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Enunciating ambiguity: Thailand's *phi* and the epistemological decolonization of Thai studies

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ABSTRACT

Why are ostensibly paradoxical statements so common when villagers in Thailand's lower Northeast are asked to recount their personal encounters with the nonhumans known as *phi* in local language games? Inspired by the anthropology of ontology and drawing on Wittgenstein's linguistic phenomenology, I set out to explore the epistemic appropriateness of the paradox in ethnographic accounts of villagers' narratives about these encounters. In an attempt to epistemologically decolonize the debate on Thailand's *phi*, I use interlocutors' ostensibly paradoxical narratives about their encounters to reflect upon the multiple worlds that intersect in villagers' everyday lives. While an analytic reconstruction of the various language games this multiplicity produces and their partly irreconcilable ontological registers may help to dissolve the paradox of villagers' accounts analytically, I ask whether the scholarly inclination to identify and resolve paradoxes through the acknowledgment of epistemological multiplicity reproduces the hegemony of naturalism. An outline of animist collectivity and its identification as the social ontology of everyday village life finally suggests that the ostensible paradoxes that encounters with *phi* produce are not only what makes them socially meaningful, but also enunciations of the concept *phi* itself.

KEYWORDS

Animist collectivity; social ontology; equivocation; epistemic decolonization; onto-epistemological multiplicity; paradox

'Do you fear *phi*?' is a standardized question I ask during interviews with villagers in Thailand's lower Northeast.[1] Academic texts on Thailand written in English tend to translate the word *phi* as 'ghost' or 'spirit'. These commonly encountered translations gain their meaning from a naturalist language that associates the ghostly first and foremost with invisibility and ephemerality (Ladwig 2011, 23). While some authors acknowledge that they use these globalized concepts 'both out of sheer convention and in deference to a non-Thai-speaking audience' (Johnson 2016, 85), others turn invisibility into the *phi's* most distinguishing feature (Sprenger 2016, 38, 2021, 69).

In modern Thai, the concept *phi* is highly contextual, denoting ostensibly visible as well as ostensibly invisible entities. The concept functions not only as a prefix that indicates uncanniness in the designation of various nonhumans that anthropologists tend to

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[1]All transcriptions of Thai words are based on the official system devised by the Royal Institute of Thailand (*Rachabanditsathan*).

render as 'ghosts' or 'spirits' (Baumann 2016, 151), but refers to a human corpse prior to its cremation and is also found in the Central Thai word for butterfly (*phi suea*).

Thailand's *phi* form an inclusive class of nonhuman beings that is produced by the sharing of 'family resemblances' in Ludwig Wittgenstein's sense (1999, 32). These family resemblances manifest as an indeterminability that may be rendered analytically as ambiguity. Based on the recognition of ambiguity as their most characteristic feature, I draw on Levy, Mageo, and Howard (1996) when I propose to translate these nonhumans as numinals (Baumann 2017, 2020a).

The lower Northeast (*isan tai*) is vernacularly recognized as a distinct sub-region in the south of Thailand's Northeast (*isan*), bordering Cambodia. While Lao-Isan is the dominant dialect spoken in much of the Northeast, many inhabitants of the lower Northeast speak a local Khmer dialect in addition to standardized Thai as their first or second language (Suwilai 2547 [2004], 70). Thailand's public sphere tends to associate the lower Northeast, therefore, with the ethno-linguistic category Khmer rather than Lao or Thai.

Buriram Province is the westernmost province of the sub-region and characterized by a coming together and mixing of four ethno-linguistic groups: Thai Khorat, Lao-Isan, Thai-Khmer and Kui. These are the ethnonyms used in official discourses on the provincial level to designate the largest 'ethnic groups' (*klum chatiphan*) of the province. This ethno-linguistic classification pattern is hierarchical and articulates notions of social inequality along a graded concept of civility (*siwilai*) with the category Thai at its apex (Baumann 2020a; Thongchai 2000). Practices that may be classified as animistic, like ancestral cults or mediumship rituals, are thereby regarded as indicators of 'primitivity'. Kui is a Mon-Khmer language and speakers of this language are known as domesticators of wild elephants throughout the Northeast. They are considered as the original inhabitants of the sub-region, and because of their association with the wilderness of the forests and the visibility of ancestral cults in everyday life they are placed at the lowest end of the province's ethno-linguistic hierarchy.

While doing ethnographic fieldwork in the province, I usually live in the house of a local host family in a village roughly twelve kilometres outside the provincial capital. My host family consists of seven sisters, who are also my main research assistants. Interviews with villagers in the sub-district are largely impossible without one of my host sisters accompanying me. For most of my host sisters it goes without question that various *phi* exist and possession phenomena – in their various manifestations – constitute aspects of their everyday life (Baumann 2022). The sub-district is known throughout the district for its local dialect (*phasa thin*). This dialect organically hybridizes not only Khmer and Thai words within a single utterance, but it also uses both languages to create idiosyncratic word compositions that are unintelligible outside local language games (Phumchit 2546 [2003]). This also affects the everyday classification of *phi*.

However, villagers' perceptions of these numinals are not only shaped by regional languages hybridizing in the sub-district, but also by an onto-epistemological multiplicity characterizing everyday lifeworlds in contemporary Thailand.

One of my host sisters is an English teacher at Buriram's Technical College. She is usually more sceptical and tries to explain the phenomena her sisters frame in idioms of spirit possession with recourse to psychological rationalizations that characterize the discourse on spirit possession in Thailand's print media, where it is frequently dismissed as a form of charlatanry and premodern superstition (Jackson 2022, 20–22;

White 2005, 2014). As a civil servant, who studied in Bangkok, she has incorporated the ontological register of a modern language game that is articulated by progressive journalists and Buddhist intellectuals to a larger extent than her sisters, who have never left the village for prolonged periods of time and continue to work as farmers.

