 buun3 man2 kaø-liin4 phaj3 liin4 ñang3 mot2. lin5 sêè2 lin5 saaw3 paj3 qool. qoo phuu5 saaj2 nii4 bòø-mii2 phuu5 saaj2 kam3 ngen2. kam3 bòø-daj4.*

<sup>256</sup> *Qaaw5 mùng2 qòòk5 sòòng3 lang2 kuu3 qòòk5 sòòng3 lang2*

<sup>257</sup> *Bòø-khùù2 phuu5 ñing2 haw2*

<sup>258</sup> *Qee3 phuu5 saaj2 nii4 man2 kaø-bòø-khùù2 lèèw4*

family's money' as an index of how that woman spent money generally and ultimately as a sign of whether she was a 'good woman.'

### **Gendered Savings in the Literature**

Over the last forty years, scholars in Thailand (and some in other parts of Southeast Asia) have explored local expectations about how women and men do and should handle money. In a series of early essays, Kirsch (1975; 1982) and Keyes (1983a; 1984) debated the issue. Why, they asked, do "Thai women carry out the bulk of the petty marketing chores" and why are they "commonly controllers of a household's pursestrings" (Kirsch 1975:175)? Both men argued that the key to understanding the relations between gender, morality, and economy in Thailand was Buddhism (for a criticism of this position, see Tannenbaum 1999). Kirsch's (1975:190) answer to the question was simple and has historically not fared as well as Keyes's answer. For Kirsch, a Buddhist perspective revealed that for Thai people participation in the economy "involves an attachment to the greatest of this-worldly symbols, money, as well as an ever-present temptation to be greedy or selfish." "Thai women are left with such economic roles," he wrote, "because in religious belief, in the structure of religious roles and rituals, and in popular thought, they are deemed to be more deeply rooted in this-worldly activities and secular concerns than are men" (Kirsch 1975:191). For Kirsch, Thai women handle money for the same reason a butcher does not hesitate before grabbing a slab of pork: his hands, after all, are already covered in blood.<sup>259</sup>

Keyes (1984: 226) challenged Kirsch's account, arguing that Thai society was not as negative about Thai women's karmic chances as Kirsch had implied. Thai women just make merit differently than men. "The characteristic tension between worldly attachment and

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<sup>259</sup> "It may not be fortuitous..." Kirsch (1975:190) wrote, "that monks are formally shielded from contact with both money and women."

orientation toward Buddhist salvation for females and males,” he wrote, “is expressed in distinctive sets of gender images derived from the sources of the Buddhist world view.” For women, he continued to argue, ‘petty trading’ is considered an extension of the domestic economy, of providing for her family; a woman is imagined to do such trading “through her productive activities in the fields and in craftwork at home, and[,]” Keyes continued (1984:229), “it is but a small step to market the products of the family enterprise.” Thus, he argued, to be a moral woman from the perspective of Thai society, a woman must embrace her ‘nature’ as a provider who nourishes her family (cf. Van Esterik 1996). When women fail to do this, they fail to act naturally and they fail to act morally.<sup>260</sup> Keyes (1984:233) also contrasted these moral economic expectations of women with those of men. To be good, Thai men must suppress rather than embrace their natures (cf. Ortner 1972). Keyes (1983a:859) found that male villagers in Northeastern Thailand (Thailand’s ‘culturally Lao’ region) placed a high value “on being able to forgo the immediate gratification of desires (*ot thon*), to refrain from drinking, gambling, and conspicuous consumption,” and that they did so “in order to accumulate wealth that can be used in meritorious actions that will effect a more lasting reduction of suffering.”<sup>261</sup> Keyes argued that men internalized this ‘ascetic quality’ from their time in the Buddhist monastery, as most young Thai men were expected to ordain briefly. But unlike Thai women who were always expected to be good providers, Keyes showed that Thai men were not expected to be ‘good’ all the time. They vacillated between their ‘religious’ and their ‘natural’ dispositions, “between intense spirituality and intense worldliness” (1984: 233-234). Just as they at times ordained in the

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<sup>260</sup> As an example of such a woman, he cites Amittatapana from the Vessantara Jataka, who pressures her husband to request Prince Vessantara’s children as slaves. Keyes (1984:233) argued that her negative behavior “is not portrayed as a consequence of her inherent nature as a woman; rather, the story shows it to be a product of a particular type of relationship she has with a man” (cf. Ladwig 2009).

<sup>261</sup> *Ot* in *ot thon* is the same form *got2*, or ‘to refrain from,’ that I discussed in chapter four.

temple, they also at other times drank, bragged about sex, and slaughtered animals. They acted like tough guys or *nakl lêng* (Johnston 1980), a term my Lao dictionary defines as “debaucher, adventurer, gambler” (Kerr and Bourommavong 1973), and in doing so, they often faced only mild criticism and sometimes even gained a bad-boy notoriety and reputation for charismatic power.

Following Keyes, some academics have criticized Thai notions of masculinity that seem to excuse wasteful consumption among men that are entirely off limits for good feminine subjects.<sup>262</sup> While men who gamble, drink, or act like *nakl lêng* are treated with a boys-will-be-boys attitude, women who do the same gain reputations as bad mothers and neglectful people (but see Ockey 1999).<sup>263</sup> Examples of this apparent double standard in the literature on Laos and Thailand are easy to find.<sup>264</sup> Cassaniti (2015:103) quotes one man in northern Thailand: “if you’re male it’s Ok to sleep in. But if you’re female that’s bad.”<sup>265</sup> In her discussion of the

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<sup>262</sup> In the expansive literature on Thai female sex trafficking and sex work, scholars have often exclusively emphasized this bad side of Thai masculinity, leaving a vague, blurry caricature of the desirous man in the place of real people. Lytleton (1994:265) writes that the unexamined Thai male is part and parcel of an exoticism of Thai male culture, “predicated on images of unrestrained libidinousness, [in which] sexual profligacy is considered a national character trait.” This fits with a more general trend in research on sex work, which has often ‘ignored customers’ (Weitzer 2009:224) or treated them as automatons.

<sup>263</sup> Keyes (1984:233) writes, “Lay men drink alcoholic beverages, thereby flouting one of the five precepts that all lay Buddhists are supposed to adhere to, whereas lay women rarely consume such drinks. Some men enjoy having reputations as Don Juans or as people who can engage with impunity in activities that border on or are criminal (e.g., slaughtering large animals, gambling) as well as being violations of Buddhist lay ethics. Such men often attain considerable power within rural society. The rare woman who acquires a comparable reputation—as, for example, being a prostitute within a village—is held in low esteem. In short, the structural asymmetry of the roles played by men and women with reference to religion points up not the spiritually inferior status of women but the greater difficulty of men in being good Buddhists.”

<sup>264</sup> Acknowledgement of this double standard is absent from many early accounts of Thailand, which emphasized the relative equality of men and women. Kirsch wrote, for instance, that women will do things “which might pose threats for men in their merit accumulation, for if women ‘sin,’ it is only to be expected and the consequences are less” (Kirsch 1975:185). Even earlier, Hanks and Hanks (1963:438) wrote that “Women enjoy gambling and drinking as much as men, and people do not condemn female vices more severely.”

<sup>265</sup> The man continued to argue that it was because women were ‘in charge’ that they had to wake up early, and Cassaniti (2015:111) writes that the example reveals problems with pinning down exactly who has the ‘power’: “men may be symbolically superior in theory, but while in social life women call the shots; or the breakdown of power in the gender order may be even more subtle, landing on neither side of the debate, breaking down instead in different ways and in more diverse contexts than a universalizing view of power dynamics might suggest.”

families of Thai migrant workers' remittances, Mills describes how men were "allowed more discretionary use of their personal income" than women (1997:51).<sup>266</sup> Petit (2015:420), similarly, writes that in a Tai Vat village in Houaphan Province, Laos, "[y]outh working in the city are expected to help their parents in the village through remittances. This applies mainly to girls: few parents expect boys to remit money, and they laugh as they explain how young men drink and go to parties."

Keyes (1984) understood these different possible ways of being a man and a woman as encapsulating distinct 'gender images,' embodied in terms like 'monk,' *nakl lêêng*, 'mother,' and 'mistress.' Many studying gender and Southeast Asia, some quoted above, have outlined the problem in similar terms, emphasizing that expectations about male and female ways of being are best understood in relation to gendered figures of personhood similar to what linguistic anthropologists sometimes call 'characterological figures' (e.g., Agha 2007). In her piece on migrant laborers, Mills (1997:37), for instance, describes how female laborers reflect on and negotiate their identity among distinct ethical figures (what she calls 'potential selves'): namely, 'the good daughter' and 'the modern woman.' In regard to masculinity, Pattana Kitiarsa (2005:60) follows Keyes to argue that Thai masculinities "are negotiated cultural products and consequences of *nakleng-hood* and 'monkhood', two contrasting extremes of what being male is about in the Buddhist Thai world." Both figures are understood in opposition to other figures of women: the nurturing mother, the reckless philanderer. Kitiarsa's and Keyes's arguments also closely parallel Suzanne Brenner's (1995; 1998) description of Javanese notions of gender and

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<sup>266</sup> Mills (1997:51) writes: "Parents and kin usually expect young men to bear considerable expense for entertainment: cigarettes, alcohol, gambling, and women. While parents generally view a certain amount of personal expenditure as unavoidable for migrant daughters, it should not be of the same type or on the same scale as that demanded by young men's urban consumption practices. According to some women in the city, daughters who fail to send home money are liable to far greater criticism from parents and other villagers than are delinquent sons. Several spoke of brothers who had 'never' or only infrequently sent home their city earnings; their parents 'never said anything about it.'"

the economy. Brenner argued that, in Java, there were two common tropes of masculinity. Alongside the dominant image that men were adept at controlling themselves was another image of men constantly enslaved by their desires, an image that also justified why women should control the family finances. Of course, whenever one starts counting figures like these, one risks reifying dynamic notions of gender. In the next section, I show how men and women do at times present themselves and others as different figures of personhood, but stress that they often do so not with specific labels, but by indexing and underlining patterns of responsibility, tendencies, and attitudes regarding money.

### **Gendered Savings in Luang Prabang**

It was mid-afternoon and I wandered over to Muu's house to interview his wife, Tia. Muu was another friend (*siawI*) of Dii's, and Sii's, and mine through most of my fieldwork. No one knew I was coming to their house that day, although I had asked Tia if I might interview her a few times before and she had agreed in principle—she was already deeply familiar with my research and accustomed to me filming almost everything. We sat on small plastic stools in her driveway, facing my video camera, while her young nephew and daughter occasionally rode around us on a bicycle. Muu gave us space, first lounging upstairs and then leaving the house to run an errand, and we did the interview out of his earshot. After talking with Tia about where she grew up and what life was like when she was younger, I asked her who in her family (that is, her nuclear family of Muu and their daughter) watched over their finances. She responded that she mostly did. I then asked her who watched over her father and mother's finances. She said that her mother did. Sensing a pattern to my question, she explained with a generalization: "Lao people will mostly have women hold (*kam3*) the money."<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> *suan1 laaj3 khon2 laaw2 caø-haj5 phuu5 ñing2 kam3 ngen2*

1.1) Tia

*phuu5 n̄ing2 kaø- huu4 k̄ep2 laaj3 kwaa1 phuu5 saaj2*  
 women topic.linker know take more than men  
*phuu5 saaj2 caø- huu4 t̄èè1 lin5*  
 men irrealis know only play

“Women know how to save much better than men, men only know how to play.”

1.2) Zuckerman

*m̄èn1 qaq1 qanø- nii4 m̄èn1 th̄èè4 b̄òò3*  
 COP polar.q thing deictic.proximal COP true polar.q

“Yeah? Is this really true?”

1.3) Tia

*m̄èn1 th̄èè4 khan2 juu1 nam2 phuu5 saaj2 l̄èw4 mii2 t̄èè1*  
 COP true if at with men already have only  
*paj3 lin5 lin5 han5 lin5 nii4 kin3 law5*  
 go play play deictic.distal play deictic.proximal eat alcohol  
*kin3 bia3 kap2 muu1 l̄èw4 caaj1 mot2 paj3 phuu5 n̄ing2*  
 eat beer with friends already pay all go women  
*haw2 n̄ang2 huu5 khii5 thii1 nèè1*  
 1st.person(sg./pl.) still know cheapness factive.particle  
*haw2 n̄ang3 huu5 pajat2*  
 1st.person(sg./pl.) still know economy

“It’s really true. If you are with men then they only go to play. Play there, play here, drink beer and liquor with friends, and then afterwards, they spend all the money. Women, we know how to be cheap. We know how to be economical.”

Because of the prevalence of men who acted like this, Tia estimated that at least 80 percent of women in Laos control their family’s finances. She added that there were some men who spent reasonably and knew how to save but that most were irrationally lavish.

It was difficult for me to monitor what controlling the finances actually entailed in ordinary life in Luang Prabang. The men with whom I spent time often had physical money on their persons—but exactly how they had acquired it was sometimes murky. In my own host-

family's household, Mèè Phòòn, my host-mother, controlled the family's finances but Phòò Thiàng rarely went anywhere to spend money and, thus, rarely needed money. When I asked people to describe the situation, they tended to provide a generic and normative picture. When a man receives a salary, he should pass it on to his wife, who will then distribute it to him in (non-regular) installments of what is sometimes referred to as 'spending money,' (*ngen2 caaj1*), 'pocket money,' (*ngen2 thong3*) or 'eating money' (*ngen2 kin3*). To get this money, the man is said to 'request' (*khòò3*) it. This 'requesting' always spurred comments, jokes, and clarifications when I mentioned it; similar in form, if not cultural context, to the various 'persuasion techniques' of American housewives that Zelizer (1997:45) describes, 'requesting' in Luang Prabang was subject to significant ideological elaboration. Men and women both sometimes depicted it as a comical hierarchical inversion. In it, the husband, who is generally talked about and referred to as 'the older brother' in a marriage (cf. Haas 1969) is reduced to acting like a child begging for candy. The word 'request' or *khòò3* is like the English 'request' insofar as it is an explicit performative verb (Austin 1975) that can be used to ask for things—e.g., 'Please sir, I request a meeting'—and to gloss requests that have been made using other linguistic means—e.g., a note that says merely 'Can we meet?' might be described as a 'request for a meeting.' In Laos, as in English, the use of *khòò3* as an explicit performative often comes off as much more formal than requests made with other means. When I asked men at the court how they asked for money from their wives, they laughed at the implication that they might use a construction that began with *khòò3*. Likewise, Tia stressed to me that Muu 'requested' (*khòò3*) money when he needed it but she gave me an example of a request in directly reported speech that omitted the verb *khòò3*, keeping only the appropriate sentence final particle for requesting, *dèè1*: "Like, 'I am going there or here, please give me money,' and I would take the [money] and give it [to



him].”<sup>268</sup> When I asked Tia if Muu had to ask very politely, she glossed such ‘asking’ as ‘regular’ or ‘ordinary,’ and not ‘too polite’:

2) Tia

*khòò3 thamadaa3 qaaj4 lèq1*  
 request normal older.brother sentence.final.particle

“He just asks normally, older brother does.”

The final *qaaj5 lèq1* in this example is a post-positional subject which means ‘[my] older brother.’ Here, it referred to Muu and seemed to counter any implication that he needed to be too subservient when he requested money: he was, after all, her ‘older brother.’

People generally talked about the distinction between the ‘eating money’ (*ngen2 kin3*) that a husband requested and the ‘money saved away’ (*ngen2 qaw2 vaj4*) by his wife as a distinction between money for the outside world and money for the household. Eating money was on the man’s person, in his ‘pocket’ or ‘wallet,’ and money saved was imagined as being at ‘home’ (*juul hùan2*) or safely put away. In Tia’s example of Muu asking for money, for instance, she depicts Muu asking for money when he is set to leave the house to buy something. This contextual indexicality of the two different kinds of money erases all sorts of practices that happen outside the house with household money—such as going to the market, investing in rotating credit associations, or putting money in the bank. Nevertheless, it captures a certain truth: that men do most of their problematic spending at restaurants, bars, and places like the *pétanque* court that are away from home.

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<sup>268</sup> *pèè3 vaal khòòj5 qiø paj3 han5 paj3 nii4 qaw3 ngen2 haj5 khòòj5 dèè1 lèqø- haw2 kaø-qaw3 haj5 nêè1*

When I asked what men spent money on, my interviewees would almost invariably list off three expenditures: drinking, gambling, and courting mistresses.<sup>269</sup> In a *Vientiane Times* editorial entitled “Why do more women divorce their husbands these days,” the author points to the same issues: infidelity, drinking, and gambling as the major causes of divorce as well as legal grounds for it (Somsack 2012). In the previous chapter, I discuss how drinking and gambling are both often discussed in an idiom of wasteful consumption, as ‘eating’ (*kin3*). People talked about courting mistresses in similar terms of wasting and consuming money. Having a mistress was expensive, and the economic investments that went toward a mistress were frequently depicted by men and women as both a betrayal of a husband’s economic responsibility to his family and as a betrayal of the love one was expected to have for one’s wife. During one conversation with a *pétanque* player, he said that when he gave his monthly salary over to his wife it represented his love for her. Another man, during an interview, joked that if he did not give the money he earned as a driver to his wife three times in a row then she wouldn’t sleep with him. From this perspective, spending money on a mistress violated one’s love for one’s wife. As anthropologists have often noted in their descriptions of Thailand and Laos, in Luang Prabang material gifts and emotional investments were thought to overlap with one another—economic gifts were talked about as a vessel for emotion and as its substance (Wilson 2004:91–94). When Mèè Phòòn talked about how she had recently received a remittance from one of her daughters abroad she beamed to me and said that ‘that daughter really loves me.’ My little host sister, likewise, would cry for candy by claiming that if I did not buy it, I did not love her. Some women with whom I spoke even said that if a man makes enough money to have affairs and still support his family, then his

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<sup>269</sup> These are the ‘three madnesses of men,’ as apparently some in Cambodia refer to them (Brickell 2008:1672). Likewise, When I witnessed real arguments among couples, of which there were a few, they were without exception about going out too much, spending money, or sleeping with other women.

infidelity becomes a more tolerable vice.<sup>270</sup> While no women said that they themselves looked away from their husband's infidelity, several told me that they knew others who did do so because they were thriving economically. Problems arose when those spending habits came at the expense of the family unit's livelihood.

Many of the wives with whom I spoke were suspicious of how their husbands spent money. When I was interviewing Tia, she voiced such suspicions and pointed to some of Muu's economic secrecies. Muu had left during our interview, apparently to go deliver something for his family's company. The place to which he was delivering was close by, and I wondered aloud—not trying to invoke suspicion—about what in the world was taking him so long. Tia said she did not know. “Maybe he went to get coffee,” I offered. “Ohh,” Tia said through laughter, “Coffee, no one is drinking coffee right now [i.e., in the evening].” She then paused for a second and said, “I’m afraid he went to go bet on soccer, don’t you think?”<sup>271</sup>

Muu had frustrated Tia with his soccer gambling before. One day, he picked me up on his motorcycle and told me that he was in trouble: Tia gave him money to buy himself a new gold watch but he blew it all gambling on soccer. I never heard what happened after, how she responded when he told her that the watch money was gone or if he managed to hide what he had done but when we spoke that day, he was sure she would be very angry with him. When I interviewed Tia, Muu had long talked about stopping gambling on soccer and occasionally had quit. One day, as we rode around town he said that he realized it just was a waste, that he never won. As we rode, he listed several things he might do with the money he saved by not betting:

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<sup>270</sup> Researchers in Thailand have found that women there often articulate a similar position (Saengtienchai et al. 1999:86): “Wives’ views in our focus groups showed that the consequences for the family’s economic situation is an important factor conditioning wives’ tolerance of husbands’ extramarital sexual relationships. Few will tolerate a situation in which the husband squanders scarce financial resources for his sexual pleasures outside the house and lacks responsibility for the family’s well-being.”

<sup>271</sup> *qoo1 kafêê3 ñaam2 nii4 (h) (h) kin3 naq1 (h) (h) jaan4 laaw2 paj3 lin5 baan3 nòq1*

buy things for his daughter and for his wife, buy a new car, or buy a big house. And yet, he never quit betting for long, and often, before going out to drink or play soccer, we would stop at the gambling office and he would place a bet, drop off money or, on the rare occasions when he won, pick some money up. Unsure if Tia knew that Muu was still gambling on soccer, or at least the extent to which he gambled on it, I responded to her suggestion that he had gone to bet in the only way that came to me, by asking if Muu still played. Tia responded knowingly: “He plays secretly, before he used to play a lot. He lost a whole lot of money.”<sup>272</sup> Laughing, she said that when she saw the print-outs of soccer gambling odds that the bookies distributed to players and which the players used to bet odds, she would now ‘scold’ (*haaj4*) and ‘yell at’ (*daa1*) Muu.

When Tia (in line 1.3, above) told me that women controlled household finances because they knew how to be ‘cheap’ (*khii5 thii1*), I had only ever heard *khii5 thii1* said in a negative light. Market women complained of *khii5 thii5* customers, Mèè Phòòn complained of *khii5 thii1* neighbors and acquaintances, a taxi driver once angrily called me *khii5 thii1* when I spent too long haggling over my fare. But when I asked Tia if being *khii5 thii1* was a good characteristic, she told me that it was. She next said that men wanted to be ‘big hearted’ (*caj3 ñaj1*) and would ‘spend lots of money’ (*caaj1 laaj3*). To clarify what she meant by ‘big hearted,’ she gave a hypothetical situation “It’s like if you go and drink with your friends, right, you have to take money out to pay and take money out to pay, like that. You take money out to pay for your friends to eat. Your friends take out some amount, and then you take out the same amount, and your money is gone.”<sup>273</sup> ‘Is that good?’ I asked. She laughed and said that it was not. The same

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<sup>272</sup> *kaø-lak2 lin4 lêq1 tèè1 kii5 han5 lin5 laaj3. mot2 ngen2 bak2 laaj3 laaj3*

<sup>273</sup> *bèèp5 thii1 vaa1 paj3 kin3 bia3 nam2 muul nòq1 tòòng5 cok2 sùù4 cok2 sùù4 han5 naa1 cok2 sùù4 suul muul kin3 muul qòòk4 thaw1 nii4 haw2 qòòk5 thaw1 nii4 kaø-mot2 lèèw4 dèè1*

kind of sociality that in chapter five I quoted people describing as the essence of good *pétanque* gambling, was from Tia’s perspective, a wasteful vice.

As my interview with Tia continued, I asked her about the twenty percent of women who she estimated did not *kam3* their family’s finances: Why did they not do this? Tia first spoke of herself. She would not like to have to *khòò3* or ‘request’ money from Muu every time she went to the market. She then switched to speaking generically about what wives would feel, shifting from the first person pronominal *khòòj5* to the first-person ambiguously singular or plural *haw2*.

### 3) Tia

*khòòj5*            *kaø- ...*            *haw2*                            *kaø-*            *bòø-*  
 1st.person(sg.)    topic.linker    1st.person(sg./pl.)    topic.linker    NEG  
*sabaaj3*   *caj3*   *lêq1*                            *pên3*   *mia3*   *haw2*  
 content   heart   sentence.final.particle    COP   wife   1st.person(sg./pl.)  
*tòòng4*   *jaak5*   *kam3*   *ngen2*   *phòq1*   *vaa1*   *haw2*  
 must   want   hold   money   because   COMP   1st.person(sg./pl.)  
*bòø-*   *sàa1*   *caj3*   *phua3*   *nèè1*            *phòq1*   *vaa1*   *phua3*  
 NEG   trust            husband   factive.particle   because   COMP   husband  
*qòòk5*   *ngen2*   *paj3*   *lèèw4*   *caø-*   *paj3*   *lin5*   *sêè2*   *lin5*   *saaw3*  
 take.out   money   go   already   irrealis   go   play   women  
*qaq1*            *paj3*   *kin3*   *law5*   *kin3*   *bia3*   *siq1*  
 list.particle   go   eat   alcohol   eat   beer   this

“I . . . We would not be happy. Being wives we want to hold the money, because we don’t trust [our] husbands, you see. Because if your husband takes money and goes out he is going to mess around with girls or maybe go drink beer and liquor.”

When I asked Tia if she had any female friends who did not *kam3* their family’s money, she said that she did not. At the time, I remembered vaguely having a late-night conversation about household finances with Muu, Sii, Dii and another friend Khêêng in which someone had said that he controlled the money in his family. Tia knew all of these men’s wives (I discuss her relationships with them in more detail in chapter eight), and so I suggested a few names of who it

might have been who told me that he controlled his family's finances. As I said Sii's name, who according to my fieldnotes from weeks before had in fact said it, Tia jumped in: "Yeah, I'm afraid it was Sii, Sii holds [his family's] money."<sup>274</sup> "You see (*nêêl*)," she added.

This last line, formed entirely by the particle *nêêl*, foreshadowed some of what was to come. In this context, *nêêl* meant something like 'you see,' or 'that's right.' *nêêl* is often said when someone wants to point out that an event fits a pattern already mentioned or that a prediction has come true. For example, in a different interview, when a woman was telling me about how bad quality Chinese goods were, I told her a story about buying a set of Chinese-made badminton racquets. One of the racquets broke on my first swing, in which I missed the birdie: "*nêêl*" the woman said, underlining that my story fit her narrative, "[their stuff's] not good, Chinese stuff's not good."<sup>275</sup> Later, in the same interview, as we were talking about how men could not be trusted to take care of their family's finances because they spent too much money on drinking, gambling, and women, a man came in to buy a case of beer: "*nêêl*," my interviewee said, out of the man's earshot, "[he] is buying [beer] already (*maa2 sùù4 lèèw4 dèèl*), haha, [he] is buying [beer] already (*maa2 sùù4 lèèw4 dèèl*)." When Tia used *nêêl*, she clearly used it in much the same way. But at the time, exactly why it seemed 'right' that Sii's wife, CamPaa, did not hold her family's money was lost on me. I clumsily tried to interrupt what Tia meant, and she ignored me, picking up on where her *nêêl* left off but sketching the issue generically.

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<sup>274</sup> *qee3 jaan4 mèn1 Sii. Sii kam3 ngen2 nêêl*

<sup>275</sup> *Nêêl nêêl bò-dii3 daj4 khòng3 ciin3 bò-dii3*

## 4.1) Tia

*phòq1 vaa1 baang3 khang2 mia2 mak1 caaj1 qaql*  
 because COMP sometimes wife like pay list.particle

“Because sometimes a wife likes to spend...”

## 4.2)

*lù3 vaa1 mia2 mak1 lin5 mak1 kin3 mak1 caaj1 fumfua2*  
 or COMP wife like play like eat like pay extravagantly  
*nòq1 mak1 hèn3 ñang3 kaø- sùù4 siq1 lèq1*  
 polar.q like see who topic.linker buy this sentence.final.particle

“...or maybe a wife likes to play and eat, likes to spend extravagantly, right? [Maybe] she likes to buy whatever she sees, or something like that.”

## 4.3)

*phua3 kaø- bòø- haj5 kam3*  
 husband topic.linker NEG give hold

“[If that’s the case, her] husband wont let her control the [family’s] money”

## 4.4)

*lèq1 mia2 kèp2 ngen2 bòø- daj4 lèq1 khaw2 bòø-*  
 and wife take money NEG capable and 3rd.person.(sg./pl.) NEG  
*haj5 kam3... phuu5 saaj2 naq1*  
 give hold men factive.particle

“If she can’t hold onto the money, then her man [i.e., her husband] wont let her control it”

## 4.5)

*bat2 nii4 haw2 kam3 ngen2 daj4*  
 time deictic.proximal 1st.person(sg./pl.) hold money capable  
*haw2 kèp2 daj4 siq1 haw2 thòòn4*  
 1st.person(sg./pl.) collect capable this 1st.person(sg./pl.) save  
*ngen2 daj4 phua2 kaø- qaw3 haj5 vaj4 vang3*  
 money capable husband topic.linker take give save want  
*caj3 haw2 nii4*  
 1st.person(sg./pl.) 1st.person(sg./pl.) deictic.proximal

“On the other hand, if we [i.e., women] do a [good job] holding onto the money, [if we] can collect it, [if we] can save it, then our husbands will give us [the family’s money] to save according to our wishes.”

Even though I had introduced CamPaa as a specific topic of discussion, Tia no longer talks about CamPaa directly. Rather, she evokes a generic image of a woman who ‘spends too much.’ This generic image seems to encompass CamPaa without evaluating her on record as someone who cannot control her family’s finances because she likes to go ‘play’ and ‘eat’/ ‘drink’ out on the town.

After Tia finishes speaking, like any naïve gossip, I make one of her implications explicit. I ask her directly whether CamPaa likes to ‘play and drink.’ Tia clarifies—stuttering slightly:



Tia

5.1)

*kaqø kaqø kaqø bəø- qan3 nan4*  
topic.linker topic.linker topic.linker NEG thing deictic.distal  
*ləq1*  
factive.particle

“It’s...it’s...it’s not that.”

5.2)

*jaan4 mèn1 laaw2 bəp5 hèn3 khàng1 hèn3*  
scared COMP 3rd.person(sg.) like see stuff see  
*nāng3 laø- laaw2 mak1 sùù4 tii4 bəq1*  
whatever and 3rd.person(sg.) like.to buy polar.q.assume polar.q

“I am afraid it’s like when she sees stuff she likes to buy it.”

5.3)

*ləq1 qaaj4 Sii bəø- haj5 kam3 san5 tii4*  
and older.brother Sii NEG give hold thus polar.q.assume

“And so older brother Sii doesn’t let her kam3 the finances.”

5.4)

*daj4 n̄in2 CamPaa lom2 han4*  
perfect hear CamPaa talk deictic.distal

“I heard CamPaa talking about that.”

There are a number of signs in this response that signal Tia’s hesitancy to say that CamPaa does not hold onto her finances for any particular reason. First, there are the initial disfluencies in line **5.1**, a veritable rush to correct the record—it is not, Tia stresses, that CamPaa goes and ‘plays and drinks,’ an accusation that has connotations of adultery and debauchery. Next, when Tia sketches that CamPaa spends too much (**5.2**) on things she sees and that (**5.3**) this is why Sii stopped letting her hold on to the family’s money, Tia marks her epistemic uncertainty about this

by twice using the sentence final particle *tii4*—a polar question marker that, as Enfield (2007a:43) puts it, “marks a proposition independently assumed”—and by further encasing her evidence in reported speech from CamPaa herself, who Tia heard “talk about” (*lom2*) the issue. Tia considered CamPaa to be her best friend among our male group’s wives (see Chapter 9). I argue here that her hesitance to talk about CamPaa being fiscally irresponsible is, in part, evidence of Tia trying to not be an obvious gossip, to not air dirty laundry to her anthropologist friend. But it is also evidence of a more basic fact: saying that a woman does not hold onto her family’s money can be a serious criticism. People sometimes made this explicit. As another woman told me, when a married woman does not *kam3* her family’s money, ‘there is something wrong with her.’ Tia’s concern and care about talking about CamPaa’s financial situation indexes this stance; saying that a woman does not hold onto money because of her fiscal irresponsibility is a serious charge.

There is more evidence of this seriousness, in fact, in the interview I did with CamPaa, in which she framed herself as a diligent financial manager. During the interview, we sat in the family’s driveway and Sii played on his guitar nearby. He and I were planning to go drink and play snooker with Dii and others, but I went to the house early to interview CamPaa first. Regarding their family’s finances, CamPaa gave a very different story than Tia had. She said she held (*kam3*) the money in the family, and she stressed that she did so with care and purpose: “You have to have a record (*bansii2*),” she added. When I asked her if it was true that men and women spend differently, she pointed to Sii with her left hand and said, “This guy, he spends really well.”<sup>276</sup> By ‘spend well’ (*caajl kêngl*), she meant that he spent a lot of money.

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<sup>276</sup> *phuu5 nii4 laaw2 caajl kêngl*

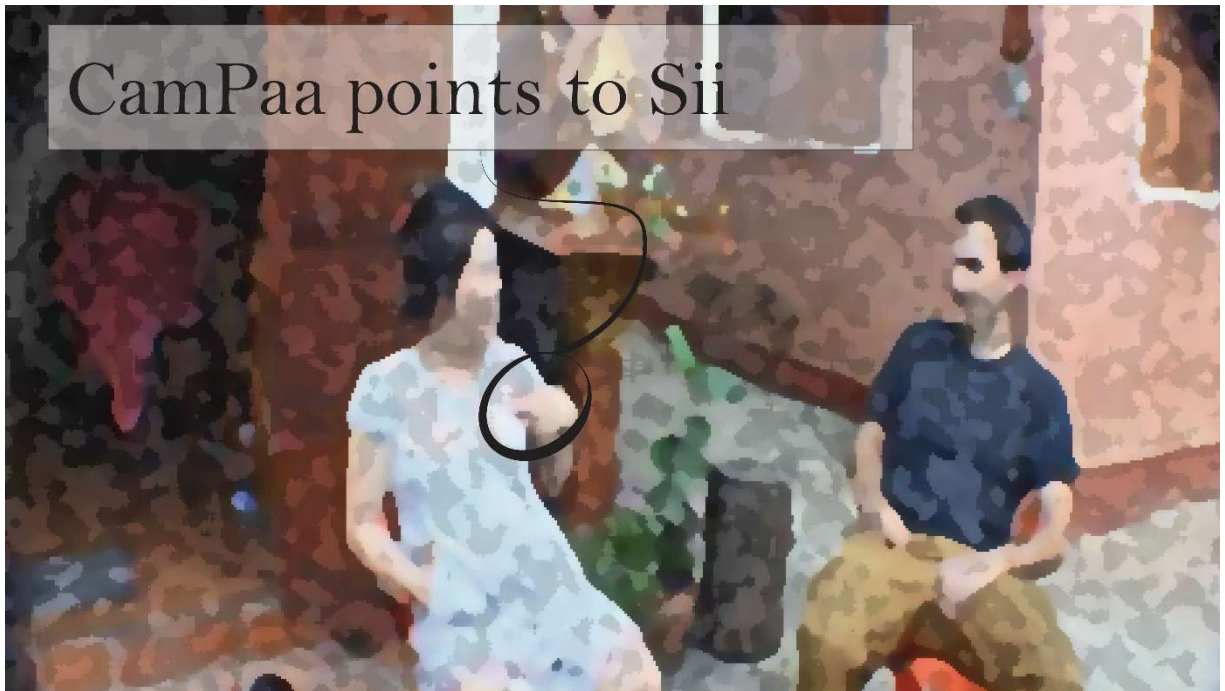


Figure 41: CamPaa points to her husband Sii with her left hand, while looking at Zuckerman and saying, “this guy, he spends really well.”

Sii, who was just off frame from the camera, playing guitar, did not respond. She uttered the words slightly more softly than she had been speaking otherwise and it was not clear if he heard (he did pause playing the guitar for a moment). CamPaa, smiling, asked me if I agreed and I responded by pointing at Sii as well and saying, *caajl kêngl*. CamPaa, in turn, repeated herself once more (*caajl kêngl*), this time adding “I, really, am the one who saves.”<sup>277</sup> As she said this she pointed at herself and tapped rapidly on her own chest.

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<sup>277</sup> *khòj5 thèè4 pên3 phuu5 thòòn4*

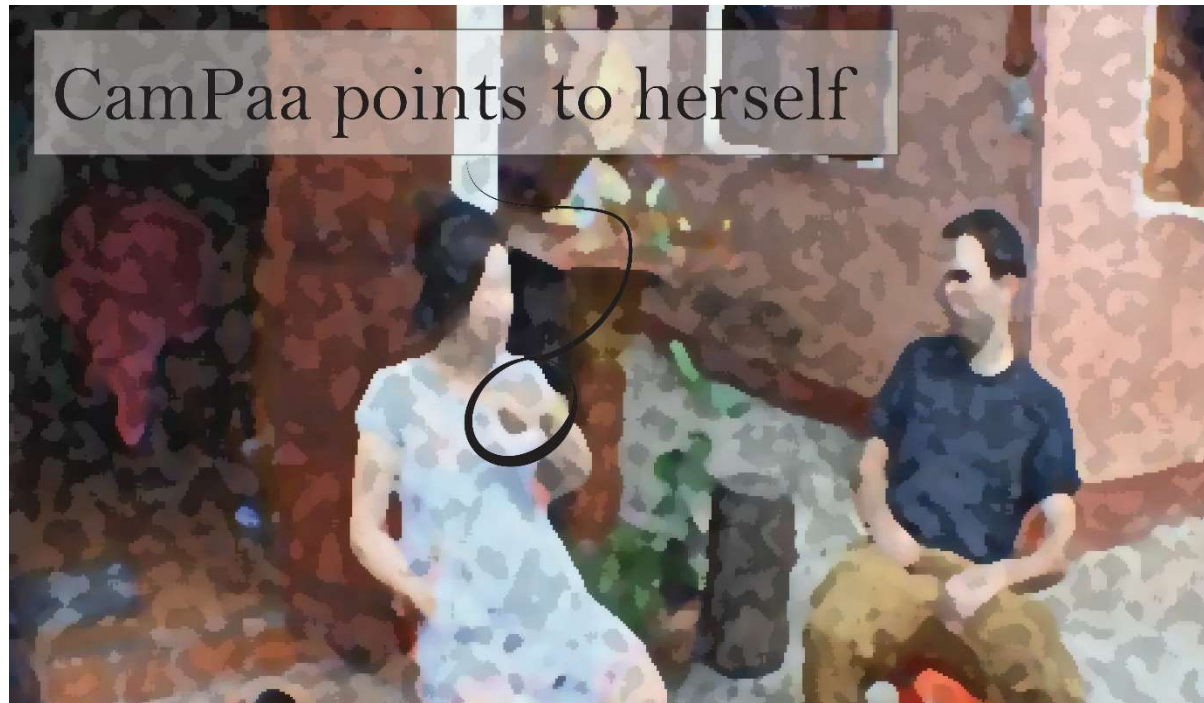


Figure 42: CamPaa points to herself with her left hand and taps on her chest, saying, “I, really, am the one who saves.”

In referring to Sii and then herself, CamPaa concretized my question about whether it was true that men and women spent differently, applying the generic referentials ‘men’ (*phuu5 saaj2*) and ‘women’ (*phuu5 ñing2*) to her and her husband’s bodies. In her self-representation, she was a typical woman and Sii was a typical man who spent too much money. She jokingly jabbed at Sii but also re-affirmed her own economic responsibility. She was the one who saves. If he was bad at saving and they still had a nice place to live and significant disposable income, then the implication was that she was doing a good job.

While throughout the interview CamPaa treated herself as a responsible spender and guarded against any implication that she spent irresponsibly, she seemed to take some pride in Sii’s frivolous spending even as she criticized it. When I asked her what kind of characteristic ‘spending well’ was, she said that ‘it means that someone is not cheap’ (*khii5 thii1*). She then clarified that someone who “spends really well” is someone with a “big heart” (*caj3 ñaj1*; a term which means generous, among other things). I agreed that Sii had a “big heart.” CamPaa beamed

for a moment and said “Yeah, you say that [too],”<sup>278</sup> pointing again at Sii, the man with the big heart.

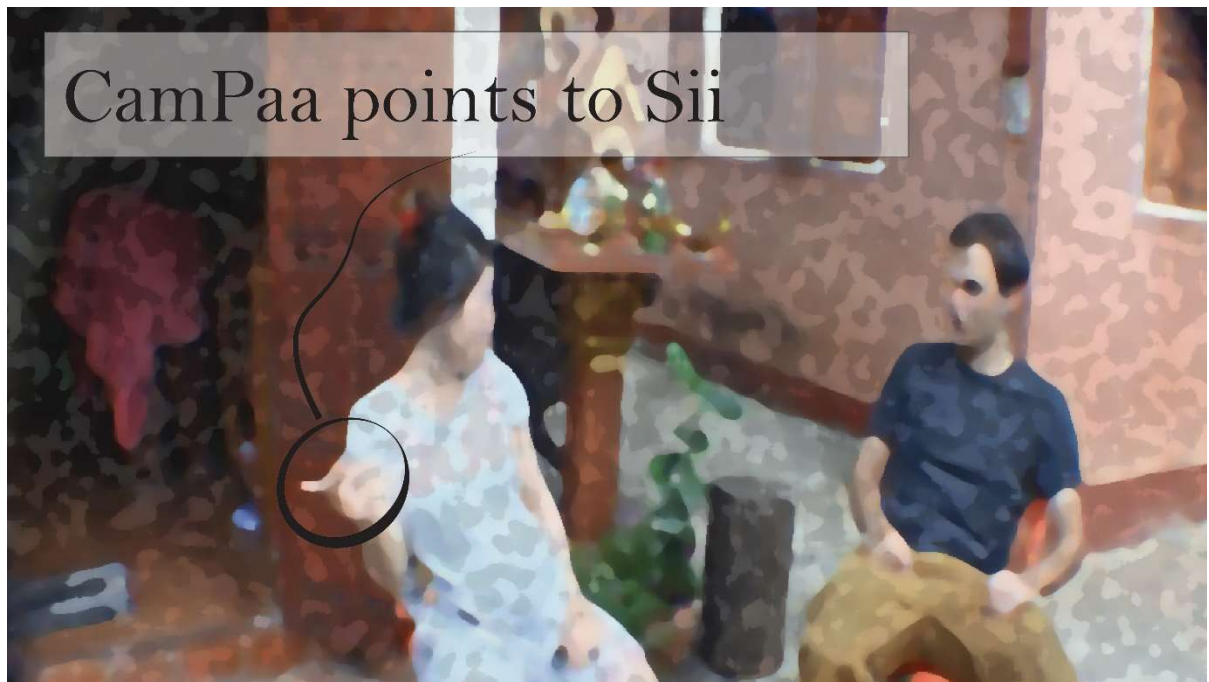


Figure 43: CamPaa points to Sii You say that [he has a big heart, too],”

CamPaa’s jabs about how her husband ‘spends money’ all the time were good natured. While this does not mean that similar accusations cannot be made seriously, the figure of the wasteful, generous man is something that lends itself to joking. As my interviews with CamPaa and Tia made clear, similar accusations about women are taken more seriously and handled with care.

### Squandered Savings

It was still early morning at the money gambling court, before any games had started, and a few other men and I sat a bit like construction workers readying for a long day of work—smoking cigarettes, drinking cups of coffee, and sipping tea to wash the coffee down. The games

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<sup>278</sup> *mè̀n1 lēq1 caw4 kaø-vaa1*

would start soon, and we would work another day at the court. For whatever reason, that morning I was feeling especially sociological and I started directly asking men what kind of people went to the court. ‘This court,’ one man said, ‘only has *kòò3 nòò2 mòò2* people.’ *Kòò3 nòò2 mòò2* is a series of letters in the Lao alphabet, translated best as something like “EWW” (but without the acronymic pun). Confused, I asked the man what he meant. ‘It’s filled with men who *kin3* (‘eat,’ i.e., *kòò3*) *nam2* (‘with’ i.e., *nòò2*) *mia2* (‘wife’ i.e., *mòò2*),” he said—men who ‘eat with their wives’—E.W.W.

The half-joke, half-truth was that men ‘ate’ the money their wives earned. High (2014) writes that ‘eat with you’ (*kin3 nam2 caw4*) is a general way to talk about corruption in the south of Laos. She describes how her interlocutors would complain that the state only ‘ate with’ the citizenry but that the citizenry never ‘ate with’ the state. That morning at the court, ‘eat with’ (or more intuitively translated, ‘eat from’) is used to identify a similarly parasitic relation: the court, the joke implied, was a place for lazy, non-working men to spend their wives’ money.

*Pétanque*, as I mentioned in chapters two and five, has become for some a paragon of male sloth and wastefulness; a way to ‘eat’ and ‘lose’ both time and money. Some men go to the courts every evening. Others sneak off during the day in between or instead of working. Much of the tension around *pétanque* is framed as a battle between husbands and wives. Angry wives stress to their husbands the opportunity cost of their *pétanque* play—time spent that men could use to work at home or make more money for their families. They also point out the games’ direct monetary cost—money spent on beer rather than bottles of formula; cash bets that might have been used to pay for school fees or to buy a gold watch that keeps its value. In this section, I explore the discursively constructed figure of the wasteful man and this figure’s compliment, the angry wife.

During interviews with *pétanque* players, I would always ask married men (and most of the men at the *pétanque* court were married) what their wives thought about their playing *pétanque*. No matter how delicately I asked, the question itself inevitably brought tension, and my interviewee would either go into defensive detail (cf. Drew 1998) about how his wife did not care whether he played *pétanque* or he would sheepishly admit that she disliked it. It felt at times like asking someone whether his parents liked it that he smoked cigarettes, or his teacher liked it when he did not complete his homework—of course, they did not like these behaviors. The better question was whether they cared enough to sanction them. Even those men who claimed their wives had no problem with *pétanque* agreed that, in general, women did not like when their husbands played *pétanque*.

When I asked one man whether his wife ever said anything about his *pétanque* play, he laughed. “I think it’s an important topic,” I pushed.

### 6.1) Pétanque player

*khaw2 khaw2 kaø- bòø- mak1*  
 3rd.person(sg./pl.) 3rd.person(sg./pl.) topic.linker NEG like  
*lèw4 lùang1 ni4*  
 already topic deictic.proximate

“They don’t like it, this stuff.”

### 6.2) Zuckerman

*mèèn1 qaq1*  
 COP polar.q

“Is that right?”

### 6.3) Pétanque player

*phuu5 ñing2 khaw3 bòø- mak1 daj4.*  
 women 3rd.person(sg./pl.) NEG like perfect

“Women, they don’t like it.”

### 6.4)

*khaw3 vaa1 tii3 buun3 tii3 hêt1 ñang3 qiø-*  
 3rd.person(sg./pl.) COMP hit ball hit do what irrealist  
*naa1 khaw2 kaø- bòø- mak1 lèw4*  
 factive.particle 3rd.person(sg./pl.) topic.linker NEG like already

“They say ‘What are you playing pétanque for?’ They don’t like it.”

Although I asked about his own wife, his comments above refer to ‘women’ (*phuu5 ñing2*) generically. “They say it wastes time,”<sup>279</sup> he continued, laughing. When I asked him later in the interview who watched over the finances in his family, he said that his wife did and added that “if [we] kept the money with me then we wouldn’t have any more [money], I would spend it all.”<sup>280</sup>

Sometimes, when others at the court overheard me ask this question, they would jokingly call out that the interviewee was ‘scared’ that his wife would ‘yell’ (*daa1*) at him. In the interview below, for instance, I ask a man questions and a third man interjects repeatedly.

<sup>279</sup> *khaw2 vaa1 sia3 vêêlaa2 (h) (h)*

<sup>280</sup> *khan2 qaw3 vaj4 nam2 haw2 lêq1 bòø-juu1 lêq1 haw2 kaø-caaj1 (unintelligible) mot2 lèw4*



**Zuckerman**

7.1) *naj2 khòòpkhua2 caw4 caw4 pên3 phuu5 kam3 ngen2 bò01 lùù3 mia2 pên3 phuu5 kam3 ngen2*  
““In your family, are you the one that holds the money, or is your wife the person that holds the money?””

**Third man**

7.2) *mia2 lêqø-laaw2 jaan4 mia2*  
“His wife, he’s scared of his wife.”

**Interviewee**

7.3) *mia2 kam3 ngen2 qoo1*  
“My wife holds the money alright.”

**Third man**

7.4) *laaw2 jaan4 mia2*  
“He’s scared of his wife.”

**Zuckerman**

7.5) *caw4 jaan4 mia2 bò01*  
“You’re scared of your wife?”

**Interviewee**

7.6) *jaan4 thèè4 man2 hò0ng4 sajl khò0j5 khò0j5 qiø-lêên1 leej2*  
“Scared for sure, when she [*man2*] calls out for me, I run away.”

**Third man**

7.7) (laughter)

**Zuckerman**

7.8) *thèè4 qaql*  
“Really?”

**Interviewee**

7.9) *mm*  
“Yup.”

**Zuckerman**

7.10) *caw4 vaw4 jò0k5 tii4*  
“You’re joking, right?”

**Interviewee**

7.11) *vaw4 thèè4 vaa3 (h) (h)*  
“I’m speaking truthfully, hahaha.”

**Third man**

7.12) *mia2 laaw2 phuu5 ñaj1 kwaan1 laaw2 dèè1 suung3 kwaan1 laaw2*  
“His wife is bigger than him, taller than him.”

**Zuckerman**

7.13) *thèè4 qaql*  
“Really?”

**Interviewee**

7.14) *mm*  
“Yup.”

**Zuckerman**

7.15) *tèèl vaa1 caw4 kam3 ñaj1 dèèl caw4 bòø-tòòng4 jaan4*  
“But you have big muscles, you don’t have to be scared.”

**Interviewee**

7.16) *qooj4 hii3 juu1 nam2 khaw2 vaa2 haw2 tòòng4 daj4 jaan4 khaw2 daj4*  
“Oh, they have vaginas [literally, ‘the vagina is with them’], we have to be scared of them!”

In this example, the two men, who I knew well at the time of the interview, are clearly messing with me. The third man begins the joke (in line 7.2) and, being a good sport, the interviewee who has up until this point answered mostly seriously and with candor joins in. Juree (Vichit-Vadakan 1997:441) writes that Thai men feel an “overwhelming rage and shame when described as ‘fearful of wife.’” This example shows that, unsurprisingly, claiming people are scared of their wives is also ripe for joking (*vaw4 jòòk5*) with friends and a foreign anthropologist. One aspect that seems to insulate this joke from being too real is that again, like in the transcript above, the interviewee’s last line jumps scale (7.16), so to speak, to describe not his wife particularly but women generically, *qua* a class of people with vaginas (*hii3*). The vagina, rather than any property of his wife in particular (i.e., her ‘largeness’ or ‘height,’ as mentioned by the third man) is what makes her dangerous. It is unclear exactly what the interviewee meant when he said the vagina should inspire fear, but it seemed to me at the time to have less to do with any idea of pollution (but see Bowie 2011) and more with the sexual organ’s capacity to tempt men with desires they cannot repress (cf. Mills 1995 and see the example in Enfield 2015:135 on the ‘Big Vagina Technique’).

Jokes like this were incredibly common and hilarious for people. Two men trying to organize a money gambling game, for instance, debated about how much they were going to stake. Eventually, the one who wanted to bet less money on the game told the other that he was ‘scared’ the other man’s wife would ‘be upset’ if they bet too much. In other moments, when a man accused another of being afraid of making a bet, the accused would likewise often retort, ‘I

am scared of nothing but my wife.’ Such jokes were not only for or funny to men on the court. One day, I was drinking with female pork vendors in the market and asked why I did not see one of their husbands, a regular *pétanque* player, around the court anymore. Another woman interjected that the man was too ‘scared’ of his wife to keep going. As she said this, she laughed and made a throat slitting gesture. I even became adept at using the trope. When people would ask me why I did not take a Lao woman as a wife, as almost everyone asked, I would tell them that I was already married. Like it was the next move in an Abbott-and-Costello comedy routine, they would then suggest that I get a second wife in Laos. I would respond by saying that if I did my wife would ‘yell’ at me (*daal*) or maybe even worse. The laughter that inevitably followed cut off the line of questioning.



Figure 44: Cartoon from Laos's 'Sports Magazine'

The image of the enraged wife and sheepish man—which these jokes conjure—is captured in the above cartoon from Laos's *Sports Magazine* (2014). In the cartoon, a wife looks on as her drunk, *pétanque*-playing husband continues to assure her that he is still ‘at work,’ ‘helping the boss.’ Note the club behind the woman’s back and the other players running away in fear. The bird in the bottom left of the cartoon says that he suspects the husband will be eating “a *pétanque* ball sour soup” that night, conjuring an image similar to the picture of soup I reprinted in the previous chapter.

