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**Autor:** Herrmans, Isabell

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Isabell Herrmans\*

# Permeable Personhood and Techniques for Negotiating Boundaries of the Self among the Luangans of Indonesian Borneo

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**Abstract:** This article explores the negotiation of permeable personhood and human health and well-being in the healing rituals (*belian*) of the Luangans, a group of indigenous people of Indonesian Borneo. I describe different techniques employed in the rituals relating to the soul and other components of the self and to extraneous, unbound spirit agencies. Luangan rituals express a relational ontology according to which the constitution of personhood and human well-being is based on the condition of the notoriously volatile human soul or life-force (*juus*) and the nature of social relations with human and nonhuman beings. Rituals most centrally seek to advance well-being by increasing the fixity and hardness of souls and by improving the relationship with spirits and humans. These efforts are closely interconnected; the condition of the soul is inextricably bound up with the condition of relations with others. This entails a constitutively dual and contextually variable aspiration to both reinforce and open up the boundaries of persons and to associate and dissociate with others. While well-being is generally contingent on containing the soul within the body and alleviating the harmful influence on it of spirits and other humans, it is also adversely affected by alienation and neglect of relations and obligations, and dependent on the help of spirits and human shamans and consociates. The article describes the ambiguous and convoluted nature of Luangan human-spirit relations and how the unpredictability of these relations and the volatility of the soul is reflected in the structure of ritual performances.

**Keywords:** personhood, soul, senses, ritual, Indonesia

In this article I take the Luangan expression that they have “a hundred souls and eight essences” (*juus jatus, ruo walo*) as a clue to understanding the permeability of Luangan personhood and the continuous need to both reinforce and extend boundaries of the self. This expression was a common phrase in ritual chants, and should not, as was pointed out to me during fieldwork in

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\*Corresponding author: Isabell Herrmans, Swedish School of Social Science, P.O. Box 16, FI-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland. E-mail: isabell.herrmans@helsinki.fi

Indonesian Borneo, be understood literally, as referring to an actual number of souls. Rather, the phrase should be understood metaphorically, as pointing to the evasiveness and inherent instability of human souls, and the multiple and repeated efforts needed to contain and integrate them.<sup>1</sup> One hundred here stands for “many” or “every” more generally,<sup>2</sup> whereas eight is an auspicious number associated with life, life rituals, and completeness (and contrasted with the number seven, which represents death and adversity).

In Luangan conceptions, the soul or life force of a human being, *juus*, which under normal circumstances is lodged somewhere in the body, may for various reasons become lost or stolen by spirits, resulting in loss of vitality, illness, and eventually death. In cases of suspected soul loss, a shaman, *belian*, is usually called to perform a ritual to retrieve the soul.<sup>3</sup> This article deals with the anything but straightforward task that Luangan shamans face as they set out to treat illnesses by retrieving the errant souls of their patients, grabbing after them again and again during the course of a ritual, calling them in the manner that chickens are called to their cages at nightfall, or by trying to contain them in people’s bodies by erecting fences of different sorts, but also by attempting to strengthen them by opening up the boundaries of human selves and bodies, by affirming health-promoting social relations with people and spirits.

Exceptionally multivalent, conceptually evasive, an example of a “floating” or “empty” signifier in Lévi-Strauss’ sense, the Luangan notion of the *juus* is as hard to pinpoint theoretically as the *juus* is to contain. Being both perceived as elusive and conceptualized elusively, it is aptly characterized by Marina Roseman’s concept “soul-in-motion” or “spirit-in-motion.”<sup>4</sup> Similar to the shamanic spirits of the Darhad Mongols described by Morten Pedersen, the *juus* can be defined as “an inherently multiple entity irreducible to any singular form, which moves along an unpredictable path of perpetual and unpredictable

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<sup>1</sup> The term *ruo* in the expression appears to be used only as a synonym to *juus*, mostly as a poetic extension in parallelistic constructions, which, like elsewhere in the region (Fox 1974), are ubiquitous in Luangan ritual chants.

<sup>2</sup> See Venz 2012: 205.

<sup>3</sup> I use the word shaman here in a general sense, as commonly employed in the Southeast Asian ethnography (e. g., Atkinson 1989; Sather 2001). A *belian* may be defined as a shaman in the classical sense of a “ritual intercessor” (Sather 2001: 11), who is capable at will of passing “from one cosmic region to another” (Eliade 1964: 259). Like his or her Iban counterpart, a *belian* is “believed to dispatch his soul into invisible regions of the cosmos” and is thought to have “the power to direct [his soul’s] movements and to perform deeds within these unseen regions with the help of personal spirit guides” (Sather 2001: 11).

<sup>4</sup> Roseman 2007: 58.

becoming or transition.”<sup>5</sup> The soul is an essential part of a person, yet it is also an other, a spirit-like being, prone to an unruly sociality, and to feelings of longing, desire, and fear. Perceived as both an animating principle and an agency with a subjectivity of its own, it is both singular and plural, immanent and transcendental, more a quality than a thing, which nevertheless may take material form as it is caught in ritual and returned to the body of a patient through an invisible hole at the top of the head. It is perhaps no wonder then that expressed conceptions of the soul often are contradictory and vague. In ritual chants, shamans may call the *juus* of their patients’ different body parts to return, but all the same they usually claim that there is only one soul. Similarly, although it is metonymically linked to an individual body, of which it is sometimes described as an invisible replica, the *juus*, or perhaps rather its double, also stays in a soul house in heaven, together with the souls of family members. Moreover, in addition to the *juus*, and along with *aseng*, the seat of emotion and character, and *sengat*, breath, there are also a number of other aspects of the self (*nyawa*), such as invisible plant counterparts, *samat*, and the placenta, *juma*, which present doubles of the self in a comparable way, and whose conditions similarly affect human well-being and mirror bodily vitality.