Peter A. Jackson refers to this characteristic feature of everyday life in Thailand as polyontologism, which he defines with reference to Janet McIntosh (2019) as the acknowledgment of the ontological reality of more than one set of religious or cosmological forces (Jackson 2020, 14). While Jackson reproduces McIntosh's (2019, 117) equation of religion with ontology in his depiction of Thai polyontology, a number of alternative definitions of ontological multiplicity shape the anthropology of ontology (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 30–68).[2]

Ontology is here understood in a broad sense as 'a mode of being'. This broad anthropological understanding of ontology differs from the more narrow philosophical understanding, where ontology is traditionally perceived as 'a discourse (*logos*) *about* the nature of being' (Graeber 2015, 15, italics in original). Discursivity is, according to David Graeber, also the main feature that characterizes the philosophical understanding of epistemology, which is 'not knowledge of the world but rather, a discourse concerning the nature and possibility of knowledge about the world' (2015, 15).

While Graeber emphasizes how the idiosyncratic application of both philosophical concepts in the anthropology of ontology has caused confusion and misunderstandings, many contributors to the debate stress that the categorical distinction between ontology and epistemology is itself constitutive of a hegemonic conceptualization of the world that is rooted in Cartesian dualism (Evens 2008; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Scott 2013). The anthropology of ontology tries to escape this 'modern regime of ontological "common sense"' that acknowledges the existence of many worldviews (epistemologies/cultures) but just one world (ontology/nature) (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 40). As one of the most fundamental dualisms of the one-world world (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 3), the categorical distinction between multiple epistemologies and one ontology impedes our ability to acknowledge the existence and nondualist constitution of alternative ontologies (Evens 2008; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Kohn 2007).

Terence Evens (2008, xxiii) suggests, therefore, the hyphenated construction onto-epistemology. While this construction remains within the conceptual apparatus of scientific language games, it simultaneously draws our attention to the artificiality of the dualisms cherished in naturalist science that positively disallow ambiguity (Evens 2008, x). I am drawing on Evens here, when I employ onto-epistemology to emphasize the inseparability of 'modes of being' from 'modes of knowing' that characterizes everyday life.

Methodologically, I differentiate between animist, Hindu-Buddhist and naturalist onto-epistemologies co-existing in contemporary Thailand. This co-existence produces multiple language games intersecting in everyday village life. Animism is thus not a type of religion or historical state in the development of religion, but an onto-epistemological configuration producing a distinctive social ontology (Baumann and Rehbein

[2]I am following Michael Scott here, as I use 'the anthropology of ontology' to acknowledge that 'there were several independent calls for an ontology-centered anthropology' during the first decade of the twenty-first century and not merely the Cambridge-associated initiative that came to be known as the 'ontological turn' (Scott 2013, 868, FN 2).

2020). This social ontology is characterized by a nondualist mode of being in which the differentiation between humans and nonhumans is 'a continuous flux of transformative becoming' (Scott 2013, 864) and humans and nonhumans participate in one another to form animist collectives (Baumann 2020a, 2022). Evens outlines such a mode of being as fundamentally ambiguous as it

> does not break down finally into things in themselves, entities with absolute boundaries. As a result, neither intellectualism nor empiricism, neither idealism nor materialism, can serve in the end to make such a reality perspicuous. These standard theoretical offerings are predicated on the received acceptation of ontology and are therefore ill equipped to entertain ambiguity as basic. (Evens 2008, x)

In this article, I propose to use interlocutors' ostensibly paradoxical narratives about their encounters with *phi* to reflect upon the onto-epistemological multiplicity that characterizes their everyday life and how to capture it analytically. Drawing on Wittgenstein's linguistic phenomenology, I argue that this onto-epistemological multiplicity produces distinct but parallel existing language games with sometimes mutually exclusive ontological registers. Based on Wittgenstein's equation of language games with forms of life (1999, 11e), I argue that different modes of being co-exist in contemporary Thai habitus. I will show that for villagers, who are socialized into this onto-epistemological multiplicity, the simultaneous participation in different modes of being is not experienced as a paradox, but as given, commonsensical and meaningful.

A central question I raise in this article is whether the scholarly depiction of empirical ambiguities as analytical paradoxes constitutes an act of epistemological colonization. Through my answer I seek to refine the debate on Thai notions of contextual sensitivity (*kala thesa*) that was recently re-introduced by Jackson (2020, 2022). I contend that we need to acknowledge foundational ambiguity as an aspect of the essentially nondualist character of Thai language games in addition to the cultural value of contextual sensitivity. I finally argue that ambiguity is not always resolvable by *kala thesa* contextualization, although contextualization is still portrayed as one of anthropology's central methods to make sense of our ethnographic material. With this final point I seek to caution readers that despite the undisputable need to develop an embodied understanding of the workings of *kala thesa* to 'play' Thai language games meaningfully, an overemphasis on contextualization may tempt us to resolve ambiguities analytically when in fact they are essential in practice (Graeber 2015, 13). I furthermore assert that the inclination to resolve ambiguities analytically through contextualization is an artefact of the Cartesian onto-praxis we call science and finally a self-affirmatory impulse to keep the one-world world and our identity as rational scientists intact (Evens 2008, 5–6; Graeber 2015, 7; Scott 2013, 862–863; Viveiros de Castro 2014, 191).