The cartoon, and the jokes mentioned above, present married life as a kind of sitcom, a predictable battle between two gendered notions of how one should live and, in this case, spend

money and time. Like many sitcoms, the trope in part inverts expectations of power, control, and the ability to exert physical violence; the inverted world that results is fantastic and, for many, comical and cathartic. But like sitcoms, the trope captures and constructs actual interactions. In fact, a family member of someone who owned the money gambling *pétanque* court told me that something similar to the above cartoon once actually did happen. A woman called her husband on his cell phone as she stood nearby, watching him on the court. The man was a mini-van driver and he assured her on the phone that he was right then-and-there picking up a customer. She, standing a few feet away from the court, said okay and then promptly threw a rock at his head. Apparently, she missed. Another owner of a money gambling court told me that the police only hassled them when someone complained about ‘noise’ (*khwaam2 nan2*), or when a wife complained as a last ditch to force her husband to stop gambling and wasting time.

## **Gambling Savings**

When I was living in Luang Prabang, women almost never spent leisure time at the money gambling *pétanque* court. Those who did did not participate as money gamblers. While I often saw women go to beer gambling courts as part of an office group or, as CamPaa and Tia sometimes did, with their husbands in packs out on the town, only on two occasions did I see a woman play a game of *pétanque* to decide who might buy beer (games with Maj, discussed below, excluded). In both games, I was playing against the young women who worked at the money gambling *pétanque* court and, in both cases, I suggested the stakes. I did frequently see women gamble to determine who would drink a glass of beer, but when money was involved (either to buy beer or be staked in and of itself), as a rule, only men played.

Why do women not gamble on *pétanque*? The issue is not with gambling per se. Women often gamble for money in Luang Prabang. They play cards and the lottery and the ‘crab-fish game’ that is set up on fairgrounds. Many people, in fact, say that women are more avid gamblers than men and, in a sense, gambling and women are indexically tied to one another. Not in harmony but in dissonance, they come together to form a fear, embody an anxiety, and make palpable a cultural figure of vice.

Female gamblers are a significant, haunting figure of the public imagination. For this reason, they were also difficult for me to investigate with any rigor. I did try to join card ‘circles,’ I did talk to women about gambling, and I did occasionally play small-stakes games with women I saw playing in the back of their shops, in the quiet parts of the market, or in my friends’ houses. But card gambling was usually more secretive than gambling at the *pétanque* court (although see chapter nine). These games were not exclusively for women, but there was a general, and from what I could tell, accurate assumption that more women played cards than men. But they did so in less visible, more private spaces. One day, as I wandered through a market, I stumbled upon a group of women playing cards in the back of a shop. Surprised, I said, ‘Oh, you’re playing cards back here,’ one of the women, responded: ‘It’s not good, right?’ (*bòø-dii3 nòql*). When I asked them how much they were playing for per hand, the woman said they were playing ‘for fun’ even as the bottoms of bills poked out from the placemat in front of her. These card games were usually audience-less. They were built for less than four people and at most, a few hangers-on alternating in and out. Rarely did women allow me to just watch them play cards; I had to join in, lose some money, learn the hard way—virtually paying for access. This was especially true for the higher-stakes games that would pop up around my neighborhood. Filming was out of the question; these games were patently illegal and thus

clandestine, built to avoid the notice of neighbors, police, and nosy anthropologists. I heard that they were happening in rumors and whispers and rarely from the players themselves.

The secrecy of female card-playing was a methodological hurdle I encountered in my research, but it also hinted at why *pétanque* was so popular among men rather than women. Gambling on *pétanque*, like gambling on cards, conflicts with the hegemonic ideals of how women should behave that I discussed above. The court is associated with consumption and crudeness, activities and qualities for which women are judged and men are assumed to be unable to resist. Card gambling is frequently referenced as an evil that rips women away from their money and their duties as good mothers and wives. Women still gamble in part because they can do so in secret. Gambling on *pétanque*, in contrast, happens outdoors in public, visible spaces.

*Pétanque*'s official status as a 'sport,' as I described in chapter two, has also given it a quality of public-ness (a term I use without any theoretical allegiance), a quality games of card gambling—most often held behind closed doors—are designed to thwart. Most *pétanque* courts are alongside the road in places that no one would dare to play cards (unless it was a post-partum party or a funeral, as I discuss in chapter nine). In fact, when men at the money gambling courts did play cards, as they occasionally did, they would sneak off somewhere else—to a hotel room, someone's house, to the back of a taxi. Those same men would gamble for money on *pétanque* openly in the middle of the day, shouting out bets that bicyclists and motorcyclists passing by might hear, handing money to one another, screaming heckles into the city's soundscape. Money gambling games are even designed for an audience—anybody can wander up and watch people play, all one needs to do is sit on one of the benches built around the courts. Beer gambling, while not so much a spectator sport available for strangers, often takes place on courts adjacent

to one another and involves alternating teams. Unlike the bars located around the city where men and women both drank (and were often judged for doing so), the money gambling court was most packed during the day. The fact that games took place during ‘work hours’ underlined its wastefulness, calling to mind the work that might otherwise be getting done and making the game not merely a kind of leisure but a “conspicuous abstention from labour” (Veblen 2007:30). Because they were mindful of the potential problems with these aspects of *pétanque*’s publicness, the provincial office in Luang Prabang issued the written policy I mentioned in chapter two, which ordered that civil servants should only play *pétanque* outside of working hours and that courts should be moved toward the back of office buildings.

When I asked men at the gambling court why there were no female patrons, they would usually tell me that the women were ‘at home’ or *juul baan*<sup>4</sup>. When I pushed about whether this was really true, whether a given man’s wife was right now at home, it almost always turned out that, in fact, she was somewhere else, like at the market selling goods, at a fancy hotel down the street cleaning rooms, or working at an office job at the airport. In the 2015 census (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015:193), among those men and women in Luang Prabang province above the age of ten, 65 percent of women versus 66 percent of men were recorded as ‘employed.’ I could not find figures for Luang Prabang district (in which the city is located), but from general breakdowns between urban and rural areas across the country, it is likely that women are more likely to be employed than men. Nationally, in fact, among those in the “usually active population,” women in the workforce outnumber men in the work force at 69.3 percent to 66.2 percent respectively (Lao Statistics Bureau 2015:74). That women were ‘at home’ made sense to men at the court as an easy shorthand for explaining why they were virtually absent from the court, but it was a moral myth: women were ‘at home’ only in the sense that they were not



squandering their families' wealth out in the world. Physically, they were much more likely to be out and about.

There were, however, some women regularly at the court. Almost all of them were family members of the court's owner. They worked—grilling meats, steaming sticky rice, selling drinks, and collecting court fees—alongside a few men. While the men who worked there would sometimes play *pétanque* and checkers with patrons, gambling for beer or money, the women rarely did this. They freely chatted and fraternized with the patrons, often joking or drinking beer as the night went on, but they distanced themselves from *pétanque* itself. They spent most of their time near the outdoor kitchen and the tables next to it, rather than directly around the courts, the closest of which was about 10 feet away. They brought drinks out to patrons when the patrons called for them. They were friendly with most of the customers, although the two younger women (both around thirty years old) who worked there were teased incessantly and occasionally complained about it.

When I asked these two women to complete my survey about *pétanque*, as I mentioned in chapter two, they told me I had to ask men, or maybe, they said, a *thòm3*—a word short for 'tomboy' (for discussion of 'tom' gender identity in Thailand, see Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Wilson 2004). I said that, considering they had worked at a *pétanque* court for more than four years, they would surely know about the game; they demurred. They sat at the court every day, but still kept their distance from the games.

Many people with whom I spoke talked about the money gambling court as a place where rudeness, drinking, arguments and rampant sexuality ruled. For them, the court was a loud, male-dominated hangout, brimming with drivers in the tourism industry,<sup>281</sup> a place—as the jokes about

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<sup>281</sup> Drivers in Southeast Asia, especially truck and taxi drivers, often have a bad-boy reputation among tourists. In Luang Prabang, for instance, *tuk tuk* (open air taxi) drivers often will offer to sell passengers pot or opium or take

my survey emphasized—where talk about sex and the sharing of pictures and sometimes the telephone numbers of local women (*phuu5 saaw3*) were as prevalent as talk about money.<sup>282</sup> When I first started going to the court, one particularly loud player decided to teach me all of the scandalous words he could think of, including the word for body odor, ‘turtle shit,’ (*khii5 taw1*), and ‘clitoris’ (*kèèn1 tèèt5*). To explain the latter term to me, to the laughter of the dozens of people around, the man drew me a diagram in my notebook. There was also constant banter about cunnilingus, a practice that is especially disturbing but also intriguing for many Lao men. Cunnilingus disturbed in part because it involved a lowering of the man’s head below the woman’s and thus inverted the supposed power structure in the relationship. One man told me it would make you grow hair on your tongue. Another would repeatedly joke with me about how tired he was from performing it on his wife or his mistress—‘seven hours last night,’ he would say, adding, ‘Usually, I can go for eight.’ The fascination with cunnilingus might come in part from the increasing availability of pornography in Luang Prabang. It was not uncommon for men to stream it on the court using their cell phones. On one slow day at the court, for instance, three men sat on a bench, one standing behind them, his arms wrapped around the others, watching a Japanese-made sex video on one of their cell phones. After watching for a bit one of the men grabbed the man in the middle’s penis. ‘It’s hard!’ he shouted and jumped up howling with laughter, at which point everyone on the court started joking with the man, mocking him because

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them to prostitutes. This image—classed and racialized (insofar as many of the open-air taxi drivers in the city are not ethnic Lao)—is not too far from how some Lao people talk about *tuk tuk* drivers. But there is significant heterogeneity across drivers. Many of the mini-van drivers on the court model themselves in a professional mode, wearing nice button-down shirts and earning and gambling for money that would make many a *tuk tuk* driver balk. Most of them work for themselves and pride themselves on their freedom of not only selecting their hours, but of selecting their reputation (on taxi drivers in Thailand, see Textor 1973; Hickey 2010; Hickey 2013; Sopranzetti 2017). All of the drivers I have met are male.

<sup>282</sup> As Saengtienchai *et al* (1999:96) found in a series of interviews, “Male and female sexuality are considered to be fundamentally different by both Thai men and women” and, like in other places in the world, desire for sex is treated as one central motif for what it means to be male.

merely watching a video had given him an erection. On a different day, a man I was interviewing interrupted our interview midway through by opening an adult video (called *nang3 sek1*; the latter word appears to be a borrowing from the English ‘sex’) on his smart phone. Standing next to the court’s tables, he nonchalantly passed the phone around to others and continued to talk to me. Such scenes were common at the court.

The money gambling courts are commonly represented by locals as metaphorically and physically dirty places where no one should spend too much time, whether a man or a woman. Even people who frequented would often tell me that no one who was ‘wealthy’ or ‘good’ would go there. Going to the money gambling court was considered particularly unbecoming for civil servants. When I asked a civil servant friend, for example, why I hadn’t seen him around the court recently, he said that he just accepted a promotion and that ‘it would be inappropriate’ (*bòø-khùù2*) for him to keep coming around. The problem with his going to the court did not concern *pétanque* itself (although, during my time in Laos as I documented in chapter two, *pétanque* was slowly becoming a less acceptable fixture in some offices). He kept playing in tournaments, at his office, and at privately run beer gambling courts. The problem was being perceived as the kind of person who gambles for money—a rough and untrustworthy man, prone to argument and desirous of what others have, who has to earn money (*haa3 ngen2*) through hustling others on games rather than work, and who after winning bolts the scene. Another civil servant friend who never went to the court, for instance, once told me that he could hear ‘the court’ in the unintentionally rude way I asked his girlfriend questions (I had, among other things, omitted the second-person-pronominal with a zero form and used the sentence final partial *qaq1*). People talk about the language of the money gambling court as another instance of the ‘low’ (*tam3*) language of the ‘market,’ (*sap2 talaat4*), filled with yelling-words (*kham2 daa1*),

and other non-polite (*bòø-suphaap4*), unsweetened forms (*bòø-vaan3*). For me, a Westerner, to spend time at the court, learn this language, and develop some of the habits of the court was a funny inversion of how foreigners are generally imagined, and led to many jokes (and sometimes real criticisms) about how I was a ‘bird-shit foreigner’ (*falahang2 khii4 nok2*), a phrase that, among other things, carries strong connotations of ‘cheapness’ (*khii5 thii1*), lack of politeness, and greed. In the half-joking opinion of my friend criticizing how I spoke, the court had leaked into me, the bird-shit foreigner, through a transformational social process I have heard summarized with the (coincidentally) also avian phrase, *tok2 muu1 kaa3 pên3 kaa3 tok2 muu1 hèng4 kaø-pên3 hèng4* or ‘If you make friends with crows, you’ll become a crow; if you make friends with vultures, you’ll be a vulture.’ The company you keep leaves its mark on you.

I was told multiple times that if a ‘boss’ finds out that one of his civil servant employees goes to the court too much, he will hold the man back from promotion, just as he might hold someone back for other breaches of character, like unchecked corruption or not modulating one’s politeness when speaking with ‘important (literally ‘big’) people’ (*phuu5 ñaaaj2*). One friend, who owns a small private construction company, told me that in contrast to bosses (*hua3 naa5*) in the government, he, a boss of a private enterprise, did not care what his employees spent their money on, as long as they came to work and did their jobs. Perhaps for fear of such judgment, many civil servants do stay away from the court. But others go, even as their presence is erased in comments about how the ‘dirty’ place is filled with drivers.

While the money gambling court was not conducive to being a ‘proper civil servant’ it was understood as even less conducive to being a ‘proper women.’ When I told one woman I was studying the court, she described to me the kind of people that went there in broad brush strokes. The woman, a young mother who had been married for a few years, became frustrated as

she spoke. “Look,” she said, “every person there”—she then let out a long sigh, “*qeem3*”—“[they] talk like they have no discipline (*maalañaat4*). Just look at everyone there”—“*qeem3*”—she said again, sighing even longer than the first time.<sup>283</sup> She then jumped into a specific story that proved her point. A man who she knew went to the court approached her. She acted out the scene:

*“‘Want to go with older brother?’ he said, or something like that, ‘I’ll give you money.’*

*And I said, “You are going to give money to go somewhere—what for, what is this about?” [I said it] like as if I [didn’t know he was asking to sleep with me] ...*

*After I spoke really politely (*vaw4 dii3 dii3*), I asked him, “You think you are going to ...”, yeah, so I asked him, speaking really politely, right, “You are going to take me to go sleep with [you]” or whatever. That was what he meant, I asked him [about it] because I wanted to know his heart (*caj3*) [i.e., how he would respond].*

*After I yelled at him, he said, “No, I didn’t think that, you said that yourself, I did not say any words like that,” he was like that kind of person, do you see?<sup>284</sup>*

In her dialog, she presented herself as someone who spoke politely (*dii3 dii3*) and directly to a crude man who offered her money to sleep with him and then quickly denied that he had done so (cf. my discussion of plausible deniability on the *pétanque* court in Zuckerman 2016). She sketched a stark contrast between herself and his rough directness. Every man at the court, as she put it, was like this or without ‘discipline,’ or *maalañaat4*, a fact that was audible in their rough

<sup>283</sup> *paak5 bəθ-saj1 qiθ-mii2 maalañaat4 mèn1 ñang3 nòq1 qee3 caw4 beng1 tètə-laθ-khon2 han5 nòq1 qeem3*

<sup>284</sup> *paj3 nam2 qaaj5 qaql mèn1 ñang3 siql siθ-qaw3 ngen2 haj5 siql*

*qaw3 lèq1 vaal khòj5 vaal qi-qaw3 ngen2 haj5 paj3 nam2 lèq1 qaw3 ngen2 haj5 mèn1 ñang3 mèn1 ñang3 si4 bèèp5 sommut1 haw2...*

*bat2 haw2 vaw4 dii3 dii3 lèw4 haw2 vaw4 thaam3 laaw2*

*qee3 caw4 khit1 vaal qiθ-qaw3 qee laθ-haw2 thaam3 laaw2 vaw4 dii3 dii3 nòq1 siq4*

*caw4 qiθ-qaw3 khòj5 paj3 qan3 nòn2 nam2 mèn1 ñang3 khwaam2 maaj3 vaw4 leej2 naq1 khòj5 thaam3 bèèp5 jaak5 huu4 caj3*

*(after some disfluency)*

*bat2 haw2 daa1 laaw2 vaal bəθ-naa1 khòj5 bəθ-daj4 khit1 sam2 caw4 vaw4 qêeng1 khòj5 bəθ-daj4 vaw4 ñang3 cak2 kham2 naa1 bèèp5 khon2 pèn3 nèw2 nii4 hèn3 bəθ1*

speech and improper suggestions to married women. The same woman also told me that she knew one of the owner's family members who worked there from school. They were the same age. When I asked if they were *siaw1* (i.e., good friends, see chapter eight), the woman distanced herself and said that they had "gone to school together." She then told me that often when she drove by, she saw her classmate drinking beer with the men at the court, sitting at one of the tables. Disapprovingly, she asked me rhetorically, "What are other people going to think she is?"<sup>285</sup>

Halfway through my time in the field, the money gambling court moved. After the move, the owners tried to make it more of a beer gambling court and arranged for 'beer-girls' (*saaw3 bia3*) to come and sell and serve bottles of Heineken in the evening. The transformation to a beer gambling court mostly failed, but the beer waitresses were a hit, as money gamblers often faded into drinking beer in the evening after they arrived. The waitresses were paid by the beer distributor and every week or so a new woman would appear. They rotated from bar to bar to ensure that neither they nor their often-ogling customers became bored. Each night, they were picked up and dropped off by a mini-van for their five-hour shifts. Smaller establishments like the money gambling *pétanque* court only had one *saaw3 bia3* but other places had many, sometimes of competing brands. The *saaw3 bia3*, most of whom were single women in their early twenties, were subject to constant sexual harassment and provocation at most bars, but the money gambling *pétanque* court was a particularly intimidating environment. They were at times poked and groped, hit on, and invited off for sex, as the woman above was. They were required to be of a certain degree of attractiveness, as judged by the management. They dressed in tightly fitting dresses that looked like the labels of the beer they sold. Some men said that the beer tasted

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<sup>285</sup> *khacaw3 siə-khit1 laaw2 pən3 nèw2 daj3*

more delicious when served by a *saaw3 bia3* and would wait for one to arrive before ordering. *Saaw3 bia3* were rarely sex workers and it was generally assumed that they did not provide sexual favors for money. Nevertheless, they worked for mediocre salaries and, for some, a commission per bottle of beer sold, which created an incentive to sell more and ‘advertise’ (*khoosanaa2*; some people called it *khaaw1*). To be more successful, the beer girls pressured their clients (*khèèk5*), and this frequently took the form of playful sexual banter. They would often ask customers if they had a wife or a girlfriend yet, and customers, generally fibbing that they did not, would ask the question back. As Buun, quoted in the previous chapter, said to a *saaw3 bia3* as I interviewed him on the side of the court, ‘I will drink your beer if you don’t have a boyfriend yet.’ ‘I don’t have a boyfriend then,’ the woman responded.

If an establishment requested, a Heineken *saaw3 bia3* could be asked to stay past a week, and one woman who served as the *saaw3 bia3* at the money gambling court, whom the owners and most of the customers really enjoyed because of her quick wit and pleasant banter, stayed there for almost two months. I will call her Taaj. I interviewed Taaj at a noodle soup restaurant near her apartment in the city, and she brought along two of her friends who also worked as *saaw3 bia3*. They were in their early twenties. One of them was studying in school; Taaj herself spent her days selling vehicles at a shop. This was the first time I interviewed a beer waitress, and I expected the women to go into detail about how they disliked all of the sexual banter and harassment, but they downplayed this dimension of their jobs, and agreed that that talk about whether they had ‘boyfriends’ (*mii2 fèèn2 lèèw4 bòò1*) was just the customers and themselves ‘joking’ and was good for their sales. Speaking ‘enjoyably’ (*vaw4 muan1*), they told me, was the main job of a beer waitress. When I asked how one might do that, speak *muan1*, Taaj gave a line that appealed to the mutual aid of the customers and is the typical form for soliciting sales: *kin3*

*bia3 sòòj1 dèè1 sùù1 bia3 sòòj1 dèè1* or “Drink beer to help [me], buy beer to help me.” Taaj, before our interview, had used this line on me many times. She and her friends now told me that the goal of such speech was to make customers ‘love’ them, not necessarily sexually, one woman clarified, even though she added that such interest might produce more sales. This emotional labor was arduous work. Taaj said her job selling vehicles was much easier. She did not need to do as much ‘advertisement’ in the motorcycle showroom. People would come in when they wanted a bike. Selling beer, you had to convince them of what they wanted.

The women stressed that one crucial part of this work was controlling one’s temper. When customers spoke rudely, it was a beer waitress’s job to ‘resist the urge’ (*got2 qaw3*) to yell at them.<sup>286</sup> Just as in chapter four, the women explicitly said that not making a scene was much more important than speaking what was in their ‘hearts.’ They told me that they had friends who had yelled at customers who had crossed a line, either by being too aggressive or too mean. When I asked the women to provide examples of how their friends had yelled, however, they demurred. One woman said, “I don’t know how to yell, I haven’t ever yelled at anyone, I’ve only smiled and laughed, and that’s it.”<sup>287</sup> Taaj, however, said that the money gambling *pétanque* court had tested her ability to ‘resist the urge.’ It was not the sexual banter but the rudeness that she disliked. One particular customer, she said, was intolerable. He alone made her not want to work there. He would curse her rudely, with phrases like *qii1 haal mùng2* or ‘curse you,’ and even sometimes spit on her arm as she served him beer. After she told me this story, she continued to say, almost to herself, “resist the urge, resist the urge,” (*got2 qaw3 got2 qaw3*) and then let out a sound very similar to the sound the woman who described the sexually aggressive man at the court had made: *qeem3*. I then clarified a detail I had missed in her story: Had he spit

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<sup>286</sup> *khèèk5 vaw2 nèèw2 daj3 kaø-qot2 qaw3*

<sup>287</sup> *bòø-sang1 daal bò-kheej3 daal mii2 tèè1 ñim1 hua3 lêqø-kaø-lèèw4*



in your face?’ I asked. No, she said: “If [he had spat in] my face, I would have hit him already.”<sup>288</sup> She and her friends erupted with laughter.

During the hundreds of hours that I spent at *pétanque* courts generally, I only ever saw one woman gamble for money on *pétanque*. She initially had a very hard time getting anyone to bet against her. Maj, as I call her, had seen some success as a *pétanque* player in the past, on the international stage. When I interviewed her, she bragged to me that years before when she was practicing more, “if you compared [my skills] to a man’s they were equal.”<sup>289</sup> In fact, she told me that she won a large doubles tournament in Vientiane playing in a men’s bracket, with a male player as her partner. She stressed that there were no real differences in capabilities between men and women in *pétanque*. One did not need that much strength, she said. When I asked her why there were few women that played *pétanque* on the beer gambling court where I usually saw her, her answer took me off guard. It inverted my expectations about stereotypes about gender and sports. Women do not like it, she told me, because “it’s a sport that doesn’t make you sweat.” Women, she said, like sports that make you sweat.<sup>290</sup>

Maj was someone who others called a *thòòm2* or tomboy, although she never self-identified as such to me. She had short hair, dressed in athletic clothing, and played *pétanque*. She had a girlfriend who would often come to the *pétanque* court not to play but to sit and watch Maj play with men. The court where I first met Maj and where I always saw her play was a beer-gambling court. But when the money gambling court closed, and then later still, after the customer base grew upset with the ownership for incessantly telling them to ‘quiet,’ it morphed

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<sup>288</sup> *khan2 naa5 khòj5 ka-top2 lèw4 qoo1*

<sup>289</sup> As soon as she said this, she clarified that she was “talking about back then, remember,” when she practiced more frequently. *khan2 piap5 thiap4 kao-jaak5 sam1 sam1 kap2 phuu5 saaj2 tònn3 samaj3 nan4 daj4*

<sup>290</sup> *man2 kilaa2 bòø-qòòk5 hùal dèè1*. This was not a typical opinion, and says more about Maj than it says about dominant ideologies of gender and sports in Laos.

into a money gambling court in the day and a beer gambling court at night. Neither Maj nor her girlfriend would drink beer but on many nights before the court had any money gamblers, I played *for beer* with Maj and others who went to the court. Maj would pay whatever the amount was when she lost but then drank iced tea or a Gatorade-like sports-drink called *Sponsor*. When I first met Maj, she told me that she did not like to play for money. But when the money gambling court closed, and money gamblers started filling the beer gambling court, Maj who was unemployed at the time, spent her days there too.

As Maj spent more and more time at the beer-gambling court that had, in some ways, morphed into a money-gambling court, she started to bet money on the ‘outside’ (*nòòk5*) of games. She told me that the process was slow and that people did not want to bet with her at first. I witnessed this: She would sometimes call out a figure and no one would respond or she would respond to a called-out bet only to have the bettor look the other way. We talked about how it was hard for both of us to bet with everyone else—me because I was a foreigner and her because she was a woman. Before I went to interview Maj, I asked Dii whether I should ask her directly about her gender identity. He told me not to, that she might be embarrassed or uncomfortable talking about it, and that her parents might not know about her girlfriend. I took his advice and I never asked her directly how she identified or if she did. But however she identified, Maj did not take on many of the coarse practices that other men at the court sometimes reveled in. She did not drink. She did not speak lewdly about sex or prostitutes. Nor did anyone ever hit on her or pressure her to drink. People treated her with respect and distance. They talked about her as an athlete, as she was and as she talked about herself. I end this section by merely noting that Maj offers a unique exceptional case. The one woman whom I ever saw gamble for money was, in some ways, drastically different from the average player’s wife. Maj was young (just past thirty),

childless, lived with her family, and was in a romantic relationship with a woman. As such, she was susceptible to significant judgment by people but impenetrable to many of the forms of judgment that might apply to a woman who would so publicly gamble for money with crowds of men.

## Conclusion



Figure 45: A Cartoon from the *Vientiane Times* (Khammalavong 2003)

The man who spat on Taaj was incredibly wealthy. He would often sit at the money gambling court, buy beer for whoever wanted it, and drink until closing. He was rude to everyone who worked at the court, loud, and would get stumbling drunk each time he drank. He was rough, brash, and once even invited me to go fishing with hand grenades. I declined after everyone else told me there was a real chance he'd drunkenly blow me up. To be frank, I found him insufferable. But Dii, who had known him for years, admired the man's large heart (*caj3 ñajl*). One night, I complained about the man and Dii rebutted me, listing all the times the man had bought him things or even bought things from Dii's family's business. Dii emphasized the man's

generosity and downplayed his flaws: his only problem was that he got a little drunk sometimes, acted a little crudely. While I was in Luang Prabang, the man was not working but living off what his wife made. She was an important, rich woman and all of his generosity was at her expense. I am not sure if she ever complained about this to him, if she ever yelled at him or chased him with a rock; I never heard anything about it, nor did I ask. But if she had, such a scene would not surprise anyone in Luang Prabang. In a sense, it was what one might expect. Men wasted money; women got angry.

I conclude this chapter by underlining something implicit heretofore. ‘Cheapness’ and ‘generosity’ are relational characteristics. When married women like Tia say that they are *khii5 thii1*, a trait that without any contextualization most would consider bad, they are indexing selflessness rather than selfishness. The figure of the good women, in her virtuous stinginess, is cheap to the outside world, to pleasures and friendships, but not to her family. A bad woman, like the woman depicted in the cartoon above, ‘eats’ and ‘plays’ first and thinks about her family later. The titles of some newspaper articles published over the last decade or so make the consequences of this lifestyle clear: “Gamblers ruin their families” (Vientiane Times 2004b), reads one. “Gambling is like burning down your own house” (Vientiane Times 2012), reads another.

The profligate man, in contrast to the virtuous woman, is big-hearted to the world at hand as he shreds his family’s bank roll. Like a good Lao government man and a bad husband, he universalizes solidarity. From this perspective, as I outlined in the previous chapter, beer gambling and money gambling are equally destructive. Beer gambling is the more ethical kind of gambling for so many men because it produces a positive sociality among those involved, but from the perspective of wives trying to rein in their husband’s spending, such sociality is at the

expense of the family. It is telling that some women denied to me the distinction between beer and money gambling altogether. As one woman put it, ‘they are the same, you lose money.’

While I have emphasized here the figure of the profligate man, this image does not stand alone nor does it capture the dynamics of family life in Luang Prabang. As Keyes (1984; 1983a) and Pattana Kitiarsa (2005) argued for Thailand, men orient to, invoke, and embody other paragons of masculinity: the monk, the hard worker, the family man. They emphasize that they spend within their means, that they care for their families, and that they are never too drawn to drink, women, or fun to be unable to resist the urge (*qot2 qaw3*). No one wants to be known as a one-dimensional party animal, a pure consumer, an anti-family-man. Muu took pride in taking his family out to dinner, or to the fair, or to buy small things and would often tell me about these activities when he did them; he sometimes invited me along. Sii, likewise, considered himself a savvy businessman who knew how to make a big profit and who, in doing so, was providing a good life for his wife and children.<sup>291</sup> Most men recognized that the pressure to spend money with their friends could cause problems with family’s coffers, but they presented themselves as never reaching that point. The ideal was a merging of the figure of the profligate and the responsible man into a man who spends without thinking because his wallet is fat and his family is full and so he does not need to think.

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<sup>291</sup> When Sii, for instance, told me and others at a bar that he was the one who controlled the money in his family, he did not say at the time that Campaa spent too much money on clothing or other stuff. Doing so, it strikes me now, would have been cruelly evaluative of her. Rather, he treated the fact that he held onto his family’s money as an extension of himself as a businessman, who was starting his own company, and who was sophisticated with finances. It was late at night and the topic came up after Muu accused Dii of letting his wife go out too much. Dii said that he went out too and that his wife, thus, could go out as well. This was a return to a theme that had often lurked in our conversations, as some in the group felt that Dii was too ‘scared’ of his new wife, and would often not be able to go to do things or drink as much as the rest of us. Muu’s accusation, a challenge to his autonomy and masculinity, clearly upset Dii. After the brief discussion of who holds the money in which Sii said he did, Dii seemingly vengefully shifted the topic to discuss how Muu needed to change how he played soccer (see Chapter 8 for discussion of the stakes of this topic). The competitiveness crescendoed through the night. First, embarrassingly at my suggestion, it turned into arm wrestling and we then continued to another friend’s house for a very late night of card playing for money.

## Chapter 7 Masculine Bets

### Introduction

*“Politics (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power) is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities. In the mundane, day-to-day, small-scale exchanges of things in ordinary life, this fact is not visible, for exchange has the routine and conventionalized look of all customary behavior. But these many ordinary dealings would not be possible were it not for a broad set of agreements concerning what is desirable, what a reasonable ‘exchange of sacrifices’ comprises, and who is permitted to exercise what kind of effective demand in what circumstances.”*

*-Arjun Appadurai (1986:57; emphasis removed)*

In June 2011, I was conducting preliminary fieldwork and pondering what to study in Luang Prabang. I was staying at a guest house slightly south of the center of town, a five-dollar-a-night room with a fan and a rotating crowd of neighbors—the occasional Lao family, travelling from out of town, and hourly guests, who would stop in late at night from the nightclub next door and leave before dawn. One of the owners of the guest house, Sak, a mini-van driver for a private company, began to invite me to play *pétanque* in the evenings. He played at the Kaysone Phomvihane memorial park where many of the Southeast Asian Games athletes had trained almost a decade before. The *pétanque* section was comprised of a few courts, some benches, and a table with a thatched roof where people would sit, drink, and sometimes eat food that a small, attached kitchen prepared for profit. The court has since closed but at the time, it hosted, rain permitting, ten to fifteen men every night. On the first trip, Sak, a man in his mid-forties, explained to me that we would be gambling for beer. Over the course of a couple of hours, we played a few games, and then sat, drank, and ate some snacks with Sak’s friends. On the short motorcycle ride back to the guest house, Sak stressed to me that because we ate, drank, and paid

the bill together, we were now in a relationship of warmth and love (*hak1 phèng2 kan3*) with one another—like an older and younger brother (*qaaj5 nòng4 kan3*).

The next afternoon, I went to a small clothing shop a friend of mine was opening up. I told her about the *pétanque* games I had played the night before and she mentioned that around the corner from her new shop, there was another court, packed every day. I walked over to the court and sat for a while watching, trying to understand what was happening as people passed bills to one another, measured the distances between balls, and ordered drinks from the court's owners. As I wrote in my fieldnotes at the time, I felt like I had “stumbled upon a gambling den of sorts,” adding that “I saw a few people playing and yelling at each other in a way that I don't normally see.” A few days later, after having played more at the beer gambling court, I wrote again, “Gambling for beer seems very different than gambling for money.”

Now, more than six years later, it is difficult to know exactly what made me feel that these two types of gambling were different from one another. Was I merely following my eyes? Even a Martian would notice that a robbery had a different vibe than a marriage proposal; were the games likewise different enough in tone and color to stand apart from one another naturally? Or perhaps I was internalizing what people were telling me without realizing it. I now vaguely suspect that in those early games for beer, someone might have said that they did not like playing for money. Or maybe, as I sat down at the money gambling court for that first time, one of the men with whom I spoke had intimated something similar. Perhaps he had complained about two people arguing over who owed whom cash or had pointed out that he planned to go to the beer gambling courts later that night. It is impossible to know now what prompted my notes. But by the time I was done with that first summer trip, I was already talking about beer and money gambling like the typical *pétanque* player in Luang Prabang.

In his introduction to *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai (1986: 57), quoted above, writes that because "exchange has the routine and conventionalized look of all customary behavior," the politics of exchange is not visible in the "small-scale exchanges of things in ordinary life." In this chapter, I explore the visibility not of the politics of exchange *per se* but of affect and ethics in 'ordinary life' and 'customary' economic behavior. In Luang Prabang, people talk about money bets as being, like money gambling itself, an aggressive social act. But what do money bets really look like? In this chapter, I take a microscope to a central unit of a bet—bet offers—and wonder whether aggression is made visible within them, and if so, how. For my data, I use one hour and twelve minutes of five video-recorded money gambling games filmed on separate days over the course of a year.<sup>292</sup>

### **Automatic Bets**

*"If we really want to understand the moral grounds of economic life, and by extension, human life, it seems to me that we must start instead with the very small things: the everyday details of social existence, the way we treat our friends, enemies, and children—often with gestures so tiny (passing the salt, bumming a cigarette) that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all."*

*-David Graber (2014:89)*

In Geertz's (1973) essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," he writes vivid descriptions of how Balinese bets work; his essay is filled with images of shouting, waving, the locking and unlocking of gazes. Here is how he describes the difference between 'center' and 'side' bets: "The first is a matter of deliberate, very quiet, almost furtive arrangement by the

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<sup>292</sup> I tracked every bet across these games. The games were filmed using two video cameras, one positioned on each side of the court and a central Zoom audio recorder. As elsewhere in this dissertation, transcription was facilitated using the program ELAN (2017).



coalition members and the umpire huddled like conspirators in the center of the ring; the second is a matter of impulsive shouting, public offers, and public acceptances by the excited throng around its edges” (1973:425).<sup>293</sup> This imagery is more than rhetorical embellishment. Geertz uses it as evidence for the different moral and economic ends of center and side bets. The center bets are ‘deep play’ for status rather than money, and Balinese gamblers make them ‘solemnly’ to reflect this seriousness. The side bets, in contrast, are frivolous “money gambling” (as Geertz puts it) and so Balinese gamblers offer them with apposite crude shouts and vigorous hand-waving.

Without putting it in these terms, Geertz treats the manner and mode of the two types of betting as a diagrammatic icon of the cultural and moral economic meaning they have in Balinese society. The logic of his argument, abstractly understood, is familiar: he treats the performance of the Balinese economic activity as itself performative of the values associated with it. Countless anthropologists have made similar arguments. Take, for example, how Chu (2007:23) describes the differences between interactions in a Chinese market when someone pays for a product in Chinese currency (*renminbi* or RMB) versus one where a client pays in American dollars (USD). The differential expression of suspicion within the two types of economic interaction manifests what Chu argues is a broader cultural pattern:

*In contrast to the combative tit-for-tat of RMB exchanges, where people eyed the money and goods changing hands with equal suspicion, the practical handling of dollars was often quite one-sided, if mutually affirmative, among the villagers with whom I lived in the Fuzhou countryside. Regardless of whether it was a loan from a neighbor or repayment to gods at local temples, the giver typically did all the counting and handling of dollars, while the receiver humbly and unquestioningly accepted the money.... I was often impressed by the giver,*

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<sup>293</sup> “The taker,” Geertz (1973:427) continues, “who is the wooer in this situation, will signal how large a bet he wishes to make at the odds he is shouting by holding a number of fingers up in front of his face and vigorously waving them. If the giver, the wooed, replies in kind, the bet is made; if he does not, they unlock gazes and the search goes on.”

*who under the purview of the recipient, would briskly shuffle through the stack of money with the efficiency of a bank teller and the bravado of a card player. In turn, the recipient would quickly stow away the stack of bills without inspection or care as if embarrassed by any suggestion of suspicion or calculation. Unlike RMB transactions, to scrutinize the USD changing hands in these circumstances was to undermine the very foundation of personal trust through which such monetary exchange could occur in the first place.*

In *Out of the Pits*, Caitlin Zaloom (2006:111) likewise describes the aesthetics of futures exchanges as affective manifestations of the sentiments people generally had about them: these were rough, loud, noisy practices.

*Financial trading floors are dens of incivility. Before a visitor can get her visual bearings, her ears are filled with loud noise, her feet shuffle through the shredded paper that covers the floor, her shoulders are smashed by the flailing bodies of traders in garish attire, and her balance is threatened as traders shove their way into the action.... In the pits, traders bring to life a particular form of economic man—aggressive, competitive, fiercely independent, and often crude—that dramatizes taking profits from the hands of their friends and colleagues.*

Zaloom (2006:105) continues to describe how in the “volatile atmosphere of the trading floor,” risk-taking is linked with physical fighting: “Trading often erupts into contests of shoving and swearing, joining together literal and symbolic violence.”<sup>294</sup>

Similar descriptions of meaningfully performed economic action are scattered across cultural anthropological accounts of economy, even more so after the discipline turned away from ‘structure’ and toward ‘practice’ (cf. Bourdieu 1977). The authors of these accounts make us alive to the fact that the manner with which an economic action is done can give a hint as to its ethical or performative purpose. In this sense, these scholars argue for a position that resonates with linguistic anthropological theory and would seem amenable to linguistic

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<sup>294</sup> Geertz coincidentally compared the cockfight to stock traders: “Rather than the solemn, legalistic pactmaking of the center, [side bet] wagering takes place rather in the fashion in which the stock exchange used to work when it was out on the curb.”

anthropological methods of recording and analyzing individual scenes of economy. In a footnote, Geertz (1973:428) even writes that if one really wanted to truly capture the betting at the cockfight, one would need to have a video camera and multiple observers.<sup>295</sup> But, would a camera really add anything to Geertz's vivid picture of the cockfight? As he recognizes the usefulness of a camera and other recording devices, his writing style implicitly obviates their need. Without a camera or a microphone, he already has captured the look and feel of the cockfight, the facial expressions of gamblers, the timbre of their voices.

Linguistic anthropologists who have studied economy—many of whom focus on market interactions—have offered case after case in which the manner of conducting economic action can metapragmatically manifest the ethical profile of the action *qua* type (Kapchan 1996; French 2000; Bauman 2002; Orr 2007; cf., Keane 2008b).<sup>296</sup> But the methods of these linguistic anthropologists have also forced them to confront actual events, often with conflicting, messy details. In his essay, Geertz hovered above such real events. As Crapanzano (1986:75) points out, throughout “Deep Play,” Geertz never describes the workings of a single cockfight. While he goes into detail about how he, on one specific day, ran from the police, he sketches the cockfight in the broadest, most generic terms as a token of a type. “Presumably,” Crapanzano writes, Geertz has conflated “many observations, taken from many vantage points...into a single, constructed performance, which becomes a sort of ideal, a Platonic performance.” Such a move, Crapanzano writes, “gives the illusion of specificity when there is no specific temporal or spatial vantage point.”

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<sup>295</sup> He also added that one would need someone fluent at wielding decision theory.

<sup>296</sup> Orr (2007:75-76), for instance, in a study in Chinese markets, shows that “everyday events of buying and selling in local markets” are oriented to the exchange of commodities rather than the production of positive social relations. That is, the way that people tend to talk during market exchanges hints to the stereotypical ends of such exchanges.

When one looks at economic events, some potential gaps and holes in Geertz's sketch of the cockfight suggest themselves.<sup>297</sup> Missing from Geertz's account is variation—say, outside bets done quietly or inside bets done with more enthusiasm. When I compare my recordings of bets on the *pétanque* court with his descriptions of bets at the cockfight, I feel as if I am looking back and forth between a Jackson Pollock—all blobs, splatters, and lines—and a Norman Rockwell. It is unlikely that this orderliness is just a consequence of how betting at the cockfight works, that the Balinese are much more orderly in their affective regimentation of styles of betting than Lao gamblers, because linguistic anthropologists have found that ultimately, nothing works in the way Geertz described. Variation is everywhere; while people sometimes work hard to make it disappear, they never fully succeed. As Bauman (2002: 59) puts it using a slightly different vocabulary from what I have used here, “the fit between a particular text and the generic model—or other tokens of a generic type—is never perfect.” Things fit a little too perfectly in Geertz's essay.

In this respect, Geertz is by no means alone. Such vivid accounts of meaningful economic practice are the bread-and-butter of much great socio-cultural ethnography. As such, they both shed light and cast shadow. Linguistic anthropologists often have a difficult time convincing socio-cultural anthropologists that the small, communicative things that people do matter, that metapragmatics and reflexivity are constantly affecting the interpretation of life. Partly, this is a

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<sup>297</sup> Here I use Geertz's essay to point out a symptom of a larger tendency rather than a problem with Geertz's argument in and of itself. Of course, Geertz has already faced significant critique. William Roseberry, for instance, writes that Geertz 'seduced' anthropologists and, in the process, obscured his ethnography's too-tidy, aseptic foundation. For Roseberry (1989:1027), Geertz's essay on the cockfight was vivid but flawed. Geertz, he argued, neglected the socio-economic and political structures that infused the cockfight. In distilling the cockfight into a 'text,' Geertz extracted culture “from the wellings-up of action, interaction, power and practice”. In the landmark volume *Writing Culture*, Crapanzano likewise argues that Geertz uses his essay's opening vignette of fleeing from the police—a metamorphosis from invisibility to rapport—to woo us, and give “the illusion of specificity when there is no specific temporal or spatial vantage point.” The essay “attests,” Crapanzano (1986:75) continues, to Geertz's “having been there and gives him whatever authority arises from that presence.”

rhetorical problem—as many people untrained in linguistics find the linguist’s attention to detail tedious. Arguments like those of Geertz, Chu, and Zaloom carry a version of this fundamental linguistic anthropological insight in a palatable form for cultural anthropologists.

In their generic accounts of what practice looks like, they also, however, risk merely reproducing explicit metapragmatic ideologies about practice rather than exploring where such ideologies break down and blur. When I started studying language in Laos, many locals told me that if I wanted to learn dirty words, I should go to the market—that that’s where *sap2 talaat4* or ‘market language’ is most prevalent. Years later, when I started filming pork vendors in the market, my recordings told a very different story about typical market interactions. Sure, there were bawdy conversations, dirty jokes, and occasionally angry words exchanged, but the most common refrain for a seller to attract a customer is not rude, rough, or impolite, but *sùù4 sòòj1 dèè1* or ‘please help me by buying something.’ Ideologies of practice, as linguistic anthropology has shown extremely well over the last few decades, influence and reflect what people do while also erasing as much as they reveal. The solution is not to reject ethnographic impressions as useless, or to write painfully exact, idiosyncratic, and boring descriptions of ‘real’ events. At least, we cannot do this all the time. Rather, it is to recognize, as I do in the rest of this chapter, what ideologies of economy underline and what they omit.

## **Structured Bets**

Before describing how bets are made, it is important to review some dimensions of how the game is played and how bets are integrated into it. As I mentioned in the chapter one, each team of two tends to employ a division of labor: one person will *khaw5* (or ‘point’) and the other will *tii3* (or ‘shoot’). Being a *mùù2 tii3* or the ‘shooter’ was imagined by people to be the more

masculine, skilled, and brave position.<sup>298</sup> While there were many people who self-identified as a *mùù2 tii3*, there were few that self-identified as a *mùù2 khaw5* (or ‘pointers’), and those who were *mùù2 khaw5* were usually either really skilled at the style of shot, or more often than not, unskilled and thus wary of being put in a position to fail. Especially for beer gambling games, it seemed that the vast majority of men wanted to be the *mùù2 tii3*. The centrality of the *tii3* shot to the game is instilled in how people most often refer to it: *pétanque* is most often called *tii3 buun3*, or hit balls, not *khaw5 buun3*. People will often remind an opponent of this when they are trying to convince them to *tii3* rather than *khaw5*: ‘It’s *tii3 buun3* not *khaw5 buun3*!’ One gambler told me that watching women’s *pétanque* at tournaments was more fun because they did not *tii3*. The (factually incorrect) implication was that female athletes were not strong enough to throw such shots. Because shooting shots are riskier, players often challenge an opponent to *tii3* rather than *khaw5*, and they more often bet on *tii3* shots rather than *khaw5* shots. One of the most common idioms in heckling, in fact, is to ask a player *kaa5 tii3 thùùk5 bòò1*, or, ‘Are you brave enough to hit a shooting shot?’ (Zuckerman 2016).<sup>299</sup>

We might conceptually split *pétanque* play into a number of units: a throw, a change of team, a round, a game, and a match. The maximum number of points a team can score in one round of play is six (as each team has six balls). Games consist of a series of rounds. Because they are generally played to seven points, games necessarily last more than one round.<sup>300</sup> Most

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<sup>298</sup> People particularly like to bet on individual shooting shots; they are much more likely to bet on them than *khaw5* or pointing shots.

<sup>299</sup> Sometimes at the court people would play games that were merely striking games—called *suutting3* from the English ‘shooting.’

<sup>300</sup> Players typically used scoreboards (if available) to keep track of the score, but games varied in how judiciously people kept the scoreboard updated, and players tended to remember the score. The most common way to ask what the score was, as for example an audience member who just arrived might do, was to use the formulation *thòò1 daj3*. This is the same question format people would use to ask, for instance, how much something cost in a store. Scores were often given with two numbers, say, ‘one’ (*nùng1*) ‘four’ (*sii1*), meaning that one team had one point, the other four. There was not a clear principle of order here. That is, it did not seem that someone would say their own score

games in Luang Prabang consisted of at least four rounds. Players often would play ‘matches’ of three games (a ‘best two-out-of-three structure, referred to as *sòng3 naj2 saam3* or ‘two in three’). The basic unit on which people bet money and beer is the game, but every unit can be bet on.<sup>301</sup>

### Making Bets

As I mentioned above, money-betting can take a variety of forms. Some bets are whispered, some are shouted. Some are for relatively small amounts like 10,000 Kip (LAK) or about one US dollar, while others are for large amounts like 2,000,000 or 3,000,000 LAK, or a few hundred dollars. Some are sealed with a handshake, some with a grunt or a nod, some with a single word: *qaw3* or ‘[I’ll] take [it]!’

In this section, I briefly outline some of the linguistic forms that people use to make bets. In general, when someone offers to bet someone else on the *pétanque* court, there are six pieces of information he might make explicit:

- i. To whom the offer of the bet is addressed (e.g., ‘you,’ ‘someone,’ and so forth).
- ii. The amount (or thing) being staked (e.g., ‘ten bottles of beer,’ ‘10,000 Kip’).<sup>302</sup>

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before an opponent’s, or that they would say the team who was taking a shot’s score before the team who was currently waiting’s score.

<sup>301</sup> It is generally agreed that once a player loses two games in a row, he should cease gambling or change the odds of a bet.

<sup>302</sup> For most of my research, 8,000 Lao Kip was worth one US dollar. This means that players were inevitably talking in the thousands, hundreds of thousands, and millions. 50,000 Kip, or about six dollars is expressed in Lao in the following way:

<i>Haa5</i>	<i>Sip2</i>	<i>Phan2</i>	<i>Küip5</i>
<i>Five</i>	<i>Ten</i>	<i>Thousand</i>	<i>Kip</i>
<i>‘Fifty Thousand Kip’</i>			

Generally, players omit markers of the currency itself when they talk, but these can be added in for effect or clarification. In regard to *pétanque*, Kip was the unmarked currency, but players also bet US Dollars and Thai Baht. In other contexts, like gambling on football, Thai Baht was the unmarked currency. Although people often did not

- iii. The team being bet upon (e.g., ‘my team,’ ‘his team,’ ‘the guy in the red shirt’s team’).
- iv. The unit or term being bet upon, (e.g., whether the bet is about winning a game or round, or missing a throw. et cetera).
- v. The odds of the bet (e.g., ‘5-4,’ ‘even’)
- vi. Whether it is a bet with or against someone (e.g., ‘Let’s bet 10,000 each that Tui loses’ versus ‘I’ll bet you 10,000 Kip that Tui loses’—I explain this contrast further below).

Sometimes, offers to bet specified all of these elements, but I had no such examples among the seventy-four offers to bet in the set of video-recorded games I handle here. More often than not, one element or another was presupposed or presumed. For instance, if a player was offering to bet, the presumption was that he would be betting on his own team and thus (iii) above would need not be specified (although sometimes, for various reasons, it still was). A bet offer often

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specify what kind of currency they meant explicitly, the currency was recoverable from both the context of speaking and the amount that people would be expected to gamble or, in the case of buying and selling, pay for a specific item. While Lao speakers rarely ran into problems with this, I often found myself asking follow-up questions, trying to clarify whether something cost 1,000 Baht (\$57) or \$1,000 dollars, for instance.

During bets, players often omit parts of the numerals that can be recovered from the context. For instance, fifty thousand Kip was sometimes referred to with merely the form for fifty:

<i>Haa5</i>	<i>Sip2</i>
<i>Five</i>	<i>Ten</i>

Or, as even more simply as just ‘five’

<i>Haa5</i>
<i>Five</i>

This latter form rarely occurs on its own but as part of odds-giving formulas. This means that someone might, for instance, offer to *tòd1 haa5 sii1*, using the verb *tòd1* (see below) with merely the numbers 5-4. While this is how odds often might look in a casino, the default assumption here is that the players talking in the tens of thousands, and that the offer would be to pay out fifty thousand if the better lost and accept forty thousand if he won. This means that there is often formal (although not much practical ambiguity) between offers to bet on the amount of points scored (because the games go to seven, these numbers run from one to seven) and the calling out of an amount.



spanned many turns of talk and missing elements from an initial offer were often supplied in subsequent turns. In line 1.1 below, for instance, the bet offeror specifies (ii) the amount and (v) the odds being bet. In line 1.2, a potential bettor asks the offeror to specify the unit he is betting on, i.e., ‘missing a throw,’ a piece of information that then presupposes (iii) the relevant team (i.e., the team getting ready to throw).

### 1.1) Bet Offerer

*qaaw4 saam3 sip2 phan2 tòò1 kin3 sip2 phan2*  
 CRY three ten thousand against eat ten thousand  
*dee4 phaaj3 siø- lòong2 (lip smack) saam3 sip2*  
 factive.particle who irrealis take.long.odds lip.smack three ten  
*phan2*  
 thousand

“Hey, 30 thousand Kip against 10 thousand, who wants to bet? (lip smack) who wants to bet?”

### 1.2) Respondent

*vaw4 bòø- thùùk5 siq1 qaa1*  
 say NEG hit this polar.q

“[You] say [the shot] is going to miss?”

