

**Abstract:** Thai Theravāda Buddhist death rituals are explored in this book chapter as vivid examples of how rituals around death can offer rich potential sources for consumer cultural insight. The chapter explores Ricoeur’s and Obeyesekere’s “cultural hermeneutics” (1965) and the “work of culture” (1990) within the context of Thai death rituals and death consumption to extend CCT research into these underexplored areas. The death rituals reflect a sense of immortality, identity, and continuity as part of collective cultural identities that link the living with the dead. The chapter uses an autoethnographic practice theory perspective to demonstrate how Theravāda Buddhist death rituals entail the symbolic exchange between the living and the dead within the liminal spaces of a selection of death rituals and festivals. Death can be seen as a culturally defined concept given the ontological finality of the Western notion of death. The roles of Thai death rituals and the language related to death and death rituals contribute to the living’s sense of self-consciousness and identity and connect to consumer culture. By engaging with death through death rituals, the cultural identity of the dead can be continued. The focus of the chapter is not what might be regarded as doctrinally correct Theravāda Buddhism, nor is it the historical provenance of the myth and folklore that intermingle seamlessly with daily religious practice in Thailand. Rather, the focus of the chapter falls on the everyday practice and experience of religious belief for Thai people as it manifests in selected ritual practices.

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**Hackley, R.A** (2022), ‘The work of culture in Thai Theravāda Buddhist Death Rituals’ in Russell Belk and Yuko Minowa (eds.) *Consumer Culture Theory in Asia: History and Current Issues*, New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group. ISBN: 978-0-367-62949-6.

# 8

## **The Work of Culture in Thai Theravāda Buddhist Death Rituals**

**Rungpaka Amy Hackley**

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### **Introduction**

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## 8 The Work of Culture in Thai Theravāda Buddhist Death Rituals

Lying down in a coffin, a Thai woman has her palms pressed together in a prayer-like position holding flowers, a candle and three incense sticks. She can hear monks chanting prayers (*Ānisonṅ Sīa Sop: The Blessings of Disposing of Corpses*) that are normally used in the Prayer for the Dead at Buddhist funerals. The monks cover her coffin with a large piece of white cloth that they normally use as shrouds for corpses in burial rites. After the chanting is over they remove the cloth from the coffin and the woman climbs out. She is participating in the *Norn-Loeng-Sa-Dor-Cro* death ritual, literally translated as lay down in a coffin and you can get rid of bad luck. She believes that this ritual will cleanse her soul and trick bad spirits into thinking that she is already dead so they will not do any more harm to her. After this ritual, it would be as if she was reborn and she could start a new life with a new identity shed of her previous bad karma.

(Extract from the author's ethnographic field notes at Wat Phromanee Temple near Bangkok, Thailand, 2011).

This chapter extends studies of death and ritual in marketing and consumer research by reflecting on the ways in which a selection of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition of death rituals in Thailand manifests as consumption practices as they bind the living and the dead in rituals of continuity, identity, and social order. The assumption is that while Asian consumer culture is extensively studied from a Western perspective, the varied and nuanced contexts of Asian (Southeast Asian in particular) culture remain underexplored in the Western research literature and offer rich potential sources for consumer cultural insight.

Death rituals and the ritual process associated with death can contribute to our collective life continuity and the production of the “work of culture” (Bloch and Parry 1983; Lifton 1996; Obeyesekere 1990; Ricoeur 1973b, 1976). Elements in rituals communicate symbolic meanings (Gainer 1995; Rook and Levy 1983) and death rituals have played a key role in a better understanding of the symbolic aspects of consumption and consumer culture (Belk 1994; Holt 1992; Houston 1999; Minowa 2008; Rook 1985; Stanfield and Kleine 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Ustuner, Ger, and Holt 2000). Taking a broad perspective on what constitutes a death ritual, this chapter reflects on death rituals such as *Norn-Loeng-Sa-Dor-Cro* (death ritual

for the living), ‘*Por-Tor*’ and ‘*Pee-Ta-Khon*’ (two of the hungry ghost festivals that occur annually in Thailand), and joss paper burning death rituals, variations of which occur across East Asian including Thailand, as vivid examples of how traditional beliefs, myths, and death rituals connect through modern-day consumption practices. In these death rituals (Hackley and Hackley 2015, 2016; Tiwsakul and Lim 2011), both symbolic and material practices are used to connect the dead and living.