Ostensible paradoxes

'Of course, I don't fear *phi!*',[3] was Yai Priao's reply when one of my host sisters asked her whether she fears *phi* during one of our interviews. Yai Priao[4] was in her early sixties during the conversation. She was born in the village and never left it for prolonged

[3]All interview passages are my translations from the local Thai dialect into English. The interview was filmed and transcriptions were made on the basis of the filmed material.

periods of time. She finished school after the fourth grade, works as a farmer and lives in a little alley opposite the village's Buddhist temple together with her children and grandchildren only a few houses away from the house of my host family. 'But do you think *phi* exist in reality?', was my host sister's immediate counter-question to Yai Priao's reply. The following conversation that evolved between these village women captures some of the ostensibly paradoxical attitudes villagers' hold towards the ontological status of certain *phi*.[5]

Yai Priao:	'*Phi* don't exist.'
Host sister:	'You don't think they exist in reality?'
Yai Priao:	'No, I don't think they exist.'
Host sister:	'What about *Phi Krasue* and *Phi Pop*?'[6]
Yai Priao:	'I don't believe in their existence either.'
Host sister:	'But you have heard stories about them, right?'
Yai Priao:	'Of course!'
Yai Priao's Sister:	'She was even possessed by a *phi*!'
Yai Priao:	'That's right, I was once possessed by a *phi*. … I lost control over my body.'
Host sister:	'You were possessed by a *phi*, but you don't believe that they exist?'
Yai Priao:	'That's right.'
Host sister:	'This is contradictory (*man khat kan*), don't you think?'
Yai Priao:	'Why?' [all laughing]' I have never seen a *phi* in my life! … People tend to say: "we are haunted, we are haunted", but I have never seen a *phi* haunting someone. … All I know are stories about what the *phi* did.'
Host sister:	'So, you don't have any personal experiences with *phi*?'
Yai Priao:	'No! I haven't. I have never seen a *phi*. I have never seen a *phi* walking down the road.'
Host sister:	'And this is when people say: 'we are haunted'?'
Yai Priao:	'Exactly! But I have never seen a *phi* walking around in the village.' … 'But *Charap* … how do you call it? … *Charap*, *Charap* … I have seen for sure!'[7]
Host sister:	'Really? What does a *Charap* look like?'
Yai Priao:	'It emits some kind of light.'
Host sister:	'It emits some kind of light?'
Yai Priao:	'I saw it near the little stream, while cooking alcohol. It was chasing my little brother. It's a pulsating light that goes "whap", "whap" and then it disappeared. I saw it for real. … But what it was, I don't know. That's what you call *Charap*. Is it the same as *Phi Krasue*? … I don't know.'
Host sister:	'I also don't know.'
Yai Priao:	'I am not sure either.'
Host sister:	'But you have seen it?'
Yai Priao:	'Definitely! I saw it chasing my little brother.'
Host sister:	'And you didn't run?'
Yai Priao:	'My little brother ran away.'
Host sister:	'But you didn't run? Weren't you afraid?'
Yai Priao:	'No! I wasn't afraid.'
Author:	'What colour was the light?'
Yai Priao:	'It was like a spotlight, chasing around. I am not sure how you call it in Thai.'
Host sister:	'How do you call in Khmer?'
Yai Priao:	'*Charap*! … It chases humans. It's a light that chases humans. When it sees a human being, it starts to chase it.'
Host sister:	'But it only chases humans who fear it?'
Yai Priao:	'Exactly!'

[4]*Yai* is a Thai kinship term that designates the matrilateral grandmother. *Yai* is widely used in villagers' classificatory kinship system to address woman in the grandparental generation and to indicate social proximity.

[5]The transcript was shortened and freed from redundancies to enhance readability. I furthermore tried to explicate implicit meanings that are not explicit in the transcripts, but interpretations based on my knowledge of context and relations between the speakers, with tropes that are common in English.

[6]*Phi Krasue* and *Phi Pop* are witch-like *phi* that are known throughout Thailand (Baumann 2022).

[7]*Charap* is a Khmer designation for a numinal that is largely unknown outside the lower Northeast, but known by Khmer-speakers in neighbouring Cambodia (Ang 1986, 126). The uncanniness indicating prefix *phi* is unknown in Cambodian Khmer and no equivalent exists in the local Khmer dialect in Buriram. Local interlocutors regard *Charap* nevertheless as a numinal belonging to the witch-like sub-class of *phi* epitomized by *Phi Krasue* and *Phi Pop* in Thai popular culture (Baumann 2016). Local interlocutors frequently drop the prefix *phi* when they talk about the these iconic numinals.

During this conversation, Yai Priao switched between the categorical denial of numinal existence, while simultaneously recounting her personal encounters with numinals belonging to the inclusive class of *phi*. These personal encounters range from once being possessed by a *phi* to having seen a *phi*-like numinal in the form of a pulsating ball of light that chased her little brother.

Ostensibly paradoxical statements like these are common when talking with villagers about *phi*, magic, possession phenomena and local mediumship cults. As these are also the foci of my ethnographic research, the apparent paradox of villagers' statements about *phi* immediately attracted my attention. Many of these paradoxes seem related to questions of in-/visibility and the *phi's* ontological status. However, when asked about the contradictory nature of their statements, villagers usually do not see any paradox involved.

Graeber (2015, 28) argues that contradictory statements like Yai Priao's characterize the anthropological endeavour and are especially common when interlocutors talk about 'spirits'. Graeber uses the treatment of these empirical paradoxes in anthropological texts to critically evaluate the position of proponents of the Cambridge-associated ontological turn. While anthropologists would generally try to answer 'how society is organized in such a way that no one ever notices the statements are contradictory' (Graeber 2015, 2), proponents of 'the ontological turn' would try to 'take their interlocutors seriously' by imagining 'a world in which those statements would be literally true' (Graeber 2015, 27). In contrast to these two alternatives that both try to resolve the apparent paradox of interlocutors' statements, Graeber (2015, 28–9) seeks to acknowledge their contradictory nature as an essential dimension of interlocutors' perception of these empirical phenomena. This is according to Graeber (2015, 27) the only way to take our interlocutors 'truly seriously' as it acknowledges 'that neither party to the conversation will ever completely understand the world around them, or for that, each other'.