To actually offer a bet, people used several key verbs. The most common was *qaw3* or ‘take.’ One hears forms like *qaw3 bòò3* or ‘[Do you want to] to take [the bet]?’ and affirmative responses like *qaw3* ‘[I’ll] take [it]!’ constantly on the court. A verb with a similar function regarding betting, but which was used much less frequently was *long2* (or ‘invest’), similarly people can use *lin5* or ‘play’ as a transitive verb meaning ‘to bet.’ After someone has just recently lost a bet, they might also use the verb *kèè4* meaning to ‘run it back’ or ‘bet again.’ *Kèè4* is similar to the English ‘double or nothing,’ but *kèè4* must take as its subject a person who

currently owes money due to having just lost a bet.<sup>303</sup> In bet offers, as I described in chapter five, the word *kin3* or ‘eat’ means to win.

For odds giving, there are also several common verbs. To *lòòng2* is to take the long odds of a bet. If the odds are five to one, for example, then to *lòòng2* is to wager the five (e.g., thousand Kip) and potentially win the one (e.g., thousand Kip). *Tòòl* is *lòòng2*’s opposite. It means to take the short odds of a bet. The term can also mean to give a player a handicap, for instance, to play where one player plays with fewer *pétanque* balls than another, or wins at six points rather than seven. Some handicaps can verge on the absurd—players might have to play lefty, stand on one leg, or throw two *pétanque* balls at the same time. Players use the form *samee3* to refer to equal odds.

Like in the Balinese cockfight, there are ‘inside’ (*naj2*) and ‘outside’ (*nòòk4*) bets on the money gambling *pétanque* courts. ‘Inside’ bets are those made between the principal players in a game before the game begins and ‘outside’ bets are those made either by others or during the course of the game. Inside bets serve as the answer for questions like ‘How much are they playing for?’ They are more likely to be made at even odds than outside bets, but this is not a rule. They also tend to be for more money than outside bets and to concern the outcome of a game (or perhaps a match) versus the outcome of a particular round or a particular throw.

### **Bets With, Bets Against**

All offers to bet can be divided into two categories: a bet with or a bet against. When people bet against each other, they ‘eat each other’s money’ (*kin3 ngen2 kan3*); to bet with somebody is to ‘share’ (*pan3*) or ‘eat with’ (*kin3 nam2*) another person. Usually, a bet with

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<sup>303</sup> This form can be used for both bets with and bets against another person.

someone involves one person organizing to bet against a third-party and then breaking off a portion of the risk and reward of the bet for a friend.

**Offer to bet against:**

**2.1) Man 1**

*bat2 nii4 bòø- qaw3 tii4 [name]*  
time this NEG take polar.q [name]

“This round you don’t want to take [a bet], [NAME]?”

**2.2) Man 2**

*huh*  
huh

“Huh?”

**2.3) Man 1**

*qaw3 bòò3*  
take polar.q

“Do [you want] to take [a bet this round]?”

**2.4) Man 2**

*(looks down to the side, raises left index finger high into the air signalling an acceptance of the bet)*

In line **2.1** above, for instance, Man 1, a potential gambler, asks Man 2 if he would consider betting against him on the current round. The man’s addressee, who he calls by name, apparently not hearing him, initiates a repair in line **2.2** whereupon, in line **2.3**, Man 1 rephrases his bet with the simple *qaw3 bòò3*. Finally, in line **2.4**, Man 2 nonverbally accepts the bet with a raised finger.

Offer to share a bet:

3.1) Man 3

*kèè4 kèè4 [name] qaaj4 kèè4 dêê1*  
bet.again bet.again [name] older.brother bet.again factive.particle  
*dee4*  
factive.particle

“[I’m] betting again, [I’m] betting again, [name]!, I’m betting again, you hear!”

3.2) Man 4

*(nods affirmatively)*

In line 3.1, by contrast, Man 3, an audience member sitting on the bench, initiates a shared bet with Man 4, who is playing in the game.<sup>304</sup> At this point in the interaction, Man 4’s team has just lost a game and, as a result, both Man 3 and Man 4 have lost money. To confirm that he is ‘betting again’ (*kèè4*) on the next game, Man 3 calls out to Man 4, who then nods affirmatively.<sup>305</sup>

These economic relations—whether someone is betting on you, ‘with you,’ or ‘against you’—are often talked about in the abstract as indices of social relations, much in the same way that people distinguish gambling for beer and gambling for money. As I mentioned in chapter four, almost every *pétanque* player distinguished some set of people with whom they would not gamble for money. Now, I can clarify that this prohibition only applied to bets against those people, not bets with them. In fact, the shared risk of betting with someone was talked about by

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<sup>304</sup> Note that I call this an offer even though the format is clearly declarative rather than interrogative. I do this because the statement might still be rejected as if it were an offer.

<sup>305</sup> There is not a direct correlation between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ bets and whether bets are against or with someone. Although inside bets are often larger and then split up or ‘shared’ with a number of other people, ‘outside’ bets are also often shared.

*pétanque* players as not only an economic relation that was explicitly allowed among close relations, but one that, like beer gambling, produced such close relations. The mutual investment was imagined to both create a shared rooting interest at the time of gambling, and also to potentially instill longer relations of ‘being on the same side,’ and ‘trusting’ one another’s skill. When, for instance, one gambler in his mid-twenties, Too, sat with me at my house and helped me transcribe a game I had filmed in which he was playing, he described his relationship with Phuumii Hii, introduced earlier, in terms of the frequency, and volume, with which Phuumii Hii bet with him. We were transcribing a moment in the game when Phuumii Hii joked with Too, saying that Too better play well, because if he did not, all the people who had ‘outside’ (*nòòk5*) bets on him would soon yell at him (*haaj4 haj5 mùng2*). As we watched the video, I had a hunch (clued in from Phuumii Hii’s use of *mùng2*, the barest second person pronoun; see chapter eight) that Too and Phuumii Hii were close. I asked Too how well he knew Phuumii Hii:

*“[I know him] really well, like, he is like a caring older brother (qaaj5 hak1) to me, like a caring older brother, when we play pétanque, (we) don’t eat each other’s money (bòø-kin3 ngen2 kan3), he...like...he likes to be my partner when we play pétanque. Like, sometimes he gambles a lot of money, sometimes he gambles more than me, sometimes he will bet for me. He likes me, he likes me to be tii3, he trusts that I can make (tii3 thùùk5) my shots.”<sup>306</sup>*

Too’s relationship with Phuumii Hii, he went on to clarify, did not predate *pétanque*. It was formed at the *pétanque* court within the last seven or so months. I asked him if he had this kind of relationship with anyone else on the court, and he said yes, mentioning another man who is quite wealthy, who often gambles on him and with him. He talked about the relation in similar

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<sup>306</sup> *laaj3 bèèp5 khùù2 pèn3 qaaj5 hak1 bèèp5 khùù2 qaaj5 hak1 naa2 bèèp5 vaa1 tii3 buun3 lêqø-bèèp5 bòø-kin3 ngen2 kan3 naa1 laaw2 bèèp5 laaw2 mak1 khuul [unclear] tii3 qee3 bèèp5 lêqø-kaø-bèèp5 baang3 thii1 laaw2 kaø-phanan2 laaj3 baang3 thii1 laaw2 kaø- lin5 laaj3 kòòn1 khòòj5 baang3 thii1 laaw2 kaø-long2 haj5 khòòj5 tii3 sii1 naa1 laaw2 qee3 laaw2 mak1 khòòj5 sii1 laaw2 mak1 khòòj5 tii3 laaw2 sùàø-caj3 khòòj5 nii4 vaa1 tii3 thùùk5 nii4.*

terms, saying that he loved the man like a “caring older brother and that, (we) don’t eat each other’s money” (*hak1 phèng2 khùù2 qaaj5 hak1 han5 lêq1 lêqø-kaø-bòø-daj4 kin3 ngen2 kan3*).

Too talked about these relationships as a kind of asymmetric patronage; in both examples, the bettors were ‘caring older brothers,’ who, as older brothers should, showed their love (*khwaam2 hak1 phèng2*) for their younger brother in part through economic investment. Here, the investment was described not merely as a transfer of money or property, as is often the case, but as a perduring relation of monetary trust in Too and his skills.<sup>307</sup>

Of course, betting with somebody has its own hazards. There is the possibility that the relationship will fray, and this is a common topic of conversation, even as it is not central to how betting with someone is imagined. This first occurred to me clearly one day at the money gambling court when a man brought his twelve-year-old son to play. They played as partners in a game for money in front of a big crowd, and the kid became more and more angry as his father missed shots. The crowd roared and encouraged him to yell at his father. It was both a fantastic inversion of father and son roles and, it seemed to me at the time, also a caricature of the tension that can emerge when one teammate plays well and another plays poorly. The result of the partnership was scapegoating and infighting.

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<sup>307</sup> These monetary non-aggression pacts do not only occur in asymmetric relations like those between a younger and older brother. The court—and other venues for gambling like the pool hall—is often a place for peers (*muul* or *siawl*) to socialize, as I discuss in the following chapter.



Figure 46: The audience sitting at the edge of a pétanque court

In contrast to betting with someone, betting against another person is talked about generically as an index of social distance, aloofness, and a lack of ‘love’ and ‘solidarity’ among gamblers. One *qaaj5 hak1* I had at the court, for instance, rejected my money bet offer by telling me ‘eating’ my money would be *bòø-sèèp5*, or ‘not delicious’; the same man shared bets with me without compunction. By saying my money was not delicious, the man alluded to the bittersweet feeling he might get from ‘eating’ it. He also corrected my misunderstanding of our relationship, and thereby implied a closer one; I thought we could gamble for money, he knew better. The preponderance of monetary non-aggression pacts also affected how games were organized. Many match-ups, great regarding talent level and skill, crumbled because the two potential opponents said that they did not ‘eat’ each other’s money.

Yet as my interaction with the man that did not like the taste of my money implied, social relations on the court were not always so stable, citable, or consistent, nor was the sanction against eating money with those to whom one is close always followed. Such bets had the capacity to create and presuppose social relations, but at times this capacity could be muted or

treated as irrelevant to the current situation. In chapter four, I gave the example of Phuumii Hii and Bot arguing over who was more hypocritical for gambling for money with his *siawI*. I have likewise heard people complain that others only said they did not eat so-and-so's money to avoid an unfavorable matchup.

While the rule is not always followed, these examples show its power and frequent mobilization as an explicit moral measure in interaction. As I mentioned in chapter four, the structure of the rule resembles the narrow moral economic logic sketched in Marshall Sahlins's (1972:199) diagram.<sup>308</sup> In this logic, moral economic norms are "relative and situational rather than absolute and universal. A given act...is not so much in itself good or bad, it depends on who the 'Alter' is." Likewise, many on the *pétanque* court draw a line in the sand—or gravel—between those with whom they will not 'eat money' and those with whom they will. The ideal is to gamble with strangers without fear of love lost.

While there were few complete strangers that went to the money gambling *pétanque* court, the court did involve more stranger sociality than many ostensibly social places in Luang Prabang. For one, people often went to the court alone. Compared with other places in Luang Prabang, this was unusual. Virtually, no one went to a Lao bar alone, for example, or to a soccer field. Rather, they would go with a group of friends. When they met friends somewhere, they would usually wait outside for them to arrive before entering. But at the *pétanque* court, many

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<sup>308</sup> Here the distinction between sharing bets and betting against resonates with Sahlins's distinction between pooling and reciprocity. Sahlins (1972:188–189) writes, "Pooling is socially a within relation, the collective action of a group. Reciprocity is a between relation, the action and reaction of two parties.... Pooling stipulates a social center where goods meet and thence flow outwards, and a social boundary too, within which persons (or subgroups) are cooperatively related. But reciprocity stipulates two sides, two distinct social-economic interests" (emphasis original). Sharing bets is a clear instance of pooling, where money is collected by one member (sometimes physically collected, sometimes collected through the power of a bet) and, if the bet is won, re-divided in the group. Gambling against others, on the other hand, is a form 'negative reciprocity,' an "attempt to get something for nothing with impunity..." (1972:195). Sahlins calls negative reciprocity "the most impersonal sort of exchange," the "most economic"; and he mentions gambling as an example of it.



people just dropped by, took a spot on the bench, and watched the action. Perhaps they were driving past or looking to kill thirty minutes before they had some work. In this sense, the court is as much like the market as it is a bar. One can just go there.

The stranger sociality of the money gambling court was brought home to me when I organized a going-away party. I gave invitations to everyone with whom I had spent significant time during my fieldwork, including most of the regulars at the money gambling court, where I passed many of my days. People from all over my life in Luang Prabang came to my party. My singing teacher with whom I had taken a few lessons, assorted neighbors with whom I chatted with around town, all of my close friends like Dii, Sii, and Muu, and vendors in the market I had filmed as they sold pork, but very few people from the money gambling court showed up. The five or so who came were people whom I had spent time with away from the court, gambling for beer, eating together, or at another social function. While friendships are made at the *pétanque* court, as the example of Too and Phuumii Hii above attests, the low representation of money gamblers at my party is symptomatic: the money gambling court is not a place one goes to make friends.

As I described in early chapters, not everyone always claims that gambling for money is morally unproblematic when done with strangers. Rather, the same tension that Evans argued caused the failure of the collectivization of agriculture after the revolution circles around money gamblers' moral pronouncements. While some declare that gambling for money is fine as long as it is not done with friends, others make a more universalist claim that one should never gamble for money, no matter the opponent. This latter claim is in part what makes it, say, uncouth for a civil servant to go to the money gambling *pétanque* court in the first place. For those who take this position, gambling against anyone contrasts with much of what is recognized as 'good,'

(*dii3*) ‘beautiful,’ (*ngaam2*) and ‘polite’ (*suphaap4*) in Lao society and stands against the dream of a national atmosphere of ‘mutual-aid,’ ‘love,’ and ‘solidarity.’

### **Aggressive Bets**

*“The illegal but pervasive betting is almost as ferocious as the kicks and punches.”*

*-William Klausner (1960:351) describing Muay Thai*

Both the position that one should never gamble for money with anyone and the position that one should only avoid gambling for money with friends presuppose that money gambling elicits antagonistic sociality among gamblers. In the former case, this antagonism is itself deemed immoral, in the latter, it is acceptable so long as it does not destroy extant warm social relations of ‘love’ and ‘friendship.’ As I reviewed in chapters two and four, people talked about the antagonism of generic ‘gambling for money’ explicitly. I was told again and again that money gambling makes people ‘argue’ and ‘fight’ (*thiang2 kan3; tii3 kan3*), that it does not manifest or create ‘solidarity,’ but troubles and destroys it.<sup>309</sup> One Lao newspaper article, put the issue directly: “Betting on sporting games is illegal, and not seen as based on friendship. It also breeds anger and aggression, and may encourage players to attack each other” (Sangkhomsay 2006b).

The aggressive effects of gambling for money were often talked about in idioms of ‘noise’ (*khwaam2 nan2*) and ‘strong,’ loud speaking (*vaw4 hènng2*). At the money gambling court, the assumption was that the more worked up a group of men became, the louder they got. This ‘noise’ was the problem. As one of the *pétanque* court owners said to me, before *pétanque*

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<sup>309</sup> Another Lao newspaper article put it like this in its report on a man who had been caught for aggressive purse snatching: “It is commonly known that gambling leads to crime...” (Vientiane Times 2010b).

took off, the police would let you play for money most of the time, but not if such gambling made ‘people loud with each other’<sup>310</sup> Likewise, when people occasionally set up gambling stalls at the fair, arguments were often stifled by bystanders telling others to quiet down because if they were ‘loud’ (*nan2*), the police might come.

These issues came to a head at the money gambling court. As I mentioned briefly earlier in the dissertation, during my time in the field, the court moved locations. The owners were evicted from their old plot of land, which they had been leasing for years, with only a few days’ notice. Even before they had moved from the court, bulldozers came to move them out. I have video recordings of the last few games on the court, with the remnants of the old structures burning to the left of the shot, bulldozers in the background, and a game in the foreground.

For the next few weeks, there were usually people there—construction workers, people gathering stray firewood, or people just staring at the ground. I went there, too, and asked a few people what they thought about the old court. One woman, who had just been walking by, stood there looking at it, the old *pétanque* scoreboard left as the only sign of the old court. I asked her how she felt about the change. Like most other teachers, she liked *pétanque*, she said, but she knew that the game had a time and a place. She was glad to see this court go because the people there played all day and usually argued. A different day, I saw another man, from the capital city Vientiane who said that the old court was ‘dirty’ and that the people who went there were equally dirty. One of the owners of the court told a very different story; before they made the court there, the land was wild and no one wanted it, but it was only after they cleaned it up that people realized its potential and gave it to the next highest bidder. While many of the people with whom I spoke treated the court as a disruptive eye-sore, like a strip club in a family

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<sup>310</sup> *man2 nan2 kan3 dèèl*

neighborhood, she reflected on it with pride and nostalgia. Even nine months later, when I offered to make copies of some of my videos and photographs of the old court, she declined, adding that she missed the old court too much to look at them.

The new court was a bit further outside the major tourist tracks of the city than the old one, and thus, was said to no longer be an eyesore for the city on such valuable land. The old court was replaced by an ostensive and expensive tourist attraction and a restaurant with Western food, such as pizza and pastries, at Western prices. The new court was next to a school for young children.<sup>311</sup> It was on a less public and prominent plot—i.e., not a major road—but it was still always teetering on being too disruptive, especially to the school next door. The owners of the court—already made aware of their precarious position by the fact that they had recently been forced to move—were worried about the ‘noise’ of the court disrupting the school next door. They said that the school had complained about the noise, that the children would be woken from their naps and bothered. Many commands to be quiet were given in the name of not distracting the children. One of the people working there would often call out to whoever was yelling or arguing and tell them to ‘please don’t be too loud, the children are sleeping,’ or just ‘the children are at the school.’ They posted signs around the court, asking people to ‘please, not be too loud’ and, almost immediately, some players graffitied these signs. Under one (shown below), somebody wrote, in bright red pen and in English, the two letters: “OK,” a word which has been borrowed into Lao; under another, somebody added *jaal caa4 laaj3* or “Don’t be really stupid!”<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> In fact, some of the players’ children went to the school; and the same ice-cream truck that would set up shop at the school during lunch time would come to the court. The ice-cream sellers would come and relax on the bench for a few moments, watch the *pétanque* games, or just sit in the cool of the court’s roof’s shade.

<sup>312</sup> Above the sign on the scoreboard, a player wrote: *jaal sajl jaa3*, that is, “Don’t dose” (cf., Zuckerman 2016).

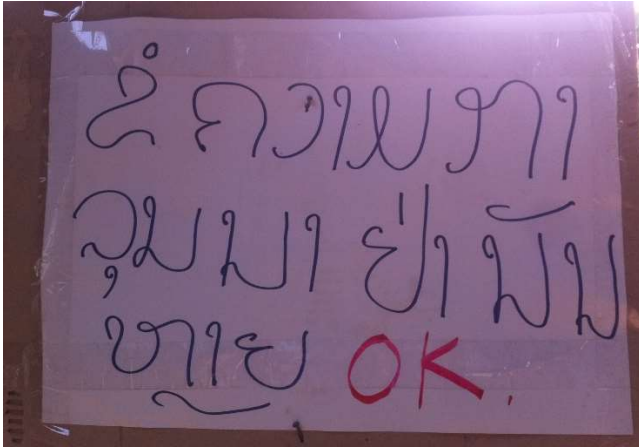


Figure 47: A posted sign that reads: 'Please do not be too loud.'

'Not disrupting the children' became a half-joke among the players. One day the rain started coming down hard and loud during a game with significant shouting. A player, sitting on one of the benches, called out through the deafening rain, 'Whoever wants to yell, now's your time!' People also referred to the 'quiet please' proscription written on the signs to defuse serious situations. During one match, two players money gambling on their own version of *pétanque* disagreed about the rules. One of the players became furious and violently threw a *pétanque* ball at the ground, not far from my video camera and people in the audience. The two men called each other stupid, pointed at one another with raised arms, and yelled. I thought they were going to fight physically. Everyone at the court—about fifteen people—watched them. After yelling at one another, they angrily decided that, with a slight amendment to the rules, they could resume playing. One of the men in the audience literally waved them off and then tapped the sign on the post: "Hey, what does this sign say you should please do? Please don't be too loud!"<sup>313</sup> As he said this, one of the players, walking by, bumped into the man. Another man, also trying to get the men to stop playing against one another said to them, "don't worry about [playing another game], don't worry about [it], the students [in the school next door] are sleeping, the students are

<sup>313</sup> qeej4 kalunaa2 mèn1 ñang3 qan3 nii4 naq1 jaa1 nan2 laaj3

sleeping [so don't worry your heads' about playing another game]."<sup>314</sup> As he said this, he stepped into the center of the court and the two men ceased all talk about playing again.

The constant, often less dramatic, attempts at quieting the court created an atmosphere of frequent shushing, an enforced modulation of volume that was almost all-encompassing. From the morning through the afternoon on weekdays, it seemed a pervasive imposition and constraint. It gave the court a feeling of a high-school house party, in which everyone tried to stifle their laughter so as not to wake the parents or disturb the neighbors. And, like such a house party, the shushing was bound to fail. The assumption was that because people were gambling, they would get angry and yell, things would get loud. This is, in fact, what happened. Toward the end of my time in the field, most of the money gamblers stopped going to the court and moved on to a beer gambling court at which they would gamble for money during the day. When I asked some men why, just after the switch happened, they told me that the other place 'was too close to the school and so they couldn't be loud.' Later I heard that the owner had screamed at a group of players for being too loud, saying, 'You're all dogs!' (*suu3 pên3 maa3*). Offended, they had refused to return. While the court owner and some people who were there gave me different details, everyone agreed that the gamblers were so loud because they had started playing a new game on the side of the court with higher stakes (while the details do not matter here, the game involved predicting the sum of the serial numbers of bills of Lao Kip). The stakes were so high, that the men could not help themselves from 'yelling' and being 'noisy.'

The association of money gambling and 'noise' was sometimes manifested in actual offers to bet, made with a 'strong' and 'loud' demeanor. That is, offers to bet were sometimes delivered with a multi-modal assortment of aggressive special effects: challenges about the

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<sup>314</sup> *bòø-pên3 ñang3 bòø-pên3 ñang3 nak1 hian2 nòn2 lap2 nak1 hian2 nòn2 lap2*

bravery of an opponent, co-occurring flails of the hands and points at the addressee, loud and prosodically marked speech, an extended hand for sealing the deal. Much like Geertz's description of 'outside' bets, these aggressive bets on the *pétanque* court could at times take on a mood of violence that seemed to congeal the ideology that gambling breeds violence and discord.

My hunch when I started looking at video recorded money bets was that I would find something like the affective distinction that Geertz found at cockfights, that offers to make a bet against someone would tend toward aggression, while offers to share a bet, their apparent affective and moral opposite, would look more nonchalant, perhaps even 'loving.' But, confronted with actual bets, I found that my hunch was both right and wrong. It was correct insofar as *some bets* looked and sounded like how I imagined all bets might look and sound. That is, there were bets against that were harsh, aggressive, and thus indexed a masculine, antagonistic, and economically risky demeanor. But my hunch was also incorrect. Not all offers to bet against someone looked like that. As I show in the next section, some were even indistinguishable from offers to share a bet.

To exemplify this, I walk through an example that has two bet offers, made in succession by the same man Phuumii (i.e., not Phuumii Hii), but with radically different affective components.

Phuumii is a man in his mid-forties. He was a trader and his wife worked at the largest market in Luang Prabang.<sup>315</sup> Eventually, during my time in the field Phuumii stopped playing *pétanque* for money. In fact, it was him whom I asked about at the market, as I described in the

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<sup>315</sup> I leave the details intentionally ambiguous to keep his identity anonymous.

previous chapter, when a woman told me he was too ‘scared’ of his wife to keep going to the *pétanque* court and then made a throat slitting gesture.

On the day I was filming, Phuumii and Saj were playing on a team against Taa and Laa. It was late morning and the players were gambling for what at the time was a typical amount of money for an ‘inside’ bet, 50,000 Kip per person (or \$6; after a few games they doubled the stakes to 100,000 Kip per person), but the game involved significant betting on individual shots, and thus, over its course, much more money than that was staked. The relevant pair of bet offers happened twenty-two minutes into my recording. Immediately before them, Phuumii made a different offer to Taa (in line 4.1 below). The bet offer gave favorable odds to Taa; a normal game is to seven points, but Phuumii offered to bet Taa that if Taa scored six points, Taa would win the bet.

LINE	SPKR.	UTTERANCE	CO-SPEECH GESTURE
4.1	Phuumii	kuu3 ñang2 qiø-tòð1 hok2 haj5 kin3 nii4 naa1 “I’ll still give you odds to win at six [points]”	HAND SHAKE TOWARD TAA
4.2	Phuumii	kèèm3 nii4 naa1 “in this game”	
4.3	Van	qaw3 qaw3 “[I’ll] take [that bet]! [I’ll] take [that bet]!”	BRINGS HAND UP, POINTS RIGHT HAND AND
4.4	Van	haa5 sip2 qaaj4 Phuumii bòø-qaw3 laaj3 “50, brother Phuumii, I wont take much [of your money]!”	INDEX FINGER AT PHUUMII, OSCILATTING
4.5	Van	qaw4 “[I’ll] take [that bet]!”	FINGER CONTINUOUSLY
4.6	Phuumii	bòð1 faaw4 mèè4 bak2 Taa liin5 kòðn1 mèè4 “Noooooo, wait, let Taa take his shot first”	VAN TURNS HEAD AWAY FROM PHUUMII; PHUUMII POINTS INDEX FINGER AT BALLS ON COURT

While the offer is addressed to Taa, who is about to make a shooting shot in the game, Van intercepts it. In lines 4.2 to 4.4, Van points and shakes his finger at Phuumii, trying to get Phuumii to bet against him instead of Taa. Phuumii demurs in line 4.6 and tells Van to wait for



Taa to take his shot. His immediate rejection of Van’s offer reveals that perhaps he was not so serious about the bet after all, but merely trying to distract Taa as he takes his shot. Just after this back and forth, Taa misses. At this point, re-emboldened, Phuumii then offers a bet directly to Van.

LINE	SPKR.	UTTERANCE
4.7	Phuumii	qaw4 liin5 samee2 qiik5 sèen3 nùng1 nii4 naq1 “Take it! Let’s play even odds, one hundred thousand more!”
4.8	Van	Paaaa vaw4 bak2 hèng2 hèng2 lèq0-[samee3 lee2 “Haaa! [You] are talking so strong, and you’re asking for even odds!”
4.9	Phuumii	[lin5 taa3 nii4 “on this round”
4.10		OTHER PLAYER TAPS PHUUMII, LAUGHS, AND POINTS TOWARD GAME
4.11	Van	Paaa mùù4 kii4 [Phuumii nii3 thèè4 nii3 caw4 “Haaa! But a second ago Phuumii.. You really ran from that [other offer you made]”
4.12	Phuumii	[bò0-qaw3 qaq1 “You don’t want the bet?”

This new bet offer is done with flourish. As Phuumii makes it (in line 4.7), he points at Van. His utterance is more imperative than interrogative. His speech appears louder than normal and prosodically marked. Broadly, the offer—in all its multi-modal glory—is a good example of a ‘strong’ (*hèng2*) betting style. Van, in fact, explicitly labels it as such in line 4.8. But although Phuumii’s offer was ‘hard’ in its format and demeanor, its odds were soft and safe. Remember that just a moment before, in line 4.1 Phuumii had offered a bet with favorable odds for Taa. Now after Taa missed a shot and his chance of victory increased, he was curiously offering only even-odds. How does one respond to such an offer? In line 4.8, Van screams and howls—‘*paaa!*’—doubling over with laughter at the mismatch between Phuumii’s ‘strong’

demeanor and his wimpy, ‘even-odds’ bet. The audience members on the surrounding benches, chairs, and the newly bought—and quickly rotting—pleather couch mostly laugh too. As Van continues talking, Phuumii, in line **4.10**, clarifies what he wanted to bet upon (element *iv* above in the list of pieces of information an offer to bet might include) and then, in line **4.12**, offers the bet again, this time in a contrastively *thamadaa3* or ‘normal’ way: *bòø-qaw3 qaql* or ‘you don’t want the bet?’ Rather than pointing at Van, his arms are to his sides and he is smiling. Also, unlike the first offer, Phuumii’s offer here is syntactically formatted as a question that anticipates a negative response.

Across these two bets we see the same offer, for all intents and purposes the same economic action, with the same amount of money and same odds, made with two markedly contrastive demeanors. From this comes the painfully obvious point that it is possible to offer a bet without indexing aggression or ‘being’ aggressive. But beyond this obvious point, Van’s reaction to Phuumii’s bet gives a hint as to why this variation might matter. When Van points to the juxtaposition of Phuumii’s ‘strong’ bet and his ‘even-odds’ he is pointing out a cross-modal non-congruence (cf. Agha 2007), a seeming mismatch between Phuumii’s demeanor and the terms of the bet he wants to make. In pointing out the non-congruence, Van implicitly scales economic ‘risk’ and ‘riskiness’ with ‘strong talk’: the riskier the bet, the implication is, the more license a player has to say it in a ‘strong’ manner.

The association of economic risk and ‘strongly worded bets’ was not Van’s alone. In fact, it fits with the broader patterns of discourse I discussed in the previous chapter, where ‘not thinking’ about the consequences of spending money is treated as a sign of masculinity; ‘strong bets,’ made without worry about the possible economic consequences, make such masculinity visible. The use of ‘strong’ (*hèng2*) in Lao to describe these harshly worded bets is not marked.

People often talk about speech as being ‘strong’ with connotations of loudness and harshness; they might likewise say that a radio is too ‘strong’ to mean that it is too loud. Nor is *hèng2* limited to describing male or masculine speech. As I mentioned in chapter four, my judgmental neighbors occasionally joked with me that I might be scared to live with Mèè Phòòn because she liked to ‘speak strongly.’ Nevertheless, to offer a bet ‘strongly’ clearly has the capacity to index a masculine ‘bravery’ and ‘fearlessness.’ In this sense, bet offers can be both instruments of economic action and indexicals of a masculine and antagonistic demeanor. When felicitous, they are a doubly ‘performative’ technology; a ‘speech act’ (Austin 1975) and a ‘demeanor indexical’ of the sort that Judith Butler (1999) described (without using the term).

While people do not often make the connection between a ‘strong’ affect and fearlessness explicit, they do often amp up the aggressive qualities of bets as bets get larger and riskier, as Van does here. Over my survey, I found several linguistic features that seemed to lend themselves to producing this effect, all of which occur in Phuumii’s initial offer to bet. The first of these is the initial form transcribed as *qaw4* above, but often written in Lao orthography with a long vowel, *qaaw4*. While I translate this form as ‘take it’ in the above transcript, its pitch contour sounds different than the word ‘take’ (which, following Enfield’s system, I represent with the ‘3’ rather than ‘4’). During transcription sessions, however, my research assistant would usually nevertheless identify these various forms of *qaw3/qaw4/qaaw4* as the same word. In other places in this dissertation, I translate a related form to this *qaaw4* as ‘woah’ or ‘hey’ this seems to capture the form’s effect. Whenever I asked people to give me an example of an aggressive or ‘impolite bet,’ they would use the *qaaw4* form initially. For example, here is what Dii provided when I asked him to give an example of a ‘strong’ bet:

## A ‘strong’ bet

### 5.1) Dii

*qaaw4 bak2 tui3; example name diaw1 nii4*  
 hey mr.bare Tui; example name now deictic.proximal  
*kuu3 mak1 thiim2 nii4 samee3*  
 1st.person.pronoun(sg.).bare like team deictic.proximal even  
*haj5 mùng2 saq1*  
 give 2nd.person.pronoun(sg.).bare sentence.final.particle  
*sèèn3 nùng1 qaw3 qaq1*  
 hundred.thousand one take polar.q

“Hey, Tui, right now I like this team. I’ll give you even odds, at a hundred thousand [Kip], [do you want] to take [the bet]?”

### 5.2)

*lùù3 vaa1 sèèn3 nùng1 kin3 tèè1 sip2 phan2*  
 or COMP hundred.thousand one eat only ten thousand  
*qaq1 siø- naa1 bèèp5 laksanaq1 bèèp5 vaw4*  
 polar.q irrealis factive.particle like characteristic like speak  
*bòø- muan1 bat2 nan4 vaw4 bèèp5 bòø- pèn3 mit1*  
 NEG enjoy time deictic.distal speak like NEG COP friend  
*kan3 lèèw4 nèèw2 nii4 naq1*  
 reciprocal already kind deictic.proximal factive.particle

“Or maybe, ‘a hundred thousand to ten thousand [Kip]’ (i.e., Dii would take the short odds), like that, like speaking without pleasantness, speaking like you are no longer friends.”

Notice too that in Dii’s second, revised example of the bet in 5.2, he offers extremely risky odds—ten to one. His example of a ‘polite bet,’ in contrast, had no such initial *qaw3* and involved even odds. Initial *qaw3* also appeared in other, similar, antagonistic constructions, like the female *pétanque* court owner’s representation of what one man would say to another when talking about competitively buying beer, which I quoted in the previous chapter: “*qaaw4*,” she voiced the man, “if you buy two cases, I’ll buy two cases!”<sup>316</sup> ‘Stronger’ bets also tended to be

<sup>316</sup> *qaaw5 mùng2 qòòk5 sòòng3 lang2 kuu3 qòòk5 sòòng3 lang2*

louder—the property that *hèng2* most explicitly identifies—and to involve pointing at the addressee.

The example of Phuumii and Van’s bet also brings another issue to the fore: none of the three bets offered in the string are actually finalized. In this respect, the first offer, in line 4.1, is the most interesting. Van tries to accept the offer only to be rebuffed by Phuumii. Such bad-faith offers to bet are ubiquitous. At times on the court, a real money bet can seem hard to find. People shout out odds and put their hands out for handshakes to seal the deal only to reel them in when a suitor approaches. This is at times done playfully, but at other times, bet offerors appear to legitimately reconsider the terms or the stakes they have just advertised and revise the bets in such a way that odds shrink and the amount of money staked decreases. The propensity for bets to be offered with only partial seriousness or commitment encourages a three-part structure to sealed bets. Rather than an adjacency pair of offer-acceptance, many bets take the structure of offer-acceptance-reconfirmation, in which the last form works as a ‘sequence closing third’ (see Schegloff 2007). This three-part structure goes against common assumptions about how bets work (evident, for instance, in Geertz’s discussion of cockfight bets and Austin’s discussion of speech acts), but it does not appear to be unique to the *pétanque* court. A recent commercial for Kia (2015) automobiles plays off the relative absurdity of a two-part bet structure when the initial offer is less than sincere. The commercial begins with somebody Tweeting to the NBA star and Kia spokesperson LeBron James that he’d “bet anyone \$10,000,000 that LeBron doesn’t roll up to [his NBA] games in a Kia.” James goes on to say that he ‘accepts’ the Tweeter’s offer, and after confirming with his lawyer that the bet is legally binding, he drives over to the Tweeter’s house in his Kia followed by an armored cash transport to collect his winnings.



Figure 48: LeBron James accepts a bet

The preponderance of bets offered with no or little intention of sealing them makes the potential pragmatic force of bets more obvious. If Phuumii did not really want to make a bet, then what was he doing offering one? On the *pétanque* court, bets like his are sometimes used to distract other players readying to take a shot, and there is evidence that that was the effect Phuumii was trying to produce here (Zuckerman 2016). The purported goal of such bets is both to merely grab an opponent's attention and 'to make him think,' as one man put it to me, 'about the money he is risking.' These bets often take the form of bravery gambits, where one man will say that another is too 'scared' (*jaan4*) or not 'brave' (*kaa4*) enough to take a bet. 'Are you brave enough?' he might ask the man he is offering to bet against. Similar bravery gambits are used to get players to choose to attempt a shooting shot rather than a pointing shot. The parallel between these two kinds of gambits scales one's confidence in the outcome of the game with one's willingness to risk money. For players, being 'scared' of losing money or missing a shot is linked to being 'scared' of one's wife and thus emasculated. Men sometimes mention this explicitly, 'you don't want to bet that much, your wife will yell at you,' but more generally the language of bravery

and fear that they use resonates with the image of the angry wife chasing her husband away. Accepting and offering bets can thus come to stand for being ‘unafraid’ of both losing money and the domestic consequences of doing so. It can perform solvency and bravery in the face of potential financial loss.<sup>317</sup> The money gambling *pétanque* courts are key sites for such conspicuous—and paradigmatically masculine—risk-taking. From this perspective, the preponderance of offers to bet that are never consummated is partially a result of the demeanor indexicality of betting itself. Offers to bet provide a semiotic vehicle for men to multi-modally embody the risky characters they are generically said to be. Importantly, the thematic emphasis of such embodiments tends to be on risk rather than reward. Only rarely do men brag about their winnings or demand in ‘strong’ speech that they be paid. Talk of losses, risks taken, or potential losses is much more prominent. In this sense, offers to bet money and the more general ‘big-hearted’ generosity men are imagined to exhibit in social situations are not entirely in conflict. They fit the stereotype that men ‘don’t think’ before they spend money, that they are irrational, risky characters, unafraid of what might happen next.<sup>318</sup>

### **Ambiguous Bets**

As Phuumii’s second version of his bet attests (in line 4.12 above), the aggressive dimension of money bets is not always metapragmatically underlined. That is, while it might be tempting to conclude my analysis of bet-making with the paragraph above, as Geertz in a sense

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<sup>317</sup> Cf. what Vichit-Vadakan (1997:551) writes of Thai men, “As if to overcompensate for their ‘fear’ of the women in their lives, Thai men would make special effort to display and flaunt their independence and freedom from mother’s and wife’s control and approval by throwing themselves into indulgence and excesses such as drinking, gambling, womanizing and even politics.”

<sup>318</sup> As Warren (2013:41–42) writes of Thai gambling, “gambling provides opportunities for displays of character: to show how one acts when under pressure and faced with loss. Within Thai society, a premium is placed on remaining cool-headed (*chai yen*) in high pressure situations, gambling is thus a way of illustrating this trait.”

did in his essay on the cockfight, the fact that the performative dimension of some bets aligns with the ideology of money gambling does not mean that bets are monolithic or monofunctional, but rather, it helps us as analysts account for the variations among them.

Of the seventy-four offers to bet money that I coded across five money gambling games, nine were offers to bet with, and the remaining sixty-five were offers to bet against. Some immediate patterns emerge that are suggestive. As we might expect, the initial (or sometimes utterance-final) form *qaw4*, which, as I said above, marks a somewhat antagonistic stance and, as a kind of second order, indexes a ‘strong’ demeanor, only occurred in offers to bet against other people. The same was not true for pointing, as some offers to share bets did include points at the addressee. Notably, every instance but one of an offer to bet with someone was eventually accepted, while the majority of offers to bet against someone were never consummated. Tellingly, the one offer to bet with someone that was not accepted was eventually, and somewhat reluctantly, transformed into an offer to bet against a third-party who wanted to bet more money on the game. While many offers to bet money against someone were addressed to ‘anyone’ or ‘whomever’ was at the court, each offer to bet with someone was addressed to that discrete individual, a fact that parallels ideologies about the sociality of such bets: bets against are for undefined ‘strangers,’ while bets with are meant to be consummated with people in particular, warm social relations with the offeror. There are thus some clear differences between the two kinds of bets as they generally occur, and much could be made of these facts, and it is worth, as I plan to do in future work, exploring them more thoroughly. Nevertheless, in the rest of this chapter, rather than focusing on the differences between the two types of offers to bet on the far edges of their formal construction, I focus on the moments when they formally converge. That is, offers to bet with someone and offers to bet against someone can at times take identical linguistic



forms. In the following example, in fact, an addressee becomes confused about whether a bet offeror is offering to bet against him or with him.

How might this happen? The various ways of producing the two kinds of offers might be represented with something like a Venn diagram. On the one hand, an offer can be made maximally, performatively explicit (Lempert 2012a). To offer to share a bet, for instance, a bet offeror might use the verb *pan3* or ‘share,’ as Bot does in the example below:

### Explicit Shared Bet

#### 6) Bot

<i>khòòj5</i>	<i>qiø-</i>	<i>pan3</i>	<i>haj5</i>	<i>caw4</i>
1st.person.pronoun(sg.)	irrealis	share	give	2nd.person.pronoun(sg.)
<i>sip2</i>	<i>phan2</i>	<i>naa1</i>		
ten	thousand	factive.particle		

“I’ll share 10,000 Kip with you.”

But often the form of an offer to share a bet might just as easily have been used to make an offer to bet against someone. This simple fact, and the subsequent consequence that offers to bet with someone can be confused with offers to make a bet complicates any simple notion that affective dimensions of the act of offering a bet itself are determined by the sort of bet that is being offered.

Below, I dive into one extended example that exhibits the formal bivalence of some bets with and bets against and that more generally gives a feel for what bets on the court look like and how people respond when others default. The example comes from a game being played by four players on two teams. Bot, the man who Phuumii Hii accused of ‘eating his *siawl*’s money’ was betting on the game. Bot was an officer in the Lao army and an avid gambler. He was a

physically large and loud man in his mid-forties, and some people referred to him with a nickname that meant, more or less, ‘loud mouth.’ Bot came from an important family and had been in a powerful position in the army, but around the time that these games were filmed, I heard rumors that he had been demoted for ‘eating a lot’ (*kin3 laaj3*), or, as my friend Muu put it, ‘corruption’ (*khalapsan4*). Eventually, Bot stopped going to the money gambling court altogether, and some people suggested that it was because he owed too many people money that he could not pay.

In the example below, Bot was sitting on a bench at the far end of the court. Another man, Khaw, sat about fifteen feet down the bench. Khaw was in his early sixties and Bot tended to refer to him as ‘older brother’ (*qaaj5*). While the two men knew one another from the court, as far as I could gather, they were not very close. Earlier in the day, Bot and Khaw had already bet, but the details are vague as this happened before I began filming. When the transcript below begins, the game in front of them was already well underway. One team had six points, needing only a single point to win. A new round was just beginning. As multiple people sat between Bot and Khaw on the bench, Khaw began to offer Bot a bet.<sup>319</sup>

**Khaw**

7.1) [Bot] *caw4 lin5 paj3* [Bot]

“Bot, are you gambling on this [game], Bot?”

**Bot**

7.2) *mèen1 ñang3*

“What?”

**Khaw**

7.3) *caw4 lin5 nii4 qaql qan3 nan4 lèq1*

“Are you gambling on this [game]? That’s what [I’m asking]”

**Bot**

7.4) *khòj5 lin5 bùang4 nan4 bùang4 khaw2 ... caw4 hêt1 ñang3*

(pointing toward one team on the court) “I am betting on that side, on their side. What do you want to do?”

7.5) *qaw3 vaa3*

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<sup>319</sup> In part because they struggled to maintain communicative contact with each other around the people in between them, and intermittently attended to the ongoing game, some of what they said was redundant.

“Do you want to take [a bet]?”

**Khaw**

7.6) *hok2 bòø-kêêm3*  
“Six won’t win.”

**Bot**

7.7) *qaw3 qiik5 qaql ... qaw3 qaql ... qaw3 caj3 caw4 sip2 phan2*  
“Want to play for more? Want to take [a bet]? Ok, I’ll follow your heart and we’ll bet ten thousand Kip.”

**Khaw**

7.8) *qaw3 ... maa2*  
“I’ll take that, bring it on.”

**Bot**

7.9) *dee4 khòj5 vaw4 hok2 kêêm3 dee4*  
“Ok, you hear, I say six will win, you hear!”

**Khaw**

7.10) *daj4 kan3 dee4*  
“It’s done, you hear!”

At this point, the bet is made. Khaw, who had been leaning forward to see Bot turns back to face the game. None of the language uttered during the brief negotiation looked anything like Phuumii’s ‘strong’ bet mentioned above. The men spoke loud enough to be heard but they did not by any means ‘shout.’ The bet seemed satisfactory on both sides. The issue was settled and now the men waited for the game to unfold, to see whether the team that had already scored six points already would win or lose. Shortly after they made the bet, however, another man yelled a joke to Bot, which Khaw repeated.

**Other Audience Member**

7.11) *cet2 kêêm3 siaw1 [Bot] cêt2 phun5 naql kêêm3 dèè1 dee3*  
“Seven will win, friend (*siaw1*) Bot. Seven, that’s how many points it takes to win”

**Khaw**

7.12) *cêt2 phuun5 daj3 kêêm3 qaql*  
“Seven, that’s how many points it takes to win, right.”

**Bot**

7.13) *kêêm3 khii5 maa3 duu3*  
“A dog shit game.”

**Khaw**

7.14) *khacaw4 vaa1 ... daj4 kan3 lèèw4 qooj4 paj3 fang2 khwaam3 khaw2*

“They said it. [The bet’s] on. No need to listen to what they’re saying.”

The joke is astonishingly simple in Lao but less intuitive in English. It is a pun. In the original bet, Bot and Khaw are using the word *hok2* or ‘six’ metonymically to refer to the team with six points. They also, like all *pétanque* players in Luang Prabang, use the form *kêêm3* from the English ‘game,’ as a verb meaning ‘to win a game.’ Saying ‘*hok2 kêêm3*,’ as Bot does in line 7.9 above, thus means that ‘[the team with] six [points] will win.’ The use of ‘six’ to refer to a team is not unusual; metonymic speech like this is common on the *pétanque* court, as is referring to players or teams by the colors or the qualities of their shirts, the shape or pattern on their *pétanque* balls, or any other identifiable feature. The joke, of course, is that while *hok2 kêêm3* means ‘[the team with] six [points] will win,’ it also can mean ‘six [point] wins the game.’ But everyone knows that this latter utterance is false; only seven, not six points, will win a game. Much Lao humor is based on these kinds of puns. One joke, for instance, plays on the use of bottle as a classifier for beer. The jokester asks, *caw4 kin3 bia3 caw4 kin3 cak2 kèèw4* or ‘When you drink beer, how many glass bottles do you drink?’ When the respondent says a number, the jokester plays off his earlier use of ‘bottle’ (or *kèèw4*) in his question, and replies with the punchline: ‘ooh, that’s impressive, I can’t *kin3* glass bottles, I can only *dùùm3* the beer inside them.’

The problem with the audience member’s joke—which perhaps leads Bot to respond with the idea that ‘seven’ only wins a ‘dog shit game’—is that it puts into question the felicity of the bet. This problem is underlined because Khaw himself repeats the joke in 7.12. As I mentioned above, people often will offer bets that they have no intention of consummating. While these kinds of bets were at times a vehicle for distracting someone or displaying a certain kind of masculinity, they could also backfire, as people are liable to judge one as someone who talks

brave but is not brave enough to follow through on a bet. Such characters are often referred to with the term *kacòòk5*.

A man with whom I spoke at the court one day said that *kacòòk5* had three variations (*bèèp5*) which he ordered in increasing severity:

- i. To not be brave enough to bet (*bòø-kaa4 long2 ngen2*, the man said).
- ii. To offer a bet but then not follow through on it, for example, to put out one's hand and then take it away when another man goes to shake it (he summarized this as 'saying without doing'; *vaw4 lêq1 bòø-hêt1*)
- iii. And, worst of all, to lose and not pay (*sia3 lêq1 bòø-caaj1*).

To call someone *kacòòk5* can be a serious offense. As I was talking to this man about the different meanings of the term, in fact, I made a bet with another man on the game in front of us. I asked if he wanted to shake hands on the bet. He said there was 'no need,' and I joked that he 'better not change his mind' or I would know he was '*kacòòk5*.' He was not amused by the suggestion. To hedge off potential accusations of being *kacòòk4*, men often claim that their bets were 'just jokes' (*vaw4 jòòk5*) rather than lies. While everyone at the court recognizes that claims that someone is 'joking' are sometimes merely excuses for defaulting on a bet, they also would argue that generically understood, 'to jokingly bet' is patently not the same as offering a bet one intends to default on or not pay. In the latter case, the 'joker' would not have collected money if he were to have won. In the former, the point is to win or default.

People do several things to anticipate and ward-off welching, including, most commonly, collecting the money they are playing with before they play, usually with a third-party holding onto it (*cap2 ngen2 kòòn1*). To anticipate 'joking' and other misconstructions, people also have mechanisms of explicit performativity: shaking hands, saying that they are *qaw3 thèè4* or 'really

taking' the bet, and making maximally explicit the terms of the bet like Bot does in line **9.10** above when he says, “Ok, you hear, I say six will win, you hear!”

The joke about ‘six not really being game’ put these mechanisms into doubt. Nevertheless, in line **7.14**, Khaw apparently puts the issue to bed by making explicit that he is not the one defeating the bet (and eliding somewhat the fact that he repeated the joke): “They said it. [The bet’s] on. No need to listen to what they’re saying,” he said. He and Bot then continue to watch the game. The team without six points continued to miss all of its shots and was then reduced to the last-ditch effort of throwing their *pétanque* balls at the pig, trying to kill it and thus to restart the round without any points being scored.

Just under a minute later, as the player lines up to strike the pig, Khaw realizes that he might have mis-bet. He asks a man to his right which team had six points. After confirming he bet on the wrong team, he immediately calls out Bot and tells him of his mistake.

**Khaw**

7.15) *qaa [Bot] fang2 bòø-thùùk5*  
“Aah! Bot, I didn’t hear it correctly.”  
(waving his hands at Bot)

**Bot**

7.16) *bòòl*  
“No!”

**Khaw**

7.17) *khit1 vaa1 khaw2 daj4 hok1 khit1 vaa1 khaw2 bak2 [name] daj4 hok1*  
“I thought they had six, I thought [that guy’s team] had six [points].”

**Bot**

7.18) *bòòl*  
“No!”

**Audience member**

7.19) *mit1 mit1 mit1 mit1 mit1*  
“Quiet, quiet, quiet!”

**Khaw**

7.20) *khit1 vaa1 khaw2 [name] daj4 hok1*  
“I thought [that guy’s team] had six [points].”

**Bot**

7.21) *phaj3 vaw4*

“Who said that?”

**Khaw**

7.22) *khòj4 nii4 naa1 jaak4 lin4 khacaw4*  
“I did, I wanted to gamble on them.”

**Bot**

7.23) *qoooooooo*  
“ohhhhhh!”

**Khaw**

7.24) *mèn1 lèw4*  
“That’s right.”

**Bot**

7.25) *bòø-qaw3 lêqø-kaø-bòø-qaw3 bòø-pênø-ñang3*  
“If you don’t take [the bet] then you don’t take the bet, don’t worry about it.”

**Khaw**

7.26) *bòø-daj4-kan3 lèw4 dee4 (h) (h) (h)*  
“The bet is off, you hear, hahaha.”

7.27) *khòj4 vaa1 mèn2 khaw2 beng1 duu3*  
“I thought it was [that team who had six points], you see.”

Quiet then takes over the court. Six seconds pass, as if the fifteen or so men are waiting for a rare bird to emerge from its nest. The player takes a shooting shot and misses and then, out of the silence, Bot continues talking to Khaw. He says that if the player had made that shot then he would have had to pay ten thousand Kip to Khaw. Khaw says, “that’s right, that’s right” and Bot continues, reiterating that it was fine if Khaw did not want to take the bet, but that Bot himself would have lost money if that shot had made it. Bot grows silent as the player readies to take another shot. After the miss, he shouts another bet, loudly and with a finger in the air, addressed to anyone who might want it:

**Bot**

7.28) *qaw4 saam3 nùng1 phaaj3 qiø-lòng2 saam3 nùng1 saam3 nùng1*  
“Hey, three-to-one, who wants to take the long odds, three-to-one, three-to-one!”

7.28) *phaj3 jaak5 lòng2 phaj3 jaak5 sùu4 lêék4*  
“Who wants to take the long odds, who wants to buy a lottery ticket!”

Throughout the somewhat tense situation Bot tells Khaw that it is fine that he did not pay the bet, but he is clearly upset. Nevertheless, the issue is squashed, or at least put to a temporary close.

Over ten minutes later, Khaw leaves for the bathroom and then returns and sits next to Bot on the bench. Bot says something unintelligible and puts his hand on Khaw's knee. At this point, Bot begins to retell what just happened, loudly and to the court generally.