This chapter aims to connect theoretically with the extended form of Arnould and Thompson (2005, 2007, 2018)’s work on consumer culture theory (CCT). Although Moisander, Peñaloza, and Valtonen (2009) address the lack of interpretive consumer culture studies by non-Western (American) ethnic minority researchers within the CCT community, practical and theoretical problems and issues still remain. Moisander et al. (2009) suggest that consumer culture research related to the Asian consumer culture context often employs research conventions that broaden North American theoretical and methodological constructs to exemplify cultural differences, rather than starting with candidly investigating differing cultural consumption phenomena in developing theoretical constructs that might challenge established CCT and Western customs. This chapter hopes to address this issue by seeking to generate new insights on a central enigma of Southeast Asian consumption.

The approach taken uses multiple methods of data gathering including autoethnography, ethnographic field notes, observations, interviews, and videography, and the interpretation draws also on practice theory. The chosen rituals are described as examples of Thai Buddhist ritual and practice although, like much religious belief and practice in the east, they are highly inflected by influences from folk beliefs and local cultural and commercial practices as well as by Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Tibetan Buddhism (Sino-Thais being the largest ethnic group in Thailand). Nonetheless, the practices would be described as essentially religious and Buddhist by participants as they are framed and constrained by Theravāda Buddhist structural and constitutive influence. The focus of the chapter is not what might be regarded as doctrinally correct Theravāda Buddhism, nor is it the historical provenance of the myth and folklore that intermingle seamlessly with daily religious practice in Thailand. Rather, the focus of the chapter falls on the everyday practice and experience of religious belief for Thai people as it manifests in selected ritual practices.

Below, the cultural context of Thailand and Thai Buddhism is introduced, followed by an introduction to the cultural logic of death rituals in Thailand. Subsequently, the chapter will offer an outline of the four death rituals that form the basis of the philosophical reflections in this chapter. Next, the chapter will develop a discussion on contrasting eastern and western notions of selfhood and death as end point or juncture of continuity, before continuing with reflections on the ideas of Bloch, Ricour, and Obeyesekere in relation to Asian consumer culture and death ritual.

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### Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand

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Thailand (formerly Siam) is one of the most strongly Buddhist countries in the world where 95% of the population practices Theravāda Buddhism (a branch of Hinayana Buddhism) (Anonymous 2001). Among Thai people, Buddhism is “a way of life, a national identity and the key to primordial Thainess” (Wattanasuwan and Elliott 1999, 151). Thais have a strong sense of national identity as the country “avoided the ideologically driven wars that decimated and impoverished their neighbouring countries” (Blandin 2003, 13). Thailand has been a constitutional monarchy since 1932, but its tradition of absolute monarchy goes back many centuries.

Thai culture has been influenced by Khmer, Mon, Chinese, and Indian cultures (Ginsburg 2000). Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes “the individual practice of meditation, the value of good social conduct, and the attainment of salvation from earthy desires thus breaking the cycle of rebirth and suffering” (Blandin 2003, 15). “*Sangha*” (Buddhist clergy), a national community of monks, embodies the ways of the Buddha and is highly involved in every aspect of life. For most Thai people, it is important to honor the Buddha and to accrue merit through virtuous activities such as, for example, offering food to monks at the temple in the early morning, releasing caged birds (they are captured to be ritually released in exchange for a price), building new temples, and presenting robes and other necessities to monks. Merit making and belief of reincarnation are important to Thai Buddhists. Buddhist holy days and ceremonies take place all year and offer many opportunities for merit making. Thai temples, therefore, are important sites of cultural, religious, and social practices.

Alongside belief in the Buddha and his teachings, in Thailand, a multitude of folk beliefs operate, especially beliefs in spirits and gods. The practice of Thai Buddhism remains animistic (Blandin 2003; Wattanasuwan and Elliott 1999). Spirits are believed to inhabit all things and these spirits must be placated. For example, spirit houses (which can be found in almost every Thai house and business premises) typically hold offerings of food, flowers, incense sticks, and candles to placate the spirits who dwell within. Thais have woven the animist and Buddhist beliefs together which create endless fascinating ceremonies and festivals.

Theravāda Buddhism (the School of the Elders) is the oldest branch of Buddhism practiced in Southeast Asia and is prevalent in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma (Gethin 1998; Langer 2007), in contrast to later schools of Buddhism such as Mahāyāna (the great vehicle) and Vajrayāna (the diamond vehicle) (Gethin 1998). Theravāda Buddhism evolved from the Buddhist canon of the *Tipiṭaka* (or the triple baskets of early Buddhist scriptures, which were written in the now-extinct Pali language) consisting of the *Vinaya* (the Book of Discipline for the monks or sangha), the *Suttanta*, Discourses, and the *Abhidhamma* (the higher teachings or exposition of realities) (Gorkom 1996). The fundamental tenets of Theravāda Buddhism are stated in the Four Noble Truths (*ariya sacca*) which were articulated by *Siddhattha Gotama* in Pali or *Siddhartha Gautama* in Sanskrit. The Four Noble Truths are existence (*dukkha*—suffering); craving/attachment (*trishna*—the cause of *dukkha*); the state of nirvana or *Nibbāna* (liberation, enlightenment, and the extinction of personality and personal desires which is the end of all suffering); and the way to end all *dukkha* and achieve nirvana. The cessation of *dukkha* is through the practice of the Eightfold Path (*ariya magga*), namely, right understanding, right thinking, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Gorkom 1996).