While the absence of felt contradiction in these situations may have various possible reasons, I will try to take Yai Priao truly seriously and reconstruct the practical meaning of her narrative, without resolving the apparent contradictions that characterize it. Instead, I suggest using these contradictions to question the value of the paradox as an epistemic tool in Thai studies.

Naturalism's hegemony

However, before I can do this, a brief outline of Thailand's onto-epistemological multiplicity and how naturalism was institutionalized in Thailand's public sphere is necessary. While the relation of Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism is one of the most popular points of speculation in Thai religious studies, the question of how naturalism fits into the picture is rarely addressed. Drawing on Descola's (2013)[8] and Latour's (1993) influential renderings of naturalism, I see naturalism as the hegemonic onto-epistemology of Western modernity (Baumann and Rehbein 2020, 9), producing language games that are

[8]I won't discuss the appropriateness of Descola's ontological ideal types here. I rather follow Sahlins (2014) when I subsume 'analogism', 'totemism' and 'animism' under the broader category animism to emphasize the consubstantial participation of nonhuman in human existence that naturalism categorically denies as the essential form of relational being that characterizes local language games (Baumann 2020a, 2022).

based on 'the (ontological) claim that all that truly exists are the entities countenanced by the natural sciences and the (epistemological) claim that the only true knowledge is natural-scientific knowledge' (Spiegel 2020, 51).

Siam's ruling elites selectively adopted naturalism and its ontological registers during their semicolonial encounters to craft a civilized image of the kingdom in its newly emerging public sphere (Jackson 2004, 2022). The institutionalization of naturalism in the public sphere was not only important to deprive the colonial powers of the self-affirmed legitimacy to interfere in Siam's internal politics as civilizing forces, but also to re-establish a social classification system that reinforced the elites' righteousness to rule. While the previous social classification system legitimized rule on the basis of a purely religious notion of purity, the new system drew on an idiosyncratic idea of civility that hybridized naturalism and Buddhism in the public sphere under the social values 'progress' (*charoen*) and 'development' (*phatthana*) (Baumann 2020a, 58–60; Gray 1986, 253).

This social classification system is incorporated in contemporary habitus, institutions and discourses. Although its hegemony was initially limited to the public sphere and Thailand's urban configurations, the Thai state's internal colonialism facilitated the discursive integration of the everyday under the regime of this hybridized language game through institutional centralization, the spread of mass-communication technologies and public schools (Jackson 2007; Pearson 2020).

However, a bifurcated disciplinary gaze continues to characterize the state's internally colonizing governmentality, which demands public performances in accordance with the rationalized logic of naturalist Buddhism, whereas it allows deviations from this essentially modern language games in other contexts of everyday life (Baumann 2020a, 56–8; Jackson 2022, 122–126). This fundamental bifurcation of Thai governmentality is not only essential to trace the genealogy of Thailand's onto-epistemological multiplicity, but also to understand some of villagers' ostensibly contradictory statements regarding *phi* and their ontological status, without pathologizing them through their analytic rendering as paradoxes (Baumann 2020b, 116).

Paradoxography

The German philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels (2011, 14) has remarked that paradoxes are currently *en vogue* in the humanities. This observation seems especially apt to describe the outlook of Anglophone Thai studies. However, this commonality of the paradox poses not only a problem for our understanding of village life, but it also has a political dimension that is rarely addressed.

Jackson (2005, 30) remarks poignantly that '[i]n studies by Western scholars, Thailand has often been represented as a site of "excess", "paradox" and "contradiction"'. The identification of ostensible 'paradoxes' and 'contradictions' features indeed so prominently in studies of contemporary Thailand that Thai studies seem on the verge of becoming a form of paradoxography – a literature with an orientalist penchant for the collection of curiosities (White 1991, 16).[9]

[9] I have traced and attempted to deconstruct the paradoxographical trend that haunts contemporary Thai studies in a separate publication (Baumann 2020b). The following section summarizes some of the main arguments proposed in this attempt.

A paradoxographical trend in Thai studies was already noticed in the early 1990s by Erik Cohen (1991, 38), who observed just like Jackson that 'perhaps more than in the study of any other society, ambiguous or profoundly contrasting images of culture and society are presented by different researchers'. While Cohen was the first area studies scholar to notice this trend, he did not reflect upon the modern identity politics that speak through it.

Evens (2008, 9) summarizes nicely how the onto-epistemological dualism of Western thought produces 'a sense of self that derives its meaningfulness from the capacity to exclude the other as such, whether by incorporation or, more simply, by elimination'. As this sense of self is the foundation of modern identity politics, 'every "other" appears as something to be seized, known, dominated and digested' (Scott 2013, 862–863).

The conceptual proximity that exists between the identification of paradoxes and a rather crude othering through exoticization is discussed by Bruce Kapferer (2013). Kapferer's definition of the exotic 'as the appearance of a previously unknown phenomenon of existence or else a perturbation in the behavior, creation, or formation of phenomena that deviates from expectations or predictions based on current knowledge, opinion, or theory' (2013, 818) could be used verbatim to outline the commonsensical understanding of a paradox in scholarly texts (Baumann 2020b, 115).

Instead of emphasizing that the 'paradoxical' phenomena scholars observe in Thailand represent deviations from their naturalist common sense, they usually treat the identifications of paradoxes as analytic facts, rendered meaningful by a superior order of knowledge that is deemed 'truer' and more 'objective' than its vernacular counterparts. Kapferer argues on this basis that the problem of the exotic/paradox lies not so much in its identification, but rather in the concept's function in scientific discourse, where it serves to validate the intellectual superiority of the rational Western scholar.