**Bot**

7.29) *vaw4 ... vaw4 lèw4 vaal qan3 naq1 hok1 bòø-kêem3 siø-qaq1*  
 “[He] said...[He] said that ‘six won’t win the game,’ right.”

7.30) *paa4 vaw4 nèw2 daj4 hok2 bòø1 kêem3*  
 “Woah, what [I thought to myself] is he saying, six won’t win the game.”

7.32) *sip2 phan2 kaø-vaal siq1 lèw4 nòq2*  
 “‘Ten thousand Kip,’ [he] said it like that, right.

7.33) *bat2 suut4 thaaj5 maa2 laø-pian3 caj3 naqø-[name of audience member] nòq1*  
 “Then in the end he changed his might, didn’t he [name of audience member]?”

In the final line 7.33, Bot directly addresses the audience member who had told the joke (in line 7.11, above) about ‘seven points, not six points winning a game,’ recruiting his support. That audience member then begins to retell the same joke, saying that Khaw should have actually won. Khaw, quiet up until this point, repeats the man’s joke. Bot responds to the two men by writing them off, saying that ‘no one would make a bet like that’ and then continuing to remind them of what had just happened, that when the issue of ‘joking’ arose ten minutes before, Khaw had explicitly said he was not joking.

**Bot**

7.34) *bat2 nan4 ñang2 vaw4 kan2 khòj4 vaw4 lin5 sùl sùl daj4 kan3 lèw4 vaal siq2*  
*vaw4 phen1 vaw4 qaql*

“After [the joke] we talked about it and [Khaw] said ‘I was just kidding [about joking].  
[The bet’s] done,’ he said that. ‘[The bet’s] done.’”

*(During the underlined segment, Bot points at Khaw with a turned back thumb, Khaw looks away from Bot to the right)*

Bot mocks Khaw, he points at Khaw with a turned-back thumb, and affects an enthusiastic, nasalized voice as he quotes what Khaw had said only minutes before, *daj4 kan3 lèw4*, or “the



bets made.” He makes what had just happened palpable again to those present at the court whom he is addressing.

The two men do not speak for a while after that, sitting next to one another on the side of the court. After the next game finishes, Khaw gets up and says something to Bot about going to get him a drink—the audio is difficult to hear, but Bot agrees to the offer, adding that if Khaw eventually loses (presumably, the other bets he is betting) then Bot will buy the drinks. Khaw returns with a bottle of water for Bot and an iced tea for himself. The gesture clearly settles some of the tension.

This brings me to the ambiguous offer I mentioned at the outset of this section. The game Bot and Khaw had bet on was now finished and Bot had started a new game, one in which he was actually playing. Waiting for his turn in the game, he sat on the bench opposite Khaw. The following interaction ensued:

**Bot**

7.35) *qaaj5 [Khaw] bòø-daj4 lin5 vaa1*  
“Hey, older brother Khaw, you aren’t betting?”

**Khaw**

7.36) *bòø1*  
“No.”

**Bot**

7.37) *qaaw4 khùù2 bòø-lin5 san4 naq1*  
“Hey, why aren’t you betting?”

**Khaw**

7.38) *qiø-lin5 qiø-lin5 thaang2 caw4 phun5 qoo1*  
“[I] was going to bet, was going to bet on your team.”  
(said very softly)

**Bot**

7.39) *siø-qaw3 sip2 phan2 qaw3 qaql*  
“Take ten thousand, do you want to take it?”

**Khaw**

7.40) *khòj5 lin5 thaang2 caw4*  
“I [want to] bet on your team!”  
(said loudly, with a marked falling pitch and a downward, angry looking head nod—see still below)



Figure 49: Khaw rejects Bot's offer to share a bet because he thinks it is an offer to bet against him. I have added an arrow to the still to mark Khaw's head-movement trajectory as he speaks.

In line 7.39, after asking if Khaw was gambling on the game, Bot offers a bet to Khaw. As he does so he is sitting down, across the court from Khaw with his hands on his legs. The offer looks nonchalant, nothing like Phuumii's strong bet, described above. But Khaw, nevertheless, thinks Phuumii is offering to bet against him. He, visibly and audibly frustrated, repeats what he had just said, that he wants to bet *on* Bot's team, not against it. As he says this, he rocks his head downward and raises his voice. Bot then clarifies that he meant for Khaw to share a bet with him.

**Bot**

7.41) *qee3 kaø-thaang2 khòj5 nii4 lêq1 khòj5 qiø-pan3 haj5 caw4 sip2 phan2 naa1 caw4 jaak5 sia2 naq1*

“Yeah, it's on my team, I will share [a bet] for ten thousand Kip with you, [if] you want to cheer [on the game].”

**Khaw**

7.42) *haa5 sip2 qaql tii3 haa5 sip2 qaql*  
 “50,000? [You] are betting 50,000?”

**Bot**

7.43) *qee3 tii3 haa5 sip2*  
 “Yeah, [I am] betting 50,000.”

7.44) *khòj5 lin5 sii1 sip2 kaø-phòj1 lèw4*  
 “I'll bet forty thousand, that's enough.”

**Khaw**

7.44) *qaw3 san4 vaa1*  
“[I’ll] take it, then.”

7.45)  
(Khaw smiles and chuckles while looking at Bat)

**Bot**

7.46) *pan2 caw4 sip2 phan2 khòj5 lin5 sii1 sip2 jaa1 lèw4 phòl1 muan1*  
“[I’ll] share the ten thousand with you, and I’ll bet forty thousand, that’s enough to have fun.”

The form of Bot’s bet in 7.39 was ambiguous. We know from later in the transcript that Bot intended it to be an offer to bet with Khaw, but, formally, it would also work as a bet against someone. There was nothing about Bot’s body language or manner of speaking that led Khaw to believe otherwise. In fact, their interaction just moments before in which they bet against one another and their subsequent antagonistic conversation might have predisposed Khaw to think that Bot wanted to bet against him again, as he had before. After the confusion, Bot made pains to metapragmatically frame his offer to bet with Khaw as not merely an economic decision, but as something done due to his concern for Khaw—he wanted Khaw to be able to ‘cheer’ on the game. He stressed that the remaining forty-thousand he had bet on the game was enough for him to ‘enjoy it,’ in the same way that someone offering a slice of pizza to a friend might stress that they ‘are almost already full.’ In the colloquial sense, the offer to share a bet was a gesture of friendship, an amends-maker. Like the buying of the water that had happened before, it appeared aimed at mending the relationship somewhat, smoothing the awkward remnants of the shirked bet less than an hour before.

## Conclusion

*“In Gawa, the most elementary cultural definitions of value are reproduced every time one gives a guest, or a child, food. Implicit in even such a simple gesture lies a whole cosmology, a whole set of distinctions between the heaviness of gardening and garden products (owned by women), and the lightness and beauty of shells and other circulating valuables (which reproduce the fame of*

*men), one that is, in practice, reproduced precisely through such gestures, which are the most basic means for converting the one into the other.... [W]e are not dealing with preexisting codes or principles to which people then feel they must conform, but rather a property of the structure of the actions themselves."*

*-David Graeber (2001:81–82) describing Nancy Munn's ethnography of Gawa*

The form of an offer to bet can tell people in Luang Prabang and us as analysts about the bet. Its economic terms, its ethical ends, the character of the person offering it and his stance on the person to whom he is offering it. As the example of the bet between Bot and Khaw makes clear, however, different types of bets are not given form as an automatic function of their types. In lexical, prosodic and syntactic form, Khaw's offer to bet money against Bot in line 7.5 above—"Do you want to take [a bet]?" (*qaw3 vaa3*)—is quite similar to Khaw's offer to share a bet with Bot—"Take ten thousand, do you want to take it? (*siø-qaw3 sip2 phan2 qaw3 qaql*).

I began this chapter by narrating my own introduction to the distinction between money and beer gambling. At the time, it seemed like I could look out onto the two courts and just see the different moods and modes of gambling: one type was filled with cheers and smiles and high fives, the other with shouts and cries and threats of violence. It is clear to me now that that impression I had, like all impressions, was a generic abstraction, a way of seeing that emphasized some acts and obscured others. As I reviewed above, a similar ideological gestalt about gambling for money exists among people in Luang Prabang. Those bets that are most ideologically salient embody conflict and anchor ideologies of betting as inherently problematic, 'noisy,' and anti-social. But these do not exhaust the bets on the court.

As Keane (2008) reminds us, economic action is always semiotically mediated. The bets I have described in this chapter exhibit this fact, and they show that this mediation involves both constraint and freedom. Bet-making on gambling *pétanque* courts in Luang Prabang, Laos is routine and conventional, but it is also resolutely variable. Offers to bet can reveal not only what

kind of person is betting, but also what kind of act he claims betting to be: an act of aggression, a gift, an enjoyable leisure activity. There is a reflexive quality to much exchange, just as there is a reflexive quality to most meaningful action. But this reflexive quality is not prefabricated or baked into action as a function of its type.

In distinguishing shared bets and bets against someone I have relied on a rough economic diagnostic, rather than a linguistic one. The former ‘bets with’ involve pooling, the latter ‘bets against’ involve a meeting of opposed economic interests. The pragmatic and moral force of any given bet is neither entirely a function of its economic characteristics nor of the affective and linguistic infrastructure surrounding and sometimes infusing the act of making it, the act of accepting it, the process of playing the game as the bet is realized, or the semiotic-instrumental act of physically ‘paying’ the bet. Nevertheless, actors in Luang Prabang do align these two features. Insofar as they do so, the economic stipulations of a bet can be read in relation to the semiotics of bet-making. Voiced opinions like Van’s that a meek bet is not deserving of a ‘strong’ stance point to the fact that bets are more than a mere semiotic scaffolding for indexing demeanor. Not everyone has the funds to be a convincingly irrational man. Performing masculinity, instead, can require money, a fact that is given particular importance in the booming and still-socialist city of Luang Prabang.

According to Geertz, during cock-fight gambling, ‘character’ was not only indexed, but gambled. Geertz wrote that the more money one risked, “the more of a lot of other things, such as one's pride, one's poise, one's dispassion, one's masculinity, one also risk[ed]....” In ‘Where the Action is,’ Goffman (1969) writes similarly that gambling money was a way to gamble character. Both Geertz and Goffman point to something important; gambling appears to be a site where character is often tested. But, as I have shown in this chapter, there is no crude

determinism. A felicitous performative in Austin's sense does not automatically entail a performance of risky masculinity in Judith Butler's sense. Economic stakes do not determine a particular affective form or second-order meaning, they afford them. The way one bets, the way one accepts other's bets, what one says before and after, the metapragmatics of risking money, all can be made to matter.

## Chapter 8 Fractured Friendships

### Introduction

*“As the Thai build their simple bamboo houses so that they can be readily modified and quickly dismantled, so too they build their groups.”*

*-Lucien M. Hanks (1972:80)*

WhatsApp—a chat messenger software that allows people to share texts, photos, audio clips, and videos—became a major means of communication during the last three months of my dissertation research. I had gone back to the United States to start reflecting on my earlier fieldwork, write my dissertation, and, more than anything else, get married. When I returned to Laos, my ‘group’ or *kum1* of *siaw1* had started a chat ‘group’ (again, *kum1*) in WhatsApp. The *kum1* was named *phùan1 bòø-thiim5 kan3* or “Friends that don’t throw each other away.” The name referenced an extremely popular Thai love song at the time by Konglha Yodhampa. The song’s chorus begins with the line ‘we promised to not throw each other way,’ and the bunch of us would often sing it, drunk and late at night, as loud as possible. I was invited to the WhatsApp group when I arrived back in Luang Prabang (in October 2015), but it had been operating since February of that year, a few months after I had gone back to the United States.

When I joined the chat group, it was already not long for this world. Only a few days later, Dii wrote a message: “Where did everyone go? If no one is going to chat, I am going to leave the group, you hear!”<sup>320</sup> He then promptly deleted himself from the group. Muu pasted an image of a poem, clarifying that it was a ‘gift’ to the group:

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<sup>320</sup> *paj3 saj3 mot2 lèèw4 bòø-mii2 phaj3 sèèt4 siø-qòòk4 kum1 lèèw4 dee1*

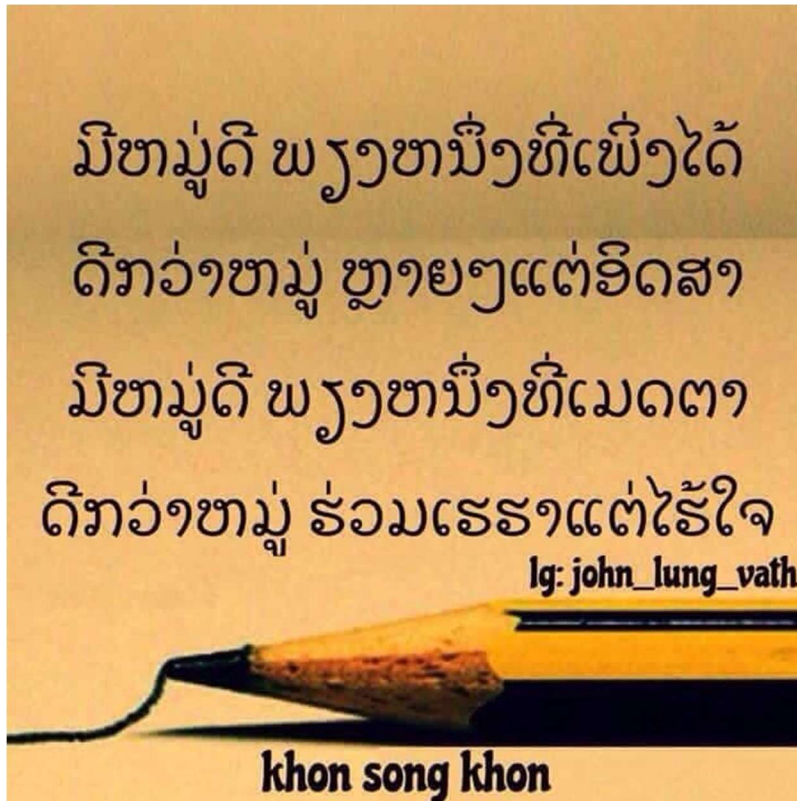


Figure 50: This is the image that Muu sent to the group

The poem reads roughly, “One good friend with worth is better than many friends who are jealous; one friend with compassion is better than many friends who are without heart.” The group organizer, a man who had recently moved away, responded with the English word ‘destroy,’ before removing everyone but me, Muu, and one other man from the chat group. With that, the group—a digitally crystallized social structure, a consciously constructed communicative channel—had dissolved. I joked later that the ‘friends who would not throw each other out’ had, in fact, thrown each other away, discarded one another into the digital heap. Muu and others laughed when I said the joke. It was funny because it was true.

In this chapter, I track the dissolution not of the WhatsApp group *per se* but of the group of friends who composed it. This dissolution, unlike the chat group, happened not all at once but over the course of a series of outrages, slights, and arguments. By the end of my last three



months in the field, the group, as previously constituted, was but a memory. In the first section, I explore how friendship in general was imagined among the group of *siawl*, and its relation to activities of consumption, payment, and gender. In the second section, I reflect on an older literature that imagined friendship in Thailand as inherently unstable. I argue that while this literature is problematic, it offers some insight into sociality in Luang Prabang, especially the at times fragile social relations of the young men at the center of this chapter. In the third section, I move to consider pronominal forms, and their function as both signs of intimacy and aggression. Finally, I explore more closely an argument among Muu and other *siawl* in the group.

### **Forming Friendships**

I joined the group of *siawl* through Dii. We first met one another at the money gambling *pétanque* court, where he taught me about the game. We sat for hours as he and I elicited the language surrounding it and played games of checkers. He described to me how *pétanque* players talked about the ball's movements—when a ball soared over its target, it ‘passed over the head’ (*khaam5 hua3*); when it landed short, it ‘didn’t reach’ (*bò-hòt5*). These terms of art were idiomatic and predictable, and Dii—who was working as an apprentice when we first met—had the time and the patience to write each form down for me, explain when it might be used, and entertain my various questions. For weeks, we would meet at the court—not by plan but by coincidence—and play checkers or *pétanque* for beers. Over the next weeks, he started inviting me to events outside the court. To drink beer, to go to an event, to play soccer or snooker.



Figure 51: A Still from a Video of a Game of Snooker in an Air-Conditioned Room

Just before befriending me, Dii had befriended Muu. Muu lived near my house in Luang Prabang and I first met him at the post-partum party hosted by Bêê and described in chapter nine. At the party, I offered to help Muu with some repairs on his house he was planning to do the following day. He accepted and the next morning, after Muu, a few other men, and I mostly stood around watching a man who did construction for a living nail corrugated metal to a new structure, Muu treated me and the other men helping with the work to a small party. We drank and talked and a friendship was born. We exchanged numbers but we would often just arrive at each other's houses and call out. Muu, who worked from home, also was an avid gambler at the money gambling *pétanque* court. We began to gamble on the same teams, and occasionally would make our own team and challenge other players for 25,000 or 50,000 Kip a person. We played *pétanque* and snooker for beer at night. Because Muu's schedule was open, he also started helping me with transcription work and for a few months, we would meet frequently to go over

videos together. I paid him a flat rate, but he always insisted that I could give him whatever I wanted.

Muu, Dii, and I played soccer together. We had a team (*thiim2*) the outlines of which patterned onto the more general friend group that became ‘Friends that don’t throw each other away.’ The team was comprised of Muu, Dii, Bêê, Sii, and a couple of Bêê’s friends from years past: Nòòng and Khêêng.<sup>321</sup> We would play soccer about twice a week, although there was no official schedule. The games were organized by phone calls and WhatsApp, once people started using it. After the games, we usually drank beer together, sometimes just a few beers, sometimes heavily. Alongside playing soccer a couple of times a week, the group also went to the pool hall or the *pétanque* court, or sometimes someone’s house. Not everyone in the group went every place every night, but, on the whole, about half of most men in the group’s nights during a given week might be spent with the group.

The group was very much imagined as a group, by both those within and outside of it. People recognized and occasionally talked about how some members of the group were closer to others, but they more often emphasized that it was a broader cohesive unit. This cohesiveness was made palpable not only in the WhatsApp chat ‘group’ but in ours sports ‘team.’ Our games of soccer were typically against other ‘groups’ or ‘teams.’ People talked about these groups as cohesive groups of their own, organized by age. Dii picked me up to play soccer one day and told me, for instance, that we were off to play a team of ‘younger (brothers)’ (*phuak4 nòòng4*). On another day, as we drank beers and debriefed about the game we just played, Muu referred to the opponent’s team as ‘older brothers’ (*phuak4 qaaj5*). Sometimes, when we played on a smaller field or could not find an opponent, our group would split into two teams, but such teams

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<sup>321</sup> Because I had not played soccer in at least fifteen years, I was placed in the goalie position, which no one wanted to play.

were not talked about as a unit in the same way; they were temporary, ad hoc arrangements, organized ostensibly to make the game as even as possible.

Some people were imagined as more central to the group than others. Dii was the main organizer of our soccer games with other teams and he took pride in it. One day, after making half a dozen calls in the afternoon before a game, he bragged to me that if it were not for him, we would never play. Occasionally, someone else would organize the games. In one case, for instance, Muu set up a game for us against someone he had met around town.

The games were played in the evening on pay-to-play fields. The teams would almost always gamble the court fee, sometimes betting a percentage, wherein, for example, the winner would pay 1/3, the loser 2/3. We would also sometimes gamble for bottles of water, energy drinks, or beers to be drunk after the game at a nearby bar or *pétanque* court. These stakes were sometimes determined when the games were organized, but they were usually negotiated just before the game. The stakes were talked about as akin to gambling for beer. The fee for the field was, like the money won during a beer gambling game, exhausted during the activity itself. No one took any of the winnings home. Interactions with the opposing team tended to be polite, but guarded. On a few occasions, the negotiation of terms was surprisingly formal. One representative from our team wandered out onto the middle of field and met the representative of the other team, like two generals meeting at the center of a battlefield. This polite structure would sometimes continue at the bar as well. After one game, for example, in which we played a team of similarly aged players, one of whom knew Dii well, we sat down at a long table at a nearby bar, our team on one end, their team on the other. Initially, the groups had infrequent interactions, someone from one team would occasionally get up and clink glasses with everyone on the other team. But, the structure of the drinking changed as the night went later and everyone

became drunker: people started temporarily switching seats, talking about the game, what cars they liked, women they knew, mutual acquaintances. By the end of the night, the groups were close to intermixed. When the opposing team did not join us at the bar, our team would usually still go to the bar and debrief about the game. We would talk about the other teams' players, their skill levels, their attitudes, and whether we wanted to play them again.

The soccer team, like the WhatsApp group, gave the *kumI* formal cohesion, a boundary, and an order. Sii ordered us team-shirts, and before that, the players spent months and months talking about what the team name should be. Later, when I returned for my last field trip in 2015-2016, the team was further institutionalized. With a few different players and the subtraction of Muu, the team became organized around Sii and another *siawI*'s new business. They named the team after the business, paid for jerseys with the team name printed on them, and asked their two employees to come play as well. Sii began organizing games and while the team still played games with other non-corporate groups of friends, games that Dii mostly organized, Sii said he preferred to play other offices. There was something official, adult, and respectable about such games. In chapter two, I described how Khap, a *pétanque* player at the money gambling court was denied entry into a tournament because he was not part of an office. He was not, as the referee implied at the time, a tournament kind of man. The linking of business and sport gave sport an institutional sheen.

Members of the group often played soccer with their own office's teams as well, and sometimes invited us to join. When Bêê's office team of police officers had a match against another office, for instance, I joined in along with a few other *siawI*. Likewise, I played when Dii's office had a match. The two biggest soccer bookies in Luang Prabang even had a match, office against office, which Muu and I played in for about ten minutes. Unlike those games our

group played, the soccer gambling offices bet big money on the game. Like our own games, these office events were followed by parties. For the game at Bêê's police precinct, for instance, the party ended with dog eating and a *pétanque* tournament.<sup>322</sup>

As the group of *siawl* and its games and often late-night hang-outs occupied the time of its members so too did it occupy their imaginations. The group and its collective activities were crucial for how the men understood themselves. Their participation, their team-shirts, their leisure time, the artificial grass soccer fields they could afford to play on, their athleticism, their friendships—they treated these as evidence of being modern, fun, wealthy, and good men. When Dii met another acquaintance of mine one night, he began the conversation by telling him that 'He liked to play soccer.' A different night, I listened as Muu began to talk with someone he had never met before, he quickly told the man that we had a 'team' and that if the man had a team, we could organize a game. The other man, a young professor at Souphanavong University in Luang Prabang—perhaps a bit embarrassed but also proud of his position at the University—said he did not have much time for sport these days and did not really have a team.<sup>323</sup>

When the group socialized, alcohol was essential. Few soccer games concluded with everyone going home. This or that person might leave—because he was sick, or his wife needed help with something, or he needed to 'guard' the house—but rarely did the night end without drinks. Rarer still were the times when people followed a game with only a single beer. Instead, drinking would typically last a few hours into the night, sometimes much longer. Many of the soccer fields had attached bars with snacks and food. Buffalo skins, cow lips, fried vegetables,

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<sup>322</sup> The officers were clearly slightly embarrassed by the fact that they were eating dog and were hesitant about me filming anything at the party.

<sup>323</sup> The professor's response shows that the group of *siawl*'s interest in soccer was not universal among men in Luang Prabang. It nevertheless seemed ubiquitous among those under forty and with means. There were at least a dozen soccer fields around the city and they were booked every night. We never ran out of other teams to play against. Even though the professor did not play soccer, he did pass some time playing *pétanque* and drinking beer at the university, where I joined him a few times. He took pride in his skill in the game.

and fried rice—the food was drinking food (*kèèm4*). The bars tended to have beer waitresses. When present, the waitresses would often pour beer into a rotating glass called a *còòk5 lòòp4*.<sup>324</sup> The waitress would pass the *còòk5 lòòp4* to one of the revelers who would down it in a few gulps and then immediately pass the glass back, ready to be filled for the next person. *Còòk5 lòòp4* was the style of the drinking for the most raucous nights. It ensured that everyone would drink the same amount and usually more than they might choose on their own. When not drinking *còòk5 lòòp4*, each person would drink from his own glass or very rarely, from an individual bottle. If someone did not want to drink, he would usually somewhat discreetly drink iced tea, which had a similar color and sometimes went unremarked upon, or he might go home.

There was pressure to stay later and to drink more. When those who were present drank from separate glasses, cheersing was constant. To initiate this, one man might raise his glass in the middle of a group and invite others to join and clink their glasses together (*tam3 còòk5*), normally through a series of separate dyadic clinks. In more intense drinking sessions, as the glasses reached the center of the circle, a man might suggest that everyone drink the entirety of his beer. When others were hesitant, the person who suggested might drain his glass and lift it up for others to witness that he in fact had finished it, challenging them to do the same. He would often call out *kin3 mot2*, or ‘drink it all.’ If a full glass was too much to drink, he might shout, ‘half’ (*kheeng1 nùng1*), or, more exacting still, he might state a percentage—‘Drink thirty per cent!’—or point to where he wanted his addressee to bring the beer’s meniscus.

People had ways of resisting this pressure. They had methods for avoiding drinking, for example, they might say that they were sick or that they had just taken medicine (*kin3 jaa3 lèèw4*, presumably antibiotics, which doctors advise not to mix with alcohol). They also had

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<sup>324</sup> Note that people also drank in this style without waitresses. Beer waitresses often encourage heavy drinking, however, to pad their commissions.

strategies for literally drinking less. They might ‘cheers’ someone, tell him to finish, and then not drink their own glass, or dump out their beer into a nearby bush as if it were merely the backwash left among the cubes of ice. This latter method was particularly useful when you were drinking with a rotating glass because it was proper to dump out the remaining beer after finishing. People would also tend to avoid drinking by disappearing, especially late at night. It was not uncommon to be drinking with one friend, have him apparently wander off to the bathroom, and never come back. No one was surprised; even as they would occasionally call the person on his phone to try to pressure him to come back. Usually whoever ghosted was smart enough to turn his phone off. When someone did announce he was leaving, people often asked him to drink a parting glass, and then, after he did so, they would tell him to drink another. A person might say he was leaving and not actually get away for hours more.

But these strategies—non-reciprocal ‘finishing,’ fake drinking, and ghosting away from the party—risked being interpreted as weakness, or worse, displeasure with an event, or a sign that one disliked (*khiat4*) the people there. People often gave in and drank. My fieldnotes are filled with both my complaints about hangovers and descriptions of moments like the following snippet from a *pétanque* tournament, when I had just sat at an acquaintance’s table:

*They quickly poured me a beer and told me to eat the meal of pork, some cèw1, and sticky rice. I told them I had just eaten but they still pressured me to eat a little bit. I drank a few glasses of beer that were given to me.*

In this case and others, ‘one’ glass of beer was never just one glass of beer. It was inevitably followed by pressuring jokes like, ‘just drink two; you have two eyes right?’ After drinking for both eyes, the pressures might move to other parts of the anatomy, as if the group was leading a rendition of head, shoulders, knees, and toes. As a foreigner, I faced abnormal pressure, but it was not abnormal in style or pervasiveness, only in intensity. While individuals varied in how



much they wanted to drink beer across different days and in comparison to one another, most people, myself included, were not only victims of this ‘festive regime’ (Chau 2008), but willing enforcers of it: calling out for others to finish beers, drink more frequently, or not skip their turn in the *còòk5 lòòp5*. The pressure tactics became the most aggressive during games of gambling for beer. In the previous chapter, I described how some bets for money seemed to embody the antagonism that sat at the middle of the trope of money gambling, but many bets to see who would drink beer had the same kind of multi-modal gestalt: shouted bets with hand points and interjections and a variety of ‘strong,’ aggressive special effects. People would often demand that the loser of a bet drink the wagered glass of beer before his next turn in *pétanque*, if he could not gulp it all down but still tried to pass it back to whomever was pouring, the pourer might order that the man finish whatever was left.

Explicitly, pressuring people to eat, drink, and stay during sessions of partying was said to be a sign of ‘love’ (*hak1 phèng2 kan3*), and a path toward enjoyment. When I occasionally complained about all the pressure to drink and eat people treated me as if I was complaining about someone letting me borrow their car too much. One night, Dii laughed with me as I told him how I had spent my night so far, committed to three parties including his own, marching around from house to house and repeatedly being asked to eat and drink. He clearly identified with my plight, but it did not make him pressure me to eat any less. He and his wife, Khòòp, told me to take more food even as I told the story.

Drinking is thought to both evince and destroy a strong, masculine body. One friend of mine once introduced me to some of his other friends by telling them that I could ‘drink beer like a man.’ It was not, however, an exclusively male activity. Most of the *siaw1* were married and had young children, under three years old. At the end of my fieldwork, in 2016, all but one of the

men in this initial group were married, and all of those married men, excluding myself, had children. Sometimes, the men's wives would come out to drink with the group, at a bar or a house, and occasionally they would bring along their friends. Some of the women were said to 'drink beer well' (*kin3 bia3 kêng1*), like Bêê's wife, Kêq. Kêq actively participated in the cheersing, challenges to finish, and drunkenness that were part and parcel of drinking with the *siawl*. Others, like Dii's wife, Khòòp, did not drink much. When Khòòp did drink, she would drink Spy brand wine coolers, a sweet and juicy wine that is much more popular with women.

Different people in the *siawl* group had different opinions about whether wives should be invited to drinking sessions.<sup>325</sup> Muu complained about how other friends, like Bêê, always wanted to bring their wives along. When we planned what we would do he would often suggest we go just as men. His wife, Tia, in turn, rarely came with us. Muu took some pride in this fact that she liked to stay at home as, at times, did Tia. Tia did not consider herself friends with most of the other men's wives. She said that out of all of the *siawl*'s wives she was closest—although not that close—to Sii's wife, CamPaa and Bêê's wife, Kêq. As she told me during the interview I reviewed in chapter six, she eventually stopped spending time with both women. Tia and CamPaa fell out of touch while Kêq, Tia said, had started playing cards and drinking too much for them to be friends. Tia's relations with these women were always mediated by Muu. When I asked her if she ever called up Kêq or CamPaa to see if they wanted to go somewhere, she told me, "No, that hasn't ever happened. Only if my [husband] takes me do I go."<sup>326</sup> CamPaa, Sii's wife, spoke similarly about her own friendships. Her friends were not the wives of the *siawl* group. She told me that many of them did not drink, so when they did go out, it was not that fun;

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<sup>325</sup> Saengtienchai *et al.* (1999:81) writes of Thailand that "only a limited amount of a married man's leisure is spent with his wife and family."

<sup>326</sup> *Bò01 bò0-mii2 cak2 thù1 mii2 tè01 vaal phua3 phaa2 paj3 lêq ka0-paj3*

I interjected that Kêq “drank well,” and she laughed and said “[She can drink] as well as you guys, no problem!”<sup>327</sup>

CamPaa’s closest friends were women from her past, from her school days. One lived in China now and they had not spoken in months, “Since I’ve started a family,” she said, laughing, “I haven’t ever had any friends.”<sup>328</sup>

The difference between the importance my group of *siawI* put on friendship and the importance that women like Tia and CamPaa put on it was striking. I had seen both women hang out with peers of theirs, drinking and having fun, but they did so less frequently, and, in the context of an interview, stressed the opposite. This emphasis was in part tied up with the same issues I discussed in chapter seven: friendship was so deeply tied to images of going out, drinking, and consuming, that women like Tia and CamPaa treated it as an index of a wasteful character. There generic stances on friendship were by no means universal, however. Khòp, Dii’s wife, had a large group of close *siawI* and Dii would often go along with them. I went with the pair a few times on these outings, usually to bars around the city. Although Khòp herself was not a drinker, her female *siawI* drank in a way that did not seem noticeably different from how the male group of *siawI* drank. They pressured one another (and Dii and me) to drink more, they got drunk, they danced and yelled and sang aloud to music or karaoke when it was available. Khòp’s *siawI* were notably not married to the men in our group. In fact, as she told me, she did not really get along with any of the *siawI*’s wives.<sup>329</sup> Khòp’s friendships with other

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<sup>327</sup> *sam1 kap2 phuak5 caw4 nii4 daj4 leej2*

<sup>328</sup> *tèè1 khòj5 nii4 saang5 khòpkhua1 lèw4 khòj5 bòø-kheej3 mii3 muu1 leej2 (h) (h)*

<sup>329</sup> Foster (1976:253) writes about similar gendered ideologies of friendship in mid-century Thailand: “Most people, when asked, said that friendship among men was quite different from friendship among women. They said women were much more restricted in their activities than men—they generally stay around the house and do not go out much. When they do go out, it is generally for some specific business, such as going to the market, to a ceremony, or to visit friends who live close by. Nor do women often spend extended periods of time working outside their village or otherwise have the opportunity to meet people other than neighbors and kinsmen. As a consequence, they said, women’s friends are usually close neighbors. Some went a step further, saying that women really do not have close

women were thought to fit more generally with her lifestyle. She modeled herself as a modern woman. She worked in an office in a private industry; neither Sii nor CamPaa worked for a salary. Khòòp was also more drawn to Western things, she knew some English and took pride in it. Furthermore, for much of the time that I knew her, Khòòp was childless. After she and Dii had their first child, Khòòp still went out with her friends and had them over, but she seemed to do so much less, opting to spend evenings at home. After Tia said that she only went out when Muu when out, I mentioned that Khòòp sometimes went out on her own and that I had tagged along before. She said that Khòòp had that kind of disposition, “they are those kinds of people, they like to go around, those people.” She elongated the word “go around” or *thiaw1* as she said this, and then immediately, again like her evaluations of CamPaa in chapter six, hedged what she was implying: “[They] go around but don’t drink beer.”<sup>330</sup> “[She and I] barely talk,” she said of Khòòp. “I don’t like to go *lin5* (play), I only like to be at the house.”<sup>331</sup> While women like Tia did have people with whom they were close, comments like these exhibit a common rhetorical emphasis. Unlike the men who sketched their identities in part as a function of their friendships, married women often downplayed such relations with friends.

When my group of *siaw1* went out without their wives, they often recruited women nearby to join them. Such invitations usually took the form of one man going to ‘cheers’ the women and then inviting them to join and, if they did, buying their drinks. Rarely did these encounters lead to actual sexual relations. More often, they were treated as a frivolous way to have ‘fun’ (*muaw1*). Beer girls working at bars were also constant—albeit generally unobtainable—objects of attention. People agreed, as did most men in Laos, that drinking with

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friends at all or, what seems to be equivalent, they cannot rely on their friends in the way men can. It would seem that women’s friends fit the ideal of eating friends more than that of friends to the death.”

<sup>330</sup> *khaø-caw4 khon2 qan3 nan4 nêl1 mak1 thiaw1 phuak1 nii4 thiaw1 haak5 bòø-kin3 bia3 nòq1*

<sup>331</sup> *khòòj5 bòø-mak1 paj3 lin5 naq1 khòòj5 mak1 juu1 tèt1 huan2*

women—especially unmarried, beautiful women (*phuusaw3 ngaam2*)—was more fun. Prostitution was also frequently talked about. Occasionally, men actually visited prostitutes, in small groups, but in general people talked much more about the possibility of sexual encounters—about going to find ‘girls’ (*phuu5 saaw3*) whether sex workers or not—than they actually engaged in them.<sup>332</sup> Nevertheless, the group’s wives were all rightfully suspicious of their husbands. Tia would often grab my attention for a second as Muu was getting ready to go and ask me where we were going, testing whether my story lined up with her husband’s. Muu, for his part, would often ask that when we got back from a night of drinking that I go to his house before going home—no matter how late it was at night—to spend a second there while he smoked a cigarette so that his wife could hear my voice float up to her bedroom, evidence that Muu and I had actually gone out together. In one case, he had me do this even though we had not been out together; he called me up late at night and asked if I would meet up with him for a second.

In part to guard against such trickery, I overheard Tia tell Muu many times that she much preferred when we drank at her house, where she knew where we were. He, in fact, agreed with her, arguing that the food was better, the beer was cheaper, and it was much more ‘comfortable’ (*saabaaj2*). When we did drink at Tia’s house, Tia and her mother, who owned the house, would usually cook food for us—sometimes elaborate meals—and serve it on a long table in the driveway.

Dii, who, following the tendency toward uxorilocality in Laos, also lived with his wife’s family, likewise liked when we went to his house to drink and eat. For both Dii and Muu, this

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<sup>332</sup> Saengtienchai et al. (1999:81) writes of prostitution in Thailand: “Generally, the fact that men and women tend to socialize with persons of the same sex makes peer influence important in commercial sex patronage. It is clear from our study that commercial sex patronage by men is almost always undertaken as a social activity in the company of friends or acquaintances....”

situation made their wives and families happier, and relieved them from some of the tensions that going ‘out’ to ‘eat’ can cause. Dii stressed in particular that he was worried what his in-laws might think if he always drank outside the house. When we went to Dii’s or Muu’s or someone else’s house to drink, we, without exception, spent our time outside—like the men’s card games at post-partum houses I describe in chapter nine.

Financially, drinking at homes was quite different from drinking at bars, snooker halls, or *pétanque* courts. When you ate and drank at someone’s house, the expectation was that the host would at least be willing to pay for everything. In practice, guests would often pitch in for beer money as the night continued, and people would sometimes bring food of some kind—but the expectation was that when you went somewhere, they ‘fed’ you. People call these relations of ‘feeding’ *liang4*. Such asymmetrical hosting has long been identified by scholars as one of the principle units of reciprocity in Lao sociality (cf. Van Esterik 1996). Superiors *liang4* their subordinates at work. When an office has a party, the boss (*hua3 naa5*) tends to pay for the beer and food, sometimes with pizzazz—donations of beer are announced on microphones, crates of beer are dropped off dramatically—and sometimes more subtly.<sup>333</sup> Mothers *liang4* their children, and in doing so, are thought to solidify kinship relations with them (High 2011; Carsten 1997); adopted children are often called ‘fed children’ (*luuk5 liang4*). Older brothers and sisters *liang4* younger siblings. During ceremonies for spirits, people *liang4* the spirits. Pet owners *liang4* their pets and, in the process, make them theirs.

The substance of friendship in Luang Prabang is sometimes talked about as a series of events of *liang4* which, ideally, balance out.<sup>334</sup> One day early in my fieldwork, I was sitting with

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<sup>333</sup> These gifts are what create the circumstances for games of gambling to see who drinks beer to be played without any financial stakes.

<sup>334</sup> As Van Esterik (1996:33) writes, “Hosting a party and extending hospitality is as much at the heart of ‘nurturing’ as the domestic tasks of home food preparation. Friends sharing lunch every day take turns ‘sponsoring’ each other

two older men who began to bemoan the way foreigners pay for things. ‘You foreigners pay for everything individually.’ ‘Lao people,’ he said, ‘take turns feeding each other’ (*liang4 kan3*): ‘Today I buy your food and drinks, some other day you pay for mine.’<sup>335</sup> Although events of *liang4* are often treated as economically disinterested, people in Luang Prabang very much monitor the extent to which they *liang4* others and others *liang4* them. They complain about friends who always eat their stuff but never feed them. ‘Those are the kinds of friend you stop inviting to events,’ one man said to me.

While *liang4 kan3* is imagined both in the literature and among local people in Luang Prabang as the typical form of reciprocity in Laos (and Thailand), and while it did capture many of the economic relations that occurred when someone hosted others at his house or when I interacted with people who were much younger or older than me,<sup>336</sup> it is not how people in my *siawl* group tended to pay when they went to restaurants. Payment was different with the *siawl*. Although they did not pay in the apparently ‘American style,’ as the older men described it to me, where one pays for whatever one ordered, they did split the bill evenly. There were often obstacles to doing this. People would leave early without leaving any money; people would forget to bring enough money or not have any to pay; people would not have the correct denomination of bill; and so forth. Occasionally, because everyone was contributing the same denomination of bill, this even splitting yielded ‘leftover money’ (*ngen2 lùà3*). One night at a

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for lunch, and woe betide the foreigner who fails to recognize the rules of hierarchy and reciprocity guiding this intricate exercise. Both rural and urban households must avoid the accusations that they do not *liang* very much.”

<sup>335</sup> Events of *liang4* can range from the small act of having someone eat with you before you both head off to a game of soccer, to large feasts, like those who happen to celebrate weddings, new houses, or the *qòòk5 dùàn3* after a birth. These celebrations also follow any kind of big economic boon, the most paradigmatic of which is winning the lottery. When I won the lottery on my birthday, I took my friends out to bowling—likewise, when I was awarded a Wenner Gren. In the former case, I spent double what I won (about forty dollars). In the latter case, thank goodness, I did not.

<sup>336</sup> When I first went to Laos, I often spent time with people who were slightly younger or much older than me. In these situations, *liang4 kan3* was the rule; I almost always paid for everything or was paid for.

dog restaurant, for instance, when we got the check everyone put in 50,000 Kip; there was a remainder of 20,000 Kip. Rather than split the money, one man said we had to take that extra 20,000 Kip and buy more beer to drink (two more large bottles). He said this even though one of the other men there had been trying his best to leave the restaurant and go home for at least the last half hour. The man dealing with the bill admitted that he himself was tired but stressed that it was *ngen2 lùà3* and had to be spent. At other times, as I mentioned in chapter five, people save such ‘extra money’ for a future social event with, ideally, the same participants. This often happened when we gambled for beer. Because the bets were counted in money, rather than bottles of beer, the money would be put into the ‘middle pot’ (the *tong3* or *ngen2 kaang3*) temporarily before the bill came. When there was extra money, sometimes we would buy more beer, like the example above, or go to another restaurant. At other times, when everyone needed to leave, one person would be nominated to ‘save’ (*qaw3 vaj4*) the money for the next event.

This splitting of the bill has a clear effect, one that people are very much alive to: because friends pay the same amount, and because friendship is imagined in part as the product of mutual consumption, for friendships to last the people involved need to have similar economic means (cf. Mills 1997:46). Groups of *siaw1*, to persist as a group, to continue drinking and eating together, must be able to spend at the same level. One night, Muu sketched the situation clearly to me on a motorcycle ride. We drove by one of his old friends’ houses. He sometimes talked about how before he spent time with our group of *siaw1*, he had a different group of friends. The narrative was tied up with a story that Muu told me many times about how he used to have more money. He was in the lumber trade, and working on a big deal, when the police confiscated his stock of rare wood. He said that it had been harvested illegally, and that the police used that as an excuse to steal it. As we rode by his old friend’s house, which was giant and next to a car



dealership the man owned, Muu reminisced about how his old group of friends was richer. He did not ‘go with them’ anymore, he said, because it was not worth it, they just spent tons of money. He was trying to save for his family. He also thought about the future, when he might be rich again, make enough money to buy a shop for Tia and a big house like his old friend’s. He said that in a few years I could bring my whole family and stay in his new house. On a different night, the topic came up again, and he described the relation between *siaw1* and economy even more clearly. He said that if you are poorer in Laos, you cannot spend time as *siaw1* with rich people, because everyone needs to pay the same, no matter what they eat. Muu said he liked the way Americans paid, especially with friends. If you do not know each other well, he continued, maybe they should pay equally, but if you are good friends, then you should be able to split it exactly based on what you ate or drank.

Although Muu said then that he liked the idea of paying only for what you consumed, this was a rarity among the *siaw1*. ‘Paying together’ was important. Economic differences across *siaw1* could create tensions. Dii told me that he would not go out if he did not have any spending money (*ngen2 kin3*). He explained that while good friends will always tell you that it does not matter, that they will pay for the bill, they would over time start to resent him. Both such hesitance to go out because one does not have enough money and the resentment that might come if one continues to go out without means can lead a man to fall out of a *kum1*.

Relatedly, *siaw1* relations are imagined as fundamentally egalitarian. As is often the case, because people assumed they should be equal, apparent inequalities caused tension and fractured relationships. Economic differences were the fault lines on which *siaw1* relations were stressed or broken apart. ‘Paying together’ was a stopgap against the creation of hierarchies similar to those hierarchies formed by relations of ‘feeding’ or *liang4*. To *liang4* someone, rather than to

pay together, threatens to foster hierarchical relations: mothers *liang4* children, older brothers *liang4* younger brothers, bosses *liang4* employees. These relationships are imagined as clusters of age, economic wealth, moral stature. The first in each of these pairs is the *phuu5 ñaj1* or ‘big person’ to the second, a figure that evokes an older person, a respectable person, a meritorious person, a rich(er) person. Upon learning my age, for example, one taxi driver, a bit astonished at how young I was, and how old my face looked, said that while I might be his younger brother in terms of age, my wallet was still his older brother.

People in Luang Prabang told me that one could hold a ceremony to formally bind two *siaw1*, one to the other. As Enfield (2014:138) writes, “The informal ritual of *hèk4 siaw1* ‘becoming *siaw1* (with someone)’ is typically accompanied by overt adoption of the reciprocal use of [the bare pronouns] *kuu3* ‘I’ and *mùng2* ‘you’ (as a change from having used a more distancing form previously).” Muu, in fact, suggested that we might travel to his native province where his mother might oversee such a ceremony. But while ritual stamps on a relationship of *siaw1*-hood are possible, they are not by any means the norm. Most *siaw1* develop through incremental interactions like those I described above.

Previous writers have stressed that friends in Thailand and Laos usually have known one another since childhood. This is not what I found—in fact, most of the *siaw1* in my group had only begun to spend time together in the last years. When Dii was planning his wedding, I accompanied him as he distributed some of his wedding invitations to close friends. He invited many people that he described as *siaw1*, but I was struck that he also said he had not seen many of them in a long time. At the wedding itself, a few of these previously very close friends came, and they had not seen Dii since he was a child. Perhaps the situation is different in a smaller village, where people are not constantly introduced to new people, but in Luang Prabang, the

average man in his twenties appears to pass from one group to another, based on interests (like sports), socio-economic means, and fortune. The relations are talked about as lasting forever, but they are often transitory soon to be replaced by others.

### **‘Loose’ Friendships**

Sometime during my fieldwork, on an early cool morning, a dead body showed up. The man’s corpse was hanging by the neck over the river bank in the UNESCO-protected part of Luang Prabang. I did not see him before the police got him down, but a few people showed me photographs on their phones of the gruesome scene. I have not been able to find news accounts since, and as time has gone by, I have begun to doubt whether it really happened. Real or fiction, the gruesome scene has been imprinted on my memory. He was a young man, probably around twenty. Rumors swirled about what had happened. I assumed that it was a suicide, but a few people I spoke to suggested that it was a murder, that he had been killed before he was put up there. ‘But who would have killed him like that,’ I asked one person who told me the news. ‘Probably,’ she said, ‘it was his *siawI*.’ Others told me similar things: a *siawI* had killed him.

The premise confused me. Why would people assume that the young man’s *siawI* would be the one to kill him? Why not a maniacal stranger? A serial killer? A bookie? Some of those with whom I spoke gave possible backstories: ‘Maybe he was involved in a love triangle with a woman and a *siawI*,’ or ‘Maybe a friend was jealous of his money.’ The backstories just dressed the same premise more elaborately. Many people might be involved in a love triangle, many people might be jealous of another’s money. Why would it be a *siawI*?

It seemed clear to me at the time that the people who guessed it was a *siawI* were not responding to the same rumor. Instead, they were offering a hypothesis, informed by what they

knew and feared about how people might act toward intimate friends. In this section, I argue that this suspicion is part of a larger, widespread concern in Luang Prabang, that those who are close to you might betray you.<sup>337</sup> My argument resonates with an emphasis in an old discussion in Thai studies. Beginning with an article by John Embree (1950), a number of scholars argued that Thailand contrasted with the more ‘tightly woven’ cultures of Japan and Vietnam because it had a ‘loose social structure.’<sup>338</sup> In the same year that Embree’s article on Thai social structure was

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<sup>337</sup> Fear of betrayal of those close, of course, is not the only fear people have. My friends and family in Luang Prabang were extremely suspicious of many strangers. For weeks Mèè Phòòn told Salina’s daughter to come home immediately after school because she had heard that foreigners were coming to kidnap children and sell their organs and eyes on the international market. When a Lao man she did not know kidnapped and held a baby at knifepoint on a bridge near the largest market in town—the Phousy Market—her suspicions were only further confirmed: strange people were hunting children. The man, on an apparent methamphetamine induced binge, was not a foreigner, but still confirmed her suspicions about people she did not know. Beyond this someone fantastic fear of organ thefts, Mèè Phòòn also more generally was wary of thefts from people with ‘strange faces’ (*naa5 pèèk5*). These people were always potential—if not always probable—thieves, drug-addicts, and swindlers. They—along with ghosts—were the reason you guarded your house, and, in those moments you had to ‘abandon’ (*paql*) it, they were the reason you locked your doors thoroughly.

Strangers crystalized a more general fear, and recognition, of the capacity of others to do bad, sometimes horrible things. And yet, people also recognized this capacity in those to whom they were close. In a 2004 article in the *Vientiane Times* (2004)—a translation from an article in a Lao newspaper—“Greedy thieves are the leeches of society”, the editorialist dwells on a few types of theft:

“In some cases, thieves go to visit the family, claiming to be relatives of the family. The thieves tell the family that they have come to get some rice for their parents. After the family believes that the thieves are their relatives, the family will give them the rice that they asked for.

Another case sees friends betraying each other. Some people try to take advantage from the close relationship with their friends in order to steal their friends’ belongings. One person pretends to borrow his friend’s motorbike for a short while. Having trusted a friend, the motorbike owner would allow the person to take his motorbike. Unfortunately, the person would take this opportunity to take the motorbike to a key shop in order to produce another key. After a while, he returns the motorbike to his friend. A few days pass, the motorbike lender would give the newly produced key to another friend and pay him to steal the motorbike.

The [original Lao] newspaper says these problems occur because of human greed. Surely, they have a negative impact on society.”

The types of theft the article outlines interestingly involve mixings of friendship, kinship, and estrangement. Strangers who claim to be kin; friends who act like strangers. Another article republished in the *Vientiane Times* (2009a), “Sport healthy in moderation,” points to how people’s obsessions with sports, drinking, and gambling can “cause a lack of warmth” in players’ households and lead to disputes. After talking about how sport causes people to neglect their families, the author writes that “many sports involve gambling and there are many people who owe their friends money. Because of this, best friends sometimes become enemies.”

<sup>338</sup> Embree was an American anthropologist who was trained in the mid-1930s by Radcliffe-Brown, among others, at the University of Chicago. He had studied Japanese culture before Thailand (Pelzel 1952). Armed with an understanding of social life in Japan, Embree contrasted how people related to one another there with how they

published, he was hit by a motorcycle and killed. His work struck a nerve in Thai studies, however; and critics and advocates of it came shortly thereafter (see Potter (1976: chapter one) for a summary of the debate). The discussion of Thailand's loosely structured society continued until the early 1970s and it has not aged well since.<sup>339</sup> In 1998, Bilmes (1998:1–2) averred that “[t]he notion of loose structure...[was] little more than a hook on which to hang anecdotes and observations about Thai behavior.”

I am not interested in defending the notion of ‘loose structure,’ let alone rescuing it from Bilmes’s critique. But even if ‘loose structure’ was only a hook on which to hang curious anecdotes about Thai behavior, there was nevertheless a consistent theme across some of the anecdotes, a theme that might have nothing to do with ‘loose structure’ *per se*, but which resonates with what I found some fifty years later in Laos: people in Thailand worried about their close social relations evaporating. They recognized that connections with others could be fleeting and might turn inside out, as it were, from relations of love to relations of distance, estrangement or worse yet, conflict and discord. Phillips (1966:30), for instance, in his 1965 book *Thai Peasant Personality* wrote that while he was not trying “to imply that family fissions are typical, in a statistical sense in Bang Chan [where he conducted his research] or even less that discord is what causes them[,]” he did want to argue that family fissions “do occur frequently enough to exist as potentialities in the life of every family; when they happen they are not completely

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interacted in Thailand. For Embree, Thailand was deeply ‘individualistic.’ This was visible in many traits, some as apparently minor as the number of formal rules one must follow to compose poems and the way people walk next to one another. “When two or three Thai walk along the road together,” Embree wrote, “there is no attempt to keep in step or to swim the arms in rhythm. On the contrary, each individual walks along as if he were alone” (1950:182–183).