For Buddhists, refining their practice of Buddhism can free them from the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. Buddhists believe in *karma* (or merit) and *samsāra*. Karma is a Sanskrit word which refers to effects of actions during several lives [through the wheel of life (WOL)] which defines the destiny of an individual. Samsāra is a Sanskrit word which literally means continuous flow. Samsāra in Theravāda Buddhism refers to the idea of the cycle of rebirth and suffering due to their karma. Thai Buddhists believe that any acts done in accordance with the Buddha's teachings are to be counted as positive karma or merit (*bun* in Thai), whereas any acts against

them are counted as negative karma or demerit (*bap* in Thai). Both positive and negative karma affect a person's present life, next life, and in reincarnated lives on the WOL.

## The Realms of the WOL

In the cycle of the WOL, beings are born, die, reborn, die again, and reborn again while going through the six realms of life. According to [Gould \(1991, 1992\)](#),<sup>1</sup> these six realms (which are common to Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism) serve as a hierarchy of desirable states of existence. The lowest realm is the hell realm, followed by the hungry ghost (preta or pret) realm, animals, humans, gods/antigods, and finally, enlightened beings. The hell realm is the least desirable as the being is in a state of misery, privation, and pain as he/she is punished for misdeeds and in the previous life. The hungry ghost realm is where the individual is full of greed and unfulfilled desire and yearning for food, love, or material goods, and he/she is reborn as a hungry ghost. The animal realm is where the individual has a miserable and ignorant life. In the human realm, the being can attain some material gratification, but he/she has to work hard to achieve it and it can be lost. Envy of the higher gods leads to the antigod realm. In the god realm, the being can achieve degrees of great and constant pleasure (which can go beyond material gratification). The last realm is beyond the WOL which is the most desirable realm. This happens when the being achieves enlightenment or nibbāna (Pali or nirvāna in Sanskrit), being free from all sorrow, birth, old age, and death. He/she has gone beyond this cycle of life, birth and rebirth, leaving materialism, desire, and possessiveness behind.

Theravāda Buddhism encourages Buddhists to prepare for death in order to live a mindful and conscientious life. This contemplation of death is integrated with the practice of mindfulness. The sutta on the four Foundations of Mindfulness lists nine different contemplations on a corpse at different stages of decay ([Fronsdal n.d.](#)). In Theravāda Buddhism, Buddhists are encouraged to reflect on the four protections which are the contemplation of the qualities of the Buddha that can protect Buddhists from doubt and discouragement, the practice of loving-kindness for anger, contemplating the unappetizing aspects of the body to calm desire (especially sexual desire and the contemplation of death as a protection from laziness). The decaying corpse is perceived as evidence of the fundamental Buddhist doctrines of the moral

cause and effect (karma), of impermanence of all things (anicca), of existence as suffering (dukkha), and of the absence of an eternal self (anattā). In Theravāda Buddhism, the quality of the last conscious moments at the time of death is important as it can determine the circumstances of the next rebirth. There are good and bad deaths in Theravāda Buddhism (Langer 2007). If one practices and understands the Buddha's teachings, this should lead to a good death.

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## Helping the Dead Achieve a Good Rebirth

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Thai people believed that the *phī* (ghost) of death can be dispelled through appropriate performance of death rituals and funerary rites. These performances, chanting prayers by monks, and merit making on the behalf of the deceased assist the *dūang winñān* (the essence that survives not only death but also the disposal of the body) to have a greater chance of being reborn in a desirable state or contribute to reducing the time that he/she might spend in that state of suffering. This merit transfer is believed to ensure a good rebirth for the person who has died.