Like all 'para'-cases, paradoxes become meaningful only against the backdrop of a commonsensical understanding of 'the normal' (Waldenfels 2011, 14). The paradox thus inevitably marks a pathological deviation from an authoritatively defined 'norm' that centres the scholarly 'self' in the rational language game we call 'science' (Baumann 2020b, 116–117). As Foucault has shown, the language game of 'science' regulates social practice by separating the true from the false, the reasonable from the unreasonable, and the normal from the abnormal. As social truth, scholarly language games create 'the abnormal' as an irrational other and guide self-formation in a process of distantiation from this discursively produced antagonist (Foucault 2003). The irrational is, therefore, constitutive for the creation of the rational 'self' in scholarly imagination. This proximity to modern identity politics is the reason why it is analytically appropriate to identify the commonality of the paradox in scholarly texts on Thailand as a paradoxographical trend.

In a paradoxographic text, the identification of a paradox says more about the person who identifies the paradox than about the phenomenon that is identified as paradoxical.[10] Charles Delattre (2018, 207) defines the paradoxographer, therefore, as the one

[10]One of the more recent contributions to the paradoxographical trend is an article by Alan Strathern (2019) on the sacred kinship of King Narai. This global history narrative identifies paradoxes on the basis of Eurocentric assumptions about kingship, sacredness and morality that are universalized to explain social phenomena in seventeenth-century Siam.

who 'is able to distinguish between what is usually expected and what is extraordinary, as the one who judges what belongs to *doxa* ("common law") and what does not' (italics in original).

Looking at the textual function of the paradox we may say that it is an analogue to classifications like 'primitive', 'irrational' and 'savage'; social categories that are no longer fashionable in contemporary scholarship since their orientalist foundations have been revealed. The paradox, on the other hand, remains a commonly encountered trope that derives its continuing legitimacy from Aristotelian or formal logic and the belief in its universal validity that is institutionalized in scientific language games. Since a discourse like orientalism may be endless because of its enormous capacity to reproduce itself in new guises (Rajah 1990, 314), I think we have to critically question the appropriateness of the paradox, if we truly seek to decolonize Thai studies.

Beyond paradoxography

A language of paradoxes severely limits our ability to escape the straitjacket of dualist thinking that continues to curtail any attempts to epistemically decolonize the debate on *phi* in Thai studies. While I admit that it is difficult to transcend dualisms in scholarly language games premised on dualities, this does not rule out anthropological attempts to think and write non-dualistically in order to enhance our understanding of alternative language games and the forms of life they produce.

A language of paradoxes, irrespective how far we stretch the meaning of the concept, is counterproductive in such attempts, as it inevitably reproduces the hegemony of dualist thinking. Paradoxes gain their meaningfulness from the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction that states that a thing [A] cannot be both itself and not itself [¬A] at the same time and in the same context ¬[A∧¬A], and the associated law of the excluded middle that states that for any proposition, either that proposition is true, or its negation is true and no third option is possible [A∨¬A]. These laws form the logical basis of every language game that is able to identify paradoxes (Baumann 2020b, 110; Evens 2008, xx).

Zygmunt Bauman (1991, 14, 56) identifies the cultural logic behind these essentially modern language games as a 'horror of indetermination'. This 'horror' is basically an avoidance and denial of ambiguity and Bauman (1991, 6) summarizes the modern ideal of order thus not as a fight of one definition against another, of one way of articulating reality against a competitive proposal, but as 'a fight of determination against ambiguity'.

The modern ideal of order is always singular and precludes the existence of alternative and simultaneously valid orders. From the viewpoint of epistemology, modernity may thus be understood as the reproduction of power through the hegemony of a monistic epistemological order that is grounded in naturalism and the institutionalized belief in its universal validity and privileged access to truth. The recognition of paradoxes and the ability to formulate them therefore function as an irrefutable proof that one has mastered the rules of the modern language game we call science.

What Bauman calls the horror of indetermination manifests, according to Bruno Latour (1993, 34), most explicitly in rendering the ambiguous invisible, which simultaneously denies its ontological status. This denial grounds in the ocularcentrism of

naturalist language games, which attribute ontological status only to the visible or visualizable (Morris 2000, 340). This severely affects the ontological status of the nonhumans known as *phi,* as ambiguity is their most characteristic feature and their constant fluctuation between visibility and invisibility is a visual manifestation of this feature.

Latour (1993, 10–11) calls the politico-semiotic operations employed in naturalist language games to render the ambiguous invisible 'purifications'. The essential paradigm of these purifications is the creation of 'two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other' (Latour 1993, 11). The only way to think category-crossings between human and nonhuman realms in naturalist language games is, according to Heather Swanson et al. (2017, M5–M6), the pathologizing figure of the monstrous that haunts modernity's most essential ontological divide with its unresolvable ambiguity.

This ontological divide is, according to Latour, unknown in non-naturalist language games, where humans and nonhumans participate in one another to form associations. This happens, for example, when certain *phi* possess human persons and '[t]hey cannot simply be considered as separate from their hosts – they are different, and they are the same' (Sprenger 2021, 69). Since Latour (1993, 4) calls these associations 'collectives', I propose the term animist collectivity[11] to capture the continuous flux of transformative becoming that characterizes local modes of being in which nonhumans participate in the being of humans and vice versa to form animist collectives as the fundamental social units of everyday village life.[12] In this non-modern onto-epistemological configuration every 'monster' can become visible and thinkable (Latour 1993, 41).