<sup>339</sup> In 1968, an edited volume, *Loosely Structured Social Systems: Thailand in Comparative Perspective*, appeared (Evers 1969). In a close to contemporaneous review of the above volume, Silverman (1972) argued that the whole notion of ‘loose-structure’ only made sense in relation to models of social structure formed elsewhere in the world. Silverman contended that much as Barnes (1962) argued African models of kinship apply awkwardly in the New Guinea Highlands, so too do similar models apply awkwardly in Thailand.

unexpected.” More recently, High (2011:217) has elaborated on similar themes regarding kinship in Laos. She argues that familial relations in the village in the south of Laos where she worked were shot through with an ambivalence between nurturance and abandonment. For High, everyday acts like giving a gift manifest these tensions insofar as they attempt to resolve them; they “emphasize nurturance and ‘shout down’ abandonment.”

In the ‘loose structure literature,’ researchers stressed the fleeting quality of not just kinship but friendship. Foster (1976:251) wrote that “Thai friendship...is usually viewed as a sort of prototype of the loose structure which is said to characterize Thai society.” Phillips (1963:106) observed that, “All villagers have friends of varying degrees of intimacy both within and without the community....There are numerous gossip, drinking, and gambling groups, but these associations are notoriously unstable and involve little psychic investment.”<sup>340</sup>

The argument that Thai friendship is inherently unstable is the centerpiece of Piker’s (1968:200) imaginative essay, “Friendship to the death in rural Thai society.” In an effort to support George Foster’s (1965) contention that peasants view the world as a ‘limited good,’ Piker explored some patterns of friendship in Thailand which, on the surface, seemed to contradict Foster’s depiction of the cynical peasant. Piker begins his essay by introducing a contrast in Thailand, which appeared among *siaw1* in Luang Prabang as well, between ‘friends to the death’ (*phùan1 taaj3*) and ‘eating friends’ (*phùan1 kin3* or *muu1 kin*).<sup>341</sup> Piker depicts these friends to the death as oases of warmth in an on-the-whole mutually suspicious society. Here is how he described sociality in Thailand generally:

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<sup>340</sup> In the ellipsis, Phillips intriguingly wrote, “but these are dyadic, not group, relationships based on implicit expectations of mutual benefit.” I return to this idea below.

<sup>341</sup> Piker does not use the term ‘eating friends’ but from subsequent discussions (e.g., see Foster 1976) and from my ethnographic experience in Laos, it seems that this is what he had in mind when he spoke about ‘normal friendship.’

*The typical villager approaches his interpersonal world, in virtually all of its aspects, with a pervasive sense of distrust...and, correspondingly with a degree of caution and hesitancy that makes [durable] interpersonal commitment...unlikely. This...is verbalized by almost any adult villager. In most cases it ranges from active distrust of specific others through suspicion of almost all people the individual knows to a more or less explicit 'theory' of human motives...which leads most villagers to the conclusion that such an outlook is a compelling necessity. The theory, in its simplest form, holds that 'one can never know what is in another's mind'...; [and an immediate corollary holds that] since it is altogether impossible to fathom with any certainty the true intentions of others, one must always suspect the worst... (Piker 1968:200).<sup>342</sup>*

In the context of this bleak, cynical depiction, 'friends to the death' appear to be an anomalous kind of person, someone trustworthy, a mind one can know. And yet, Piker argues that even 'friends to the death' reveal that people are ultimately suspicious. He begins from a simple fact. When he started tracking who was a friend to the death to whom, he noticed that most pairs of friends to the death (61 of 70 whom he surveyed) did not live in the same village. Piker argues that the distance is not accidental. 'Friends to the death' serve as a fantasy away from the realities of peasant life, as Foster (1976) had characterized it in his discussion of the peasant principle of 'limited good.' They sit outside the cynical world of friendlessness and the distrust of others. "I suggest the following," Piker writes,

*personal isolation, unwillingness to undertake binding mutual involvement, and wariness of the intentions of others are part and parcel of the villager's orientation to his world. At the same time, he dreams of and wishes for another state of affairs, one in which relationships with others need not be fraught with peril and in which he need not 'resist strong affiliation as . . . [might a] rejected lover.' Although this cannot be documented at length here, there is ample evidence that the villager wishes for a warmer and more trusting interpersonal world than the one he actually inhabits.*

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<sup>342</sup> This is an internal citation in which Piker is citing his dissertation. Brackets are his.

Piker's essay, and the literature on 'loose social structure' more generally is marred by the obsessions and pockmarks of its time—an unwavering commitment to framing life in terms of 'social structure,' a too-broad notion of the peasant, and an exoticism. Nevertheless, Piker's discussion of the role of the 'friend to the death' as a kind of limit point, an ideal world that people rarely get to experience, fits well with what I found among men in Luang Prabang. For the group of *siawl*, the true friend, the friend to the death, serves as a desirable figure of personhood, a horizon in respect to which people build and judge their relationships.

### **Bare Friendships**

As anthropologists and linguists in Laos, Thailand, and most of mainland Southeast Asia have repeated, most relations in the region are relations with a hierarchical tilt. As Howard (2007:206) puts it, scholars of Thailand “can hardly put a word to the page without noting that social hierarchy pervasively structures everyday conduct in Thai society.” Hanks (1962:1249) wrote that Thai culture has a “hierarchic compulsion.” Kemp (1982:90) argued that “Thai society is based upon the premise of inequality: there are no relations between equals....” And Kirsch (1975:189–190) proclaimed that “[t]here are virtually no roles or relationships in Thai society which carry connotations of formal 'equality.' All social relationships involve a degree of status superiority or inferiority expressed by pervasive standards of etiquette, linguistic markers, and status idioms.”

Birth order between siblings is the paradigmatic form of this hierarchy, the ideological “kernel” of hierarchic relations (Enfield 2007:100; see Simpson 1997:41). As many scholars have commented, even Thai and Lao twins are sorted into roles of an 'older' and 'younger' sibling. These status and age hierarchies are perhaps most legible in the variety of ways people



refer to one another (Scupin 1988; Simpson 1997; Howard 2007). From the outside Laos and the Lao language can appear to have an “obsession with hierarchy” (Enfield 2007:117). Lao speakers use an arsenal of kinterms, names, titles, or pronominals, each of which, when deployed, carries and makes visible some information about the relational stance a speaker is taking on herself, the addressee, the referent, the context of speech, and so forth. The kinterms that are used most commonly in Luang Prabang as address terms and self-referentials are *qùaj4*, ‘older sister,’ *qaaj5*, ‘older brother,’ *nòng4*, ‘younger sibling,’ *luuk4*, ‘child,’ *phòòl*, ‘father,’ *mèèl*, ‘mother,’ *phòòl thaw5*, ‘grandfather,’ *mèèl thaw5*, ‘grandmother,’ *paa4* ‘aunt who is elder sibling of parents,’ *lung2*, ‘uncle who is elder sibling of parents,’ with additional terms for both paternal and maternal aunts and uncles, grandchildren, great grandchildren and so forth. All of these—with somewhat varying flexibility—can be used ‘tropically’ to describe individuals with whom one is patently unrelated.<sup>343</sup> One can call servers at a bar, for instance, *qaaj5* or *nòng2* or *qùaj4*, depending on the person’s age and gender, an old man can be addressed as ‘grandpa’ or ‘uncle,’ and that man might in turn call you ‘child’ in response. Likewise, cute, unknown male children are often through a kind of age inversion called *qaaj5*, or ‘older brother,’ especially by doting adults. Rarely are such ‘fictive’ kinterms used symmetrically: that is, the person you call ‘older brother’ would not call you ‘older brother’ back, the same goes for ‘aunt’ or ‘grandpa.’ There are some exceptions—often people, especially older people, will be repeatedly called one term or another, so much so that the term sticks to their name. Uncle Ho in Vietnam is such a case, as is Aunt Jemima in the maple syrup aisle of an American supermarket. When two of these people, say two ‘uncles’ meet, they might refer to each other as uncle. A variety of teknonymy can also lead pairs of people to call one another ‘father’ or ‘mother.’

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<sup>343</sup> Kinterm-heavy referential systems are common throughout Southeast Asia (see Cooke 1968).

Notably, in each of these cases in which reciprocal address forms occur, the presupposed origin of the pronoun is not the speaker herself—it is rather, all nephews or nieces, one’s children, and so forth (see Agha 2007, chapter eight). Many people in Luang Prabang say that kinterms are more ‘enjoyable’ sounding (*muanl*) than pronouns insofar as they presume a warmth.<sup>344</sup>

A consequence of the use of kinterms is that hierarchy can seem to be effectively baked into relationships. Scholars have made much of this fact. Sidnell and Shohet (2013:623) recently described how the preponderance of forms that mark hierarchy can create difficulty for speakers who might want to refer to an equal. They explore this ‘problem of peers’ in Vietnamese and chart the referential choices Vietnamese speakers use to sketch relations of relative equality in a context where “the normative momentum of the system is...towards the expression of asymmetries.”<sup>345</sup> Among other methods, the Vietnamese speakers they discuss use ‘true pronouns,’ deploy proper names without co-occurring kinterms, and mention kinterms ironically.

‘Peers’ in Laos use a similar combination of names, pronouns, and status address terms, notably, *siawl*.<sup>346</sup> *Siawl* can be used as an address term and as a title-like status marker for third person reference, e.g., I can call Muu’s attention by saying ‘*siawl*, it’s your turn,’ and I can also refer to him as *siawl* Muu in discussion with others. The term is used in ways that are reminiscent of the address use of the term *dude* in American English (e.g., Kiesling 2004) or *mate* in Australian English.

Lao’s pronominal system has a number of relatively metapragmatically distinguished ‘levels’—some of which are referred to as pairs of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns, the most

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<sup>344</sup> As Kemp (1982:90) put the same idea, “They offer a means of transforming otherwise calculating, competitive relations by the ideals of love and trust, in other words, by the axiom of amity.”

<sup>345</sup> Kinterms are ubiquitous in Vietnamese. Hy Van Luong (1990:37) writes that “In the Vietnamese system of person reference, it is not personal pronouns, but Vietnamese kinship terms in particular and common nouns in general that constitute the single most important subset.”

<sup>346</sup> Also *sahaaj3* or ‘comrade,’ discussed briefly in chapter two.

important of which, for my purposes here and in ascending levels of increasing estrangement and formality, among other possible variables (Agha 1998), are *kuu3/mùng2* ; *haw2/too3* ; *khòj5/caw4* (See Enfield 2013:chap. 12—note, the table below is not an exhaustive list):

	Bare	Less Bare	Even Less Bare
1st Person	<i>kuu3</i>	<i>haw2</i>	<i>khòj5</i>
2nd Person	<i>mùng2</i>	<i>too3</i>	<i>caw4</i>

Figure 52: Three levels of Lao first and second person pronouns

People of similar status usually pick one level of pronouns and reciprocally use the forms within that level. That is, when Muu and Dii talk, they call each other *mùng2* and call themselves *kuu3*.

As others have noted for languages in Southeast Asia (e.g., Errington 1988:234; Simpson 1997), address terms, unlike many other stylistic elements that people deploy, are metapragmatically salient. People talk about them, and how people should and do use them, with ease. This is not to say that people always accurately report how they use them; I have examples below where they do not. But when I asked people what forms they used with this or that person, they could always give me answers, a testament to people’s metapragmatic awareness of the forms (see Silverstein 1981 for discussion of the features that might make such salience more likely). The terms themselves—especially *kuu3* and *mùng2*, the ‘lowest’ (*tam1*) and ‘barest’ pronominals—are even sometimes used to gloss the status of a current relation—e.g., someone might say about some pair or another, ‘They are *kuu3* and *mùng2* together’ (*kuu3 mùng2 kan3*). People also sometimes gloss other’s (or their own) rough, rude talk as ‘all *kuu3 kuu3 mùng2 mùng2*,’ a use that hints at the coarseness associated with the terms.

The *siaw1* in my *kum1* almost exclusively used either *kuu3/mùng2* or *haw2/too3* with one another. I never heard them use *khòj5/caw4*.<sup>347</sup> Most people in Luang Prabang talk about the pronominal pair *kuu3/mùng2* as simultaneously the language of discord and the language of intimacy. *Kuu3/mùng2* are ‘fighting words,’ “the language one loses one’s temper in” (Errington 1985:9; cited in Irvine 1992), just as they are what you use with those to whom you are closest.

Southeast Asianists have a history of being fascinated by these pronominal pairs.<sup>348</sup> One of the most famous discussions of the topic is Geertz’s (1976: 248-260) description of Javanese ‘linguistic etiquette.’ Geertz’s description, as I show below, captures how Lao people talk about the pronominal system. After reviewing the speech levels of Java at the time he conducted research, Geertz (1976:255) sketches the issue:

*...etiquette patterns, including language, tend to be regarded by the Javanese as a kind of emotional capital which may be invested in putting others at ease. Politeness is something one directs toward others; one surrounds others; one surrounds others with a wall of behavioral (lair) formality which protects the stability of his inner life (batin). Etiquette is a wall built around one’s inner feelings, but it is, paradoxically, always a wall that someone else builds, at least in part. He may choose to build such a wall for one of two reasons. He and the other person are at least approximate status equals with an equal politeness. Or the other is clearly his superior, in which case he will, in deference to the other’s greater spiritual refinement, build him a wall without any demand or expectation that you reciprocate.*

Geertz provides several diagrams representing the symmetry or asymmetry of honorific interactions in Java. The center of each circle in each diagram represents a speaker’s ‘inner life,’

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<sup>347</sup> They also, on occasion, used the least bare first person pronominals: the ‘sweet sounding’ (*siang3 vaan3*) *khaanòj4* and the more formal *khaaphacaw4*, which in terms of politeness, are literally off-the-chart(s) I provide above. These uses were inevitably ironic. Muu, for example, once made a bet with Khêng, another *siaw1*, in which the loser had to tell the winner, ‘I give in’ or *khaanòj4 ñòòm2*. The joke was in the humiliation of surrender, and the pronoun underlined that humiliation.

<sup>348</sup> Their emphasis has been on ‘higher’ forms, hence the term ‘honorific’ itself. Perhaps if these earlier scholars had begun with an interest in forms like *kuu3/mùng2* the term would have been something like ‘basics,’ ‘equalizers,’ or ‘fighting words.’

and the numbers, along with the lines around the circles, represent the style of speech: “The higher the level of language spoken *to* an individual,” Geertz explained, “the thicker the wall of etiquette protecting his emotional life” (1976:255).

The first diagram below depicts two close friends speaking to one another in *ngoko biasa*, a “low styleme [with] no honorifics.”

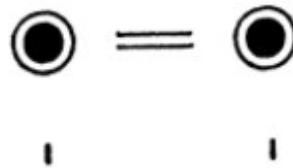


Figure 53: Geertz’s Depiction of Close Friends Speaking Together in *ngoko biasa*

The second diagram shows an asymmetrical relation, a “high official, say the District officer,” is at the top of the diagram, speaking to an “ordinary educated urbanite” (1976:256). The former speaks *ngoko biasa*, as in the diagram above, but the ordinary man speaks *karma inggil*, “a high styleme [with] high honorifics,” thereby insulating the official with a linguistic wall.

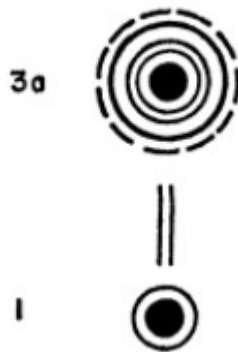


Figure 54: Geertz’s Depiction of a High Official and District Officer Speaking in Asymmetrical Styles

The first diagram above helps visualize how many of the *siaw1* appear to understand their pronominal relations with one another. One uses *kuu3* and *mùng2* with close friends because

there is no need for putting on airs, no need for walls.<sup>349</sup> Geertz's diagrams about Javanese speech levels also represent one way the pragmatic force of both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person Lao pronominals is commonly spoken about: as a comment on the speaker's relationship with, or momentary stance on, his or her addressee. In this respect, these pronominals are 'addressee focused' (Irvine 1992:256).<sup>350</sup>

In their addressee focus, *kuu3* and *mùng2* function, as Enfield (2014:143-144) argues, not through any intrinsic, decontextualized semantic meaning, but insofar as they go against what form is expected in a given situation. Likewise, the creative dimensions of pronominals, the extent to which they can both track social relations and contexts and produce them is most clear in moments of 'breakthrough,' as Friedrich (1979) puts it, where people switch from one pronominal form to another, and thus "break[] or reset[] a pattern of established pair-part usage" (Silverstein 2003:210). I saw many moments like this: as people flashed into anger, or joked, or loosened up with alcohol.

Here is a straightforward example. Tia suspected that Muu had slept with another woman. He and I were sitting around drinking beers across town. When she called Muu to accuse him, he immediately said to me that it was time to leave. I hopped in his new truck (which he had just leased with the help of Sii) and he argued with Tia on the phone while he drove toward home. As I wrote in my fieldnotes shortly after, the argument had a neat pronominal arc. At the beginning, he spoke calmly and used the pronouns *khòj5* and *caw4*. As his voice got angrier and angrier, moving to a scream he switched to *kuu3* and *mùng2*. A few

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<sup>349</sup> In a metaphor close to Geertz's, Enfield (2014:136) writes that *kuu3*, *mùng2*, and the other 'bare' pronouns are "the most exposing—or, more accurately, the least covering—forms for personal reference."

<sup>350</sup> The third person forms at the same 'level' (e.g., *man2*, *khaw2*, *laaw2*), in contrast, are talked about as primarily referent focused. That is, one's choice of word is said to concern the speaker's relation with the referred to third person, rather than the addressed person.

moments later, after calming down slightly, Muu then again began to use *khòj5* and *caw4*. As I fiddled with Muu's truck window, trying my best to look too occupied to be paying any attention, I could not help but notice how linguistically neat the argument's ABA structure was.

I am not alone in noticing such things. As I mentioned above. Such switches are highly salient for Lao speakers as well.<sup>351</sup> Examples could be multiplied endlessly, but I will provide only two. When I was babysitting Salina's daughter one day, I was lounging and watching TV only to discover that the nine-year-old had snuck out of the house and gone to play with her friends. Mèè Phòòn had told her not to leave the house, and told me to make sure that she did not, so I ran down the road to find her only a few houses away. As we walked back to our house I yelled at her, doing my best to replicate what I had heard her grandparents do: 'You have to listen to me!' I said, using both *kuu3* and *mùng2* (*mùng2 tòong4 fang2 khwaam2 kuu3*). I had never used the 'bare' *kuu3* and *mùng2* with her before. I normally used *qaaj5* ('older brother') or the polite *khòj5* as a first person pronominal, and *caw4*, *too3*, or her name to address her. As soon as *mùng2* spat from my mouth, she immediately said, 'you called me *mùng2*.' She was clearly hurt, and I promptly grabbed her a chocolate bar I had stowed away for a celebration or, apparently, an apology.

It is not just arguments that can lead to shifts in pronouns. In fact, the group of *siaw1* often shifted from *haw2* and *too3* to *kuu3* and *mùng2* during moments of late-night revelry and competition. Dii once made fun of me for doing this unnaturally, 'on the phone you are all *haw2*

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<sup>351</sup> Writing of Thai speakers' metapragmatic awareness, Simpson (1997:46) presents several similar examples where people call out either switches or patterns of usage. Here is one:

"A university professor acquaintance, having seen the dubbed version of the American movie *Dumb and Dumber*, noted that one of the things she hated about it was the way it was dubbed into Thai. They had used the pronouns *kuu* and *miŋ* consistently for the dialogue between the two close male friends who were the main characters. In spite of the fact that she agreed that these pronouns would be used by Thais of similar status in that situation whether in real life or in a movie, it still offended her sensibilities to hear those words coming out of foreigners' mouths on the movie screen."

and *too3*, but when we went out together you change to *kuu3* and *mùng2*,’ he said. But the tendency to switch was not mine alone. Often as the night went on, as people got drunker, as the stakes in games went higher, as mock fights, and occasionally real fights happened, people would make a full shift from *haw2* and *too3* to *kuu3* and *mùng2*. For instance, when I went to a New Year’s party at Sii’s house, I saw a man that I had long known from the *pétanque* court, and always spoken to using *khòj5* and *caw4*. At the party, he approached me drunkenly and began to use *kuu3* and *mùng2* immediately. The roughness of his pronouns fit with his affect generally: he put me in a headlock or two, wrestled and swore at me—in apparent jest—and I, at first a bit confused, returned his pronouns and literal jabs in kind.

Honorifics (e.g., Agha 1998; Irvine 1992 and 1995) and ‘speech levels’ have long been a principal cottage industry in linguistic anthropology and linguistic anthropologists have unpacked countless distinctions like those that exist in Lao’s pronominal system. Brown and Gilman’s (1960), “The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity,” has been so influential that Michael Silverstein (2003:204), in prefacing a reinterpretation of their data, “presumes,” a bit tongue in cheek, that “everyone knows their text by heart.” It is rare to see an introductory linguistic anthropology textbook or talk that does not mention either pronouns among the Quakers (Bauman 1983), or T/V distinctions in Russian, French, or Spanish. One common thread through these discussions, which comes out particularly clearly in Silverstein’s (2003) article on indexical order, is the extent to which pronominal forms with addressee focused pragmatic force, like *kuu3* and *mùng2*, can become indexes of the quality of the person using them. In respecting others with a ‘high’ pronoun, for instance, a speaker might index that she herself is respectable; likewise, in disrespecting others with a low addressee focus pronoun, she might index her power, rudeness or cruelty.



The addressee focus of both *kuu3* and *mùng2* seems to be the terms' most metapragmatically salient non-referential dimension. In other words, when people in Luang Prabang account for these pronouns—for example, when they provide metasemantic glosses to a foreign researcher such as myself—they most often talk about the kinds of person with whom one should use *kuu3* and *mùng2*, rather than the kind of person who uses *kuu3* and *mùng2*.

With that said, the terms are not exclusively addressee focused, and the nature of their speaker focus is contested in interesting ways. Some people say that *kuu3* and *mùng2* are ‘bad’ words, not to be uttered because they bespeak rudeness, childishness, and lack of charity on the part of the speaker. Others say that merely using the words does not in and of itself index the quality of the person using them, but that using them in a correct or incorrect way can index such qualities.<sup>352</sup> In an interview with one *pétanque* player, the man raised the issue with me explicitly. In response to me saying that English did not have an equivalent to *kuu3* and *mùng2*, he asked me: “Do you think the Lao words *kuu3* and *mùng2* are good or not good?”<sup>353</sup> Not wanting to spoil the interview soup, as it were, I said I did not know, and asked him what he thought. He went on to make a clear contrast between kinds of uses, arguing that the words can at times be used unobjectionably to represent loving relations among friends. “I say, if they are used with people you really love, people you really, really love (*hak1 phèng2 kan2 suut4*), then you can say them. [But] if the context is people of different ages [speaking to each other], then you should not use them.”<sup>354</sup> He then vaguely described to me “one ethnic group” (*sonphaw1 nùng1*) that he had heard only use *kuu3* and *mùng2*, even with strangers. They use the forms to

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<sup>352</sup> These local metapragmatic debates mirror familiar debates in the United States concerning the say-ability of curses and other taboo forms. Think for instance of debates about whether racist epithets like the so-called N-Word (Asim 2007) should either never be used or only be used in contexts in which the context or the person speaking properly defuses the terms' contagion (see Irvine 2011).

<sup>353</sup> *sap2... sap2 phaasaa3 laaw2 nii4 kuu3 mùng2 nii4 caw4 vaa1 dii3 vaa1 lù3 bò-dii3*

<sup>354</sup> *khòj5 vaa1 sommut1 vaa1 kuu3 mùng2 nii4 naq1 mèen1 thii3 khon2 hak1 phèng2 kan3 suut4 leej2 naq1 hak1 phèng2 kan3 suut4 ñang2 vaw4 daj4. thaa5 vaa1 pên3 lun1 qaaj5 lun1 nòng4 qaw3 bòq1 saj1 vaw4 bò-daj4*

mean that they “really, really love” those strangers, he told me. His cousin married a woman from their village. With enthusiasm he said that the people, “They talk to each other, saying *kuu3 kuu3* and *mùng2 mùng2* just using [the words] on each other, just speaking and using [the words] on each other.”<sup>355</sup> “You have to understand where they are coming from,” he added, “if you don’t understand them...haha...there is just going to be fighting right then...haha...saying that.”<sup>356</sup> In this man’s explicit metapragmatic reflection on the topic, *kuu3* and *mùng2* did not inherently index attributes of speaker regardless of context. Rather, one needed to take into account the situation, and even potential dialectal and ethnic differences in usage.

Others treated the forms as inherently bad. I was drinking at Muu’s house when his brother-in-law and sister-in-law, who lived with him and his wife’s parents, began to fight viciously, screaming at each other and throwing things. The fighting was just inside the house as we drank outside. It became so bad that Muu told me to go urinate around the back of the house (in our busy neighborhood) rather than in the bathroom so as to not awkwardly walk in the middle of it. During the fighting, their toddler son wandered outside the house pushing a bike. I asked him what he was pushing around, and he said, defensively, ‘*khòng3 kuu3*’, or, ‘It’s mine!’ Before I could respond, Muu asked his nephew where he had learned the word *kuu3* and ordered the boy not to use it. I became immediately curious, ‘Where do you think he learned the word *kuu3*,’ I asked Muu. ‘Other kids?’ I suggested. ‘His parents,’ Muu said confidently, referring to the couple screaming *kuu3* and *mùng2* at each other a few paces away. ‘They use it all the time.’ Muu did not tell his nephew to not use the word with me, as I heard people sanction

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<sup>355</sup> *vaw4 kan3 nii4 kuu3 kuu3 mùng2 mùng2 sajl kan3 leej2 naal sapiik4 sajl kan3 leej2 naq1*

<sup>356</sup> *tòng4 vaal tòng4 vaal paj3 juul thèw3 sonphaw2 tòng4 khaw5 caj3 khaw2 daj4 thaa5 bòø-khaw5 caj3 kaø-mii2 tèl1 tii3 kan3 juul han5 lêq1 (h) (h) vaw4 (h) (h)*

other children, but implied that he should not use it at all, treating it as indexical of the boy's parent's rough and angry argument within earshot.<sup>357</sup>

I learned much about pronominal use from my own experiences of stubbornly trying to use and be referred to with the pronouns that seemed appropriate to my station as a young man, a *siaw1* in a *kum1* of similarly aged *siaw1*. As I spent more and more time with the group, everyone began calling me *siaw1*. Pronominal changes took much longer and happened unevenly. Part of the issue was that in Luang Prabang there is a pervasive sense that foreigners should always be spoken to with *khòj5* and *caw4*. As time went on, I began to campaign for the *siaw1* to use different pronouns with me. The responses I got from different members of the group are revealing.

The biggest factor in why my close friends were hesitant to use the forms with me was, obviously, that I was a foreigner, but they gave me many other reasons. Most people whom I witnessed around the same age and apparent status as Muu or Dii, would use *khòj5* and *caw4* only briefly (if at all) upon meeting one another and then quickly shift to *haw2* and *too3* and then often, downshift again to *kuu3* and *mùng2*, like a Dodge Charger picking up speed. With me, people tended to stick much longer to *khòj5* and *caw4* before using *haw2* and *too3*. When I initially asked Sii to use the terms with me, he claimed that he never used them with other *siaw1*. One night, when I pushed him more on the issue, he agreed, but said that it would be really bad if we used them in front of his children or women, as it was *bòø-ngam2* ('not beautiful'). Khêng, another *siaw1* in the group, told me that 'real *siaw1*' use *khòj5* and *caw4*. But when I asked how

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<sup>357</sup> Adults, likewise, sometimes denied using the terms altogether. When I first went to Luang Prabang in 2009, my neighbor told me that she never referred to herself as *kuu3* or her friends as *mùng2* (cf. Simpson 1997). A few days later, I watched her play cards with her friends. Her speech was peppered with *kuu3* this and *mùng2* that. When I reminded her of what she had told me only a few days before, she said that the situation was exceptional: she was just her talking with her friends.

he spoke with Dii he backtracked, saying he used *haw2* and *too3*. Months later, he reluctantly agreed to use *kuu3* and *mùng2* with me, but he noted that now that he was a father he disliked using the words.

My shift in pronouns with Muu is the most easily trackable. We had several conversations explicitly about what pronouns to use. Most of these happened late at night, during those times when he asked me to make an appearance outside his house so that his wife would know that we had in fact gone out together. When I first met Muu, he surprised me by using *haw2* and *too3* immediately. He was also the first person in Laos who reciprocally used *kuu3* and *mùng2* with me, but the evolution was slow. On November 29<sup>th</sup>, after a long night of drinking we returned to his house. He said that we were really *siaw1* now and said that we could even ‘hit each other on the head.’ Here is what I wrote in my fieldnotes the next morning:

*Muu said he was my siaw1 and that we could hit each other's heads now. He then hit me on the head and I hit him on the head. I asked him if we could be kuu3/mùng2 and he said that that wasn't important, what was important were things such as whether he could stay in my house if he [visited] America and [whether I could stay at his].*

Less than two months later, in early January and after another long night of drinking, I asked Muu again if we could use *kuu3* and *mùng2* together. His response was drastically different. He said that he was really happy I had asked because he had not been ‘brave’ enough to ask me. We already ‘loved each other as much as possible,’ he added, and so it made sense to use the terms. Our conversion to *kuu3* and *mùng2* was not complete. After my insistence, I, unfamiliar with alternating my pronouns fluidly, would jump across all three levels of pronominals.

Muu, for his part, was also not entirely consistent, regardless of the situation. As is clear from my countless hours of recording, one major factor in which forms we used was whether we were drinking; we were much more likely to use *kuu3* and *mùng2* late at night. As a snapshot of

the development of our pronominal relationship, I surveyed a series of more sober interactions, the recordings in which Muu was serving as my research assistant, usually done early in the morning, often after a hangover from the night before. The cases spanned from November 2013 to April 2014, and thus captured the time when, according to my fieldnotes, Muu and I switched the pronominal forms we used with one another. In each of the twelve recordings, I marked the first time Muu referred to me or himself with a pronoun (which often took several minutes). I expected that these cases would reveal a clean transition from *haw2* and *too3* into *kuu3* and *mùng2*. To my surprise, the twelve events did not show any change: in each case Muu used *haw2* or *too3*.<sup>358</sup> In the videos I have of us drinking and playing *pétanque*, in contrast, Muu frequently used *kuu3* and *mùng2*.

My pronominal shifts with Muu are clearly not close to a ‘natural’ case study of what *siaw1* pronominal shifts look like. Using such forms with a Westerner (*falang1*) was uncomfortable for people, as it indexed things not just about me (the addressee) but about them (as speaker). When I eventually did start to use *kuu3* and *mùng2* with members of the group, overhearers would frequently comment and laugh that a Westerner and a Lao person were ‘using *kuu3* and *mùng2* together’ (*kuu3 mùng2 kan3*).<sup>359</sup> Sii complained about this explicitly. One night we went out to a bar and I used *kuu3* and *mùng2* with him as he used *khòj5* and *caw4* with me. I noted his usage, and he shot back: ‘What would people think of me if I used *kuu3* and *mùng2*

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<sup>358</sup> He used the two pronominals in equal measure. In five cases, the first pronominal reference was *haw2*, in five cases the first pronominal reference was *too3*, and in five cases, both pronouns were present in the first utterance with a pronominal reference.

<sup>359</sup> Their concern about overhearers was widespread in discussions of pronouns. Novices in the temple, for instance, use *kuu3* and *mùng2* like anyone else. But, as former monk told me and as I observed, people in the monastery tries to modulate their use of the forms so as to not make them audible to overhearers. The same kind of modulation regulates when and where monks smoke cigarettes, buy lottery tickets, joke around, or, to a lesser extent, spend time without wearing their outer robes. When I briefly became a novice monk, one other novice complained that my sandals were too loud as we walked outside the temple. Worried about the eyes and ears on us, he said that my loud sandals was *bò-khùu2* or ‘not fitting,’ a phrase that people often use to call out mismatches or ‘non-congruence’ (Agha 2007) between one’s status and actions.

with you?’ As Sii had said to me earlier, doing so would make him look immature, like a ‘child’ (*dêk2 nòj4*) rather than ‘an adult’ or ‘big person’ (*phuu5 ñaj1*). Interestingly, he also stressed that he did not want to use such forms in front of his children. The two fears sat in some tension: that one’s children might learn the words, but also that the words might reveal one as ‘being like a child’ (*khùu2 dêk2 nòj4*).<sup>360</sup> Sii, Muu, Dii, Khêng and the other *siaw1* often talked about people looking or acting like a ‘child.’ Such concern was not surprising. In their late twenties, all of the men had recently gotten married and had their first children and were on the cusp of relative economic independence, beginning to take over work from their parents and their in-laws or starting their own ventures. They were becoming big people (*phuu5 ñaj1*) and, as they argued to me, a big person in Luang Prabang did not speak so ‘low,’ especially not in front of women or children.

While my experiences attempting to use *kuu3* and *mùng2* are not representative, they are revealing. Notably, with me as with many young men in Luang Prabang, alcohol and late-night partying are a bridge to the developments of *kuu3* and *mùng2* relations, just as drinking and partying were said to be a bridge to the development of friendship generally.<sup>361</sup> On several occasions I have drunk with a group of men who began the night at one pronominal level and ended at another. ‘It’s all love within the drinking circle,’ one man put it to me. Furthermore, once such relations are established, people tend to use *kuu3* and *mùng2* more when drinking. In this sense, the terms do not only index supposedly perduring qualities of an addressee, a speaker,

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<sup>360</sup> Dii sketched similar themes during one long conversation we had about pronouns. After touching on topics like who was polite and impolite among our friends and how the younger students at his school used to irk him by calling him *siaw1*, he said that he did not like how people at the *pétanque* court spoke to the two younger women that worked there. He said that they would use *mùng2* and the bare prefix *qiil* to preface their names, even though, he stressed, they already were mothers.

<sup>361</sup> To describe *kuu3* in Thai, Chirasombutti and Diller (1999:118) write, “Common in rural speech and high-solidarity urban contexts (mainly male: boxing, gambling, drinking parties, etc.). Otherwise very rude in urban educated speech and used to show anger.”

or even a relationship, but qualities of the situation within which a speaker finds himself. This is not to say that these terms are only used in moments of drinking, or that the patterns I outline here are universal across Laos. On both counts, they are not.<sup>362</sup> But while *kuu3* and *mùng2* are not intrinsically tied to drinking, for the group of *siaw1* and for many people who observed them, the terms can index the drinking circle and the sometimes rough, masculine sociality that goes along with it.

In his ethnography of Surakarta in central Java, Siegel (1993: 44) argues that physical blows “have a certain place in Javanese speech.” Describing the beating of a thief he witnessed through the doors and windows of a market police post, he writes that the “blows [to the thief]...have a place in *Ngoko* [i.e., the ‘low’ styleme Geertz described above]. Given the silence of those doing the beating, one might see blows as standing in the place of speech. They are an even more *kasar* or crude form of language than *Ngoko* itself” (1993: 48). *Siaw1* often make a similar connection between violence and language. *Kuu3* and *mùng2* represented loving relations in part because they could do semiotic violence to the referent (cf. Stasch 2008b). As I mentioned above, when Muu talked about how much he ‘loved’ (*hak1*) me one night outside his house, we alternately hit each other on the back of the head. This was not Muu’s or my idiosyncrasy alone, the head was talked about as the most sacred part of the body, and thus, to allow someone to hit your head and not be offended was to signal an aggressive non-aggression pact, a nip not a bite (c.f Bateson 1972). I once asked a man how close he was to another, for instance, and he responded, ‘I can hit him on the head!’ (*top2 hua3 man2 daj4*). Hitting each

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<sup>362</sup> The general assumption within Laos is that people in the urban areas *vaw4 dooj3*, or speak with more polite affectation than those outside the city. Stories like the story that the man above told me, where some ethnic group used *kuu3* and *mùng2* exclusively, whether true or not, reproduce ideas about the ‘rude’ speech of people in the ‘forest’ (*paa1*) or the ‘boonies’ (*baan4 nòòk4*). While these claims are often overblown, other studies of Lao pronouns, like Enfield’s, of less urban areas than Luang Prabang, reveal *kuu3* and *mùng2* to be more prevalent than I found in Luang Prabang. Beyond this is a simple fact: some people, such as children for instance, do not drink at all but nevertheless use these pronouns.

other on the head, cursing at one another, and telling one another the truth, even when it is difficult, are all iconically linked together as acts that violate others, and thus, can signal the strength of a relationship of ‘love’ or the strength of feelings of enmity. *Kuu3* and *mùng2* likewise can be used both to offend and to show intimacy. As I point to in the next section, the tension as to which kind of use is meant or intended, can emerge as yet another way in which *siaw1* are living on the edge of friendship and enmity.<sup>363</sup> Bare friendship can turn, sometimes quickly, from mutual intimacy and ‘love’ to mutual aggression.

The association of *kuu3* and *mùng2* with aggression and mutual disrespect among *siaw1* helps explain some of the anxiety people expressed about others overhearing them use the forms. Similar to cursing, acting violently, or evaluating others to their faces, using *kuu3* and *mùng2* can index something about the speaker. How they do this, as I reviewed above, is subject to debate. Some people, like the man I interviewed who spoke about the village in Laos where people use the terms freely, argued that the terms were not inherently ‘bad’ (*bòø-dii3*), but only bad to use in certain contexts. Others, however, explicitly claimed that the terms themselves were, no matter the context, a sign of a bad person. The tension around whether one should use the terms at all and in what contexts parallels my discussion in other parts of this dissertation of the tensions between a universal ethics and an ethics of particular relationships. Should the spirit of solidarity be applied to everyone or only those to whom one is close? Should one never money

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<sup>363</sup> Enfield (2014:140) provides an interesting case where a previous pronominal relationship seems to fade over time:

“I witnessed a case during dinner in a Luang Prabang restaurant with KS, a Lao colleague from Vientiane. As we were eating, a fellow pupil from KS’s high-school days happened to come into the restaurant. KS hadn’t seen him for nearly twenty years. Surprisingly for KS, the man used *kuu3* and *mùng2* for ‘I’ and ‘you’ from the outset. Given that the two men had no current relationship, this was immediately taken to be a mark of disrespect, or even aggression, and KS dared not reciprocate this use of bare pronouns. KS tried as swiftly as possible to close down what had become—for him at least—an uncomfortable interaction. Later, KS confessed that he had been genuinely scared of the man.”



gamble, or only do so with strangers? For *kuu3* and *mùng2*, the question is: Can one be ‘rude’ (*bò-suphaap4*), aggressive, or ‘low’ (*tam1*) to some people without also being a ‘rude’ person?

*Siaw1* did not have the dual pragmatic functionality of *kuu3* and *mùng2*, their metapragmatically elaborated capacity to index both love and aggression. To be *siaw1* is to literally be the same age (for which people often use the word *muu1*) but it more generally references a warm egalitarianism between people. One observer of Laos in the 1950s wrote that the term was synonymous with “friend to the death” (De Young 1955:27).<sup>364</sup> While one might find it presumptuous or annoying that a younger person called him *siaw1* (as I heard people complain on a few occasions), the term itself did not denote anything negative. It is not, like *kuu3* and *mùng2*, talked about as a form that one can use either to initiate or engage in a fight. *Siaw1* lacked these pronominals’ coarseness, and, tellingly, people thus never hesitated before adopting the term with me (although they sometimes laughed at the idea of having a foreign *siaw1*). Nevertheless, while the term emphasized only ‘love,’ such relations, as I show in the next section, were sometimes haunted by ambivalence.

### Thrown Away Friendships

*“When we play, just as when we contemplate a work of art, we experience an imaginary life, which as a matter of fact would lose its entire charm if it were indistinguishable from real life. If we like to play cards or roll dice, it is because the contest implied in these games is not without a certain similarity to the contests that pit us against each other in everyday life. But let that resemblance be too complete, e.g., when the stakes are too high and therefore too close to the regular income we receive from our work, the pleasure of the game disappears. We become serious, we once more become earnestly engaged in what we are doing. We are no longer playing....” (Moral Education: 272)- Émile Durkheim*

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<sup>364</sup> De Young wrote, “Close friendships between boys of the same age are very common in northern village life. Such friends are not called ‘die’ friends but *sio* [i.e., *siaw1*], although the *sio* might at times fit this ideal classification.”

Shortly after the WhatsApp group, ‘friends that do not throw each other away’ disbanded, I was invited to another WhatsApp group with some of the same people. Muu was not. This did not surprise me at the time. When I left the field, that is, before my return trip in late 2015, I already had a sense that Muu and a few others like Bêê and Nòòng were on the periphery of the group. When I was back in the United States, I was surprised when Muu sent me messages with photographs of Dii, Sii, along with others, drinking with him.

Cracks in their relationships had appeared long before then. One night in particular stood out as a turning point. The night is notable for several reasons, reasons that congeal some of the economic tensions that I have emphasized throughout this dissertation. It was only a month after Muu and I first agreed we would use *kuu3* and *mùng2* together. The night ended with a drunken consensus that Muu and Khêêng would still be ‘eating friends’ and drink together, but that they would no longer love one another. I did not film the arguments, but made extensive notes throughout the night, in a small notebook, and wrote up my experiences on my computer the following morning. The below narration is based on those notes.

On February 9, 2013, I woke up and went to a funeral with Phòò Thiàng. When I got home in the afternoon, I lounged in a chair in front of my house, talking with Phòò Thiàng as he chopped scrap, painted wood into smaller pieces to use in the cooking fire. Muu walked past on the street. He told me that he was going to play *katòò4* or rattan ball at a court around the block and that I could come along. The game, a Southeast Asian leisure shibboleth (Reid 1988), is played like volleyball but with a small wicker ball that one kicks and heads, often quite acrobatically. This was in the early afternoon. Since I was terrible at rattan ball, I watched as Muu and Dii played on a team with one another against Bêê and Nòòng, another *siaw1* in the

group. The games were for beer and snacks. It was a best two out of three. Dii and Muu won both games.

We then left to go drink the beer and eat the snacks that Muu and Dii had won. We decided to eat dog, but when we went to two dog places, they were both closed. We settled on a drinking spot near the *pétanque* stadium. As we drank, Khêêng joined us as did a few ‘older brothers’ (*phuak4 qaaj5*) whom we knew from the money gambling *pétanque* court. We invited them to join us as we saw them ride by on their motorcycles. They were on their way back from visiting prostitutes down the road and they ate and drank with us for maybe twenty minutes. Bêê, who did not know them, touched his elbow as he clinked glasses with them out of politeness. They then left, leaving no money for the bill (as expected, since we had invited them to sit down and were thus playing a kind of host). We decided to leave as well and asked for the bill, planning to play snooker at a snooker hall across town.

We split the bill. I did not notice, or note, any discussion about it, but Bêê and Nòòng did not outwardly offer to pay what they presumably owed from the game of *katòò4*. We had bought more food and drink than we had planned when they played the game, and had hosted people who they did not anticipate we would host, such as Khêêng and the ‘older brothers.’ Perhaps this was part of their thinking, that this absolved them from paying for everything, but the issue went un-raised at the time.

While we readied to leave, Muu and Khêêng talked about who would win in a game of snooker between the two of them. The conversation continued on the motorcycle ride over to the snooker hall. I sat on the back of Muu’s bike and he and Khêêng rode close to one another, jawing about who might win, and the stakes and terms of the game. When we arrived at the snooker hall, rather than organize a game of doubles like we normally did, so as to incorporate as

many people as possible, Muu and Khêêng convinced us that they should start by playing one game for six bottles of beer. At six bottles of beer or about 60,000 Kip, the stakes were higher than the 10,000 or 20,000 per game that we normally played for at the snooker hall. The higher stakes meant that Muu and Khêêng would play first. Like on the *pétanque* court, bigger games with more on the line took priority—many a beer game has been shut down by players who are planning to play a big money game, a tacit scaling of economic value and importance.

Muu lost the game. We then played doubles, Muu and I versus the others in teams of two. My team won both of our games. We decided to settle the bill and move to a *pétanque* court. This is when an argument ensued. Normally, in our snooker games, losers of a game would pay immediately after losing. They would balance the money earmarked for beer on the wire scoreboard to the side of the table or place it on the snooker table itself, but Muu had not paid after he lost to Khêêng, and, when we paid for these games, he offered an amount that did not account for those beers. He argued with Khêêng and Bêê as the rest of us looked on. Back and forth they went for what seemed like forever. People occasionally told them to ‘quiet’ (*mitl*) and calm down (*caj3 jênø-jên3*), but they persisted. During the argument, Muu told Khêêng and Bêê not to act like ‘little kids.’ He emphasized that they were being too demanding, and said repeatedly that his character was such that when he did not like something, he adamantly did not like it, and thus said something about it. Khêêng shot back, reminding Muu that he owed money for the games. To cool the fire, Nòòng, one of the other *siawl* present, told Khêêng and Muu to make up, and had them pose for pictures with a crate of beer, ritualizing the handing off of the six bottles that Muu had lost.



*Figure 55: Muu and Khêng pose for photos with a crate of beer.*

I and the others snapped a few photographs with our cell phone, including the one above. Nòng stands on the left side of the frame, trying to get the two men to look at the camera and shake hands, to pose around the transfer of goods like the Lao Development Lottery poses around its donations to the nation. Khêng offers his hand, Muu eventually takes it. The photo-op did little to resolve the argument. After additional bickering, Muu admitted that he did not have enough money with him to pay for the six beers. He paid the money that he did have and the group decided to go to its third competition of the night: *pétanque*.

It was already late into the night, and the *pétanque* courts were closed. We decided to go to a court that one of the *siaw1*'s family owned, which had gone quiet hours before. On the ride from the snooker hall, Muu and Khêêng again rode near one another, and I again sat on the back of Muu's motorcycle. They continued to argue. Muu yelled to Khêêng about the group of *siaw1* generally: 'You guys (*suu3*) bicker like little kids' and 'you guys (*suu3*) don't sympathize with your friends (*hen3 caj3 muu1*).' He used the second person plural pronominal *suu3*, which people say is as equally 'low' as *kuu3* and *mùng2*. Khêêng yelled back. He asked Muu to whom he was referring with *suu3*, 'Do you mean *kuu3*?' he said. Muu, furious, did not answer and we turned off the road to go back to his house to pick up more money before heading over to the *pétanque* court.

As we went to his house, Muu complained to me that Khêêng and Bêê were like children. He did not like their 'characters' (*nitsaj3*) or the way that 'they wanted what others had' (*khaw2 jaak5 daj4 khòng3 muu1*). When we reached the *pétanque* court, Khêêng and Bêê were waiting there with a case of beer cans that they had just bought. We turned on the weak lights connected to a post at the corner of the court and Muu continued to argue with the two men. As I wrote the next morning, the four other men who were there were mostly quiet, occasionally telling the Muu, Khêêng and Bêê to stop arguing. The dimly lit *pétanque* court allowed those who were not arguing to almost slip into the darkness and watch from afar. For much of the time at the court, Nòng sat on a bench on opposite side of the court from the light, occasionally shaking his head, silent. I sat near him and when I asked him why everyone was so upset, he again just shook his head. We then played for more beer. Muu's team won, and, upon winning, someone decided that they should pose for another picture of Muu and his winnings. This time Muu, Bêê, Khêêng, and

Nòòng all posed together, holding cans of beer Lao; Khêêng stuck his tongue out, smiling throughout.

After the photograph, I asked Bêê whether he was alright. In what seemed to be within Muu's earshot, he said that he was really upset. After the photograph, Muu and Khêêng continued to argue. Muu told Khêêng if he did not want to be friends anymore, that was fine, they could do that. Or maybe, he said, they could just not like each other, but still go and drink and eat together. Khêêng agreed with the second option, and as I wrote in my notes, he repeated almost exactly what Muu said: 'We will just not like one another, but still drink together.' The group would thus remain intact, but their relation to one another would fade.

As the men argued, they used *kuu3* and *mùng2* exclusively (or, at least, so I wrote down as I sat on the bench). I remember feeling a strange shift happening as they yelled. Rather than a 'breakthrough' into a new relationship by way of a change in pronouns (Friedrich 1979), it felt as if the same pronouns shifted in meaning, from indexing the intimacy of being *siaw1* to indexing anger; they 'broke through' from signaling mutual exposure to signaling mutual destruction. Khêêng left the *pétanque* court, and Muu asked Dii if he stay and continue drinking beer; he was so angry, he said, that he would not be able to sleep. Dii, having quietly sat through most of the night, said that he needed to go home. Muu and I then went home too.

When we got back to our neighborhood, Muu told me, unlike his agreement with Khêêng, that he was not going to spend any more time with Khêêng or Bêê. He said that I could, but he would not. He was done with them. And yet, he did spend some more time with them. After the fight, Bêê did begin to spend less time with the group generally. Namely, he stopped playing soccer so much. But Khêêng stuck around. This was not the first time I had seen him and Muu bicker. During a party the day before Dii's wedding, a month prior to day at the pool hall,

Muu and Khêêng argued about a different bet they had made. Khêêng bet Muu that he could ‘burn’ a cigarette with ‘just one puff.’ The bet was a trap, the kind of bar bet that is won through a technicality, a literal reading of an idiom. Khêêng lit the cigarette on fire, not just at its end, but across its entire length, and puffed at it once as it smoldered. Muu, he said, owed him a crate of beer. They argued for a while, as Dii’s other guests watched on. After the pair went home, I asked another of Dii’s friends from a group past who had been watching and did not know Khêêng or Muu well what had happened and whether the pair seemed upset. He said somewhat obliquely that they did seem upset. He told me: if people are good friends, you can joke with them. But if they are not good friends then jokes will make them ‘dislike’ you (*khiat4*). Clearly, he thought that Khêêng and Muu were not good friends.

After the big fight, Khêêng and Muu occasionally argued with each other, or became visibly annoyed, but they often also acted as if nothing had happened, as if their relationship was never strained. Perhaps they were, like they had said, going out together without liking one another. Perhaps they had gotten past it. Or perhaps, and this seems to me to be the closest to the truth, they stayed in an intermediary space that many acquaintances find themselves in, a knowing mix of unease and ‘love,’ of tension and friendship. As Muu’s relation with Khêêng stabilized, his tensions with others in the group grew. Slowly, over the next few months, a consensus developed that Muu was selfish—that he ‘wanted what others had,’ that he ‘used his heart’ too much or was too emotional, and that he wanted to compete with his friends. This was most clearly articulated in how he played, and bet on, sports and games. In fact, almost all of the arguments that Muu had with others in the group were premised on a disagreement about some competition: cards, *pétanque*, snooker, and most of all, soccer.



Muu's style of play in soccer was said to be symptomatic of his other characteristics.<sup>365</sup> He did not look out for his friends as he ran down the field; he never assisted goals only tried to make them. He thought he was better than he was. People would groan as he dribbled the ball endlessly, they would wave their hands wildly for him to pass. Dii took it upon himself on multiple occasions to talk to Muu, to tell him that others had a problem with his style of play. Dii understood himself to be giving Muu exactly the kind of frank, 'straight' talk that close friends are expected to be able to give (as I discuss in chapter four). This 'telling it like it is' evinces a close relationship. Like a hit to the head or the use of *kuu3* and *mùng2*, it presumes that the person with whom you are speaking will not take offence. Muu did, however, sometimes take offence, and many long nights were spent with three or four of us drinking, me sitting quietly, Muu telling Dii how the problem was that his teammates were unskilled, and Dii telling Muu that he, not them, was the problem.