## Phī: The Essence Beyond Death

### “Preta” (Hungry Ghost)

The hungry ghost is a particularly significant figure in Thai Buddhist belief and folk mythology: “A preta (ghost) is one who, in the ancient Buddhist cosmology, haunts the earth's surface, continually driven by hunger—that is desire of one kind or another.” (Oates 1974, in Gould 1991, 33). Those people who accumulated bad karma when they were alive may be punished by being reborn in the ghost realm as hungry ghosts. The translation of preta to refer to the myth of the hungry ghost seems to cause some confusion in the Western literature. The Sanskrit word preta is generally used to mean dead or as defined by Langer (2007) “in a more technical sense, newly dead, ghost” (p 17), so the word has a slightly different meaning (and different Anglicized spelling) in reference to Theravāda Buddhist death rituals in Southeast Asia. According to Langer (ibid), “the past participle from the root pra √i, preta (mfn.)”, which literally means “gone



away,” came to mean “departed, deceased, dead, a dead person.” In the course of time, the term acquired another, more specialized meaning, namely, “the spirit of a dead person (especially before obsequial rites are performed), a ghost, an evil being and a newly dead as opposed to ancestor (pitṛ, m.)” (17). In Buddhism, death rituals should be performed to help the deceased transfer from being pretas (ghosts) to pitṛ (ancestors). [Holt \(1981\)](#) supports this belief: “the pattern of ritual activity designed to promote the deceased from the status of pretas to pitṛ was prevalent before the emergence of specifically Buddhist conceptions” (6). Pretas, without death rituals, would retain their hunger and misery.

There are three different types of pretas according to their dwelling place and behavior: the ñati-prēteo (ñati = relative who cannot let go of his/her loved ones), the maḷa-prēteo (maḷa = dead) prefers dwelling places like cemeteries and crossroads, and the gevala-prēteo (geval = houses) are ghosts who cannot let go of their homes ([Langer 2007](#)). Pretas are always hungry and thirsty, and they cannot feed or put on any clothes themselves. They have long thin necks, tiny mouths, long arms and legs, and huge bellies. Their appearance and craving are depicted in many folk tales that are related to Thai children.

## Hungry Ghosts Versus Ancestors

In Buddhism, not all the deceased will become ancestors because some will become ghosts, depending on the person’s moral behavior, how they died, and whether proper death rituals were conducted for them. [Langer \(2007, 14\)](#), writing of Sri Lankan Buddhist practices, discussed the importance of the “quality of the last conscious moments at the time of death as determining the circumstances of the next rebirth.” Buddhists believe that people who die during a natural disaster or in an unnatural death are likely to become ghosts as their bodies cannot be found, and hence, it is not possible for their relatives to conduct proper death rituals or hold appropriate funerals. In addition, if the deceased relatives have no living descendants, they are also likely to become ghosts as there is no one who cares for them by feeding them (donating food to monks or taking part in death rituals) and performing death rituals on their behalf. In Theravāda Buddhism and Chinese Confusion Buddhism and Taoism, abandoned/wandering souls and hungry ghosts seem to be the main kinds of ghosts that are related to death rituals. It is also believed that by conducting death rituals on behalf of ancestors and feeding them, the ancestors in return will

offer protection and good luck for the living. The hungry ghost or pretas realm of the WOL is clearly separated from that of the living (the Human realm), but death rituals conducted at specific times and places can open the gates to an interaction between the living and the dead, as we will see in the rituals discussed below.

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## The Interpretation of Death in Buddhist Texts

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In Thailand, when a death occurs, before the corpse (*sop*, in Thai) is cremated, it will be laid in a room for up to 100 days (or even years in the cases of some high ranking monks) in order for relatives to pay respects and offer prayers. The physical remains are no longer considered to be a person (*khon* in Thai), but the source of a potentially perilous spirit (*phī*) which would trouble the living until the physical remains are properly disposed of and the spirit is placated. It is believed in Buddhism that a corpse must be sent off so it can be separated from the social grouping in which it has been part of when the deceased was alive. Thai funerary rites are directed toward the disposing of a corpse (and sending off of the *phī*) and giving friends and family a chance to sit with the dead body which can help with their grieving process. This tainted spirit can benefit from merit made on its behalf by family members and friends of the deceased in death rituals. After this ritual process, the spirit can be further transformed through rebirth into a new being the state of which would be determined by the merit (positive karma—*bun* in Thai) and demerit (negative karma—*kam* in Thai) accumulated by the deceased during his or her lifetime and by the merit transferred to the spirit by his or her family and friends. By taking part in Thai funerary rites, the *phī* would become *dūang winñān* (the essence that survives not only death but also the disposal of the body). This essence has liminal essence, and it is linked to the Buddhist construct of consciousness. This state is not an immortal state but a link between one existence and the next on the WOL.

The *phī* can include the *thēwadā* (Gods or deities) who may be dangerous if their death has been sudden and violent, and their spirits have not been placated properly. Theravāda Buddhists, like Western counterparts, are unwilling to accept death as signifying the finality of life. The *phī* can be sent off through the performance of appropriate death rituals and funerary

rites, but the idea of *dūang winñān* shows that the deceased and his or her identity goes beyond death and has a new existence.

This chapter will now outline the method and describe the four death rituals chosen for this study by the author.