If naturalist language games rest on the laws of Aristotelian logic, the language game that renders encounters with *phi* practically meaningful rests on the 'law of participation' as it was once formulated by Lévy-Bruhl (1966, 61). This attempt to formulate an alternative logic was recently reformulated by Sahlins (2013, 20) as a 'mutuality of being'. As the antithesis of formal logic, the 'law of participation' states not only that human and nonhuman beings participate in each other's existence, but also that the causalities naturalism cherishes are irrelevant (Lévy-Bruhl 1966, 42). Naturalism takes it for granted that beings are given beforehand and afterwards participate in this or that relation; whereas, for Lévy-Bruhl participations are already necessary for beings to be given and exist (Sahlins 2013, 33–4).

The nondualism that Lévy-Bruhl attempted to capture in his 'law of participation' is largely irreconcilable with a language of paradoxes, as it recognizes the meaningfulness of boundary crossings, ambiguity and contradiction without their pathologization (Evens 2008, xx).

Despite the hegemony of naturalism in Thailand's public sphere and the commonsensical status of its formative dualities in everyday village life, the simultaneous validity of seemingly antithetical propositions (A and ¬A) in a single context as well as the participation of nonhuman in human existence that naturalism categorically rules out continue

[11]With the term 'collectivity' I refer to the embodied sense of belonging to a collective that all members of a collective share.

[12]With reference to Haraway's (2017) conceptualization of *sympoiesis* we may be inclined to say that naturalism also acknowledges the participation of nonhuman in human existence. While I agree that Haraway has drawn our attention to the biological essentiality of symbioses between humans and nonhumans, the nonhumans that enter into participations with humans in animist collectives are of a sort whose existence is still categorically denied by the natural sciences.

to fulfil crucial semantic and social functions (Baumann 2020b, 118). According to Evens this is not surprising, since '[a] logic of ambiguity allows for the possibility and functionally specific uses of formal logic but ultimately does not admit of an absolute boundary between logic and practice'. The ambiguity generated by categorical boundary crossings or a co-presence of phenomena naturalism regards as mutually exclusive in a single context is therefore not only essential to understand the practical meaningfulness of possession phenomena and other encounters with *phi*, but also to understand how villagers navigate through the multiple language games that shape their everyday lives and the different social ontologies they articulate.

When talking about possession phenomena and encounters with *phi* in rural Buriram, we thus have to acknowledge that interlocutors socialized into onto-epistemological multiplicities are, obviously, neither struck by nor feel compelled to respond to the logical fallacy that the term 'paradox' implies in naturalism (McIntosh 2019, 117).

Our inclination to frame Yai Priao's narratives about her encounters with *phi* as paradoxical is, therefore, not so much a problem of logic, but a problem of language. More precisely, a problem of translation between the multiple language games intersecting in Thai village life, the multiple onto-epistemologies they articulate and the multiple worlds they enunciate.

Drawing on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) I propose, therefore, that many of the paradoxes we encounter in scholarly texts on Thailand are uncontrolled equivocations that are produced by the naturalist denial of onto-epistemological multiplicity and the hegemonic vision of the one-world world reproduced in naturalist science. Marisol de la Cadena (2015, 27) explains equivocation as 'a type of communicative disjuncture in which, while using the same words, interlocutors are not talking about the same thing and do not know this' (references omitted).

The goal of anthropological translation is, according to Viveiros de Castro, therefore not the resolution of equivocations, but their control. Control implies here the recognition of equivocations and their unresolvable fundamentality in the encounter between worlds. In order to control equivocations, anthropological translation needs to expand

> the space imagined not to exist between the (conceptual) languages in contact … To translate is to presume that an equivocation always exists; it is to communicate through differences, in lieu of keeping the Other under gag by presuming an original univocality and an ultimate redundancy – an essential similarity – between what the Other and we are saying. (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 89)

Since paradoxes and contradictions can only be identified within the boundaries of a single language game (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 90), the identification of a paradox becomes an uncontrolled equivocation once our modern belief in the possibility of unequivocal meaning and the associated well-intentioned denial of difference makes us not only miss the gap between everyday and scholarly language games, but also how an onto-epistemological multiplicity produces multiple language games and associated worlds not only between clearly demarcated contexts (Jackson 2020, 26), but also within a single context.

The flourishing of uncontrolled equivocations in form of a paradoxographical trend indicates that naturalism's ontological simplifications produce the epistemological

monsters that haunt Thai studies, just as the Anthropocene is haunted by the biological monsters that ecological simplifications produce in the vast monocultures of the modern world (Swanson et al. 2017, M6–M7).

Multiple language games – multiple forms of life

In order to control the equivocations that narratives about *phi* seem to produce in the anthropological encounter without pathologizing them as paradoxical, I suggest drawing on Wittgenstein's (1999, 11, 88) notion of language games and their equation with forms of life. Wittgenstein introduces the term 'language game' to address the contextuality of meaning, linking meaning-making to the practical requirements of a given speech event.

Wittgenstein's understanding of language is inclusive and phenomenological. It encompasses all meaning-bearing activities so that ostensibly non-linguistic matters become elements of language (Lütterfelds 1995, 109). Understanding the significance of a concept in a language game is indispensable from one's familiarity with the associated practice (Winch 1964, 309). I use the term language game thus to emphasize the performative dimension of language. In contrast to Foucault's (1980) and Butler's (2010) power-critical understandings of discourse, I am highlighting meaning, its difference between worlds and its situatedness in specific bodies, rather than power; without denying that these worlds and bodies are produced by multiple forms of power.