Dii told me a few times that he knew that Muu was not listening to him or changing how he played. Eventually, people in the group began to invite me to play soccer but not Muu. Because Muu and I lived so close to one another, whoever was picking me up would normally ask me to wait down the road so there was less chance that Muu might see me or them in our soccer attire. On one of these days, I arrived at the field and Nòòng asked me if Muu was coming. I told him no. 'Good,' he said. This became a general pattern. The others in the group told me not to tell Muu we were playing. It was necessary to tell me this explicitly because no one was sure that I would know enough not to say anything to him, like a babysitting grandparent might instruct a child not to tell his parents that grandpa gave her an extra scoop of

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<sup>365</sup> See Archetti (1999) for discussion of how style in soccer can signify national character.

ice-cream. I found the whole situation terribly awkward, and would try to avoid bringing up soccer whenever I saw Muu.

I still spent time with Muu, as did Dii, but less than before. When we did go out together it was to play *pétanque* or snooker or to just drink. Only very rarely did we play soccer together. On a few occasions Muu organized games, but with a new team, consisting mostly of his brother-in-law's friends. In one case, his new team played the rest of our group. There was awkwardness, but as far as I could tell the rift between Muu and the rest of the group went unmentioned.

When I returned home the *kumI* as such seemed to spend much less time together. As I was writing in the United States, they would occasionally send me pictures of them drinking together. It was never clear to me exactly why 'friends that don't throw each other away' was disbanded, but almost immediately after it was, I was invited into another WhatsApp group, named after Sii's company. I soon realized that while I was gone, a new group of friends had been emerging, built around Sii's new company, and that the new chat group represented this group of friends. Muu was not invited into the chat group, and by implication, was not part of this group. I was advised, like the games of soccer before, not to tell him about it. He clearly knew, however. On one night, when the tension between him and Dii was strongest, the same night that he fought with his wife on the telephone, he asked me to come drink with him to settle himself down before he went home. During our conversation, he told me that he did not have any 'friends to the death' in Luang Prabang (*muuI taaj3*), only 'eating friends' (*muuI kin3*). Where he was from, a different province, he had some friends to the death, he added. Those were his real friends.

Some weeks into my last field trip, Muu found me at the money gambling *pétanque* court and told me I needed to come with him, that he wanted to bring me somewhere but that he could not tell me in front of anyone where it would be. I had a brief moment of worry, fear that he was going to drag me into something bad, steal my money, or worse. We had rarely been spending time together at this point, and I sensed that he resented me for that. As I wrote in my fieldnotes reflecting on the invitation the next morning, I was scared of my *siaw*. I went with him anyway and he did not after all drag me into something bad or at least not bad for me. Instead, he gave me an ethnographic gift. Some Thai friends of his were coming into town to play a big money game with some local snooker players. Muu knew these men were really good at snooker, and planned to set up the game and secretly bet on them as they hustled players in Luang Prabang. Muu invited me to tag along so that I might see what ‘real gambling’ looked like. He knew my interest in gambling and how much I would appreciate the gesture. We met the Thai gentlemen and one of their wives on a quiet road. We stepped out of Muu’s truck, they stepped out of their minivan, and Muu gave them a speech along a quiet stretch of the Mekong river. He said that they could not let anyone in Luang Prabang know about the conversation. He described the snooker hall to them, the tables, and how they would play in a private room where no one could make noise. He described their prospective opponents, their weaknesses, their skills. And they agreed that Muu would make a show of betting against them in front of the people in Luang Prabang who would be there, but take he would ultimately take a cut of the Thai group’s winnings.

It was a classic hustle; and by far the most effective one I have ever witnessed. The Thai men won more than 100,000 Baht that night or more than \$3,000 USD. They were paid in the first few games with crisp and clean 1,000 Baht bills, and by the end, mixes of US dollars, Baht,

and Kip. The Lao men clearly had to dig into their pockets to pay off the bets. It was exactly the kind of money gambling people imagine but which almost never happens—strangers against one another, playing for big money. On the day after, the *pétanque* court was buzzing with people talking about it. I had had an inside view and told them about the scene, minus, of course, Muu's speech and secret bets. Nevertheless, people immediately suspected Muu, but he pretended that he had lost like the rest of them.

While the Thai men gambled with their Lao counterparts, Muu and I sat next to one another in plastic chairs, drinking beers. I had my cell phone out, occasionally taking pictures—they would not let me film the game. As I sat there, enraptured in what was happening in front of me, Muu asked me straightforwardly, perhaps hoping to catch me off guard, what the name of the *siawl*'s new WhatsApp group was, because, he said, 'I accidently quit the group.' I did not know what to say. I was holding my cellphone and Muu was looking down at it. I said that I wasn't sure of the group's name, but that I was in it, but only because Sii and the rest of the group wanted to humor me, to include me (which was perhaps the truth). I added that the new group was mostly for Sii's business. Muu stopped asking about the group and we continued to watch the Thai snooker team win game after game.

Later that night, we went to drink at a party our village was hosting, held on the temple grounds. We drank and ate and stayed out late into the night. I left a few weeks later. Muu's relationship with Sii and Dii and the others in the group had almost evaporated by then, following a few other incidents and arguments. As a kind of going-away party, I asked everyone to come to the bowling alley with me. Muu arrived late with another man from our village. They did not stay for very long and after they left, Sii and Dii told me that Muu had only brought the

other man because he was scared we would beat him up. The *kum1* that seemed so solid when I arrived in Laos had been thrown away, or at least, it had morphed into something else.

When I called Dii on WhatsApp from the United States, I was surprised to hear him tell me that Muu just had a new baby and had moved away. Muu had already told me about his newborn but I was surprised that Dii seemed to care; he talked about Muu as if Muu was still his close friend. When I asked him when was the last time he had spoken with Muu, he said he was not sure, but that it had been awhile. In a long audio message, he described to me how he felt about the situation:

*Whatever it is, there's friendship, siaw1 [Zuckerman]. Mutual love is better than mutual hate. If...if people know they did something wrong and they want to change, then we have to give them a chance to change. You don't lose anything in doing that, and it's even better for us, too.<sup>366</sup>*

Before I left, Dii thought Muu was too scared to even go to my party alone. The new physical distance between them and time seemed to make their relationship better again. But, in its distance, it was now also more of an abstraction, the kind of ideal that Piker (1968) shows is embodied in 'friendship to the death.' The kind of friendship that is not repeatedly consummated, but that lives on in pictures one can post to Facebook or send through WhatsApp.

Muu is my friend. Our relationship is still warm. Just as I was writing this, he messaged me telling me that he (*kuu3*) 'missed' me (*mùng2*). He sent photographs of us drinking together taken almost two years before. I missed him too. But as his friendship with others in the *kum1* frayed, so did my friendship with him. This was not just because I could not spend time with him and these others. I grew frustrated with him at times. I lent him money to pay off a gambling

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<sup>366</sup> *nèw2 daj3 kaø-muu1 khuu1 kan3 siaw1. mak1 phèng2 kan3 dii3 kwaal sang2 kan3. khan2 thaa5 vaa1 thaa5 vaa1 khaw2 nòq1. huu5 vaa1 too3 qêng3 qee3 hét1 bòø-thùik5 siq1. khaw2 jaak5 pian3 pèng3 siq1 haw2 kaø-haj5 qookaat5 khaw2. man2 kaø-bòø-mii2 ñang3 sia3 haaj3 nêq1 lêq1 pên3 kaan3 dii3 tòd1 haw2 qiik5.*

debt that he never paid back and was upset by it. One thing that struck me was that as others shut him out, however, they told me not to. Dii and Sii, for instance, both said to me on multiple occasions that I should still spend time with him: ‘Go with him,’ they told me. The sense I got was that even if they did not want to ‘be near him’ anymore, they wanted to preserve friendship generally. Friendship, imagined as the product of love and mutual consumption, was good. Their no longer spending time with Muu did not change that.

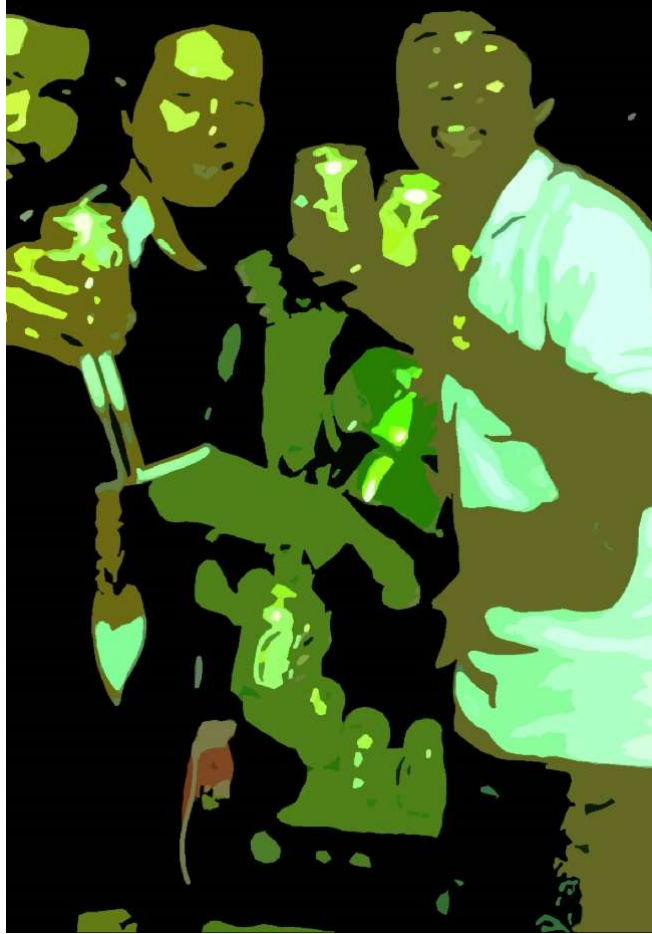
## Conclusion

The anthropology of friendship has struggled to stabilize its often casual-seeming object (see, for example, Paine 1999; Beer and Gardner 2015; Pitt-Rivers 2016). Scholars simultaneously treat friendship as a constant, natural outgrowth of living together over the course of a life, while also treating it as something flimsy, quickly to be dismantled. In this chapter, I have shown how men in Luang Prabang deal with similar tensions surrounding friendship. The *siawI* in Luang Prabang both recognize friendship and emphasize its possible perdurance.

Laos, as has long been noted, is a place where hierarchical relations are the norm. Relations of being *siawI*, thus, in their presumed equality stand apart. Splitting the bill, using reciprocal address terms, being friends with people of the same age, these are all technologies for maintaining that equality. In respect of this emphasis, gambling and sports can appear to be an out-of-place activity. While people avoid relations of ‘feeding’ or *liang4* when they go out together, gambling for beer produces the same economic result, functioning as a kind of raffle for who should *liang4* when an event is not held at someone’s house. As such, gambling and competition during games like *pétanque* and snooker flirt with inequality. In fact, much of what the *siawI* did together that they said evinced their social relations also seemed to invite low levels of conflict that tested those same relations: pronouns that flirted with offense, smacks to

the head, competitive spending. Friendship was imagined to rise above such tensions by conquering them, and its importance for people was in part a function of the fact that having friends signaled that someone had overcome the tensions inherent in communal consumption. Good friends are a testament to one's economic, social, and moral quality.

To conclude here, I want to linger for a second on the photographs that Muu was asked to take during his argument with the other men. Why take these photographs in such a heated moment? What did they do? Muu sent me a series of photographs on WhatsApp recently: photographs of us drinking together with the old group of *siawl* and photographs of his family in their new home. In response, I sent him a few photographs of us that I had on my phone. One was the picture of him, Khêêng, Nòòng, and Bêê, the second photo-op of the night of our argument, taken at the *pétanque* court. In the photograph—reproduced with significant overlain effects below to preserve the men's identities—Muu and Khêêng are shaking hands and holding the cans of beer Muu has just won from Khêêng. It struck me as I sent the photograph through WhatsApp, that it was not noticeably out of place. Khêêng had been in other photos that Muu had sent to me and in the photo that I sent to him the conflict surrounding its origins was invisible. Muu did not seem to notice; he immediately sent me a similar photo, a picture of himself drinking with his wife and some other friends in his new home.



*Figure 56: A photograph taken after the argument*

Staged photographs like this one are ostensibly ‘good representations,’ as I described in chapter three. Perhaps the camerawork and the posing was sloppier, given the intoxication of the men involved, and perhaps Khêêng would not have stuck out his tongue if it were a more formal photograph, but it was crafted to look much like the pictures in newspapers of donation-giving ceremonies, of formal exchanges at parties, of graduations.

The photograph was fundamentally creative in its representational force: it hoped to bring about the state of affairs it represented. The men had organized this picture, and the picture taken before at the snooker hall, as a way to heal the relationship between Muu and Khêêng. The beer in between them had in part caused the argument and threatened to fray their friendship. Now it made manifest the bet and the sociality surrounding it and it did so at the exact moment that that



sociality was at risk. It painted a picture of enduring friendship, even as relations were beginning to fray.

## Chapter 9 Good Gambling

### Introduction

There are two contexts in which almost all Lao people agree that gambling for money is an acceptable thing to do: post-partum houses and funerary wakes, like the ‘good house’ described in chapter four. There is little about the card gambling *per se* that is different at these events. The games and rules are the same, the amount gambled is at times equivalent to what might be gambled elsewhere. Nevertheless, people often view gambling outside of these events as inherently problematic while viewing gambling within them as necessary. When I asked why, the answers were predictable: gambling draws and keeps a crowd.

This apparently simple account evinces a complicated cultural logic. The account presupposes that the hosts of these events not only have ideas about what gambling as a type of economy does sociologically and psychologically—how it draws in attention, activates desires, and keeps a crowd—but that they use this socio-psychological knowledge to mobilize gambling as a cultural tool for a greater, encompassing end. The logic appears utilitarian. Like the early announcements for the Development Lottery, which claimed that the lottery would launder people’s individual economic hopes into a fund for developing the nation, gambling at post-partum houses and wakes is said to be good not because of why people do it but because of what it does. What matters is that gambling mobilizes the social body to go to and remain at the house of either the recently departed or the emergent person, and thus makes the event succeed.

In this chapter, I reflect on two dimensions of these accounts and justifications for gambling at post-partum houses and wakes. First, I focus on funerals and ask why having people at a wake is a worthy goal in the first place. What is it about the presence of others that is valuable? I survey the answers my interlocutors in Luang Prabang, and researchers in Thailand and Laos,

have given to this question. The answers vary and stress both the safety—from ghosts and thieves—and the emotional contentment, fun, and palpable sociality that comes with other people. I then explore what it is about gambling that brings people to the house: its capacity to grab attention, induce flow, and cause people to forget the passage of time.

Next, I move to post-partum houses and explore how people actually gamble at these events. I ask, much like I did in chapter seven where I reflected on gambling for money on *pétanque*, whether people gamble at these events in ways reflecting the larger aim the gambling at post-partum houses is supposed to have. Do they play with an eye toward positive sociality? Do they discipline their gambling (Keane 2008b), signal to one another and to themselves that their aims are non-economic, that they are striving toward a greater good?

### **Greedy Gambling**

The first night I met Muu, he gave me a ride home and on the ride told me he did not like Bêê. We had been at Bêê's house for hours, playing cards for money and drinking Beer Lao. The gambling was raucous. Bêê's sister had to tell us to quiet down multiple times, reminding us that the house was in the middle of the old part of the city, sandwiched between a spa and a small hotel or 'guest house.'

Muu, who planned to drive me home, had throughout the night implied that I wanted to leave the house earlier than he did. Hours before we actually left, he said, unprompted, that we could leave after he won back some of his money. I told him not to worry about it, that I was happy to sit and drink and watch the card game, which I was learning to play. As the night wore on, Muu repeatedly told me we would leave soon and I, in turn, told him that I was fine. His insistence was strange enough that I jotted it down in my notebook.

At midnight, rather than ask me again, he told me it was time to leave. He had lost money playing cards. He walked briskly out of the house; I found my shoes in the pile at the door, awkwardly said goodbye to Bêê and the others, and met him outside. After we had sputtered only a few feet down the road on his small motorbike, Muu said that if he did not have to drive me home, he would have stayed at Bêê's much later and won back his money. I told him, again, that I was fine to stay longer and that we could go back to Bêê's house. Muu demurred and then began to excoriate Bêê. He yelled as we rode down the otherwise quiet streets. He said that he did not like Bêê's personality, that Bêê always acted like a child. Bêê 'just wants what his friends have.' 'In actuality,' Muu explained, 'he is not my *siawl*, but my little brother.'

Muu and I had gone to Bêê's house that night to celebrate a recent development in Bêê's life: less than a month before, his wife had given birth to their second son. Since the birth, Bêê had hosted guests at his house almost nightly for drinking and gambling; his was a typical post-partum house. Per custom, he placed a basket, called the *tong3*, next to each card game, which served as a repository for donations to him, his wife, and their new son. On the ride home, Muu told me that he especially disliked Bêê repeatedly asking him to put money in this basket. 'Even after he saw that I was losing money,' Muu said, 'Bêê kept asking me to put money in the basket!' When I dismounted at my house, I felt at the time like my new friend Muu had revealed some old social fault lines, the result of a long and intimate relationship with Bêê.

The next evening, Muu drove me back to Bêê's house for a party called an *qòòk5 dùan3*, or 'exiting of the month [of seclusion].' The party marked the end of the string of late-night visiting and gambling sessions and the beginning of Bêê's son's emergence in the larger social world. We arrived early and sat with Dii. The event was much more formal than the night before; we

dressed well, were greeted with a *nop2* at the entrance and a shot of liquor, and brought gifts of money in the envelopes that had held our invitations. There was no gambling.

Dii had come early to the *qòòk5 dùan3* to help set up, acting like a de facto second host.<sup>367</sup> Muu and I sat with him and started drinking beer. I asked Dii who had won money gambling the night before, after Muu and I left. The winner, he said matter of factly, was *qaaj5 nòòj4*—that is, Bêê’s newborn, or ‘small older brother.’<sup>368</sup> Dii was not markedly offended by my question but his answer was stern and knowing. He made it clear that I had asked the wrong question; I had emphasized the wrong values. The evening’s gambling was not about the guests winning or losing. Instead, it was about supporting Bêê’s newborn child. We were gambling, yes, but our goal had been to spend time with Bêê and his family and to raise money for the new baby by putting money in the *tong3*. Our goal was not to win money. Suggesting otherwise was crude and calculating.

Of course, in his complaints to me the night before, Muu had suggested otherwise. On the motorcycle ride, he said that he wished he could have stayed later not so that he might have given more money to the baby, but rather so that he might have taken back his money from the newborn’s father. In his complaints, Muu not only treated the event like a money-making opportunity, but also accused Bêê of doing so, of being calculating and greedy when he should have been generous, of wanting too much from his friends. Even Dii, for his part, had acted as if he cared about the money. He spent much of the night gambling aggressively and celebrating each hand he won. Khòòp, his wife, even sat out as we played cards because, as she said, she and Dii would just ‘be winning each other’s money.’ If he had been fully possessed by the intention

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<sup>367</sup> When I arrived, he poured me beer and put the ice in for me, but when I tried to take over serving he told me that I couldn’t because I was ‘the guest’ (*khèèk5*). This was just as I began to spend time with him and the other *siawl*.

<sup>368</sup> *Qaaj5 nòòj4* is a respectful and cutesy way to refer to a young boy.

of gambling for the young boy, wouldn't it not matter that he was playing against his wife? Any losses would have inevitably led to a double donation.

Dii framed the aim of the gambling that night as obvious but the other things people did and said tacitly sketched it as unsettled. Why were we gambling at Bêê's house? For the baby? For our friend that would raise that baby, feed it, and buy things for it? To keep that friend company? Or were we gambling for money? Money to put in our pockets, to spend on our own school fees, or to give to our wives?

### **Funerary Gambling**

*The telos of the funeral casino is, as they say of the gift economy, to establish relationships between people—to produce a community. In this case a community of gamblers for the sake of the dead.*

*-Alan Klima (2002:251-252)*

Paa's 'good house' or *hùan2 dii3*, which I described in chapter four, was in part so tragic because it did not draw a crowd. The dearth of bodies haunted the event with a sense of failure; the people who were there talked about it throughout the event. A crowd at a funeral is, in some ways, not unlike a crowd at a wedding: it manifests one's entire social network (Mariani 2012:157) and is often read as a sign of the quality of the person who died. Paa had not been social in the last years of her life, partly because she was bedridden. This fact was made palpable on the first night after her death, when Phòò Thiang sat alone with her corpse, playing solitaire.<sup>369</sup> Compare this with a Lao funeral that High (2011:225) describes in which...

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<sup>369</sup> One of my host aunts, for instance, said that only a few people came to Paa's funeral because she did not go to their funerals. This was not a magical point. The aunt was not saying that those who predeceased Paa might have attended her funeral if she had only attended theirs. Instead, she was sketching a theory of how events like these work and what they mean: the more social you are, the more you attend to the needs of others, the more people come to you in your time of need, whether before or after death.

*[talk about the funeral] continually returned to describing the great overflow of attendees. There had been so many visitors that they had filled the large house, and a neighboring abandoned house had been opened up to shelter guests. When this was full, a neighboring shed that had once housed a rice mill was also opened. The massing of people I was told, at times explicitly, was a sign of [the deceased woman's] extraordinary qualities. 'She was no ordinary person,' one neighbor said, 'she knew a lot of people.'*

When I asked people in Luang Prabang why they wanted a crowd at a funeral or post-partum house, they normally pointed out that the crowd 'guarded' (*faw5*) the house. That one should 'guard' a house is a basic fact of daily life.<sup>370</sup> On the day of Paa's cremation, I did not even attend the ceremony because Phòò Thiang and Mèè Phòòn told me to stay at home with Salina's two daughters. My role was as much babysitter as house-sitter. This emphasis on guarding the house is not a withering relic of the older generation, phased-out among younger people.

Although my friends would often leave their houses unattended—and older people would sometimes nostalgically mention this as a habit of 'kids these days'—my friends also cared about whether or not their houses were guarded. They would sometimes excuse themselves from an engagement by saying that there was no one to 'guard' the house. Dii, for instance, frequently invited me over to his place rather than accept my invitation to go somewhere else, ostensibly so that he would not abandon (*paq2*) his house (although he also had other reasons, as discussed in the previous chapter, for wanting to stay home).<sup>371</sup>

At funerals (and post-partum houses like Bêê's as well) the stakes are higher and the imperative to guard the house, and especially the corpse of the deceased, is stronger. Some

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<sup>370</sup> Every time I left Luang Prabang, either to head to another province or back home, for example, I would invite Phòò Thiang and Mèè Phòòn to join me at a restaurant in town, an admittedly foreign ritual for celebrating and thanking them. Each time, however much I would push, only one of them would come and the other would stay home to 'guard' the house.

<sup>371</sup> Mentioning that one needed to guard the house, in fact, was one of the most effective ways to leave an event or decline an invitation, and I learned to wield the tool myself. Being at the house, as I describe in chapter six, is also gendered.

people told me that this was because the house and its inhabitants needed to be protected from ghosts (*phii3*). Ghosts target people who are alone. A group of people, especially a group of people wide awake, can keep these ghosts away. People often, for example, refuse to ride a motorcycle at night alone for ‘fear of ghosts’ (*jaan4 phii3*).<sup>372</sup> One woman I knew would frequently invite her friend to stay over at her house so as to not sleep alone. In guarding the *huan2 dii3* with a mass of bodies, mourners built a wall against ghostly intruders.<sup>373</sup>

In Luang Prabang, some people were skeptical of this motivation for guarding the corpse and of the existence of ghosts generally. At times, I heard comments like those that Ladwig (2012:444) heard from monks at a “rather ‘modernist’ monastery” in Vientiane: there was no such thing as ghosts, people sometimes said (also see Kitiarsa 2002). This kind of skepticism was particularly prominent when I volunteered at a hospital in Luang Prabang before I started training as an anthropologist. In the advanced English class I taught, we read an academic article on birthing practices among Katang people and some of my medically trained students argued that ghosts did not exist. Even these skeptical medical professionals, however, many of whom had been trained to argue against spirit beliefs in their daily practices, articulated complex attitudes about whether ghosts existed and whether they were frightening. People would change their position on whether ghosts existed depending on the situation in which they found themselves. For instance, some of the same medical professionals later told me in more casual settings that they believed that the old hospital in Luang Prabang, which had become the city’s

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<sup>372</sup> Just as in the United States, people in Laos treat the night as inherently more frightening than the day, especially when encountered alone.

<sup>373</sup> This idea of guarding the good house is not unique to Laos or Thailand. Rather, as Terwiel (1979:406) puts it in his ethnographic survey of Tai funerary cultures, “keeping the corpse under constant guard is an aspect of the original Tai funeral rite.” Terwiel continues to point out that the custom “may well be related to fear of the dead person....”



fanciest hotel, was haunted and that even if they had the money to pay for a night in the luxurious complex, they would be too ‘scared’ to sleep there.

In conversations like these about ghosts, ‘belief’ (*khwaam2 sùal*) and ‘fear’ (*khwaam2 jaan4*) are often disentangled (cf. Spiro 1996). An ‘older brother’ of mine, with whom I lived during my first month in Luang Prabang, for instance, told me that people who did not believe in spirits had no need to fear them. At first, I thought he meant that those who were unafraid of ghosts did not need to fear spirits because they could live in blissful ignorance *as if* there were no spirits. But he clarified that the consequences of disbelief were more powerful than that: the spirits themselves would not attack non-believers; such people were invincible. A story in a 2005 collection of Lao jokes and tales called “There are no ghosts in the world” (ກະວີນຸດ 2005: 49-50) inverted the same theme.<sup>374</sup> In the story, one friend says to another that ghosts do not exist but that he is still scared of ghosts. “How are you afraid of ghosts if they don’t exist?”<sup>375</sup> his friend asks. He responds: “There are not any ghosts, but I am still scared because society has led me to be scared since I was born. Scared? Yeah, I am really scared. But I don’t believe there are ghosts because I’ve never seen one.”<sup>376</sup>

Believers and non-believers both sometimes disagreed as to which spirit one should fear at any particular funeral and whether one should fear it all. Like those who expressed the vague sense of concern about my survey—where it was left murky whether the CIA, the Lao state, or ‘my boss,’ might later read what they wrote—many people were unconcerned with delimiting, once and for all, from what exactly one was protecting the *hùan2 dii3*. Multiple people with whom I spoke mentioned that they were concerned not with ghosts but with cats. One woman,

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<sup>374</sup> *bòl mii2 phii3 juul naj2 look4*

<sup>375</sup> *siq1 jaan4 phii3 nèw2 daj3 haak5 vaa1 phii3 bòl mii2.*

<sup>376</sup> *phii3 bòl mii2... tèl haak5 jaan4 phii3, phòq1 sangkhom2 phaa2 jaan4 maa2 tèl keet5, lùang4 jaan4 mèn1 jaan4 thèè4 tèl haak5 vaa1 bòl sùal vaa1 mii1 phii3, phòq1 bòl hèn2 phii3 cak2 thùal*

Moo, from chapter four, for instance, told me that although she did not believe the claim now, in the past people believed that you had to guard a casket to deter a cat from jumping over it. If a cat did cross the casket, the corpse would rise. Ghosts and thieves seemed vaguely substitutable. When Mèè Phòòn and Phòò Thiang directed me to ‘guard’ our own house during the cremation day, for instance, they seemed equally concerned about spiritual intruders (*phii3*) as they were human intruders (*coon3*). When Phòò Thiang briefly left his older sister’s *hùan2 dii3*, he likewise told me not to leave the platform where Paa’s corpse rested, both, it seemed at the time, so I could guard the collection of donated money from potential thieves (like Kham) and to guard the house.<sup>377</sup>

If one were scared of spirits, the identities of such spirits were often underdetermined. Was the spirit worth fearing the ghost of the biographical, recently deceased person clinging to her loved ones, her old property, her old body? Or was it the ghost of some indefinite person, attracted to the scene of death to exploit the compromised state of sad mourners? Tambiah (1970:193) wrote that at a *hùan2 dii3*, “the spirit (*winjan*) of the dead hovers dangerously. This spirit may attack the closely related living kinsmen because of its previous attachment to kin, property, and house.” Most people seemed to accept this as one possible reality at a funeral. At Paa’s *hùan2 dii3*, Phòò Thiang, Salina, and I all slept in the structure with her corpse. As Salina settled down, she asked if I could sleep on the side closer to the casket—she was scared, she said. At a different *hùan2 dii3*, I heard the son of the recently deceased woman, who was about

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<sup>377</sup> Although, it is worth pointing out that in mentioning only thieves or ghosts, people might be read as having indexed themselves as distinct kinds of person. I heard women talk more about being scared of ghosts than men. Muu, for instance, once had me walk back with him for the crab/fish (*puu3 paa3*) game at the fair because, as he told me during the walk, he was scared to walk alone because of ‘thieves’—while he might have said ghosts, my sense is that he would not have. The connection between the two entities appears in Thai writings as well. Take, for instance, Phya Anuman Rajadhon’s (1987:72) explanation for why people keep a light burning in the house of a newly birthed baby (note that *hùan2 dii3*’s also have a light burning until the day of cremation): “[A]nd a light must be kept burning. The excuse they give is that if they keep a light burning spirits will be afraid to enter. This is clever reasoning because fire and light are enemies to spirits (to say nothing of spirits, thieves also dislike them).”

twenty years old, casually say that he did not want to stay at the house because he was scared of a ghost (or ghosts—number is unmarked in Lao nominals). Someone sitting nearby interjected: he should not fear his own mother. The implication was that someone so close would not do him harm.<sup>378</sup> The fact that the young man worried about his mother’s ghost in the first place, and was told that he need not, shows that such principles are not automatically shared, but negotiated during ordinary interaction.

Phòò Thiàng told me during an interview that he was not scared of his sister’s ghost, but he also stressed that most people would be, especially if any of them had slept alone next to her corpse, as he did the night she died. This included Kham and Thii. ‘Why didn’t they spend time with you during the night?’ I asked Phòò Thiàng, “*bòø-huu4 nam2 khaw2*,” or “I don’t know about them,” he began, using a phrase that often prefaced evaluation, “[M]aybe they were scared, maybe they were whatever, I don’t know, hahaha.”<sup>379</sup> “Maybe they were scared?”<sup>380</sup> I asked. “Scared, really scared...scared of the person that died, let’s put it like that.”<sup>381</sup> But while Phòò Thiàng said Thii might have been scared, when I asked Thii about the night, she described it very differently. We sat where her mother’s casket had been and talked about Phòò Thiàng spending the night there: “[A]nd older sister, did you sleep down there, or did you sleep up here?”<sup>382</sup> “I slept up here also, I wasn’t scared, I slept up here,”<sup>383</sup> she told me, matter-of-factly. When I asked these questions, I had not mentioned fear to either Phòò Thiàng or Thii, but both brought the subject up when discussing sleeping at the house, and both claimed that they were not scared.

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<sup>378</sup> I also heard people imply the correlate to this, that those who are strangers might do more harm to you. When I asked Mèè Phòòn whether she was going to join Phòò Thiàng and me as we wandered over to a Vietnamese neighbor’s funeral, she responded *khii5 jaan4* or ‘[I’m too] scared.’

<sup>379</sup> *caak4 khaw2 jaan4 caw4 khaw2 ñang2 bòø-huu4*

<sup>380</sup> *qaat5 caø-kaø-jaan4 bòò1*

<sup>381</sup> *jaan4 thèè4 jaan4 jaan4 khon2 taaj3 han5 vaw4 san5 jee4*

<sup>382</sup> *lêq kaø-qùaj4 dèè1 nòn2 juul han4 bòò3 lùù3 nòn2 juul theng1 phii4*. This ‘gift’ from Paa set off a another point of tension between Salina and Thii, who thought she deserved the ring.

<sup>383</sup> *khòj5 nòn2 juul theng1 phii4 khùù2 kan3 bòø-jaan4 nòn2 theng1 lee2*

It is possible that Phòò Thiàng and Thii's accounts were both true—perhaps Thii spent some of the night in her own bed and some of the night hanging out with her mother's corpse, sleeping or even lying down (the verb *nòòn2* by itself is ambiguous between the two actions)—but whether or not both accounts were true, it is clear that the moments of self-presentation in which Thii and Phòò Thiàng claimed that they were not afraid of ghosts at the funeral, and in which Phòò Thiàng claimed that Thii was afraid of ghosts at the funeral, accomplished some pragmatic work. In saying that they were not afraid, Phòò Thiàng and Thii both indexed themselves as dutiful mourners, who gave the corpse company and, as a result, made the funeral slightly less sorrowful.

That people in part use claims of fear to do interactional work, to present themselves as certain kinds of person helps explain apparent divergences and ambivalences in how people relate to the dead. Salina, for instance, said that she was too scared to sleep next to Paa's corpse but, the next morning, she was convinced that Paa was helping her and had offered to her the ring that she found searching through Paa's post-cremated bones as a gift.<sup>384</sup>

Exactly from whom one is 'guarding' the house can be a moral question. Most people think that people who die a violent death are much more likely to become dangerous spirits.<sup>385</sup> Some people worked hard to frame the nature of the death as a happy one, and thereby emphasize the chances that the deceased will be reborn happy rather than forced to wander the world of the

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<sup>384</sup> See Tambiah's (1970:186–187) discussion of the 'collection of bones' for a related practice. People in Luang Prabang search not only for the coin Tambiah mentions, but for any jewelry left on the body. The person that finds the jewelry is said to be given it by the deceased.

<sup>385</sup> Many anthropologists have written about such deaths, in which people *taaj3 hung3* or die unnaturally (e.g., Langford 2013; Formoso 1998; Tambiah 1970; Eberhardt 2006; Mills 1995; Johnson 2014; Bouté 2012). Tambiah (1970:189–190) notes, for instance, that "these spirits are said to hover on earth because of their attachment to worldly interests, having been plucked from life before completing a normal life cycle." Eberhardt (2006:68–69), in her book about Shan people in Thailand, remarks that these deaths make the implicit "darker side of Shan funeral rites" explicit, where "making merit for the dead to help them 'get to a good place' can...also be seen as giving the spirits of the dead whatever they need to make them go away."

living, hungry. I experienced the tension around framing the nature of a death and the possibility of haunting personally when I discussed how my own biological brother, Andy, had died in northern Laos, years before my fieldwork. Andy's death was a quintessential violent death—a motorcycle crash. As Lao people asked questions like whether his corpse was flown back to the United States after he died (it was), I found myself defensively detailing how not only was his corpse cremated in the United States, in his hometown, but that he was a man of great character and merit. I would add that I had since made significant merit for him, both by briefly becoming a novice monk and giving to the temple and that so had my parents. The elephant in the room during these conversations—the elephant that I was herding away, so to speak—was that Andy might not have been reborn but was left wandering and hungry as a ghost around northern Laos. I would have been crushed and furious if someone had told me that he was.

My obsession with shouting down the possibility that my loved one was a dangerous spirit was not mine alone. The day that I heard of Paa's death, I was interviewing someone when a passerby told us that a man in our neighborhood had died earlier in the afternoon—a traffic accident, the passerby said. Over the next few days, I heard varying stories about the man's death: some said he was dizzy, others said he was drunk and could not drive. His relatives in a noodle-soup shop a few houses down from his house stressed the story that he was dizzy. But others, less connected to him, gave more critical accounts. A few people, who knew him only a little, told me that he was not even driving during the accident but sitting on the back of a motorcycle with a long-term mistress—or perhaps a prostitute he had just met—driving for him. While those close to him pitied the man, others said that he had caused his own death—his drinking and his philandering had caught up with him. It was a holy day (*van2 sin3 dap2*), after all, a day when one is both more likely to be injured and when the karmic consequences of dying

are more severe, a day when one should definitely not be riding around drinking with women other than one's wife.

The tendency for loved ones to frame a death as a happy one was also made clear to me during an interview with another neighbor who has a habit of divining lottery numbers with a method called *phii3 naang2 kwak4*. The *phii3 naang2 kwak4* is a puppet of sorts that spirits can enter, dance, and then use its arms—held up by a pair of living, human widows—to write lottery numbers into raw rice. For divination, the best ghosts—the ghosts that are most powerful or *khiu3* the most—are those who have died unnatural deaths. My neighbor, a widow who conducted such ceremonies, told me how she would sometimes lead a ghost to her ceremony by making a trail of raw rice from the spot of the deceased person's house or death. She did this because it allowed her to conduct the ceremony without alerting the ghost's family. I asked her why she would not tell the ghost's relatives that she was doing the ceremony. 'It would make them sad,' she said, sad to think that their relative had not been reborn after all but left to hang about, be hungry, and occasionally give lottery numbers to widows.

Framing a deceased person's death in the right way make the person's family happy and, in fact, making both the family and the spirit of the deceased happy is the other reason people give for wanting a crowd to 'guard' the house.<sup>386</sup> If protection is, as Eberhardt called it, the 'dark side' of these Tai funeral rituals, which is only mentioned in moments of concern about ghosts, happiness and merit are their bright side.

This bright side is frequently mentioned in Lao written accounts for why people celebrate Lao funerals in the way that they do. In the collection of essays *Kingdom of Laos*, the former

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<sup>386</sup> Keyes (1980:9) calls the events of the nights after the death "a wake in the truly Irish sense" and writes that "[t]he overt purpose of such wakes, I was told, including very much the seemingly irreverent behavior of the young people, is to dispel the sorrow of the bereaved."

minister of education, Thao Nhouy Abhay (1959: 144), anticipated how strange Westerners might find the happiness of funerals: “Among the Laotian customers” he wrote, “there are none which comes a greater surprise—or as a shock, no doubt—to Europeans traditionally imbued with the respect for death and for the departed, than the contrast between the pomp of the great funerals of Western Christianity and the popular rejoicing which at home accompanies the last farewell to our beloved ones.”<sup>387</sup> One American observer writes of the reasoning behind such happiness: “[T]he Lao believe that a family [*sic*] show of sadness would retard the rebirth of the spirit of the deceased in a better existence or prevent its attainment of nirvana” (Whitaker *et al.* 1972:120). Tambiah (1970:185), likewise, describes the wake as aimed precisely at making the family members happy and he even translates “*gnan hyan dee*” or, *ngan2 huan2 dii3*, as “to make the family members happy.”<sup>388</sup> Although ‘gathering at the good house’ might have been a more literal translation, Tambiah’s translation of the northeastern Thai phrase captures some local etymological explanations for why people call it the ‘good house’ in the first place. In cultural manuals written in the Lao language, authors give some related but alternate

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<sup>387</sup> He continues: “And, while the monks are praying and the parents keeping a night vigil over the mortal remains laying in the coffin, and the workers preparing the catafalque and putting the last touch to the ornamentations of the bier, life goes on around in joyful animation. Girls are rolling cigarettes and preparing cakes. Gathered around a tobacco chewing set for Mak Poun Ya, brought together by the Mak thot and all kinds of games appropriates [*sic*] to these night vigils—which are banned in nay other circumstances, owing to some superstitions, no doubt—*phubaos* and *phusaos*, seem to give a denial to the strict admonishments of the monks, in making at the very sight of death an outburst of life and youth. How many new lives were thus shaped in the very shadow of death, how many matches were thus formed beside the coffin. The parents themselves are themselves involved in this outburst of life and are taking part in the general liveliness. This must not be interpreted as indifference towards the loved one who has just passed away, but if they would show their grieves too openly, this would not only be a breach of good manners; but their regrets too loudly expressed might hold back the soul of the departed and prevent it from flying to the blissful land of the great beyond. At the sound of the orchestras, which sometimes drown the laughters of the crowd, people drink, dance and play... The feast is in full swing, the great feat of life proves itself stronger than death which is, after all, the gateway to a new life” (1959: 146-147).

<sup>388</sup> He writes (1970:185): “The chanting was followed by the wake ‘to make the family members happy’ (*gnan hyan dee [ngan2 huan2 dii3]*)’. Many people, both old and young, stayed on in the funeral house until very late, the old conversing and the young playing games. This was an occasion for young people of both sexes to have fun together. On the following two nights as well people visited the funeral house, both to listen to the monks’ chanting and to make the bereaved family happy.”

explanations for the phrase *hùan2 dii3*. The famous Lao intellectual Maha Sila Viravong (ສິລາ ວິຣະວົງສ໌ 2014:76–77) wrote in a section titled ‘*ngan2 hùan2 dii3*,’ for instance, that the name comes from the fact that the people who visit the funeral are ‘good-hearted’ (*caj3 dii3*) with ‘compassion’ (*mêêtaa3 qaarii2*) toward the family of the deceased. Sila stresses that these people come to help out without even needing an invitation and that their presence, along with the activities at the *hùan2 dii3* should make the family feel less sad, make the sorrows they feel when they think of their deceased loved ones disappear. Another compilation on Lao culture and tradition (ຄຳຜຸນ ພິລາວົງສ໌ 2009:223) borrows Maha Sila Viravong’s explanation (word for word) but adds that another reason people call it the *hùan2 dii3* is not presuppositional but indexically creative and aspirational: “[A]ny house that has a person die has bad luck (i.e., is not good), so we call it the ‘good house’ to make the house have good luck from then on.”<sup>389</sup>

At the heart of the ‘good’ atmosphere of a ‘good house’ and the ‘good’ relations between funeral goers and mourners is a trope of presence: merely being at a house is implied to both presuppose and create warm relationships between visitors, the deceased, and the family of that deceased person. People make this trope explicit. When Phòò Thiang’s *siaw1* died, he made a point to stay late. During the night, he told me that not sleeping would be bad for his health but that he wanted to stay anyway. We played cards together until just after one in the morning. I had never seen him gamble before that night and, until this point, he had only stayed until 10 PM or so at the other funerals to which we had gone together. In the morning Mèè Thiang chastised

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<sup>389</sup> *phòq1 hùan2 thii1 mii2 khon2 taaj3 nan4 mèn1 thùù3 vaa1 sook4 haaj4 (bòò1 dii3) cùng1 phaa2 kan3 vaw4 vaa1 hùan2 dii3 phua1 haj5 sook4 dii3 tòò1 paj3*. The latter compilation on Lao culture and tradition (ຄຳຜຸນ ພິລາວົງສ໌ 2009:223), after mostly sticking with Maha Sila Viravong’s explanation for the *hùan2 dii3*, inserts a telling, perhaps contemporary comment. Just after mentioning that people read stories to keep people at the house engaged, the author adds that, “currently, people use gambling as a substitute, which [we] see is not appropriate.” Whoever inserted this comment portrays gambling as a somewhat distasteful and modern tool used to soothe people and make them forget their sadness. The way he or she sketches gambling as a ‘substitute’ for other kinds of entertainment fits with how people tend to talk about funerary games: as a means to an end.



both of us for staying so late and risking our health. She also seemed to understand that Phòò Thiang had to stay that late, to sacrifice his health for his friend. When we went to the ceremony later in the morning, just before the cremation, Phòò Thiang stressed how much time we had spent at the good house the night before and he rounded up the time he told people we finally left—just past 1 AM (*nìng1 moong2 paj3*) became 2 AM (*sòòng3 moong2*). I caught myself rounding up as well, and feeling serious and sentimental when I did so. Being there late into the night proved our commitment to the event and to the dead man.

This contact trope is not limited to Laos. Across the world, co-presence, stretched through time, is spoken of as an honest sign of relationships and positive sociality, an idea often carried forward in Malinowski's notion of *phatic communion* (Ogden et al. 1946; Zuckerman 2016).<sup>390</sup> Nor, in Laos, is this contact trope limited to funerals. The same calculus of time and strength of relationship is dominant in post-partum events and other similar moments when people are supposed to gather together. During the night after Dii got married, for instance, the party moved to his house and he, his wife (Khòòp), his brother, Khòòp's friends and I stayed up really late drinking and making ribald jokes—one woman, for instance, joked that Dii would not be able to sleep with his wife that night but would have to sleep with her instead. Dii's brother gave me a ride home because we were the last guests; just before we left, Dii told me that I was a good person and a good friend for staying so late, and for taking part in all the wedding festivities generally. He said that he 'loved' me and that for my wedding, if he had a chance to attend, he would stay until dawn.

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<sup>390</sup> Malarney (1996:548), for instance, traces how Vietnamese reforms of funerary practices, motivated by concern about the extravagant exchanges and feasts that occurred during funerals, aimed to strip funerals of everything but co-presence. "'Sentiment,' in the socialist world..." he writes "was not to be reproduced as before, but through the simple act of attendance at the funeral. For villagers in the new socialist society, 'that which is most prized,' noted one official source, 'is the presence of one's face.'" See also Evan's (1991) discussion of the Lao government's influence on Tai Dam funerals.

Attending a funeral can even create social relations from thin air. One of the things that struck me when I went to my first Lao funerals was the extent to which people not only allowed but encouraged pretty much anyone to take part. People, in fact, sometimes called guarding the good house itself ‘being there as a friend’ (*juul phuanl*). The need for bodies meant that those who did not know the deceased were still useful, could still serve as a ‘friend’ (*phuanl*) to the corpse and other guests. For example, at Paa’s *huan2 dii3*, I was not the only stranger to play a large part. One man, whom I knew from the *pétanque* court, was married to a woman who lived nearby. That man brought a few others. They stayed playing cards for small amounts until around 3 AM, after which they loudly debated whether they should go find prostitutes but instead went home. When I interviewed Thii, I asked her about the man. His wife lived in the area. “Do you know them?” I asked. “No,” she said, adding, “[but] they came to be with us as friends (*phuanl*).”<sup>391</sup> Even if they were gambling loudly and ignoring the family of the deceased, their presence was helpful.<sup>392</sup>

Generally, the need for a crowd of mourners is the end that justifies gambling at funerals and post-partum parties. As people say, gambling draws a crowd and keeps people busy. Klima, in

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<sup>391</sup> *khacaw4 maal juul phuanl*. The extent to which people who do not know the dead can take part in funerals came across strongly to me when I spent a few days with, for lack of better word, somebody I will call a funeral director. The director rented out chairs, organized cremations, and built and sold caskets for those cremations. He operated one of the few one-stop shops for funerals in Luang Prabang. When I first met him, he stressed to me how he often would take care of the funerals of people who did not have family or were too poor to pay for anything by organizing the funerals for free. He said that nobody had made as much merit as him. Here, it was not his previous relation to these people that mattered, but the care that he showed them after they had died.

<sup>392</sup> In Klima’s (2002:253) description of the ‘funeral casino’ in Thailand the presence of complete strangers seems much more common than in Luang Prabang. In his example, people who really have no relation to the dead will show up as soon as someone dies. Here is how Klima describes some of the guests: “As soon as the news broke that Patcharee’s father had died, word spread like wildfire to the gambling table runners, who seem to have psychic powers to detect such momentous events in human affairs, and at great distances. There are numerous full-time and part-time roulette wheel or dice game proprietors who make a whole or part of their living traveling from funeral to funeral, wherever they can get up a game. There are also a few habitual gamblers who follow the funeral with similar regularity.” Although I did hear about one or two people who played *pétanque* and would occasionally travel to different funerals just to gamble, I never saw them at the funerals to which I went. The man I describe here and his friends did live in the area, and his wife knew Thii and Paa a little.

his book *Funeral Casino*, approaches the question of why people gamble at funerals with more care and attention than anyone else to date. He describes the funeral of his father-in-law in northeastern Thailand and explores the different explanations for the apparently raucous gambling that took place there. Some of his interlocutors were cynical about why people gambled at funerals generally and treated the funeral as a sacred cover from any state intervention aimed at stopping the illegal gambling.<sup>393</sup> From their perspective, the end of

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<sup>393</sup> Klima writes (2002:251), “It has been explained to me in a utilitarian fashion, in so many words,” Klima wrote, “that given an irrepressible desire to gamble, supply meets demand in funeral space/time because it is a sacred space/time into which the profane state is the least comfortable penetrating.” Kingshill (1965:219) voices a skepticism similar to what some people told Klima; for him, it seems that people are there to have a ‘good time,’ and that a fear of ghosts has become merely a pretense for a party:

“One reason for continuing the festivities throughout the night is the fear of the dead man’s ghost. This is usually mentioned quite freely as one of the reasons for keeping the house noisy and alive all night, although in every case our informant would say this to us as if it were a big joke. I do not believe that fear of ghosts is the main reason for such large and expensive festivities, although it may well have been the origin. Two or three friends would be sufficient protection from ghosts, as was evident on other occasions. The wake nights seem to have developed into a time of general recreation for the villagers. The original purpose may become lost, but few villagers would be willing to abandon this opportunity for social gathering.”

Before this passage, Kingshill (1965:218) notes that the funeral is a place where things that are normally banned are allowed. “At night, when all the work has finished, two big kerosene pressure lamps, borrowed from the temple, were lit, one inside the house, and one outside where several gambling games were in progress.” He continues, “Usually gambling is illegal. At special occasions, however, such as a funeral, the *Kamnan* gives special permission to one or two men to organize games. Permission is also given for the sale and consumption of liquor during these nights. Normally the sale of liquor was prohibited in Ku Daeng.”

Kingshill points out the exceptional character of these funerals, and Terwiel (1979:406), in his review of Tai funerary cultures, remarks that normally banned activities are often present in Tai funerals, even noting that “fieldnotes from Ratburi province [in Thailand] contain a remark by a Buddhist monk that a long time ago, monks used to go to funerals and drink alcoholic beverages.”<sup>393</sup>

Nevertheless, from the perspective of the funerals I attended in Luang Prabang, and the people with whom I spoke, Kingshill’s analysis that the funeral is for fun would be somewhat offensive. The *huan2 dii3* is, of course, not just any party, but the party that occurs after a death. As one magazine article suggests (Mahason 2013), when you get to a ‘good house’ you should find the host to express your sadness to them (and, as a consequence, make them feel less sad). The idea that the all-night event at the house would be purely an excuse to have fun seems cynical, and Kingshill offers little evidence—besides the fact that people were laughing—that that cynicism is a direct product of what people told him in the field. Even he notes there were limits to the fun at the funeral; nobody danced, for instance. But Kingshill’s point might have been a point made by locals as to why people gamble, and I could imagine some people in Luang Prabang making a similar point—in fact, I did hear similar (unverifiable) claims about post-partum houses, that were, people said, left to continue in perpetuity, to basically become gambling dens. Perhaps Kingshill was reiterating a point that someone made to him, but if so, this was just one position in a field of different perspectives, the kind of thing a person in Luang Prabang might say about someone else’s funeral, but not one’s own family’s.

gambling was gambling itself, and presumably, the money that one might win. But Klima (2002:251-252) continues:

*This is all very true, but there is another ‘utilitarian’ reason, which is much more enlightening if you loved the person who has died, and that involves not so much the work of supply meeting demand, or the fulfillment of illicit desires, as it does the work of a desire for more desire itself—not producing supply (gambling), but producing demand, attracting the desire to gamble because that desire will materialize what is ultimately the desired product and supply: people themselves. The economy of the funeral casino’s telos is not simply an excuse to supply a product to satisfy a community’s urges. It has far more to do with the needs of the dead. The dead are lonely. The telos of the funeral casino is, as they say of the gift economy, to establish relationships between people—to produce a community. In this case a community of gamblers for the sake of the dead. The funeral economy is centered around and surrounds the corpse, on purpose. Indeed, the entire funeral casino is a gift to the dead, the gift of comradeship, a gift of a relationship between people, and that means between the living and the dead. Society is the gift. What the family wants above all, and what the funeral gamblers feel morally comfortable it provides, is company for the deceased spirit. No one wants the poor departed person to have to spend the night alone. The purpose of the funeral casino is to ben peuen sope, ‘to be the friend of the corpse,’ to keep it company.*

Klima’s description in the long quotation above fits with how most people in Luang Prabang talk about funerary gambling in Luang Prabang, like a kind of sociological trap, a natural stimulant that has the capability of drawing people in, and even more so, keeping them wherever they are, invested and awake. People say that one does not tire when playing cards—he forgets the time and just thinks about the games in front of him. The ideal—from the perspective of the mourning family—is that the guests at a *huan2 dii3* stay as late as possible; cards are a sociological method for doing that, for passing the time. So are the movies played, the cigarettes passed around, the coffee served, and the bowls of sunflower seeds placed in the middle of every table—the latter offering endless, mindless chewing that keeps one busy and occupied like tobacco ‘dip’ might occupy a right-fielder during a baseball game. From this perspective, gambling is not an end in and of itself but a means to a greater good: getting people to stay at the event, and to stay awake.