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## Methodology and Data Collection

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This research is framed within a social constructionist ontology to imply that human beings are interactional beings who construct knowledge not in isolation or solely as a result of external variables but in engagement with the social world. Practice theory (Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 2006; Skålen and Hackley 2011) was adopted in this study in tandem with ethnography, videography, autoethnography, reflexive field notes, and observations. The theoretical perspective of practice theory informed the analysis of ethnographic data and tentative interpretations of some of the cultural meanings of the chosen four death rituals. The author sought an ethnomethodologically informed rich description (Geertz 1973) by contextualizing this insight with her first-hand knowledge of ghost mythology, Theravāda Buddhism, and Thai death rituals and language.

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## Four Thai Death Rituals

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### Por Tor Hungry Ghost Festival in Phuket Province

Hungry ghost festivals are celebrated in many East Asian countries. In the Chinese calendar, the ghost festival is on the 15th night of the 7th lunar month. This day is considered to be a ghost day, and the 7th lunar month is a ghost month. It is believed that ghosts and ancestors will move from the lower realm of the WOL (hell being and hungry ghost realms) to the human realm. On this particular period, Buddhists believe that the gates of the realms of hell are opened, and the living and the dead can intermingle. The ghosts are invited to the human realm and offered food to placate them. Rituals would typically include singing and dancing, praying, ritualistic food offerings, burning incense sticks, and burning joss paper money.

Por Tor derives from the Chinese heritage in Southern Thailand when the first immigrants from China and Malaysia came to work in the mines of Phuket. In this ritual, unique red turtle-shaped cakes that are symbolic of long life and good fortune are offered and consumed. Food is offered to Por Tor Kong, who is the Devil spirit in charge of the hungry ghosts' realm on the WOL and to other hungry spirits who have been released from their realm by the goddess Gwan Yin to return to their former homes. In return for the food, it is hoped that the hungry ghosts will give local people and the town blessings.<sup>2</sup> One distinctive aspect of this ritual is that the ghosts are assumed to be physically present, and seats are left empty at the site of the ritual for the ghosts to occupy. When singing or dancing is taking place on the stage, some visitors lean over as if they are trying to see around the bodies of the ghosts. This ritual is closely linked to local cultural identities and community.

## **Pee Ta Khon Hungry Ghost Festival in Dan-sai District, Loei Province**

The Pee Ta Khon hungry ghost festival is held annually for three days between March and June in Dansai district in the north-central Loei province. Dansai is regarded as a sacred place, and this hungry ghost festival is unique to this province. Its history goes back further than local memory. It is one of the most important merit-making ceremonies in the Heed Sib-Song Klong Sib-Si tradition of the Theravāda Buddhist calendar. It doubles as a fertility ritual calling on the relevant spirits to bless the forthcoming harvest. It is, like the Por Tor festival, central to the identity of the local people, and it also acts as a tourist attraction. Pee Ta Khon is part of the larger event called Bun Luang. This event consists of the Pee Ta Khon festival (hungry ghost festival), Prapheni Bun Bung Fai (rocket festival), and Bun Pra Wate (a merit making ceremony). This hungry ghost festival was originally known as Pee Tam Khon, which is literally translated as ghosts follow the living. It is based on an old folklore tale of the last and tenth incarnation of the Buddha, Prince Mahavejsandon Chadoh who left his banishment in the forest to return to the village.

The first day of the festival is called Wan Ruam, which literary means an assembly day. The ritual starts in the early morning; the town's residents invite the spirit known as Phra U-

Pakut from the Mun River to protect the area where the festival is held. There is a small parade at this stage. Later in the morning, the parade goes to the house of the black magician or witch, called Ban Chow Guan in order to perform the ritual Bai Sri Soo Kwan (the ritual of bringing back spirits). When this is finished, Chow Guan (the black magician who takes care of a ghost named Pee Hor Luang), Nang Tieam, Kana San, and Nang Tang (the black magician's helpers), a dancing group of Pee Ta Khon, and some local residents would be invited to join the parade. The parade then moves to Phon Chai temple.

The second day of the Pee Ta Khon festival is the occasion of the centerpiece, a colorful and ribald march of hungry ghosts, portrayed by locals in fierce masks and elaborate homemade ghost outfits, who drink, dance, and tease people along their way, occasionally prodding tourists and local people with giant phalluses. Much food and drink are offered and consumed on the route of the parade. The parade continues until the afternoon when they welcome the Buddha Mahavejsandon and his family back to the town (this part is called Hae Phra). The third day of the festival is the day of virtue, with no ribaldry or dancing. Local people attend a grand sermon and follow Buddhist precepts. **3**