The approach I am outlining in this article shifts attention away from the ostensibly objective structures that may produce encounters with *phi,* like the power relations emphasized by Ong (2010) in her functionalist rendering of spirit possession as a 'weapon of the weak', to their social meaning in everyday life. With this shift in focus I try to approach 'a permanent decolonization of thought', which Viveiros de Castro (2014, 40, 87, 90) defines with reference to Talal Asad as a translation between worlds.

While my application of the term 'language game' is similar to the terms 'culture' and 'ontology', which have become 'floating signifiers' (Scott 2013, 860) in anthropology, I use it to emphasize that the encounters with *phi* are similar to the learning of a language. I am, however, not implying that the meaning of these encounters is located on an abstract mental plane, as proponents of ethnoscience would have it, but that it is embodied, unfolding in everyday life as a distinct social practice and therefore not necessarily explicable by actors themselves (Baumann and Rehbein 2020, 8). However, the biggest advantage of applying Wittgenstein's notion of language games in the anthropological study of encounters with *phi* is that it denies unequivocal meaning, as it locates meaning in practice. The lifewordly meaning of these encounters emerges thus as an aspect of 'the domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity' (Jackson 1996, 7).

The social ontology of everyday village life

This domain is in rural Buriram shaped by an animist social ontology that is grounded in a regional possession complex (Århem 2016, 14–15; Baumann 2022). Very briefly, a social ontology refers to the ways notions of collectivity are meaningfully embodied (Baumann and Rehbein 2020). When the anthropological understanding of 'ontology'

designates 'modes of being' then social ontology simply designates 'modes of social being'.[13] The three onto-epistemologies of animism, Hindu-Buddhism and naturalism produce not only characteristic language games, but also distinctive social ontologies. While these language games remain firmly distinct in some contexts of social practice, they intersect and hybridize in others (Jackson 2020, 34). This intersecting and hybridizing follows no unchanging pattern or internal logic, but is rather the result of the pragmatics of everyday life (Winch 1987, 133).

One example of the hybridization of animist and Buddhist language games in contemporary Thailand are the *chao kam nai wen* (karma masters) discussed by Scott Stonington (2020a, 2020b). *Chao kam nai wen* are numinals bound to humans by karmic debt. They resemble *phi* in many respects. Although their existence is rationalized through Buddhist idioms and concepts by social actors and anthropologists alike, their participation in human persons and the conceptualization of human life they articulate reproduce the participatory logic of animist collectivity that characterizes everyday language games in Thailand.

To frame this essentially nondualist logic conceptually, I am drawing on Sahlins' 'mutuality of being'. This concept is not only a reformulation of the 'law of participation', but also an elaboration of anthropological discussions of 'dividual' personhood (Bird-David 1999; Marriott 1976; Strathern 1988). Dividual persons are usually portrayed as 'divisible' and also 'not distinct' in the sense that aspects of the self are variously distributed among others, as are others in oneself (Sahlins 2013, 19). The social grammar of collective life articulated in local language games rests on the intrinsic participation of nonhuman in human existence that the purified social grammar of modern language games categorically rules out (Swanson et al. 2017). The boundary between self and other is in this language game the description and outcome of relationships and not an ontological given (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 58), which makes the categorical distinction between humans and numinals ambiguous. Evens (2008, 6) remarks that 'such a reality cannot be neatly factored into things that simply stand outside to one another. Instead, an ambiguous reality presents entities as concretely participant of one another and therefore only relatively self-contained or identifiable'.

Parallel to Jackson's (2020, 27–30) observation that pronouns proliferate in Thai language games in order to meet the relational nature of the form of life they produce, Viveiros de Castro (2014, 59, fn 19) emphasizes that humanity is in animistic language games less a substantive than a pronoun 'marking the subjective position of the speaker. It is for this reason that the indigenous categories of collective identity possess this great contextual variability so characterising pronouns'.

Various animist collectives (villages, houses, cult lineages, worship groups) constitute the principle units of social life in everyday language games, of which the dividual human person is the smallest manifestation. All of these collectives are configurations of human and nonhuman beings that are held together in mutualities of being through mystic bonds that need to be constantly shaped through various rituals of the localized possession complex (Baumann 2020a, 2022). A recognition of the practical meaningfulness of this social ontology and the parallel existence of alternative social ontologies will help to

[13]My understanding of social ontology is thus also qualitatively different from a conventional philosophical understanding of the concept (Hofner 2020).

understand that the apparent paradoxes characterizing villagers' narratives about their encounters with *phi* are not always resolvable by contextualization, but are instead an essential aspect of their practical meaningfulness.

Approaching everyday encounters with *phi* through the reconstruction of animist collectivity has the further advantage of being able to reverse a Buddhologist gaze that characterizes much of contemporary Thai studies, and thus to avoid some of the paradoxes that Buddhist readings of these encounters produce. Buddhological readings of everyday life in Thailand and Cambodia try either to subsume encounters with *phi* under the label of an all-encompassing Buddhism, construct them as the Others of Theravada orthodoxy or try to explain them with recourse to Buddhist doctrine and philosophy (Aulino 2019; Davis 2016; Fuhrmann 2016; McDaniel 2011; Stonington 2020a).

An outline of animist collectivity allows us not only to see how many rituals commonly classified as Buddhist rely on an animist social ontology, but also how Thai Buddhism[14] produces mediumship and spirit possession to deal meaningfully with the ambiguities of Buddhist soteriology that were institutionalized through the hegemony of modernist Buddhist regimes in Thailand's public sphere (Formoso 2016; Ladwig 2011, 28).

After explanation

How then should we explain the apparent paradox of Yai Priao's statements about the nonexistence of *phi* while simultaneously retelling her encounters with *phi*-ish numinals?