This, for example, is exactly what an article for Mahason Magazine (2013), posted to Facebook by the publication, argued was the major purpose of cards. The article, called ‘The discipline of going to a good house,’ gives five pieces of advice for those going to a *huan3 dii3*. The longest piece of advice begins by averring that, “before you begin to play cards, ask yourself why do people play cards at a *huan2 dii3*?”<sup>394</sup> The authors continue to argue that the point of cards is to occupy the time in between death and when relatives of the deceased can arrive from out of town. It is a tool and, thus, they advise that if you are only staying for a short while (and by implication do not need the tool) you should not play “because,” they conclude, “every one of us knows that gambling is a bad thing.”<sup>395</sup> Other anthropologists working near Luang Prabang in Thailand have found similar kinds of explanations. Eberhardt (2006:53), for example, captures the following quotation from a Shan man: “If we didn’t have gambling at funerals, not enough people would come....Besides, how else could we keep people awake all night.” In her chapter “Attack of the Widow Ghosts,” Mills (1995:253) similarly describes “all-night drinking and gambling parties” as one of “a variety of...protective techniques” that men used to avoid sleeping, and thus, avoid the grips of a widow ghost. As Mills’s example attests, people in Thailand and Laos also use gambling for similar purposes outside of funerals: to pass or ‘kill the time’ (*khaa5 vèl̄laa2*) in between *tuk tuk* rides, for instance, or to speed up the slow hours at a market (usually clandestinely).

Card playing sucks you in, and staying up for a whole night or even multiple days while playing, is not unheard of.<sup>396</sup> Cards, people say, make you not want to sleep (*bò-jaak5 nòn2*);

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<sup>394</sup> ກ່ອນທ່ານຈະລົງມືຫຼິ້ນໄພ່ນັ້ນຂໍໃຫ້ທ່ານຜູ້ອ່ານໄດ້ຕັ້ງຄໍາຖາມວ່າເປັນຫຍັງເຂົາຈຶ່ງຫຼິ້ນໄພ່ໃນງານງັນເຮືອນດີ?

<sup>395</sup> ເພາະເຮົາທຸກຄົນກໍຮູ້ແລ້ວວ່າການຫຼິ້ນການພະນັນເປັນສິ່ງທີ່ບໍ່ດີ

<sup>396</sup> When I was a child, I thought ‘board games’ were spelled, and etymologically related to, ‘bored games.’ In my mind, they were games to jolt you from boredom with their addictive patterns, which would let you waste hours without thinking about it.

the individual games seem to unfold in a different temporality. In a recent book on machine gambling in Las Vegas, Schüll writes of a similar, metapragmatically elaborated association of machine gambling and altered time. She explores the feeling of the ‘zone’ that many gamblers experience, and her discussion fits with how Lao players sometimes talk about cards as a kind of economic stimulant. Schüll argues that gambling brings about an ‘event driven time.’ Citing Benjamin’s analysis of the parallels between assembly-line labor and gambling, she writes of the differences between clock time and ‘zone’ time.<sup>397</sup> Schüll highlights the ways in which gamblers try to manage and extend these moments of zone time, when the clock can seem ‘suspended.’ During ‘flow’ or ‘an optimal experience,’ as the best-selling author Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi (2002:66–67) puts it, “[t]he objective, external duration we measure with reference to outside events like night and day, or the orderly progression of clocks, is rendered irrelevant by the rhythms dictated by the activity.... [and he continues] most activities do not depend on clock time; like baseball, they have their own pace, their own sequences of events marking transitions from one state to another without regard to equal intervals of duration.”

In the introduction to her book, Schüll (2012:2) recounts one frequent gambler who is so committed to flow that she treats winning on a machine as an almost inconvenient interruption:

*When I ask Mollie if she is hoping for a big win, she gives a short laugh and a dismissive wave of her hand, ‘In the beginning there was excitement about winning,’ she says, ‘but the more I gambled, the wiser I got about my chances. Wiser, but also weaker, less able to stop. Today when I win—and I do win, from time to time—I just put it back in the machines. The thing people never understand is that I’m not playing to win.’*

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<sup>397</sup> Benjamin (1968:177) argued that “[t]he jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called *coup* in a game of chance. The manipulation of the worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding operation for the very reason that it is its exact repetition. Since each operation at the machine is just as screened off from the preceding operation as a *coupe* in a game of chance is from the one that preceded it, the drudgery of the laborer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler.”

“Why, then, does she play?” Schüll asks, ““To keep playing—to stay in that machine zone where nothing else matters.” For Schüll, different kinds of games induce different kinds of temporality, as they suck you into their internal rhythms.<sup>398</sup> Along similar lines, Rizzo (2004:268) argues that games with “boards, grids, and diagrams” can lead one to “space out.”<sup>399</sup> This tendency for these games to suck you in, with their dense ritual-esque poetics (cf. Stasch 2011), leads Rizzo to begin one section of his essay with the intimate and for myself recognizable line, “I have spent much of the past hour not working on this essay but playing Minesweeper—one of the four popular single-player computer games (including Solitaire and FreeCell) that are bundled with Microsoft Windows” (2004:268-269). Often, I found myself at the *pétanque* court, playing games of checkers, and recognizing that the same thing happened: one best-two-out-of-three set with a checker partner, turned into a multiple-hour binge. Just as when I used to play significant amounts of chess, when I closed my eyes I would sometimes see the checker game’s common patterns as vague green blotches against the blackness.

While no gamblers in Luang Prabang seemed particularly concerned about differentiating the subjective temporal state brought about by different games—and I never asked explicitly about this—people did talk to me about the temporality of gambling games generally. ‘Losing’ or ‘wasting’ time (*sia3 vèl̥aa2*) was one of the negative consequences people often mentioned when they talked about the problems of card and *pétanque* gambling. Mèè Thiang, for instance, an avid lottery seller and player, told me that gambling on the lottery was better than other forms

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<sup>398</sup> Schüll writes, “Forms of gambling differ not only in the intensity of play they facilitate but also in the kinds of subject shifts they enable. Each type of gambling involves players in distinctive procedural and phenomenological routines—betting sequence and temporality, frequency and amount of payouts, degree of skill involved, and mode of action (checking books, ticking boxes, scratching tickets, choosing cards, pressing buttons), producing a unique ‘cycle of energy and concentration’ and a corresponding cycle of affective peaks and dips” (2012:18; the internal quotation is from Reith 1999).

<sup>399</sup> “Put vividly,” he continues, “I *become* the diagram in a way that forecloses the performative grounds of first-person subjectivity and its various rational entitlements—for starters, the ability to keep track of time” (2004:269; emphasis original).

of gambling because it did not waste time—‘you can buy a ticket and then be done with it.’<sup>400</sup>

But a negative quality at moments, the fast temporality of gambling games is weaponized at the funeral.

But while gambling is almost required at a Lao funeral, there is a major difference between ‘the funeral casino’ as Klima described it and the ‘good houses’ I visited in Luang Prabang. ‘Good houses’ were hardly casinos. For one, they were haunted with a sense of restriction and restraint. There are many things one should not do at funerals. One should not sing, one should not be too loud, one should not listen to music that is not ‘classic Lao music’ (*laaw2 deem3*). Often, people say that one should not drink. As one magazine article puts it (Mahason 2013), at a funeral, “you should not shout and have fun because a funeral is an event where the family has lost a person whom they love. Therefore, you should not give off a mood of excitement or fun, laugh really loudly, sing songs that are not appropriate, or drink alcohol.”<sup>401</sup>

Of course, people violate these rules. Muu once belted into song during a card game we played at around 4 AM at his uncle-in-law’s funeral. Salina, while sitting far away from the rest of the mourners late at night at Paa’s funeral played a bit of music on her cell phone until I, perhaps naively offended, told her to quiet down (she responded that there were no people there, so it did not really matter). Likewise, I saw a few people drink at funerals. Drinking at funerals, however, was much less expected than playing cards and occasionally outright banned. One man told me that the prohibition concerned the nature of the person’s death; drinking at an older person’s funeral was fine because that person lived a long life, but that drinking at a young

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<sup>400</sup> People also recognize the different interactional effects different types of games can cause, games like *phaj4 kèè4*, described below, can lead to bigger pots than games like *phaj3 kòòj4* and thus more ‘conflict’ and ‘noise.’ Of course, they also recognize that the rules of different games can afford different kinds of sociality, such as how many players can play at a time, *et cetera*.

<sup>401</sup> ບໍ່ຄວນເຮຮາມ່ວນຊື່ນ ເພາະງານສົບເປັນງານທີ່ຄອບຄົວສູນເສຍຄົນທີ່ຮັກໄປ ດັ່ງນັ້ນ, ຈິ່ງບໍ່ຄວນທີ່ຈະມີອາລົມເຮຮາມ່ວນຊື່ນ ຫົວສຽງດັງ ຫຼືຮ້ອງລ່າທ່າເພງເກີນຄວາມເໝາະສົມ ຫຼືຕົມສຸລາເປັນຕົ້ນ.



person's funeral would be bad as everyone would be too sad. At Paa's funeral, Phòò Thiang bought me one beer. I hesitated, but he told me that in the old days people would always drink at funerals—get drunk and then wander home whenever they could not drink anymore. Later that night, after I drank my beer, I saw the man from the *pétanque* court whom I owed a beer from a bet weeks before. I told him I would buy him the beer and he told me, 'that is not the thing to do [at this kind of event] (*man2 bòø-mèèn1 nèèw2*).' Even later, however, that man and the others sitting with him started drinking shots of Lao whiskey, got pretty drunk, and then demanded that Kham cook them more of the eels he had collected.

The limits of what was borderline ethically problematic at funerals was embodied plainly for me when I went to the temple equivalent of a *hùan2 dii3*. An older abbot died in Luang Prabang and had a grand funeral, complete with much of the town walking to the cremation grounds from the temple rather than riding in a truck. The night before the cremation, I heard word of the death and went to the temple to 'guard it.' Before I went, I asked someone whether they would have cards at the temple. He said they would. When I got home, I asked Mèè Phòòn the same question and she said they would definitely not have cards. When I got to the temple, I noticed no alcohol and saw no cards. While most people told me that they would not have cards there, I overheard one man say to another that maybe later they would play cards 'over there,' as he pointed to the back of the temple grounds. The game never materialized. Instead, people sat on the temple grounds chatting, readying decorations for the cremation, and watching movies. Dozens of people slept inside the temple's central building (the *qaalam2*) near the casket. No one seemed frightened of the monk's ghost, and I spoke to a few people who said that, rather than something to fear, sleeping near the abbot's corpse was a particularly potent source of merit (*buun3*).

## Post-Partum Gambling

During an interview with a law professor in Luang Prabang, I asked him whether in Laos gambling was illegal. ‘It is,’ he said. ‘What about funerals and post-partum houses?’ I asked. ‘Oh, there you can [gamble].’<sup>402</sup> My reference to the two kinds of gambling ritual spaces together, post-birth houses and good houses, mirrored how people talked about them, as a pair of exceptional spaces, often mentioned together.<sup>403</sup> In both events, gambling is an integral part of passing the time that is allowed and encouraged. At ‘good houses’ and ‘post-partum houses’ people play cards in the open and in view. One set of my neighbors, for instance, gambled with their shop door open, sitting on the floor, for anyone to see. Another set of neighbors gambled on tables in the middle of the street. Such gambling is thought to have comparatively no legal or moral risk.<sup>404</sup>

When people speak about ‘good houses’ and ‘post-partum houses’ in the same breath as similar states of exception, they, of course, elide some obvious differences.<sup>405</sup> They are inversions of one another. The former is an ostensibly sad event, no matter how happy people might try to make it; the latter is ostensibly celebratory. The former lasts a few days, the latter can last as long as a month. The former only occasionally has people drinking alcohol, the latter,

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<sup>402</sup> When I pushed, and asked if that exception is written in the law, he said it was not, but people knew that was the case. He then jumped to a generic, evaluative statement: “Gambling is a bad thing.” *lùàng2 kaan2 phanan2 man2 kaø-pên3 sing1 thii1 bòø-dii3 han4 lêq1*.

<sup>403</sup> Take, for instance, the opening of a newspaper article, “Gambling amongst friends is a part of many traditional Lao events such as welcoming newborn babies and funeral rituals where people frequently gather to play cards” (Vientiane Times 2009c).

<sup>404</sup> This was not always true. In a 1975 statement from the Ministry of Interior, the minister banned gambling “regardless of the time or circumstances (birth celebrations, funeral ceremonies, or various festivals held at home, in a temple, or anywhere else.)” (JPRS 1975). This strictness is non-existent now. Also, of course, nosy neighbors always might judge. For example, when I asked Mèè Phòøn whether the neighbors gambling with their doors open were hosting a *kham1 dùan3*, she made a snide remark about how they are ‘always having a *hùan2 kham1 dùan3*.’ Such judgements aside, the assumption is that people accept both of these events as ethically fine things. Of course, individuals still sometimes refrain from playing cards at one event or another, or say that they do. When in the presence of her Thai friend, for instance, Salina told me that she did not play cards at all at the funeral, even as we had played cards, for low stakes, for an hour or so together with another one of her friends.

<sup>405</sup> See Parry and Bloch (1982) for more on the common symbolic parallels people draw between birth and death.

in my experience, invariably involved drinking substantial amounts of alcohol. The gambling felt different as well. While, there were significant variations in individual games and across individuals (as I discuss in chapter seven, generally), in the events to which I went, the betting tended to be more raucous, louder, less restrained, and for more money at the post-partum house rather than the *huan2 dii3*.

There are also similarities. Post-birth events are, just as funerals, classic scenes of ghosts, especially the *phii3 phaaj2*. Similar to the spirits of those who die from accidents, *phii3 phaaj2* have been well documented in the anthropological literature.<sup>406</sup> In her discussion, Mills (1995:250) remarks that the *phii3 phaaj2* (or *phii phrai* as she transliterates it from the Thai spelling) are “among the most dangerous spirits” and Tambiah (1970:320) explains that the *phii phrai* “is generated in a pregnant woman dying with the child inside her.” Tambiah continues:

*It is said that when she dies the child inside her turns into a phii prai and consumes the mother's blood. The dead mother is taken to the cemetery, a 'surgeon' is invited to cut the womb and extract the child's corpse, and the mother and child are buried separately so that the child will not go on existing as a phii phrai. For if the child is not removed and separately buried, it will grow into a monster which sucks the blood from other mothers at childbirth, or from victims of physical injury who bleed profusely. Thus the notion of phii phrai is centered around violent and sudden death, especially the death of pregnant mothers.*

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<sup>406</sup> Archaimbault (1959) describes a ritual to dispel these spirits that he observed, where just after the umbilical cord has been cut, “one of the child’s grandmothers take a *kadong* which is a kind of rice strainer, and after having passed it through a flame, stands on the doorstep, saying to the dangerous Phis P’ais, kidnappers of children [i.e. *phii3 phaaj2*]: ‘Kou, Kou ! you Phi P’ais, who can assume the shape of nocturnal birds, the shape of those hooting owls, kou, kou, go away! From now on this child is ours.’” Izikowitz (2001:103), likewise, writes of the Lamet: “After the birth, bandages are wound tightly around the woman’s stomach, and for thirty days she is not allowed to do any hard work outside of the village, but she does not lie in childbed longer than twenty-four hours. The reason for her being forbidden to leave the village is that dangerous spirits might attack her, for such run riot outside the two magic gates of the village. [paragraph break] The Lamet also sit and watch over the woman who is about to give birth, for they are worried that a certain spirit called *phi phai* might harm the mother and child. This spirit is that of a woman who died in childbirth.”

In general, the period leading up to and just after birth is considered to be a dangerous one for the mother and the child. Death thus haunts both post-partum houses and pregnancy as an imminent danger. In fact, pregnant women are told to avoid “going to see a deceased person or to a *hùan2 dii3*” (ສິລາ ວິຣະວົງສ໌ 2014:34). In Luang Prabang people call the house during the period immediately after birth, as I mentioned before, the *hùan2 kham1 dùan3*.<sup>407</sup>

Surprisingly, I have come across no Western scholars who have drawn a connection between *hùan2 kham1 dùan3* and *hùan2 dii3*, even as Lao people make the connection frequently, almost whenever they mention sanctioned gambling.<sup>408</sup> In most discussions of post-partum houses, in fact, card playing is not commented upon.<sup>409</sup> The drinking and gambling that was such a big part

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<sup>407</sup> While no one has mentioned the fact to me, it seems that this way of referring to the event is somewhat unique to Luang Prabang. Most people on the few internet web pages and books where the topic is discussed call the time ‘*juul kam3*’ or ‘*juul hùan2 kam3*’—barring a book from Luang Prabang which combines the two forms to call it *juul kam3 kham1 dùan3* (ສົມຈັນ 2014). This former name, rather than the Luang Prabang name, seems to signal the imagined purposes of this period of seclusion, although there is some debate about what exactly it means. Maha Sila Vilavong (ສິລາ ວິຣະວົງສ໌ 2014), for instance, wrote, in a section of his book called *juul kam3* that “the word *kam3* can be translated as prohibited actions (*khalam2*) or refraining from things that are bad and from actions that are bad.” The things to avoid are many, and include dietary restrictions and leaving the grounds of the house, and Sila mentions that the practices, among other functions, protect the mother from *phii3 phaaj2*. In contrast, in an online forum on PunLao.com (2010), one user asked why it was that people called the house of someone that just gave birth the *hùan2 kam3* and people mostly agreed with the first user who responded, who wrote that the meaning of *hùan2 kam3* had to do with the expulsion of *baap5* or demerit during life. She then drew a parallel between the post-partum house and the ‘good house.’ “People that are born have to pay for their sins, so [we] call it the house of karma,” the woman wrote, “if someone has died then we call it the good house, because it is good that they did not have to pay for their sins.” When after returning to the United States I asked my Facebook friends, one wrote that he did not know. Another told me, (probably unwittingly) following Maha Sila Vilavong’s explanation, that it was because you cannot eat whatever you want. Yet another friend wrote that “There’s nothing difficult about it, they are at the *fire* for a month, so they call it *kam3 dùan3*.”

<sup>408</sup> Maha Sila Vilavong (ສິລາ ວິຣະວົງສ໌ 2014: 39) describes the post-partum house in ways that parallel how people talk about good houses. He says that while the woman is in ‘the time of avoidance,’ relatives and young people go “have a good time as friends (*juul phùan1*),” and people read stories. In parenthesis, he adds something that some accounts erase: “every day during this time, [people] like to bring cards and play.” (ທຸກວັນນີ້ ມັກຈະເອົາໄຜ່ມາຫຼິ້ນ; from ສິລາ ວິຣະວົງສ໌ 2014:39). In the paragraph above this, Maha Sila Vilavong adds that during times when in the few days after birth the new mother menstruates, this is a good sign. If you take string and wipe the blood with that, the string is lucky and, if you carry it with you, it will lead you to not lose when you gamble. I have heard people mention similar practices in relation to the blood of those who have died unnatural deaths: one woman told me that her friend had an ace that had this blood on it and she had not lost money since she had it.

<sup>409</sup> But see Levy (1963:257)

of these late-night events as I experienced them is often erased.<sup>410</sup> Rather than gambling, they emphasize that the symbolic center of the *kam3 dùan3* is the fire on which new mothers are supposed to sit.<sup>411</sup> When I first arrived at Bêê’s post-partum party, this centrality was impressed on me. Dii introduced me to the new mother and newborn and then showed me where the mother would ‘sit at the fire’ (*nang1 juul faj2*). I never saw a real fire inside the home during any of the *hùan2 kam3 dùan3* to which I went, and the rooms were never smoky. Rather, women put lit (and occasionally unlit) coals in a bowl and the new mother occasionally sat over them on a small, thatched stool (ສົມຈັນ 2014:124). When I asked Dii about this, he told me that now when people get Cesarean sections they often do not have the strength to sit very long over the fire, and so they sit “enough for the rite” (*phò2 phithii2*) but then leave the fire and go sleep or relax.<sup>412</sup>

The purpose of the fire is curative (see Hanks 1963:71–77), and it is one of an arsenal of techniques to warm the new mother’s body. From his research in Luang Prabang, Platenkamp

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<sup>410</sup> Take, for example, the description one author writes of a post-partum house in Luang Prabang in an essay on the topic. The textbook emphasizes that the *hùan2 kham1 dùan3* is a place where gifts are given: “Every day different relatives stream in to visit [the new mother]. None of them come with empty hands, but with gifts, like baby powder, clothing for the baby, or soap. The atmosphere at the Lao *kham1 dùan3* is one of fun. You can hear the sounds of the guests talking and laughing and joking with one another. Some people sit and drink the hot boiled water, some people make papaya salad, or noisily make other food.” (ແຕ່ລະວັນ ຍາດຕີເພີ່ນ້ອງແລະພີບ້ານ້ອາຕ່າງກໍ່ຫຼັງໄຫຼກັນ ມາຍາມຈຸລິວັນ. ແຕ່ລະຄົນບໍ່ໄດ້ມາມື້ເປົ່າ ມີຂອງມາຕ້ອນມາຝາກ ເຊັ່ນ: ເຂົ້າແບ້ງ, ເສືອໂສ້ງແອນ້ອຍ, ແລະ ແຜ່ປ. ບັນຍາກາດໃນການຄູ່າເດືອນຂອງລາວມີຄວາມມ່ວນຊື່ນ ໄດ້ຍິນສ່ານງຽງເວົ້າ, ສຽງຫົວຢອກໄປກັນຂອງຄົນທີ່ມາ ຍ້ຽມຍາມ. ບາງຄົນນັ່ງດີມນ້ຳຕົ້ມ, ບາງຄົນຕ່າໝາກຫຸ່ງ ຫຼື ແຕ່ງກິນອີກກະທິກ; from ສົມຈັນ 2014:127).

<sup>411</sup> In the anthropology of Southeast Asia, ‘roasting women,’ has long been described as one of the distinctive Southeast Asian customs (De Young 1955:50–51). Embree (1950:182) lists it along with “wet rice agriculture as a basis of subsistence... chewing of betel and blackening of the teeth, playing kickball, and piston bellows.” Reformers and missionaries criticized the practice. In 1865, during an effort to reform birthing practices in (modern-day) Thailand, the American missionary Dan B. Bradley (see Pearson 2015), called the practice “a tremendous evil upon the Siamese race” (Bradley 1865:84). The banality of the practice that I observed was clearly not what Bradley had in mind. Here is how he describes the scene he found when he went to help the new mother of the king’s child: “[The writer] found the miserable sufferer in a little room still lying by the fire; the window shutters all closed, and consequently the place was quite dark even in the day time. Though suffering terribly with the heat and smoke, and want of air, no one dared to remove the fire, or open the shutters lest it might prove fatal to the patient.”

<sup>412</sup> In the post-partum houses that I entered the women were usually not sitting over a fire, but lounging about.

describes the days after birth, the ‘coolness’ of the mother’s post-partum body, and the methods for ‘warming’ it:

*The partus renders the mother’s body ‘cold’ (naaw3). To restore her ‘warmth’ (qop2 qun1) the woman takes hot baths, wraps blankets around her legs and wears long-sleeved shirts. For three days she is given a medicine to drink, consisting of water containing part of a certain tree...in order to ‘expel the blood’ (laj1 lùat4) from her body and to stimulate lactation. Afterwards she continues taking medicines, the ingredients for which are collected from other tree species and dissolved in water as well. Such potions are called ‘water from nature’ (nam4 thammaaat4) or ‘good water’ (nam4 dii3). They are kept warm on top of a stove in a corner of the living room, from which the mother, as well as visiting women of childbearing age, take sips regularly.*

*The period of ‘coldness’ is called the ‘month of avoidance’ (kham1 dùan3) after the rules of avoidance to be observed during this time. The mother must refrain from eating foodstuffs that are marked by a strong poignant smell. These include the leftover from the previous day and hot spicy dishes in general, and preserved fish, preserved bamboo shoots, the meat of deer, cattle, wild or domesticated boar, chicken, white buffalo, or the eel-shaped fish species ([presumably] paa3 naang2) in particular. She should also refrain from doing hard work. During this period the child should not leave the house; neither should the mother move beyond the confines of the house yard. The mother or the child moving into the extra-domestic domains would allow the phii3 spirits ‘Old Father Past Mother’, who represent the origin of the new born child’s khuan, to ‘catch the khuan of the child and take it back.’<sup>413</sup>*

After the *hùan2 kham1 dùan3*, the Lao child emerges into the world.<sup>414</sup> The event ends, just as the *hùan2 dii3* ends, with a calling-of-the-souls ceremony or *baasii3 suu1 khwan3*. The *baasii3 suu1 khwan3* is one of the most prominent of Lao rituals and some authors—a bit hyperbolically (Evans 1998:77)—have called it the quintessential Lao ritual, the Lao ceremony ‘par excellence’

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<sup>413</sup> I have transliterated Platenkamp’s glosses (he used a combination of his own transliteration and some Lao orthography).

<sup>414</sup> The period of the post-partum house does not always last as long as a month, although the assumption is that it should be about a month for the first child. For each subsequent child, the time spent at the house can be less and less.

(Abhay 1959b; also see Ngaosyvathn 1990).<sup>415</sup> While the particulars of any single Baci<sup>416</sup> vary—based on what kind of Baci it is and on who is performing it—all Baci have a similar structure. Those present gather around a small table (*phaa2 khwan3*) with offerings—incense, fruits, sweets, and sometimes chicken and alcohol (see Platenkamp 2010:191–195 for a description of ritual speech during an *qòòk5 dùan3* Baci ceremony). With string resting on it, the offering along with a lit candle sit in the middle of the flowered structure. The *mòò3 phòòn2*, or the lay ritual specialist, begins the ceremony with a series of ritual words.<sup>417</sup> The ceremony ends with a tying of the strings and a blessing of those present, especially whomever is the focus of the Baci (for instance, the bride and groom at a wedding, a sick individual, a close relative of the deceased, the birthday boy or girl, a newborn child and so on) and any young children who are present.

The most often explicitly stated goal of the Baci is to call the *khwan3* of those present back to their bodies. As the typical explanation goes, many Lao people believe that each person has 32 *khwan3* in his or her body and when the *khwan3* leave the body, one is likely to become sick or fall victim to an accident. This is a problem because as Thao Nhouy Abhay puts it, “[T]he soul loves to roam about” (1959b:129). Tambiah (1970:243) called the Baci rituals therapeutic rituals. “The *khwan*,” he writes, “leaves the body in certain situations; its flight from a person connotes a particular mental state, an agitation of the mind. The *khwan* must be recalled and aggregated to the body in order to make the person whole; it is as if my mind is elsewhere.”<sup>418</sup> For post-partum

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<sup>415</sup> Baci are practiced by different ethnic groups across the nation toward varied immediate ends (weddings, departures, sicknesses and funerals, for instance), altered, used, and adopted by state sympathizers and actors (e.g. Singh 2014; Evans 1998: 81), and have now even been integrated into Luang Prabang’s tourist industry, where tourists can pay—or be gifted—with the experience of a ceremony.

<sup>416</sup> Here I adopt the usual spelling and pluralize it as if it were an English word.

<sup>417</sup> These speeches are easy to find in Lao books that describe the process of various ceremonies (e.g. ຄຳຜຽນ ພິລາ ວົງສ໌ 2009; ສິລາ ວິຣະວົງສ໌ 2014). Both of the *mòò3 phòòn2* whom I had a chance to interview told me that they learned their trade from these books (blending what they liked and did not like), not from any teacher.

<sup>418</sup> Along similar lines to Tambiah’s argument, many people with whom I spoke told me that they did not believe the ritual had much magical power anymore. Phòò Thiang, for instance, said it could have power if it was done by someone with power, but that, mostly, the Baci, the string tying, and the blessing just made people happy (*dii3 caj3*).

events, the Baci, and the eating afterwards, mark the (re-)emergence of the mother and child into the general world.

The Baci is filled with mostly older people and close family members. Phòò Thiàng, for instance, would often only go to the Baci portion of the post-partum event. After eating a bit of food (usually sticky-rice based food), he would not return for the later party. When I went to Baci I was often one of only a few young people. I would spend the time after it was completed loitering until the larger party, the *qòòk5 dùan3*, or ‘exiting of the month,’ began. The gap between the two events gives time for the guests and central hosts to eat, shower, and dress, and I would usually watch whoever was setting up the party unpack the rented chairs, the large round tables, and choose how many soda and Beer Lao bottles to put on each table. Like at a wedding, the tables are prepared with the food already in place, each plate wrapped in plastic. The meals tend to be served with a dish of steamed rice, not sticky rice, like at the earlier Baci. This rice, among other salient features such as decorations, fancy dresses, and a band, marks the party as a formal event; people put on their nicest clothing, are invited with letters, and take many photographs with their phones, tablets, and occasionally stand-alone digital cameras. The size of the *qòòk4 dùan3*, like a wedding, is generally understood in proportion to the wealth of the host.<sup>419</sup> When the guests arrive, they carry their invitation envelopes, filled with money—gifts for the couple and their newborn boy—they, one by one, drop them into a large gold-colored vessel, usually at the entrance of the party.

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Ngaosyvathn (1990:289) gives a similar explanation, saying that the ceremony has a “psychological function.” “To the extent that the ritual is believed to strengthen the soul or souls of the individual against possible dangers, or to restore diminished power, the person undergoing the ritual must undoubtedly feel ‘happier’ and from this point of view, the ritual is also psychologically therapeutic for the individual.” Although Phòò Thiàng clearly thought that some string tiers and ritual speakers were more powerful than others at blessing—particularly monks, he told me—happiness, wholeness, and a good disposition can also be signs of healthy *khwan3*.

<sup>419</sup> This is why it made sense for Mèè Phòòn to criticize Thii for having a ‘band’ at her *qòòk5 dùan3*, doing so implied Thii was trying to live beyond her means.





Figure 57: A Place for Gifts: a picture of a gift vessel at an *qòòk5 dùan3*

The formality of the *qòòk5 dùan3* is in stark contrast to the nights of the previous month at the *hùan2 kham1 dùan3*. People did not generally ‘dress up’ to go to a *hùan2 kham1 dùan3*, in the same way. Women did not prepare for these earlier nights by having their hair washed and styled at the salon nor did they usually wear a traditional Lao skirt to attend. Likewise, men would show up not with a long dress shirt and pants but merely the outfit they just wore to play soccer or whatever they had on after their evening showers.

Because my *siaw1* were in their late twenties and starting to raise families, I spent significant time in the field going from one *hùan2 kham1 dùan3* to another. These were hugely important events for the group of *siaw1*. All other things being equal, as people told me, the amount a person visits during this period is taken as a sign of how much that friend values his relationship with the couple. Since the birth of Bêê’s baby, for example, Dii had been to Bêê’s house three times, twice with me and once without, making the night before the *qòòk5 dùan3* Dii’s third and my second time visiting Bêê. When I asked Dii, he said a good friend should visit at least four

times. At the time, when I spoke to people in English, in emails to my committee and phone calls home, I called these events ‘baby showers.’ Hungover and tired from the night before, when my girlfriend at the time, now wife, Kim called, I often croaked that I had been at another baby-shower. She usually laughed. In English, the term implies a wholesomeness and femininity at odds with the self-conscious toughness and bravado cultivated at many of these events as I experienced them. That is not to say these events do not have more wholesome and/or more feminine dimensions. In fact, it was exactly such dimensions that were the symbolic center of the event: a woman, a newborn baby, a fire.

My perception that these were mostly male events was very much a product of the fact that I was a man and that I mostly went to these events at night. Bêê’s *hùan2 kham2 dùan3*, as I mentioned above, was not segregated by gender, but many of the others to which I went were informally segregated: men sitting outside the house in chairs and at a table, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer, and women sitting inside, on the floor, nearby to the newborn baby, and playing cards. At the first *kham1 dùan3* to which I went, I asked if it was segregated by gender and was told, flatly, that it was not. When I looked around, however, all of the women were inside playing and all of the men outside. On a different night of the same *kham2 dùan3*, a few women—those who were not playing cards—came outside and served and drank beer and watched the game unfold as the men played. Mèè Phòòn, when I asked her about this, told me that men were afraid of playing with the women because they were so much more skillful at cards.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> When I told others what Mèè Phòòn told me, they laughed this idea off. It is worth noting that there is, in fact, a card game called *phaj4 tèem4 dèng3* that is gendered feminine. Dii taught me how to play the game during one *hùan2 kham1 dùan3* he brought me to, as his wife played *phaj4 kooj1* the most common game, nearby. He said only women played it, but he had learned it from ‘watching them play.’

The segregation of genders was by no means a rule. Rather, the men and women who hosted *kham1 dùan3* organized their own houses somewhat differently. It was a sign both of the kind of person one was and the kind of gambling that one might undertake. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, at Bêê's *kham1 dùan3* men and women both played the same games together. Muu, in fact, took issue with this. When he was complaining on his motorcycle he told me that, unlike Bêê, he liked to *lin5 khùù2 phuu5 saaj2*—or ‘party like a man,’ and drink, and that Bêê, in contrast, always wanted to do things with his wife, and bring his wife along. Tia, as Muu told me over and over again, liked to stay at home and let Muu go out. The post-partum parties that I went to at Tam's house exemplified the hyper-masculine space that Muu seemed to imagine a *kham1 dùan3* should have. Tam was a few years older than me at the time and the *siaw1* of Muu's elder brother-in-law.<sup>421</sup> I went to Tam's *hùan2 kham3 dùan3* on two different nights. On both occasions, the men sat outside and the women sat inside<sup>422</sup> and, in fact, across every post-partum house to which I went, whenever men and women separated, men went outside and women went inside. At Tam's house, as the fire burned inside, occasionally ‘roasting’ the new mother, tons of tiny fires burned outside, as men puffed on cigarette after cigarette and drank glasses of beer. The space outside at Tam's house felt much rougher than anything I ever encountered at a ‘good house,’ and was filled with other occasional signs of masculinity, ‘strong’ bets, men rising-up out of their chairs, pointing fingers, and following much of what they said with semantically redundant but pragmatically potent phrases like *kuu3 vaal* (or, ‘I say’). As the men drank cold beer with ice, the women drank hot tea.

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<sup>421</sup> Note that the brother-in-law was almost the same age as Muu, but Muu referred to him as older brother—in a few moments, when complaining about him, however, just as he did with Bêê, he told me that they were really the same age.

<sup>422</sup> The exception was one person, whom was referred to by other people at the party as a *katheej2* (cf. Jackson 1997; Jackson and Sullivan 1999) and with whom I did not have a chance to speak, who twice walked back and forth between the two spaces, carrying Muu's nephew.

Late at night, on the second night that I went to Tam's house, we sat on the back balcony, playing cards. Starting around 11:00 PM and continuing until around 3:00 AM, Muu's sister-in-law (that is, Tia's sister) occasionally came to the edge of the steps of the balcony and called up to her husband, Muu's brother-in-law, that it was time to leave. She was tired and ready to go and her husband was drinking, gambling, and, as he pointed out to her, spending time to honor his friend Tam.<sup>423</sup> As she yelled up, she treated the patio staircase like a natural barrier and never went up them. He yelled back at her and told her to wait a bit longer. On the ride home, Muu told me that this was just one moment in his in-laws' increasingly rocky relationship. The night before, he said, the two of them fought physically, hitting one another and troubling his father-in-law to no end. Later during my fieldwork, I, in fact, witnessed them throwing children's bikes toward one another. The tension between the two of them crystallized a more general tension that, as I discuss in chapter six, often occurs between men and women in Luang Prabang: a battle over time and money.

## Good Gambling

*"We may say that what is moral is everything that is a source of solidarity, everything that forces man to take account of other people, to regulate his actions by something other than the promptings of his own egoism, and the more numerous and strong these ties are, the more solid is the morality."*

- Émile Durkheim (1893:331), *The Division of Labor in Society*

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<sup>423</sup> It is worth noting that many of these events happened at night. While I saw women stay late at *huan2 kham2 duan2* as well, playing cards—in fact, on a few occasions, young women, without families yet, spent the entire night out—the night at these events tended to have more men. The night often ended with a single group of men playing cards outside while everyone else inside was asleep. The same was true at funerals. When I went to a *huan2 kham1 duan3* during the day, there was often only the inside group, people, mostly women milling about, visiting the newborn, playing a game or two of cards in groups of four.

Much about the money gambling at funerals and post-partum houses seems, from the moral perspective of what has come before this chapter, inverted. The space of the home after birth is quite different from the money gambling court in terms of the sociality people say it presupposes and creates. The same could be said of funerals, where gambling on cards is an inherent part of the ritual leading from death until the day of cremation. These are intimate spaces that close friends and family must join to maintain relationships—but gambling for money is usually supposed to be something you do with strangers. The puzzle surfaces each time people in the United States ask me what I research. I often begin by describing gambling in Laos and the tensions around it, and then, anticipating the intrigue the topic draws, describe gambling's preeminence in scenes of death and birth. People inevitably wonder at the apparent contradiction: Why use a socially corrosive practice as the lead-up to two huge moments in the course of moral life? How do people account for this?<sup>424</sup>

In their introduction to the edited volume *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, Parry and Bloch (1989b) offer a model for understanding situations like this. Their introduction was aimed at unsettling the idea that money always had a single moral significance. They especially targeted what they identified as the Aristotelian tradition (and its later instantiations in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and the Karl Polanyi, among many others) in which profit-oriented

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<sup>424</sup> Before I left for the field, one fellow anthropologist I spoke with told me that the presence of gambling during these times was not a puzzle but what he might expect: in such moments of liminality, moments in which life itself is at risk and at question, people play with risk and fate. There is some evidence that cross-culturally, people often like to play gambling games after and around death. As Corr (2008:16) writes of indigenous South American mortuary rituals, "Ceremonial games of chance express the ultimate uncertainty of life and death." I even played non-staked games around my own brother's funeral in the United States—Pik-Up Stiks and Rummy-O—not because it was culturally prescribed but because it seemed like a good way to pass the time and because it fit with my family's habit of playing games together. Gambling and games generally might, at moments, diffuse people's tensions during stressful times, allow them to experiment with chance and risk, or serve as a passageway from disruption back to normality, but I am not going to stamp funerary or postpartum gambling with any one function. Answers that do this are often compelling, as workable objects of reflection that help us understand how rituals propagate, but they generalize too much.

exchange is imagined as “unnatural... and destructive of the bonds between households” (1989:2). As Parry and Bloch looked across cultures and types of economy, they found that money and ‘badness’ were not stapled together, but that money was subject to the same range of moral evaluations as any economic material or transaction. They found regularities, furthermore, as to when all transactions were evaluated negatively and when they were evaluated positively. They distinguished two “related but separate transactional orders: transactions concerned with the reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic order and a ‘sphere’ of short-term transactions concerned with the arena of individual competition.” They concluded that across the cases in their edited volume, money was evaluated depending on the ‘transactional order’ in which it was used:

*While the long-term cycle is always positively associated with the central precepts of morality, the short-term order tends to be morally undetermined since it concerns individual purposes which are largely irrelevant to the long-term order. If, however, that which is obtained in the short-term individualistic cycle is converted to serve the reproduction of the long-term cycle, then it becomes morally positive—like the cash ‘drunk’ in Fiji or the wealth given as dana in Hindu India. But equally there is always the opposite possibility—and this evokes the strongest censure—the possibility that individual involvement in the short-term cycle will become an end in itself which is no longer subordinated to the reproduction of the large cycle; or, more horrifying still, that grasping individuals will divert the resources the long-term cycle for their own short-term transactions (Parry and Bloch 1989b:26–27).*

In the current anthropological climate, this argument might seem quaint, formalistic, gauzy, and abstract. It is also out of fashion: at its center is a Durkheimian theory of morality that has become the target of criticism in the anthropology of ethics. As I mention in the introduction, anthropologists have repeatedly critiqued Durkheim’s theory along similar lines, for identifying

“the collective with the good” (Laidlaw 2002:312), for making “the moral congruent with the social” (Zigon 2007:132), for “conflat[ing] the moral with the social...” (Parkin 1985:5).<sup>425</sup>

I argue that this important critique nevertheless obscures (at least) two roughly distinct senses in which Durkheim aligned the social with the moral.<sup>426</sup> On the one hand, Durkheim argued that cultural norms were the substance of morality.<sup>427</sup> Therefore a morally good person did what society dictated was good and avoided what society dictated was bad. In this sense, “all routine, normative social action [was] moral” (Robbins 2007:293).

On the other hand, Durkheim also argued that acts which strengthen a group over and against the individual are good. As he wrote in the *Division of Labor in Society* and as I quoted above, everything that “is a source of solidarity, everything that forces man to take account of other people, to regulate his actions by something other than the promptings of his own egoism, and the more numerous and strong these ties are, the more solid is the morality” (1893:331). Broadly put, in the first sense the good is the socially sanctioned, in the second the pro-social is the good.

Critics of Durkheim have tended to focus on the first of these senses and elided the second.<sup>428</sup> Laidlaw (2002:312) writes, for instance, that as a consequence of Durkheim’s theory, “the category of the moral has, accordingly, almost invariably collapsed in the hands of anthropologists into whatever other terms we have been enthusiastically using to explain collectively sanctioned rules, beliefs, and opinions: sometimes ‘culture,’ sometimes ‘ideology,’

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<sup>425</sup> Robbins (2007:294) writes, “When every observance of a collectively held rule of etiquette is as much a moral act as is refraining from killing someone who has injured you, there seems to be little to say about morality beyond obvious claims about the force of culture in guiding behavior. A developing consensus appears to hold that this conflation of morality and culture is not the way forward for an anthropology of morality.”

<sup>426</sup> Both senses are captured well in a terse line from Durkheim’s *Moral Education* (1961:86), “If society is the end of morality, it is also its producer.”

<sup>427</sup> “If there is one rule of conduct whose moral character is undisputed, it is that which decrees that we should realize in ourselves the essential features of the collective type” (1893:329).

<sup>428</sup> This might in part be because critics have targeted Durkheim’s legacy more than his actual, diverse writings—like, for instance, *Moral Education* (1961). As Yan (2011) puts it, “the negative role of the Durkheimian obstacle may be misleadingly overstated.”

sometimes ‘discourse.’” But it was this second sense in which Durkheim elided the social and the moral that Parry and Bloch most echoed in their argument. For them, economic practices that are aimed toward producing lasting social bonds beyond the individual tend to be, across cultures, deemed good. That is, when the reproduction of society itself is the end, then Parry and Bloch anticipate the practice will be considered virtuous.<sup>429</sup>

However clumsy Parry and Bloch’s theory might seem as a universal model in our current climate of the anthropology of ethics, I focus on it here because it seems to exactly capture how people in Luang Prabang generically explain the moral acceptability of gambling for money at ‘good houses’ and post-partum houses. As I showed in chapter five, gambling for money outside of these events is predictably and generically talked about as a moral problem because it is oriented to money at the risk of dissolving social relations. The acquisition of money for the ‘short term cycle’ of an individual’s needs and desires becomes “an end in itself” (Parry and Bloch 1989:27). At ‘good houses’ and post-partum houses, by contrast, gambling for money is imagined to be encased in a larger social frame. Gambling as an economic type is weaponized. Its destructive, captivating power is channeled into a tool for gathering the social body during the two most significant moments in a life: the emergence and disappearance of a person.

Although Parry and Bloch’s argument captures the regularity of generic evaluations of gambling for money in these different environments and thus the explicit moral pronouncements of many in Luang Prabang, it leaves open a crucial semiotic problem. If social ends determine an economic act’s moral qualities, how do people in Luang Prabang identify these ends? How do they know when an action is done for society, the long-term cycle, or the greater good rather than for one’s own personal desires? In chapter five I argued that generic propositions about

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<sup>429</sup> The inverse, then, as Yan (2011) writes, is that “immorality is basically a violation of the social, and this is why it causes not only a moral breakdown but also, in some cases, a publicly-perceived crisis.”



gambling for money and gambling for beer do not determine how such types are applied to specific events, and in chapter seven I added to this by arguing that neither does the specific, referential application of a type determine the affective or metapragmatic qualities of the economic and communicative act to which it is applied. These same problem haunts Parry and Bloch's account: how and when do people make their ends palpable during exchange itself? What counts, furthermore, as a greater good? Broadly understood, both the narrow 'primitive' moral economy that Sahlins and Evans discuss and the universalistic moral economy that the Lao state trumpets hold that the morality of an economic act depends on whether it strengthens or destroys solidarity. The former merely select the relevant persons to whom one is beholden in this way more narrowly. The 'primitive' social body is still a good end in itself; the body is just composed of less people. In the next section, I turn to video-recordings of gambling at post-partum houses and show that the larger frame of the event as something for a greater good waxes and wanes from people's attention, fades in and out, and at times, frays under the weight of people's habitual practices, their desires to win and compete.

### **Generous Gambling**

Klima (2002:253) writes that a "wager at the funeral casino is at one and the same time a mundane gamble for personal profit and a donation of spiritual value for a good cause." The same cannot always be said for bets in card games at 'good houses' and 'post-partum' houses in Luang Prabang. The two ends are at times broken apart. This is in part a function of the difference between the kinds of gambling available at the Thai funeral casino Klima describes and the various events in Laos to which I went. In the funeral casino, Klima describes how the gambling was run through game operators, dealers, et cetera. These operators then gave the family of the deceased a percentage of their take. In this sense, every bet a guest made with the

operators led to either winning or a good cause. At ‘good houses’ and ‘post-partum’ houses in Luang Prabang, by contrast, people gambled on cards. In these card games, one played against other guests, not a dealer. Because there was no dealer, there was no one that automatically donated money to the family of the deceased.

Instead, in the middle of each game, there was a basket, sometimes a bowl, called the *tong3*. In some ways, the *tong3* is like the portion of the take the dealers at Klima’s funeral casino give to the family and according to the most popular Lao-English dictionary, the word *tong3* even derives from a ‘Chinese’ word for the fixed percentage of winnings taken by the house in a gambling den (Kerr and Bourommavong 1973). But, in Luang Prabang, the amount that goes into a *tong3* is not a fixed percentage of each player’s winnings.<sup>430</sup> Rather, a player, after winning, chooses how much he might want to donate. If he wins 20,000 Kip, for example, he might take 2,000 from his winnings and put it in the *tong3*, or 4,000, or nothing at all. The money in the *tong3* is set aside for either the bereaved or the newborn’s family, ostensibly meant to pay back the family for hosting the event and, in the case of the post-partum house, to defray the costs of raising a baby.

The *tong3* breaks apart the bet and donations to the family in a way that was not possible at Klima’s funeral casino. It makes the two ends palpably distinct. Donated money is not marked physically or folded in any special way (as it might be, for instance, during an alms-giving event), but the two possible ends—personal acquisition and gift giving—are divided in meaningful space. The *tong3* earmarks the money that goes to the family, to the deceased or the

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<sup>430</sup> In every *huan2 kham2 duan3* to which I went, the *tong3* was setup as a voluntary event. The one exception was at my older neighbor’s house where men in their mid-fifties were playing with an ante of 5,000 Kip and, after each every hand, took 5,000 of that ante and put it in the *tong3*. In this situation, the *tong3* worked as its etymological roots might suggest, as as Klima’s funeral casino did. But people in Luang Prabang seemed to like that the *tong3* was a vessel for freely giving money.

newborn, to give as alms to the monks or buy beer for the guests. In turn, people’s pockets, their wallets, and their hiding spots—say under the placemat on the gambling table or in a sock— earmark the money with which one can do what one pleases (on pockets see Pickles 2013).<sup>431</sup> Below, I argue that during games, the *tong3* often stood in for the Durkheimian pro-social, moral end. It materialized that ‘greater good’ in an interactional object to which people could point, act upon, and signal their allegiance. Its presence was in and of itself a relatively perduring metapragmatic statement about what the gambling was for. Just as a tip jar at a coffee shop can frame the service interaction as a situation of a certain kind, once a *tong3* had been designated, it affected the scene. People could, for instance, cite how full or empty it was as a barometer for the ethical quality of the interaction and the generosity of the players. In the example below, for instance, Muu ruffles through the bills and says, “Curse, the *tong3* has just a little bit of money [in it], barely 150,000.”<sup>432</sup> The money one won during a game of cards—usually slightly hidden away—affords similar metapragmatic work: people could point to it as evidence that they had lost money, as they often did, or others might point to it as evidence that they had won without giving anything to the host.

To show how the *tong3* affords the metapragmatics of gambling for money, below I track a specific string of games at Tam’s post-partum house. Tam, as I mentioned above, was a *siawl* of Muu’s brother-in-law. I went with Muu and at that point only knew him and his brother-in-law somewhat; I was meeting everyone else for the first time. After arriving, I asked for permission to set up my camera to capture the card playing. After playing a four-player game for some time, the group moved to a game called *phaj4 kèè4*, a variation of baccarat that can have as many

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<sup>431</sup> The money in the middle, in contrast to both of these places, is in play, on the line, and set apart as no one’s just yet.

<sup>432</sup> *haa1 tong3 ngen2 kaø-daj4 nòj4 thèè4 haa3 kaø-daj4 sên3 haa5*

players as the cards in the deck can handle (i.e., seventeen). While *phaj3 kòj3*, the four-player game was generally much more popular, and the unmarked form of card gambling in Luang Prabang, in games with large amounts of men, *phaj4 kèè4*, and a variant with only two cards, were the most popular games.

In *phaj4 kèè4*, each player must put in an ante, or forced bet, for the game to begin. They are then dealt three cards, the scores of which are tabulated in a way like baccarat. Generally, one wants to get as close to ten points as possible without getting ten points, which counts as zero. A hand consisting of a queen, 4 and 5, for instance, yields a good score of nine points. A hand with a 2, 3 and, 5 is counted as 0.<sup>433</sup> After being dealt cards, the players bet (bets can then be raised once) before the winner is determined or a tie is announced. The winner—or in the case of a tie, a chosen person—then deals the next hand.<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> There are other combinations of suits and numbers that can be more powerful, but the details do not matter here.

<sup>434</sup> The name of the game, *phaj4 kèè4* (i.e., ‘cards for betting again’) references the possibility of raising a bet, and this possibility in the game opens a space for posturing fearlessness, challenging others, and displaying the size of one’s heart.



Figure 58: A player yells *qaw4* as he, standing up, takes a 50,000 Kip bill out of his wallet and puts it on the table.

When we began playing, there were seven players; I sat out. The section of the recordings that I review here spans two separate video-files (I had to switch out the batter and memory card), forty hands of *phaj4 kèè4*, and about an hour and forty minutes. It ends after two people from this initial hand have left, and one more man has come and gone.

At the beginning of the games, Muu suggests they play with an ante of 5,000 Kip, but others say that that is ‘too big’ (*ñaj1 phoot5*). After one man suggests they set the maximum bet at 20,000, another says that they should limit it to 50,000, suggesting that otherwise they will *jaan4 kan3*, or ‘be scared of each other.’<sup>435</sup>

To understand how the *tong3* worked in this event, I first marked every time that someone touched or dealt with the small porcelain bowl, screen left in the figure above, and in the center

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<sup>435</sup> Four hands into the string of games, Muu suggests they raise the ante to 10,000 a person for one round; he is quickly shut down. Although similar ideas are floated a few times, and occasionally people make ‘outside’ bets with one another on a hand, the game maintains its general structure throughout.

of the screen-grabs in the images below that come from the other angle (I moved the camera's tripod at the end of the first recording, to capture more of the scene). I found a simple, powerful pattern in these events: over the almost two hours of video, few gifts to the *tong3* went unremarked. Across these moments, people approached the *tong3* with interpretive care, explicitly marking their interactions with it. When they changed money from it, they often counted aloud; when they gave to it, they said so, and they monitored when and whether others dealt with it.