## **Norn-Loeng-Sa-Dor-Cro Death Ritual for the Living**

This is the ritual described in the opening passage of this chapter. It earned popularity locally as a way of getting rid of bad luck but when it was featured in a Thai horror film called *The Coffin* (2008) directed by Ekachai Uekrongtham and distributed by Arclight Films, it achieved a national presence. Some temples such as Wat Phromanee near Bangkok offer this death ritual for the living on a rather commercial basis and hundreds of people queue to take part for a fee of US\$5. It is not unusual for Thai monks and temples to offer what are essentially commercialized spiritual services, and the death ritual for the living has become a significant brand. The participants to this ritual partake in a mock funeral rite, laying in real coffins and undergoing much of the ceremony and prayers that are conducted in real funeral rites. It is a dramatic and visually enchanting ritual undergone in all sincerity by devotees and conducted with gravitas by the monks.

## Joss Paper Burning Ritual

The Joss paper burning ritual is a Chinese/Thai ritual that originally used mock money, but in recent years, it has become highly commercialized with paper versions of branded goods, houses, cars, handbags, wrist watches, laptops, mobile phones, cigarettes, and Viagra tablets (often tagged with the name of the intended deceased recipient), each of which is burned so that the deceased may enjoy them in their ghostly realm. The act of merit making can be seen as a moral obligation and an expression of respect and gratitude for what the ancestors and the deceased relatives had done for the living. Where paper mock-ups of branded goods are burned in such rituals, it seems evident that the memories of the deceased's favorite brands that once constituted their identities can carry on and attain immortality. A more recent innovation of this ritual for Thai people is an iPhone app that they can download to virtually burn ghost money for their ancestors.

The chapter will now discuss some of the philosophical issues arising from these ritual practices, drawing on the work of various theorists. Importantly, the discussion will focus on the contrasts and commonalities between Western and Eastern notions of death.

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## Discussion: Bloch's Rebounding Violence, Ricoeur's Cultural Hermeneutics, and Obeyesekere's Work of Culture

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[Bloch \(1992\)](#) extended and challenged Van Gennep's theory of rites of passage. One of the key limitations of Van Gennep's work, Bloch thinks, is that it focused too much on status acquisition and does not quite explain the power of ritual in people's lives. Ritual, for [Bloch \(1992\)](#) acts "as though humanity interrupts the natural process of birth, growth and death, replacing it, in a symbolic way, with a process of ritual death and ritual rebirth" ([Davies 2002](#), 19). He refers to this process as the rebounding violence or rebounding conquest. This process is mediated through religious rituals which are performed so participants can become who they are meant to be, and the process involves the transformative energies of the human being and life cycle (ibid).

## 8 The Work of Culture in Thai Theravāda Buddhist Death Rituals

In Theravāda Buddhism, the idea of the consciousness, mind, or life force (*Vijñāna* in Sanskrit or *viññāṇa* in Pali) that links the life of a person who dies with the life of a person who is born (Keyes 1987). The *viññāṇa* is one of the five constituents or aggregates (*skhandha* in Sanskrit or *khandha* in Pali) that constitute the person. The four other aggregates are materiality or form (*rūpa*), feeling or sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), and coefficients of consciousness (the formation that condition consciousness or *sankhārā*) (ibid). The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga, VIII) is important in Theravāda Buddhist doctrine written by Buddhaghosa in Sri Lanka that these five aggregates should not have any permanence because if they did the doctrine of *anattā* (the eternal or non self) could not be sustained. Buddhaghosa repeated reference to rebirth-consciousness (*paṭisandhi viññāṇa*) as being which links one existence with the next and *anattā* is maintained by denying that consciousness is an absolute entity (Keyes 1987). In Thailand, the concept of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) has been linked with the term *dūang winñān* (it has a liminal existence beyond death that links between one existence and the next on the WOL).

In Buddhism, it is believed that life and our experience in the world are not permanent; henceforth, Buddhists should be released from *dukkha* which can be translated as suffering and attempt to attain *nibbāna* (Pali or *nirvāna* in Sanskrit), being free from all sorrow, birth, old age, and death. *Nibbāna* is the end of the cycle of birth and death. The Buddha said, “Birth is *dukkha*, decay is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*; likewise sorrow and grief, woe, lamentation and despair. To be conjoined with things we dislike, to be separated from things we like, that also is *dukkha*. Not to get what one wants, that also is *dukkha*” (Gorkom 1996, 80). In Visuddhimagga (the Path of Purification), the life moment of living being is really short, “the life of living beings lasts only a single conscious moment. . . . Life, person, pleasure, pain—just these alone. Join in one conscious moment that flicks by. Ceased *khandhas* of those dead or alive. All are alike, gone never to return. No (world is) born if (consciousness is) not. Produced, when that is present, then it lives; when consciousness dissolves, the world is dead” (Gorkom 1996, 82). Death can remind us the impermanence of each life moment. This is rather similar to Ricoeur’s work on *Oneself as Another* (1992) as he remarked on a correlation between acting and suffering. He writes, “For my part, I never forget to speak of humans as acting and suffering” (320).