An immediate explanation may draw upon the polythetic character of the concept *phi* in Thai language games. When Yai Priao first denied the existence of *phi* categorically while retelling her personal possession episode shortly after, she may have first thought about *phi* in general, whose existence is categorically denied in Thailand's public sphere, while the *phi* that possessed her belongs to sub-class whose existence is an ontological fact in everyday village life.[15]

An instrumental explanation may try to dissolve the paradox of Yai Priao's denial of any visual encounter with a *phi*, while later retelling her encounter with a pulsating ball of light that she classified as *Charap* by arguing that Khmer-speaking interlocutors attribute ontological status to numinals associated with the socio-cultural category 'Khmer' while they question the ontological status of Thai *phi* to redraw boundaries between the associated ethno-linguistic groups. While this explanation may sound convincing as it allows us to resolve the ostensible paradox, it would ignore that whether local interlocutors draw on Thai or Khmer lexicons to talk about a numinal does not say anything about the non-human's ontological status. Local Khmer and Thai dialects operate within the same animist language game and villagers do not use speculations about the ontological status of certain numinals to articulate boundaries between local dialects and the associated ethno-linguistic identities.

It would also be possible to draw upon the Foucauldian archaeology of Thailand's onto-epistemological multiplicity that was outlined above and the contextualized

[14]As there are various Buddhist sects in Thailand that may be called 'modern' or 'modernist', it would be a simplification to talk about just one Thai Buddhism. Erick White (2014) talks about multiple Buddhist regimes that compete in Thailand's public sphere and shows how possession and mediumship phenomena function as foils against which imaginations of proper Buddhism are formulated.

[15]This was the immediate explanation a Thai colleague offered, when I showed her the footage of the interview.

meaningfulness of naturalist, Buddhist and animist language games in everyday village life. As a foreign academic I am seen by many villagers as an embodiment of the social values of progress and development that the public sphere closely associates with Thailand's modernization, the ruling elites and the regime of objective truth established by naturalism (Ladwig 2011, 28–30). Villagers embody this social classification through their exposure to naturalist language games that are institutionalized in mass media, the state bureaucracy and school curricula as well as in various modernist or rationalist Buddhist regimes (White 2014). Villagers develop an embodied understanding of the contextual appropriateness of naturalist, Buddhist and animist onto-epistemologies during their socialization into Thai language games with their essential value of contextual sensitivity (Jackson 2020, 2022). A Western scientist is thus not only a manifestation of naturalism's presence in local lifeworlds, but may have also altered the social context of the conversation and thus which language game is considered appropriate. My presence during the conversation between the village women may have triggered the performance of a contextually appropriate dualist language game with an ontological register that is at odds with the mode of being reproduced in the nondualist language game of everyday village life. The ostensible paradoxes in Yai Priao's narrative may thus be resolved with reference to her unconscious switching between or mixing of two language games with mutually exclusive ontological registers.

Emphasizing the contextuality of Thai language games, it would also be possible to explain the ostensible paradox as an interpretative failure, an artefact of the misguided analytic assumption that the conversation happened in a single context all the time, just because the sociotemporal framework seemed unchanged to the foreign observer. Jackson's (2022), Mulder's (1978, 62–84) and Van Esterik's (2000, 38–9) accounts of the workings of *kala thesa* make clear how difficult it is for people not socialized into Thai language games to recognize the social boundaries monitored by this sense of contextual appropriateness. Western observers socialized into the monothetic logic of an unchallenged naturalism face severe difficulties in accepting the possibility of onto-epistemological multiplicity and in noticing the boundaries of ontological registers monitored by contextual sensitivity in Thai language games. They thus tend to identify paradoxes, where local actors experience meaningful deictic practices. The ostensible paradoxes in Yai Priao's narrative about her encounters with *phi* may thus be resolved through careful contextualizations, which would identify the paradox finally as an artefact of a lacking familiarity with the relational and context-sensitive logic of Thai language games.

Despite these possible explanations, I contend that in order to decolonize Thai studies epistemologically we should not aim at unequivocal explanations at all, but rather at polyvocal understandings. Attempts to dissolve the ambiguity in Yai Priao's narrative through the outlined contextualizations may in the end contribute to an ongoing epistemological colonization of our interlocutors. With reference to Viveiros de Castro (2014) we can say that contextualization denies the inevitability of equivocations in encounters between worlds and finally limits our chances to control them. In its search for unequivocal meaning the attempt to resolve ambiguity through contextualization may thus just produce another uncontrolled equivocation. The analytic dissolution of the ambiguity that manifests in Yai Priao's encounters with *phi* may thus only help to make her experiences plausible to people who adhere to naturalism's monistic vision of

the one-world world where ambiguity and category-crossings are loathed and onto-epistemological multiplicity is denied.

In order to meet the growing demand for an epistemological decolonization of area studies, I think we have to accept the possibility that our interlocutors simply neglect contradictions of the kind that surface in Yai Priao's statements about *phi* and their ontological status and that '[n]o attempt is made to assimilate the potentially contradictory premises of each system because there is no ideological priorization of consistency to begin with' (McIntosh 2019, 117). By accepting the possibility of alternative rationalities we may either say that Yai Priao's narrative is not paradoxical, as the idea of paradox is alien to the nondualist onto-epistemology that characterizes Thailand's animist language games, or that it is precisely the apparent ambiguity of her encounters that enunciates the concept *phi* (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, 13). In order to control the equivocations that inevitably arise in an anthropological attempt to understand everyday life in rural Thailand, we may thus have to acknowledge that a *phi* may be a naturalist 'spirit' whose existence is categorically denied and simultaneously an animist numinal whose consubstantial participation in a human person is either loathed or desired and that a paradox may be a paradox and simultaneously not a paradox and that these simultaneities are not resolvable through contextualizations, but simply meaningful in their unresolved ambiguity.

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