Roughly counted, there were forty-two moments where people talked about or manipulated the *tong3* and the money within it. In nineteen of those interactions someone put cash into the *tong3*. In all but four of these nineteen moments, the person putting money in the *tong3* either references that they are doing so or does so as a second-pair-part to a recruitment by another person to do so.<sup>436</sup>

Before moving to the four exceptions, in which someone put money in the *tong3* without an immediate remark from them or another person, I track a few examples where people did say something as they gave.

### **Example 1: Commenting on Giving to the Tong3**

After a tie in *phaj4 kèè4*, the co-winners would replay the hand with the money from the previous hand.<sup>437</sup> Often, rather than keeping all of the money from the previous hand in the center pot, players would donate some of the money to the *tong3*. In this example, there was just a tie and the men are trying to determine how much should stay in the pot. Two people tell Dêng, the man in red in the image below who is counting the money, to “*tong3* without ado” (*tong3*

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<sup>436</sup> Note that *tong3* appears to function as both a noun and a verb (that is, it can mean the action of putting something into a vessel and it can refer to the vessel).

<sup>437</sup> If others wanted to join in, they could buy in, by paying half the pot or some other agreed upon amount.

*leej2, tong3 leej2*). Dêng tells them he needs to get his change first, implying that he had on the previous hand used a larger denomination bill as a placeholder for a smaller amount of money (e.g., he had put in a 50,000 Kip bill for a 10,000 Kip bet) and that he now needs to take the difference back. As he says this, Dêng fans out the bills he is counting and displays them to everyone. He then says “*tong3* five thousand” or *tong3 haa5 phan2* and puts a 5,000 Kip bill in the bowl.

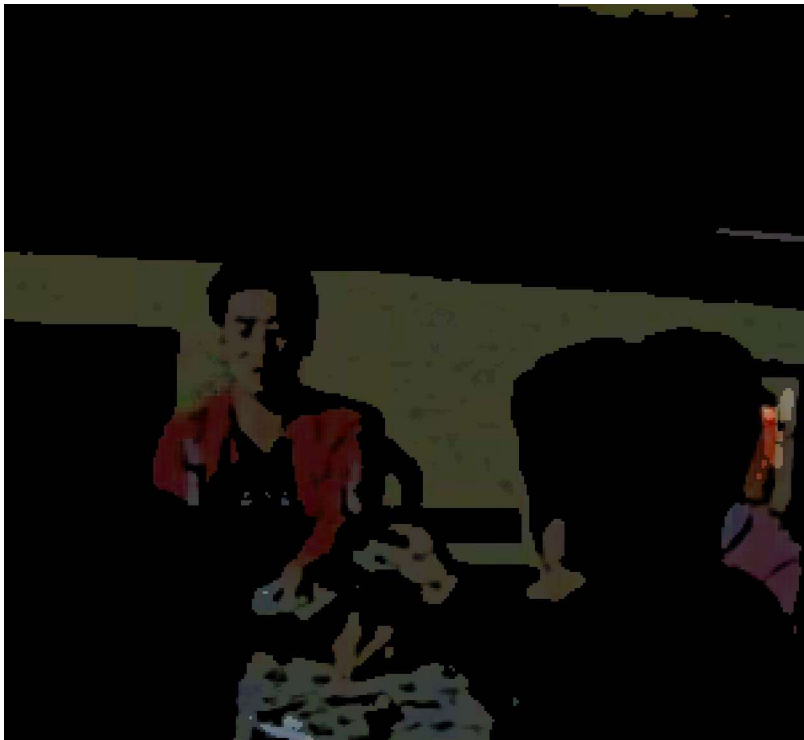


Figure 59: Example 1: Player displays the money he is counting

**Example 2: A Player Announces Putting Money in the *tong3* After a Victory**

A player has just won, shuffled the cards, and dealt them. He puts a two thousand Kip bill into the *tong3* using his left hand and as he does this he says, *tong3 kòòn1 qool kuu3*, or, roughly, and with loss of the pizzazz that the post-clausal, bare, first-person pronominal *kuu3* adds, “I am going to *tong3* first.”

**Example 3: Muu Places Money in the Center Pot that he is Counting**

Muu tosses the three thousand Kip bill he is holding in his hand into the bowl and says *tong3 leej2* or “*tong3* without ado.”

In these three examples (and in all but the four examples I have in which people gave to the *tong3* on their own accord), players narrate exactly what they are doing as they do it. Doing so is not in any sense required by the act of putting money in the *tong3*. Rather, these comments seemed designed precisely to make their economic actions publicly available. We might compare such actions with bets. Whenever a player raised a bet in *phaj4 kèè4*, he was expected to say how much he was betting. Occasionally, he might performatively throw down a large bill without saying anything and allow other people to dig it out and see how much it was but, in general, his being clear about how much he was betting was necessary for the game to function. This is not so for giving to the *tong3*. Money put in silently constitutes the same economic contribution as money remarked upon. People thus clearly have other reasons for narrating the money they put into the *tong3*. Being clear about when one has given money to the *tong3* both emphasizes that one has generously given and forestalls accusations that one has not. The normal rhythmic moment for people to put money in the *tong3*, the moment where such an action seems to become most relevant, is immediately after a hand has finished. At this moment, people would sometimes look to whoever has just won and ask that person if he or she had put money in the *tong3*, or tell him or her to do so. Here is a banal example. One man won, and another, the one sitting across the table in the picture above, told him: “*Tong3* now! You haven’t *tong3* at all.”<sup>438</sup> In response, the winner took a bill and threw it in the bowl, saying “*qaw4*.”

The performative dimensions of putting money in the *tong3* are clear by closely looking at those moments where the host, Tam, puts money into it. Because the money in the *tong3* is

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<sup>438</sup> *tong3 leej2 mèè4 bòø-daj4 tong3 cak2 thùal*



imagined as going to Tam’s family, if people announce their gifts to the *tong3* in part to perform generosity, we would suspect that Tam would not be as likely to announce that he is putting money in the *tong3*. This is, in fact, what I found. Throughout the recorded section I am discussing here, Tam put money in the *tong3* four times. During three of these times, he does not remark on the fact. The one time he does, Tam does so indirectly, without using the word *tong3*, and mid-game as he is betting. Holding money in his hand, Tam takes a bill and says, “this one, I’m going to bet (*puts the bill on the table*) [and] this one (*taking another bill in his hand*), I am going to do this with [*he then puts the bill in the tong3*].”<sup>439</sup>

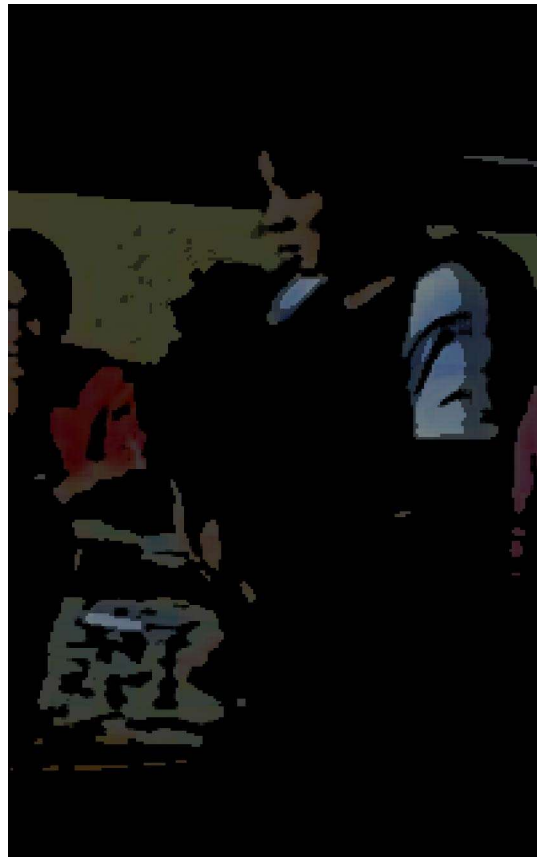


Figure 60: The host, standing, puts money in the *tong3*

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<sup>439</sup>*qan3 nii4 kuu3 siø-long2 (puts money on table) qaw3 qan3 nii4 lèw4 kuu3 siø-qan3 nii4 (puts money in the tong3)*

During each of the three other times Tam puts money in the *tong3*, he takes the money not from his own pocket but from the pot of an active game. That is, he takes from the pile of money that has already been wagered, but not yet been won. Two of these times Tam says something unrelated as he moves the money. Although this might be construed as a kind of theft from the eventual winner, he does not attempt to hide what he is doing. Neither does someone sanction him directly as he is doing it. Nevertheless, there is evidence from other moments in the recording that a person might have a problem with this kind of action. Here are two quick examples. First, during the moment where Tam did give from his own personal money, another man did mistakenly think that Tam had taken the money from the collective pot and say that Tam could not do that: “Hey, stupid, if I raise, if I raise fifty thousand I can put it in the *tong3* [is that what you’re saying]?”<sup>440</sup> This led Tam to clarify that he “bet separately” from his donation, which satisfied the other man. Second, after one moment where Tam put money from the pot into the *tong3*, Muu followed suit and took an additional 10,000 from the central pot and put it in the *tong3* as well. At the end of the hand, after a different player won, the winner told Muu to take the 10,000 out again and give it back to him.

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<sup>440</sup> *qaaw4 caa4 nii4 kuu3 kèè4, khan2 kèè4 haa5 sip2 kaø-tong3 leej2 san4 vaal*

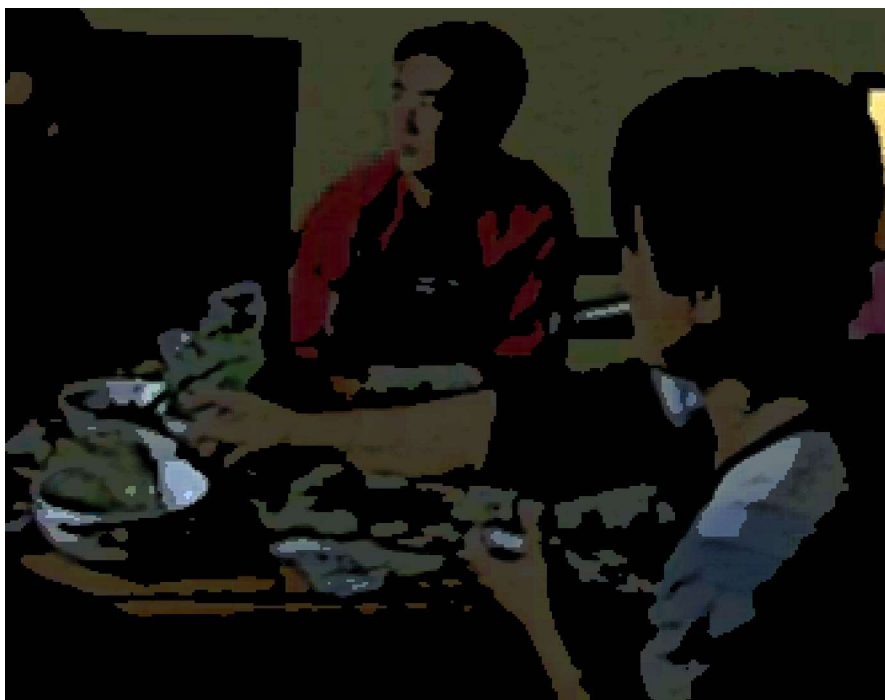


Figure 61: Tam, the host of the event, puts money in the *tong3*

While other players might be motivated to announce when they put money in the *tong3*, Tam seemed to downplay his donations, which he often funded not with his own money but with money from the collective pot. Again, I found nineteen examples where someone put money in the *tong3*; in only four of these did the act go unmentioned and Tam was responsible for three of those four moments.

This brings me to the other solitary moment where someone did not explicitly reference—or have someone else immediately prompt—a gift to the *tong3*. In this moment, one of Tam’s *siaw1* has just won. Still standing up from the table after a showy reveal of his hand, he counts out five thousand Kip and puts it in the *tong3*. He does not say anything as he does this but when he sits down, he slams the rest of his money down and calls out *qaw4* or “Take!” Furthermore, the act of putting the money in the *tong3* itself was done with some force, the sort of exaggerated movement that can turn an instrumental action into a communicative one (cf. Kendon 2004 and personal communication). Thus, while this man does not say anything, he does

emphasize his action, doing it with flourish, and at a moment when people were still oriented to him as the winner of the previous hand.



Figure 62: The man in the foreground raises up the money (circled) that he is about to throw into the *tong3*

The loud gesture, however, did not seem to be enough to put his gift on record. After the man sits down, Muu, sitting two people over, tells him that he wants to exchange the man's larger 50,000 Kip bill with small bills from the *tong3*, presumably to get more smaller bills into circulation in the game. The *tong3*, however, only has 46,000 Kip worth of change, so, after grabbing the man's bill, Muu says that Tam can just *tong3* the remaining 4,000, 2,000 in lieu of an ante and 2,000 more for good faith. Protesting, the man tells Muu that he has just put money into the *tong3*. Muu, seemingly unsurprised, says that he means the man can put the additional four thousand in the *tong3* for this coming game. Notice the way that the man twice mentions his previously unmentioned donation, correcting the public record, so to speak:

**The Man**

1.1) *qaaj5 tong3 lèw4 haa5 phan2*

“I (i.e., older brother) gave to the *tong3* already, five thousand.”

**Muu**

1.2) *bòòl qanø-nii4 tong3 taa3-nii4-naq2*  
(taps on the table) “No, this is giving to the *tong3* for this coming hand.”

**Friend**

1.3) *qee3 bòø-pên3 ñang3 qaaj5 tong3 haj5 lèèw4 haa5 phan2*  
“Okay, don’t worry about it. But I (older brother) gave to the *tong3* already, five thousand.”

A few seconds later, he tells Muu that he is fine with it and to *tong3 leej2 mèè4*, or to “give to the *tong* without ado.” He then turns to Tam, laughing, and says, “seven thousand I gave to the *tong3*” (counting the five thousand that was unmentioned before and the two thousand additional money he just gave).<sup>441</sup> Tam, looking away from the man, displaying a kind of distance, tells him that he “doesn’t know anything about that.” The man responds: “this round I am going to win again, you know that.”<sup>442</sup> He then, once more, reminds everyone that he already gave to the *tong3* right as the next game begins: “I gave two thousand already, you hear!”<sup>443</sup>

In this example, the one example where someone other than Tam gave without remarking, the man follows his unremarked gift with a repeated insistence on having given—and perhaps having given too much. In saying that he is going to ‘win the next round’ the man also implicitly references a general idea, that giving to the *tong3* can bring luck. Muu’s brother-in-law explicitly invokes this same causal relation between giving and luck later in the night. After a large losing streak, he and another man tell the host that they have lost significant amounts since they arrived. ‘Two or three hundred thousand,’ the brother-in-law says. He then takes a 10,000 Kip bill and throws it in the *tong3*. As he does this he says *tong3 tong3 tong3* and follows with, “I’ll get some luck before [we play].”<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>441</sup> *kaø-cêt phan2 kuu3 tong3 lèèw4... (h) (h) ngen2....*

<sup>442</sup> *taa3 nii4 kuul kin3 maj1 mùng2 huu5 qaql*

<sup>443</sup> *kuu3 tong3 sòong3 phan2 lèèw4 dee4*

<sup>444</sup> *qaw3 maan3 kòøn1*. One interesting moment came early in the first recording, when Muu gives one thousand Kip to the *tong3*. At this point, he has already folded from the current hand. As he puts the money in he calls out: “Okay, I am going to *tong3* now first, you hear! Separately!” A few seconds later, he mumbles to himself, “yeah, yeah, curse it,” as if he just remembered something about the money he was holding and counting. He then takes out the money he just put in. The second phrase, which announced he was taking the money back, was quieter and lacked

The tendency to remark on interactions with the basket is not limited to moments where people give. They also use the *tong3* to change small bills and to disperse some of the money within it to buy things such as ice or beer. In manipulating the *tong3*, people seem sensitive to accusations of theft. Muu, for instance, when he changes a 10,000 Kip bill with money from the *tong3* counts aloud.

### **Angry Gambling**

The *tong3* was sometimes treated as a barometer for what was going on. Like a barometer, its level of fullness, an indexical icon of the frequency with which people gave to it, shifted with the pressure of the situation. Like the gambling generally, the *tong3* measured the situation and people's capacity to put loyalty to friends and a newborn baby over their desire for money. It thus, came with some risk. Risk that a player might reveal himself to want what his friends have, to be greedy, or to have a bad personality. This risk came to a head in an argument at Tam's *huan2 kham1 duan3*, and Muu was again at the center of the situation. The argument was not about who gave money to the *tong3*, but who won a hand. Giving to the *tong3* did seem to track with the emergence of the tension among the players, however. As the night went on, the density of people giving money to the *tong3* decreased significantly. While in the first nine hands (including tie games), someone gave to the *tong3* twice, in the last thirty-one hands, someone gave to the *tong3* only five times.<sup>445</sup> Three of these latter five donations, furthermore, were the ones from Tam himself that I described above.<sup>446</sup> Impressionistically, this seemed to follow a

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any on-the-record sentence final particles like *dee4*. For a similar description of 'response cries' and their relation to distributing agency, see Zuckerman 2017.

<sup>445</sup> Of course, giving to the *tong3* is not the only way people give to the host. One player, for instance, the player who won the most hands during the night never gave money to the *tong3* without being asked to do so, but he did give Tam the money to ante on multiple occasions (after Tam asked him). Just after the segment that I stopped transcribing, furthermore, Muu's brother-in-law, just having been yelled at by his wife, realized we were out of beer and told everyone to contribute 20,000 Kip to buy beer, which Tam then wandered off to buy.

<sup>446</sup> Possibly six, as one potential donation is indeterminate from the video.

general pattern, where the more money that people won or lost, and the drunker they became, the less they gave to the *tong3* and the more they seemed concerned about how much they had won or lost. On this night, Tam in particular was quite drunk by the last few games, and this fact might in part explain why no one cared when he threw money into the *tong3* from the communal pot.

Before the argument with Muu, a man named Dêng, one of Tam's *siaw1*, had a slight row with a different guest. Dêng accused the man of taking too much change from the center pot. Eventually, after much discussion everyone decided that the man had taken the right amount of change. About eight minutes later, Dêng bickered with Muu. A hand after that, Dêng left for home. I focus below on this latter argument. It occurred—unsurprisingly considering local Lao assumptions about the tendency for money games to lead to arguments—during the biggest hand of the night.



*Figure 63: Dêng and Muu Start Betting Big*

The betting happened slowly, and with some debate. After some betting and many players folding, Dêng and Muu were the only two players left in the hand. Dêng told Muu that he wanted to bet 100,000, but, Muu then pointed out, according to the rules they had set up, that Dêng could

only bet in increments of 50,000. In the end, after raising back and forth, and with Muu standing up at the table, the pot was over 200,000, or about thirty dollars, the largest hand of the night by about ten dollars. When the two men revealed their hands, their hands were identical in every respect but one, Dêng had an ace of spades, Muu had an ace of another suit. Dêng said that his ace of spades beat Muu's ace, Muu said that no one took the suit of a card into consideration (*laj1 sii3*) in *phaj4 kèè4*. The argument continued for two minutes. Muu asked people to believe him that no one took suits into consideration; Dêng likewise recruited others to agree with him that the suit of the card did matter. Another of Tam's *siaw1* waved Dêng off with a hand and the phrase *lin5 muan1 paj3 lin5 muan1 paj3*, "play for fun, play for fun," a creative, specific reference to the event unfolding, reminding everyone of what the card playing was supposed to be all about: fun and friendship.



Figure 64: The person blocked waves off Dêng and tells him to *lin5 muan1 paj3*

The pair continued arguing. They finally agreed that they would call the hand a draw, but they then argued about whether they should split the pot evenly (*pan3 kan3*) or continue playing the



game but with a newly dealt hand (*suu1 kan3*). In chapter seven, I discuss how *pan3 kan3* or sharing a bet is taken to be a sign of solidarity, as opposed to bets against others, which are said to be something that you should not do with close friends. Here, when a fight jeopardized the conviviality of the scene, the logic was inverted: splitting the pot was the ultimate sign of social separation—like separating property after a divorce. For Tam, the situation was infuriating. He wanted Dêng and Muu to continue playing, to be friends, and as Muu shuffled the deck for the next hand, he said the following angrily: “why didn’t you figure it out a second ago, I (i.e., older brother) saw it coming, he is still filming us here—aaah!”<sup>447</sup> As he said this last phrase, about filming, he pointed right at the camera, starting with a lip point and then raising his arm and index finger at the camera. I (to the right of the screengrab below) sat quietly as he referred to me and my camera.



*Figure 65: Tam, at the end of the table, points to my camera and reminds everyone that I am still filming*

<sup>447</sup> *too3 ñang3 bòø-cat3 kan3 mùù4 kii4 qaaj5 kaø-hên3 sat2 daj4 mùù4 kii4 naa1 khaw2 ñang2 thaaj5 ... juu1 nii4 naq1 nòq1 qeeej*

As in chapter three, Tam considered it important that ‘bad’ things were not captured by things like cameras and recorder. This argument was, for him, extremely upsetting. Like a couple’s quarrel on Valentine’s Day, Muu and Dêng’s argument troubled him because it contradicted what the event was supposed to be for. The camera made this failure that much more palpable, real, and tragic for him. Unlike the picture with which I concluded my discussion in chapter eight, where Muu and Khêêng were holding beers and shaking hands, it preserved an argument, an image of fractured friendship.

Muu responded to Tam by saying that he was trying to settle the problem but that, by implication, Dêng was not budging. They split the pot and argued over whether everything was correct with it. After the next hand, Dêng left. As he walked out Dêng shook Tam’s hand and Muu leaned over with his hands outstretched, calling out to him, “Older brother Dêng.” They shook hands as well.

As soon as Dêng left, however, Muu went back to arguing his case. “In this kind of card game,” he said, “it did not matter what suit a card was.” Everyone seemed to agree, but he kept at it, clearly frazzled by the encounter. At one point, Muu told everyone what the stakes were if he were wrong, the stakes for his reputation, the stakes for his character: “Go ask anyone, ask them immediately. If they say that [an ace of spades would] win [against my hand] you all can say that I am a bad person, [you can say it] with certainty. That’s my personality.”<sup>448</sup> With that, the same man who told Muu and Dêng to “play for fun” waved Muu off, telling him to settle down. We stayed for hours more, gambling after Dêng left. On the ride home, Muu repeated his case to me. And over the next few days, he brought it up again and again. In the car, when we

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<sup>448</sup> *paj3 thaam3 saj3 kaø-thaam3 loot4 khan2 khaw2 vaa1 pit2 kin3 nii4 phuak4 caw4 vaa1 khòj5 pên3 khon2 bòø-dii3 loot4 sàa1 man5 nisaj3 khòj5 kòq1*

met Dii one evening, he even asked the whole of our group of *siawl*'s soccer team about it as we waited to play a game. 'People don't take suits into consideration in *phaj4 kêê4*, right?' He told me later that it was clear what had happened: Dêng wanted too much money, he wanted what others had. But Muu's searching questions, his repeated claims that he was in the right, signified that he was troubled by the event and what it might mean about him.

## Conclusion

After Dii sent me the message I quoted at the end of the previous chapter, the message that said that he did not resent Muu, that doing so would not make him gain anything, he sent another long voice message, a coda to the first, which hinted that his feelings were more complicated. In the message, Dii brought up the post-partum party that Muu, whose second daughter had just been born, had assuredly just had. He wondered what it was like for Muu to have none of us *siawl* go:

*Muu's father-in-law and mother-in-law and his wife, right, probably they ask him, 'Hey, your friends, where did they all go?' at his party for his new baby or when he was having his post-partum house. 'Why don't we see anyone coming to hang out with you?' They probably ask him, right. How would he respond, right? I want to know. Like, how would he feel, when they ask him.*<sup>449</sup>

Dii did not go to Muu's last *kham2 dùan3* as they had already fallen out of contact. But he imagined the emptiness, the lack of bodies, as something that might have made Muu feel bad. When Dii described his own *kham2 dùan3* to me one night, which I missed, he stressed how late people stayed and how much money they had lost. He framed it as a success and felt good about it.

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<sup>449</sup> *Phò1 thaw5 mè1 thaw5 man2 kap2 mia2 man2 nòq1 khù2 siø-thaam3 haa3 vaa1 qaw4 san4 muu1 khuu1 ñang3 paj3 saj3 mot2 nòq1 tònn3 qòk5 dùan3 lù3 vaa1 tònn3 kham1 dùan3 khù2 bò-hên3 phuu5 daj3 paj3 lin5 nam2 sii5 naa1 khaw2 khù2 siø-thaam3 man2 nòq1 si-tòp4 nèw2 daj3 nòq1 kuu3 kaø-jaak5 huu5 juu1 huh lêq1 man2 siø-huu5 suk2 nèw2 daj3 vêlaa2...khacaw4 thaam3 naa1*

Given all that I have said about money gambling up until this point in the dissertation, there is something of an irony that the quantity of friends that come to one's house to gamble for money is taken as a sign of their love for the host. Money gambling is supposed to fracture friendships, and yet in these late nights it becomes imagined as the substance of friendship. Of course, this moral definition of the situation always risked cracking. Even the *tong3* was not immune to being judged as a tool for selfishness—people can claim that it is not for the greater good but for the host's personal gain.<sup>450</sup>

The examples of people getting upset, like Muu did at Tam's and Bêê's *kham2 dùan3*, do not appear to be unique. I heard other such stories, and saw similar arguments at two other events. Rather it seems that people recognize this risk of argument; in fact, the risk itself is exactly what makes the gambling meaningful (cf. Keane 1997).<sup>451</sup> Many activities can help one pass the time and draw people to your house; gambling allows you to test one another, put loyalties into question, and choose to care more about friends than money. Similar to a smack to the head or an insult, gambling provides an opportunity for people to show one another that they can take it. From this perspective, we can better understand why Tam was so upset with Muu and Dêng when they did not want to finish their game but merely split the pot. Their inability to keep playing evinced a failure of their friendship. In such moments, playing for money is imagined as a type that presupposes friendship rather than creates discord, and it does this precisely because it has the latter capacity to stimulate conflict. The hope, in a sense, is that people lose as much money as possible and stay unresentful. Gambling gave the space for people to do much of the

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<sup>450</sup> The crux of Muu's complaints about Bêê on our ride home on the motorcycle were that he wanted what his friends had. Muu told me that this was evident by the fact that Bêê told Muu to *tong3* even though he already lost money.

<sup>451</sup> See Tomlinson (2007:706) regarding the trend in anthropology to look at contestation rather than social reproduction in ritual.

character work that recent anthropologists concerned with ethics have highlighted: to choose when and how to give, to display their characters, to cultivate themselves, but it gave them this space under the umbrella of a generically recognizable moral type. Games at these events are framed as not just gambling for money. They are gambling for money at a post-partum house; they are for a greater good that is made palpable in semiotic bits like the *tong3* and the comments about it. As such, these games embed ethical practice and potential contestation in a generic Durkheimian frame. But, of course, 'inside' this frame which people put upon the games, so to speak, is messy action, choice, and a situation that can test one's mettle.

## Chapter 10 Conclusion

Months before the money game with Sii that made me lose my cool and that drew Dii's sanction on the motorcycle ride home, Dii and I went to the snooker hall together. It was midday and we drank Oishi brand iced tea and Pepsi, agreeing that our bodies might appreciate a short respite after drinking beer the night before. In advance of our first game, we made a bet: the loser would pay for the table fee and the drinks, the winner would play and drink for free. The hall was emptier than it was at night and the quiet made the snooker balls sound louder as they cracked into each other. As I leaned over the table for the first shot in our first game, Dii called out a bet offer: '10,000 Kip,' he said, wagering that I would miss. I accepted. We continued like that for a few games, calling out and accepting money-bet offers on tricky shots. I challenged him and he challenged me.

By the end of a series of games, I owed money to the snooker hall for the games and drinks, and I owed Dii about 50,000 Kip. I grabbed my wallet to pay Dii first, but he told me to stop and just pay for the table and the drinks. 'We were joking' (vaw4 jòòk5), he said, 'not really betting money.' He laughed at me for thinking we had made 'real bets,' and mentioned it a few times on the ride home. My confusion was noteworthy enough for me that I wrote about it in my fieldnotes. It was noteworthy enough for Dii that the next day when we played snooker again with Muu, Dii narrated to him what I had done. He stressed how ridiculous the scene was, and he acted it out for Muu: my reaching for my wallet and implying that we had been 'gambling for money' as we played for drinks. They both laughed at me.

In this dissertation, I have traced many moments similar to this, in which a bet seems—to the naïve anthropologist, the greedy guest, or the pétanque player who just shirked a wager—to be two things at once: a bet and a joke, or an attempt at winning money and a gift to a newborn

baby, or a bet with and a bet against. I have shown that knowing exactly what a bet is or is not, recognizing a moment as a token of a type, is often not merely an economic or interpretive question. It is a question of ethics—of the relationship one has or wants to have with those who are co-present, of one’s sense of duty to a cause or a principle, and of the kind of person one wants to be. The scene above was, for Muu and Dii, funny and compelling: an American confusing the kind of relationship he was in, trying to pay a bet that his friends never really would have collected. In laughing about me and my misunderstanding of our relationship to each other, the pair of friends said something about themselves—they were not those kinds of people, the kinds who would take money from friends; their money bets were not real bets; their aims were not to gain at my expense, and, by implication, they would not seek to gain money at one another’s expense.

In Luang Prabang, Laos, moral economic types are more than resources for labeling the world. They are tools for acting within the world: for judging and supporting others, for cultivating character, and for sketching an image of how things might otherwise be. Over the course of this dissertation, I have outlined several dimensions of this ethical work. Here, to conclude, I briefly draw out two of these dimensions and then reflect on their theoretical consequences for our understanding of meaning and moral economy.

First, much of the most common and compelling notions of how one should live in Luang Prabang share the assumption that good is recognizable as a ‘loving’ sociality and that ‘evil’ and ‘badness’ are recognizable in arguments, disagreements, and antagonism. I have presented numerous examples where these assumptions are alluded to as if they were as obvious as the wetness of water. In Chapter Two’s discussion of the state’s embrace of the notion of ‘solidarity’, for instance, I trace how solidarity qua bonds between people has been and continues

to be imagined by state propaganda and people on the ground as both a means to achieve other ethical goods and as an end within itself. In Chapter Four, I move from the sometimes-stilted language of newspapers to what, by many accounts, was a sad and empty funeral. I show that people at the funeral articulated—and appeared to act upon—a principle that when one is confronted with problematic others, like Kham and Thii, the best thing to do is dissemble rather than confront them; that the desire to ‘resist the urge’ to cause a scene, social strife, or ‘noise’ should override the desire to speak what is in one’s heart. Likewise, in Chapter Eight, I show that even when relations with distinct biographical individuals seemed to fall apart, friendship was valued and important for people; these bonds were treated as goods in themselves.

Throughout the dissertation more generally, I trace moments in which gambling for money is described as morally problematic precisely because it breaks apart social relations, pits friend against friend, and husband against wife. Gambling for beer, in this respect, is often presented as gambling for money’s inversion. For many of the men that play for beer, the activity is good because it creates social relations with others, relations of solidarity and love, of friendship and family.

As I sketched in the introduction, and reviewed in more depth in the previous chapter, this prominent local idea resonates with dimensions of a Durkheimian theory of morality, in which the socially productive is imagined to be coextensive with the good. This notion of the good has been rightly criticized by many of those working in the anthropology of ethics. It seems to capture only some of what we—as academics and humans, at times, writing and speaking in English—mean when we talk about ethics and morality, and it risks portraying individuals as rule-followers or slaves to culture. And yet, people in Laos often speak and act as if creating a loving sociality were their moral motivation, as if it were the end for which they strived and



demanded that others should strive. This local theory of ethics prompts a question. What should we do when we find that people articulate notions of the good that seem to pattern with the theories we have rejected? I have argued here that, at the very least, we need to take such local theories of evaluation seriously, to consider how they are articulated and the moral, pragmatic, and social effects of doing this semiotic work. What people “say they ought to do and think, is part of what they do, observably, do and think” (Laidlaw 1995:11); I have here explored pronouncements of these oughts qua practice. I have unpacked moments such as Dii’s proclamation that I should not gamble for money with friends, Thaa’s order to Mùang that he write ‘good things’ in my survey and ‘speak well into my microphone,’ and Muu’s hope to someday stop gambling on soccer and buy a house for his family. I have shown that people found such allusions to oughts, rules, and ideals both compelling and useful. Often encapsulated in lexemes or idiomatic turns of phrases, they were tools ready at hand, with which people worked on their relations, their reputations, and their characters.

My focus on local theories concerning the good has forced me to contend with a second issue throughout these pages. The moral pronouncements that many people in Luang Prabang were so ready to wield, especially pronouncements about the goodness of good and ‘loving’ sociality, were liable to fail or take a narrower scope than people might hope or support.<sup>452</sup> People who promised they never gambled for money with friends gambled for money with friends, people who swore they had ‘solidarity’ with everyone had disagreements with others, people who claimed that they never used ‘low’ pronouns such as kuu3 and mùng2 often, in fact,

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<sup>452</sup> As Laidlaw (1995:7) also writes in *Riches and Renunciation*, “Where ideals are unrealizable, and where incommensurable values are in conflict, and I take it that this at least is always to some degree the case, then living in the light of an ideal must always be something more subtle and complex than merely conforming to it.”

used the forms. Such ‘violations’ were often erased rather than remembered. As I discussed in Chapter Two, this apparent inconsistency between ‘rhetoric’ and ‘reality’ was the core of Grant Evans’s account of the failure of Lao socialism: while people and the state said at times that all Lao people cared for everyone, that moral relations should be and were universally applied, the people’s and the state’s actual agricultural, social, and emotional practices belied a narrower moral circle.

When in socialist Laos building good social relations was articulated as the ultimate good, this raised the question of with whom one should build such relations. Universal morality is always limited. These limits are not unique to Laos, even if one gave and socialized indiscriminately, one cannot give to and socialize with everyone—finite resources of time and money provide a natural barrier to doing that. People in Luang Prabang, as people everywhere, must make choices about to whom they devote themselves and their time, and such choices were often read by others as rejections or insults. The husband who spends his time ‘eating’ and making friends at the pétanque court is liable to be excoriated by his wife for being wasteful and squandering money that might be used to buy things to ‘eat’ at home. In several domains, I have shown that there is a tension between broad and narrow ethical proclamations. Are *kuu*<sup>3</sup> and *mùng*<sup>2</sup> bad words, or are they merely bad in certain contexts with certain people? Is gambling for money always an evil or an evil only when it destroys extant relationships of kinship or friendship? While Sahlins might be correct in arguing that certain societies consistently articulate narrow moral economic norms rather than norms universalized to all humans, Laos does not seem to be such a place, if it ever was. In Laos, people often cite both narrow and broad explanations for moral economic and social behavior and find both ideas compelling at different times and moments. As I have shown, articulating such broad and narrow values can itself

comprise an ethical practice, which emphasizes, say, one's overall generosity or one's sacrifices for one's friends, respectively. Furthermore, as I show in Chapter Eight, the social and economic categories that narrow pronouncements of ethics presume are often applied with some flexibility to specific actors. One might explicitly claim not to gamble for money with close *siauw*, as Sii did, but nevertheless gamble for money with a *siauw*, as Sii did with Muu. The relations between such pronouncements and publicly identified types of economic action provides one metric with which people read, understand, and comment upon their relations with others. I show this in Chapter Nine when I discuss the use of gambling as a kind of semiotic trap at funerals and post-partum houses. People have strong ideas about the social relations and effects that particular economic types produce, and they at times wield these types (by mentioning them, alluding to them, embodying them, and so on) to bring about such circumstances. They make friends by explicitly gambling for beer with them and they support the nation's development by buying a Development Lottery ticket. Of course, such salient, ideologically charged functions and pragmatic force do not exhaust these types' utility. Beer gambling can also be a way to drink for free and lottery tickets can be a way to strike it rich.

To understand these issues, I have argued that we must have an account of the semiotic mediation of moral economy and the multi-functionality of moral economic 'types.' To this end, I have offered several semiotic distinctions that help us chart what makes types so compelling and useful for people and what makes them such apparently dynamic, messy, and problematic objects for anthropologists. I have shown that even as economic practices shifted radically in Laos after the revolution, some types of economy—namely 'socialism' and 'the Development Lottery,' over and against 'illegal lotteries'—continued to be important footholds for discourses about the ethics of practices and institutions. I have tracked how people's ideas about the ethics

of interaction affect the sorts of statements and evaluations they make, and I have argued that this is an interactional reality that, however obvious, must be taken into account insofar as it affects all of the evaluations people make about moral economic types. I tracked the divergent affordances of generic and specific references to types of economy, and argued that attention to these distinct uses helps resolve some old problems in the study of exchange. I have shown that types can be tied to gendered notions of economizing and figures of personhood, and that these features help us account for divergent evaluations of activities like ‘gambling for money’ by different sorts of sociologically and biographically positioned persons. I have explored the relation between tokens and types, and shown that while at times action seems to involve reflexive resources that tacitly frame an action as a prototypical token of a type, this reflexive quality is not prefabricated or baked into action as a function of its type. And finally, I have explored how people in Luang Prabang reflexively discuss gambling for money as functionally productive, and argued that for the men that gamble at post-partum houses, uncertainty and risk concerning the result of the game makes the activity more meaningful.

In many respects, ‘types’—and related notions of ‘category’—have faded from anthropological theory in recent years. In this dissertation, I have shown that moral economic types are useful for people in ordinary life for the same reasons many anthropologists have tried to discard them from anthropological theory—namely, their capacity to oversimplify, the frequency of uncertainty and debate concerning how and whether they apply to particular situations, and the moral and ethical ends that seem baked into them. How can we study such unstable objects of knowledge without falling victim to their ideological traps and snares? I have offered here that to do this, we must aim to account for (a) how people describe and advise themselves and others on how to live or be—that is, how they evoke types as ideals; (b) how

they describe and predicate about how it is that they and other people, real or imagined, are actually living and being; and (c) how both of these broadly understood communicative practices are, in turn, subject to be reflected upon, evaluated, and taken as signs of character.

## Appendix

### Kham

6.1) *qòòj ciin3 nii4 khit1 paj3 khit1 qòòk5 khoòt4 phòò1 mùng2 qeej ...hung1 ... khaan4 vaw4 dii3*  
“Oh, this Chinese guy, I understand now, fuck his parents, wow, I’m too tired to speak politely now.”

### Sii

6.2) *(h) (h) khaw2 pên3 ñang3*  
“What happened with him?”

### Kham

6.3) *lòòng2 mùù4 kii4 kaø-daj4 hung1 dii3 dak2 bat2 maa2 hòòt4 phii4 lêqø-man2 saaj3 khaat5 mot2*  
“I tried [the lights] a second ago and they were flashing perfectly, then I got here and they were broken”

### Sii

6.4) *nêê1 khaw2 hêt1 khaaj4 saaj3 sòòt5 lèw4*  
“See, he sold already broken lights.”

### Salina

6.5) *lêqø-man2 bòø-daj4 naq1 qan3 nan4 naq1*  
“So the lights don’t work, huh?”  
(walking into the frame of the camera)

### Kham

6.6) *khit1 qòòk5 khit1 pên3 nòq1 mm*  
(to himself) “Way to think, jeeze!”

### Salina

6.7) *lêqø-man2 bòø-daj4 sam4*  
“And the lights don’t work, right?”

### Kham

6.8) *bòq1*  
“Nope.”

### Salina

6.9) *paj3 pian3 paj4*  
“Go change them, go [now].”

6.10) *paj3 pian3 kòòn1 paj3 sùù4 qaw3 maj1*  
“Go change them before [we] need to buy new ones.”

### Kham

6.11) *pian3 ... pian3 nèw2 daj4 man2... phen1 kaø-pit2 haan4 kòòn1*  
“Change them, how are we going to change them? He, he closed the store already.”

### Salina

6.12) *paj3 sùù4 lèw4...khaw2 khaaj3 juul1 saj3 san4 naq1*  
“[Where did you] buy...Where did they sell you the lights?”

### Sii

6.13) *bòø-pit2 thua1 dòòk5 phòq1 vaa1 bak2 qan3 nan4 bòø-khaaj3 kaan3 vên3*  
“No, they’re not closed yet, because that guy he doesn’t sell during the day.”

### Kham

6.14) *naa5 naa5* [landmark name] *nii4 naq1*  
“No, [the guy] in front of [landmark name]”

**Salina**

6.15) *mii2 ngen2 qaql juu1 han5 naq1*  
“Is there any money over there [in the basket]”

**Sii**

6.16) *bòø-pit2 thùal tii4 ...*  
“[The store’s] not closed yet, right?”

**Salina**

6.17) *khan2 mii2 ngen2...*  
“If there is money left [in the basket] then...(unintelligible)”

**Sii**

6.18) *khaw2 khaaj3 juu1 nam2 thanon3 naal bòø-mèèn1 talaat4 talaat4 khaw2 kaø-pit2 lèèw4*  
“They sell it at the [redacted], not the market, the market’s already closed.”

**Salina**

6.19) *qoooo [caa4]*  
“Oh, stupid.”  
(said while bending over to pick up something; [‘ marks that this overlaps with Kham’s next turn).

**Kham**

6.20) *[phòø-vaal qan3 nùng1 saaw2 haa5 phan2 nan4 dèè1 qan3 nùng1 naq1]*  
“Because one of them is 25 thousand, one of them.”

**Salina**

6.21) *qooj*  
“Oh!”

**Moo**

6.22) *suut4 nùng1 saaw2 haa5 phan2*  
“One set is 25 thousand.”

**Sii**

6.23) *paj3 léqø-lòòng2 ... paj2 léø-lòòng2 vaj4 dee4*  
“Once you go, test [the lights], once you go test [the lights] for sure.”

**Moo**

6.24) *khaw2 lòòng2 haj5 [lèèw4 naal khaw2 lòòng2 haj5 lèèw4 dèè1 léø-caw4 qòòk5 maa2 lon4 khaat5 léqø-caw4 daj4 sùù1 maj1]*  
“They tested them there for you and you came here and they were inundated and broke here, and now you will go buy more.”

**Kham**

6.25) *[kaø-lòòng2 bat2 nii4 daj4]*  
“[I] tested [the lights] this last time.”

**Sii**

6.26) *man2 maa2 khaat5 juu1 phii4 nêè1*  
“The [lights] broke here.”

**Moo**

6.27) *man2 maa2 khaat5 juu1 phii4 dèè1*

“The [lights] broke here.”

**Salina**

6.28) *mùù4 kii4 nii4 mēp2 lèèw4 san4 naq1*  
“So, they were just working fine?”

**Kham**

6.29) *bòø-mēp2 cak2 bat2 leej2 qaq2*  
“They didn’t work at all [here].”

**Salina**

6.30) *qooj4 kaø-bòø-huu4 lèèw4 paj3 sùù4 lêqø-bòø-beng1*  
“Oh, I don’t know anymore, [you] went to go buy [the lights] and didn’t test them.”

**Kham**

6.31) *phòqø-vaa1 qaw3 man2 umm hêt1 maø-ñuq1 ma-ñaq1 khaaj3 daj4 cap3 maa1 dii3 dak2*  
“Because [the vendor] took them and did this and that and handed them for me to take.”

**Sii**

6.32) *(h) (h)*  
“haha”

**Moo**

6.33) *(h) (h)*  
“haha.”

**Kham**

6.34) *qooj khit1 qòøk5 khit1 phit2*  
“Oh, bad thinking”

**Sii**

6.35) *qee sùù4 qan3 maj1 jee4 (h) (h)*  
“Yeah, go buy more lights, haha”

**Kham**

6.36) *laaw2 bòø-mak1 faj2 sèèng3 sii4 naq1*  
“[Paa] doesn’t like colored lights, huh”

**Salina**

6.37) *qaw3 qaw3 ngen2 nam2 khòøj5 paj3 sùù5 qan3 maj1 paj4*  
“Take money from me and go buy new ones, go!”

**Moo**

6.38) *laaw3 luam2 taa3 laaw3 luam2 taa3*  
“It hurt [Paa’s] eyes, it hurt [Paa’s] eyes.”

**Salina**

6.39) *qaw4*  
“Take it”

6.40) *ngen2 khaw2 kaø-saj1 vaj4 han4 haj5 phii4 mèt4*  
“[I’ll give] the money [the guests] donated, [come] here.”

6.41) *qaw4*

“Take it!” (Kham is still behind the casket)



**Kham**

6.42) *taaj3 lèèw4 taaj3 qaql*  
“Oh my god” (*said to himself*)

**Salina**

6.43) (unclear)

**Moo**

6.44) *paj3 sùù4 maj1 paj3 sùù4 maj1*  
“Go buy new ones, go buy new ones.”

**Salina**

6.45) *thòò1 daj3 saaw2 haa5*  
“How much, 25?”

(*Kham walks up toward Salina, in front of casket, as she searches through her purse for money just in front of structure A*)

**Kham**

6.46) *qee3*  
“Yeah.”

**Salina**

6.47) *khii5 tua2 tii4*  
“You’re lying, right?”

**Kham**

6.48) *qee3 paj3 sùù4 qaw3 lee2 mèè4 san2 naql*  
“Go buy [the lights] yourself, if that’s [what you think]” (*Kham looks away toward the wall as he says this*)

**Salina**

6.49) *caang3 kaø-bòø-paj3 vaa1 jòòk5 sùù1 sùù1*  
“[I wouldn’t go] if someone paid me. I was just kidding.”

**Kham**

6.50) *mm*  
“That’s right”

**Sii**

6.51) (*h*) (*h*)  
“haha”

**Salina**

6.52) *kaø-haj4 jòòk5 daj4 laø-bat2 bòø-jòòk5 dèè1 kaø-qìø-muan1 nang1 ngaw3 ngaw3 ... juu1.*  
“[You] have to let [me] joke, when we are not joking are we going to have fun, just sitting here quiet and sad?”

**Kham**

6.53) [*Salina*] *dang2 diaw1 léqø-nii4 nêq1*  
“Salina is the only one being loud, now.”

**Moo**

6.54) *bòø-mii2 khon2 laaj3 haj5 man2 jòòk5 dèè1*  
“There aren’t many people, let her joke!”

**Kham**

6.55) *qan3 paj3 sùu4 qanø-daj3 phuu4 daj3 lèèw4 man2... phuu4 qiø-paj3 lêqø-bat2 paj3 kaø-bòø-daj4 ñang3 maa2 mèèn1 hua3 too1 paj3 khùu2 kaw2 nii4*  
“When other people go, they go they don’t get anything and then I go again.”

**Salina**

6.56) *qee3 paj3 jee4 paj3 jee4 paj3 jee4*  
“Ok go, go, go!”

**Kham**

6.57) *lèèw4 phuu4 paj3 lòq1 sùu4 lòng2 qiø-taaj qaql*  
“And the person who goes to buy [the lights] might die.”

**Salina**

6.58) *thoo4 paj3 sùu4 thua1 diaw1*  
“Come on, [you] went one time!”

**Kham**

6.59) *...khaw2 lêqø-paj3 lòq1 sùu4 khaw2 pit2 kòòn1 siaø-qaql*  
“When they go to buy it, then the store is already closed.”

6.60) *qaw3 qan3 diaw1 qaql man2 san4 phii4*  
“We are only going to buy one [set of stringed lights]? Wont it will be short.”  
(*Kham says this as he takes money from Salina*)

**Sii**

6.61) *nêè1 maa2 daj4 cê1 moong2 nùng1 cê1 moong2*  
“It’s only 7 O’clock now, it’s 7 O’clock.”

**Salina**

6.62) *huh?*  
“What?”  
(*said to Kham*)

**Kham**

6.63) *qan3 diaw1 san4 daj4 qan3 sòng3 kòq1*  
“One [string] will be short, [we] need two, you know.”

**Salina**

6.64) (unclear)

6.65) *haj5 man2 sia3 qiik4 dee4 maa2 maa2 qaw2 khùu2 maa2 nan4 naql*  
“Let’s just waste more [money], you hear! Come, come, give me that [bill] back.”

**Kham**

6.66) *bat2 nii4 bòø-qaw3 sii1 nii4 lèèw4 bat2 nii4*  
“This time I wont get [the same] color [light], this time.”

6.67) *saj1 lèèw4 ... dòøk4 faj2 juu1 han5 kòòn1*  
“[Test it already], [test] the light over there.”

**Salina**

6.68) *qaw3 khùu2 maa2 qaw3 baj3 haa5 sip2 phan2 paj3*  
“Give me [that] back, take a 50,000 bill.”

**Kham**

6.69) *bat2 nii4 qaw3 sii1 maj1*

“This time I am going to get a new color [light].”

**Moo**

6.70) *man2 man2 man2 bòø-mèèn1 qan3 nòj4 naq1*  
“They, they, they, aren’t the small ones.”

**Salina**

6.71) *paj3 sùù4 cak2 qan3 mùù4 kii4 naq1 san4 naq1*  
“How many did you buy a second ago, then?”

**Kham**

6.72) *sòòng3*  
“Two.”

**Salina**

6.73) *kuu3 sia3 ngen2 paj3 laqø-haa5 sip2 phan2 bòø-mii2...mii2 faj2 ñang2 nòq1*  
“I lost money already, 50,000 Kip, and we don’t have a light or anything, huh?”

**Kham**

6.74) *man2 khaat4 thang2 sòòng3 qan3 leej2 nii4*  
“Both of them broke.”

**Salina**

6.75) *bòø-beng1 ñang3 nòq1*  
“You didn’t look at [the lights at all], did you?”

**Kham**

6.76) *man2 lòòng2 haj5 kaø-hung1 hua3 qan3 dii3 dak2...*  
“He tried them for me [at the shop] and they worked really well.

6.77) *ñip1 ñap1 ñip1 ñap1 nii4 naq1*  
“Blinking like ñip1 ñap1 ñip1 ñap1.”

**Moo**

6.78) *lêø-maa2 saj1 nii4 kaqø-hung1 mèèn1 bòø1 saj1 nii4*  
“When you tried them here, they lit up, right? When you tried them here?”

**Kham**

6.79) *bòø-hung1 cak2 bat2 leej2*  
“They didn’t light up even once.”

**Salina**

6.80) *qaw4*  
“Wow.”

**Sii**

6.81) *faj2 hèèng2 phoot4 lon4*  
“The electricity was too strong, they short-circuited.”

**Salina**

6.82) *sùù4 sòòng3 qan3 dee4*  
“Buy two of them, you hear!”

**Kham**

6.83) *sùù4 sòòng3 qan3 thèè4 qan3 diaw1 man2 san2... (unintelligible)*

“[I have to] buy two of them for sure, just one would be too short [to cover the casket]...”

**Salina**

6.84) *lòòng2 haj5 man2 dii3 bòø-dii3 bòø-dii3 bòø-daj3 lavang2*  
“Test them well, if [you] don’t test them well and they don’t work, watch out!”

**Sii**

6.85) *(h) (h)*  
“haha”

**Kham**

6.86) *haj5 man2 nam2 maa2 lòòng2 nii4 bòq1*  
“Do you want [the vendor] to follow me and try them here?”

**Salina**

6.87) *thèè4*  
“For sure!”

6.88) *qee3 haj4 man2 maa2 saj1 lèqø-mèè4*  
“Yeah, have him come and set them up!”

**Sii**

6.89) *qoo khan2 man2 maa2 kaø-dii3 lèèw4... jaan3 man2...*  
“Oh, if he comes it would be good, I’m afraid he’d...”

**Moo**

6,90) *khan2 man2 maa2 kaø-dii3 lèèw4 vaal*  
“If he comes, that’s good.”

**Kham**

6.91) *phoot4 kaaj3 haj4 phuu5 nan4 naq1*  
“That person [possibly meaning the Chinese shop-owner] is ridiculous.”

**Salina**

6.92) *taaj3 lèèw4*  
“Oh my god.”

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