Obeyesekere (1990) construes the work of culture in much the same way as does Ricoeur (1913–2005). The work of culture refers to “the process whereby symbolic forms existing on the

cultural level gets created and recreated through the minds of people” (Obeyesekere 1990, xix). It focuses on the formation and transformation of symbolic forms. The work of culture (symbols, signs, and texts) forms the central core of Ricoeur’s understanding of selfhood which is equated with the linguistic reflection on existence. Telling and retelling rituals and narratives, for example, reenact our symbolic connection to our world and existence. Death rituals entail a form of the symbolic connection with existence. Ricoeur emphasized a priority of meaning over self-consciousness (Ricoeur 1975). Before we can reflect on questions of being, the detour of a hermeneutics of symbols must be undertaken (Ricoeur 1973a). The task of hermeneutical discovery of selfhood is to recover the self from the vast diversity of symbols, signs, and texts by the interpretation of various forms of semiotic meaning. Death rituals can be understood as part of this process of recovery.

Ricoeur’s work on a cultural phenomenological-hermeneutics (1975) emphasizes practical life as action. For Ricoeur, the enduring interconnections of phenomenology and hermeneutics helped us understand our lived experiences, giving us a sense of belonging and being-in-the-world (1992). He discussed several layers of the social and ideological imaginary of the human structures of being-in-the-world and hermeneutical experience itself (ibid). Our being and self, for Ricoeur (1992), is a respondent to a call that comes from the other, “this Other, the source of injunction, is another person whom I can look in the face or who can stare at me, or my ancestors for whom there is no representation, to so great an extent does my debt to constitute my very self, or God—living God, absent God—or an empty place” (355). The death rituals of Thai Buddhism connect consumerism, folklore and superstition, and religious belief, and they also operate on the plane of this injunction to invest ancestors with life and to elaborate on the sense of being-in-the-world of the living.

For Ricoeur, the meaning of being is mediated in a continuous process of interpretations. He believed that meanings were not solely produced by the subject of consciousness, and the subject did not constitute the world. Instead, the object (the world or culture) also intends meanings toward the subject. Human existence is dependent on cultural meanings, “existence arrives at expression, at meaning, and at reflection only through the continual exegesis of all the significations that come to light in the world of culture” (Ricoeur 1974, 26). It “becomes a self—human and adult—only by appropriating that meaning which first resides outside, in works, institutions and cultural monuments in which the life of the spirit is objectified” (Ricoeur 1965,



26). In order to achieve proper self-consciousness, one must go through cultural meaning where one receives from another the opinion of worth as an end in oneself by means of language.

In the Theravāda Buddhist world, meaning is projected through the use of various symbols in Norn-Loeng-Sa-Dor-Cro (death ritual for the living), Por-Tor and Pee-Ta-Khon (hungry ghost festivals), and joss paper burning ritual that carry many connotations. In the production and reproduction of Buddhist texts and the ritual language around these four death rituals, Thai cultural meaning and identity emerge and continue from the existential awareness of death and the quest for continuity beyond death. For Thai people, reflecting Ricoeur's and Obeyesekere's cultural hermeneutics (1965) and the work of culture (1990), death rituals can help the bereaved and Thai society move away from the brute fact of death to the acceptance of death and create a sense of continuity after death. The memory of a person, a multitude of signs (such as paper representations of things that belonged to the deceased, vividly portrayed hungry ghost figures, coffins in which the living assume a symbolic state of death, red turtle-shaped cakes as offerings), and the repeated memory of the deceased can create a strong sense that the deceased is still present in the world of the living. This supports Hertz (1960/2009)'s remark on death, "the brute fact of physical death is not enough to consummate death in people's minds. The image of the deceased is still part of the system in this world . . ." (81). The death ritual process leads the living to the sense of immortality and self-consciousness by maintaining collective cultural identities linked to those who are now dead. Death would be inconceivable if it were not related to a form of being in some way or another. Such meaning takes place in the process when one moves away from the direct confrontation with death toward one's acceptance that the deceased no longer lives in this world but has achieved a new state of being on the WOL.

For Thai people, death is a result of the transformation of a living person into a *phī* (the tainted spirit of the deceased before death rituals are performed on their behalf). A ghost is a liminal entity in Buddhism as it is in a transitional state toward other incarnations on the WOL. As noted earlier, when loved ones die, the living have a duty to take part in death rituals that will assist the transition of the deceased spirits from tormented, yearning ghost to happy and placated ancestors. During the process of sending off the *phī* when death rituals are performed, it can be transformed into the surviving essence *dūang winñān* (the liminal essence that survives not only death but also the disposal of the body), guided by Buddhist monks through delivering sermons (*thēt*) and chanting traditional ritual texts from *ānisong* texts at various points in the process.

## 8 The Work of Culture in Thai Theravāda Buddhist Death Rituals

As discussed previously, Thai people believe that one's current existence is conditioned by his or her previous karma (Pāli *kamma*; positive karma Thai *bun* and negative karma *bāp*). As [Tambiah \(1970\)](#) explains the effect of karma, “Bap has clearly evident results in everyday life in the form of illness, death, misfortune and the pervasive existence of evil spirits . . . the results of *bun* are vaguely formulated as a desirable state of mind or a better rebirth” (56). Thus, moral action in terms of making merit in the context of death rituals and consumption has been extended to ongoing events of everyday life for Thai people. Merit making through ritual is an essential part of Thai culture and way of life. For Thai people, partaking in the rituals maintains psychological security (their continual existence, self-consciousness, and identity) and solidarity in his/her community and family, while also helping to build a peaceful state of mind, accumulate merit and shift the responsibility to karma (leading to a better rebirth and eventually *nibbāna*, the end of the cycle of death and rebirth). Death rituals can also be seen to provide a means of behavioral control, social order, stability, and incentives for good behavior in Thai society and communicating respect and gratitude for parents, elders, and ancestors. Finally, such rituals also act as a means of social mobility within the very hierarchal Thai social system, since merit can lead to improved status, power, and wealth.

The Por Tor hungry ghost festival in Phuket province, for example, is intended to earn merit for the living by offering food to the Devil spirit Por Tor Kong and to other spirits from the hungry ghost realm thereby increasing the well-being of the local villagers. The ritual is essentially spiritual, but it has a material implication for devotees, many of whom are not economically secure and believe that correct observance of such rituals can assist them in achieving better social status, power, and wealth, while also ameliorating the negative forces of the ever-threatening malicious angry spirits. In performing these death rituals, the living acknowledge their own and the ghosts' liminal state as temporary beings on the WOL. There is no ontological discontinuity between the death and living. The work of culture, the continuing existence of the dead, death rituals, and the ritual language and chants used during these death rites allow Thai people to restore social order in the face of the rupture caused by death. The symbolic and material consumption can be enacted during these death rituals is important to the maintenance of the social order and also to maintaining the shared cultural identities and hierarchies between the living and the dead. [Driver \(2018\)](#) refers to gifts of order: rituals and their material components act as gifts to bestow order on community and society.

## Conclusion

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There are potential tensions in applying concepts such as Ricoeur's and Obeyesekere's cultural hermeneutics (1965) and the work of culture (1990) to local ritual practices such as Thai death rituals. While acknowledging that there is not a neat or seamless basis for their application, in this chapter, I have attempted to draw out elements of conceptual resonance that are intended to deepen the understanding of Thai death rituals not merely unknowable events (to Westerners) or as taken-for-granted everyday practices (to Thais) but as socially functional phenomena that can assist in our understanding of consumer culture. Thai people, like their Western counterparts, are unwilling to accept death as absolute finality, but their response to this dilemma is very different to that of the West. The different ways in which Western and Eastern death rituals intersect consumer culture can be enlightening as they speak to human commonalities in the psychological, social, and spiritual dilemmas raised by the stark reality of death. The brief ethnographic descriptions of death rituals on this chapter highlight how the essential continuity of life and death in Thai Theravāda Buddhism is evoked in symbolic exchanges that are inflected with folklore and local cultural practices. Consumption practices articulate and facilitate these symbolic exchanges, of food, money, offerings, and the material benefits that derive from ritual merit making. Death rituals challenge human identity as our self-consciousness is challenged by mortality. Consumer culture, hence, should not be seen as one variable among others, but a central and autonomous element of this transformation.

## Notes

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**1** See the wheel of life in [Gould, S. \(1991\)](#) on page 39 for further detail.

2 This information is based on a special report on “Por Tor” Hungry ghost festival in Phuket on Andaman News NBT FM 90.5 radio in Thailand at 8.30 AM, a repeat on a local cable TV Channel 1 broadcasted in Phang Nga, Krabi and Phuket provinces, <http://thainews.prd.go.th/newsenglish>, and personal experience.

3 The information in this part is based on [Ruangviset, P. \(1996\)](#), “Heed Sib-song Klong Sib-si” of Loei people at [www.thaifolk.com/doc/phitakhon\\_e.htm](http://www.thaifolk.com/doc/phitakhon_e.htm) and personal experience.