This article considers the theoretical and practical difficulty of demarcating such a vague and variable signifier. I am interested in the question of how we can account for the constitutive ambiguities of the soul as an index and vehicle of a transitory and permeable personhood, and the ostensibly contrary attempts at influencing it, by either reinforcing or opening up boundaries between the self and others. I address this question by focusing on the soul as a relational construct, anchoring it within a framework in which human beings are defined and continually shaped in the inter-subjective field of their relations. Herein I draw on recent theoretical reconfigurations of animism as a relational ontology, as presented by Tim Ingold and Nurit Bird-David,<sup>6</sup> for example, wherein personhood is seen as a relational and emergent quality of particular relationships, an approach developed further by Kaj Århem and Guido Sprenger with special reference for Southeast Asia, where animism notably mostly comes down to relations between human beings and spirits.<sup>7</sup>

Another way in which I will consider the conceptual elusiveness of the soul is by exploring how it emerges in the materiality of ritual practice. My aim here is to emphasize the significance of non-linguistic embodied communication, what one following Walter Benjamin could call “a language of things,”<sup>8</sup> through

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<sup>5</sup> Pedersen 2011: 175.

<sup>6</sup> Bird-David 1999; Ingold 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Århem 2016; Sprenger 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin 1978.



which Luangan conceptions of souls and other counterparts of human beings largely are formed, and through which the souls themselves are symbolically and physically confined. Special attention will be given to the concrete techniques, performative practices, and material forms that Luangan shamans use to channel and contain souls and to negotiate the boundaries of what one could call Luangan “sociocentric” or “distributed” selves,<sup>9</sup> in order to explore how the providing of souls and spirits with sensual form makes them “graspable” in the double sense of becoming both containable and knowable.

The article is based on intermittent ethnological fieldwork conducted for a period of over two years in all, starting in 1993 and lasting up until today, among Luangans living between the middle reaches of the Barito and Mahakam rivers in southeast Borneo, in the border area between the provinces of Central and East Kalimantan.<sup>10</sup> This is a rather remote upriver area, covered by secondary and, to a rapidly decreasing extent, primary rain forest, which at the time of my initial fieldwork could be reached only by foot (today extensive oil palm plantations cover much of the area, and most villages are connected through roads). Growing rice and a variety of other food crops through shifting cultivation, the Luangans maintain a dual pattern of residence, dividing their time between dispersed farmhouses in the swidden fields, and single- or multi-family houses located in villages, which were established on government initiative around the turn of the twentieth century. In the past, before villages were established, the Luangans lived dispersed in the forest, alternating residence between farmhouses and impermanent, frequently moved multi-family houses. Then, as now, it was above all during larger rituals that the dispersed Luangans gathered as communities.

Conducting participant observation, I spent a majority of my fieldwork in the small Luangan village of Sembulan, staying in a multi-family house (*lou solai*), a smaller, roughly 25 meters long version of the famous Bornean longhouses, consisting of only one large, un-partitioned room. I stayed there together with a shifting number of residents and guests, ranging from one to two families, and less than 10 people during busy times of the swidden year, to near a hundred people during some major rituals.<sup>11</sup> This house also served as a

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<sup>9</sup> Scheper-Hughes/Lock 1987; Roseman 1990; Strathern 1988.

<sup>10</sup> I conducted six months of fieldwork in 1993, twelve months in 1996–97, and have made five shorter (one to two-month-long) field trips during the summers of 1998, 2007, 2011, 2014, and 2015. All periods were conducted in cooperation with Kenneth Sillander.

<sup>11</sup> Compared to the famous massive longhouses of some other Borneo peoples, such as the Iban and the Kayan, Luangan “longhouses” are rather small buildings, in most cases consisting of only one undivided room.

location for community meetings, as well as a place where lawsuits and weddings were arranged. Until a few years ago, all inhabitants in Sembulan considered themselves Kaharingan, a designation commonly used for the local religion. Shamanic healing rituals, *belian*, were very common, almost daily occurrences, and have continued to be so until today, even though people increasingly now identify themselves as Christians.

Since Luangan kinship is bilateral, classificatory and inclusive,<sup>12</sup> and there is a strong tendency toward endogamy, practically all villagers are related to each other in multiple ways. Until a few years ago, and the establishment of oil palm plantations near the village, kin obligations were strong when it came to providing assistance, sharing food (especially meat), and participating in rituals. An ethos of social solidarity and village harmony prevailed, and continues to do so, even though sharing and mutual help practices have lately significantly decreased. At the same time, individual autonomy is also highly valued among Luangans and therefore it has always been somewhat challenging to obtain community integration or consensus. Kinship can easily be “forgotten” if not enacted through relation-affirming activity, and close relations are not, and cannot be, maintained with all relatives. Even in small villages, such as Sembulan, lines of division between inhabitants can be discerned, and some villagers prefer to stay out on their swidden fields for much of the time, in part to refrain from social obligations. In this respect, Luangan social life is “fundamentally dialectical, marked by oscillation between autonomy and integration”<sup>13</sup> and requires, like relations between humans and spirits, constant re-enactment and negotiation.

## 1 Health, soul strength, and human-spirit relations

*That is animism. Anything but constant.*  
– Michael Taussig<sup>14</sup>

As in many other Southeast Asian societies, health and well-being for the Luangans is perceived to be contingent on containing the soul or life-force within the body. Bodies are, however, as Robert Wessing observes when discussing soul-body relations in East Java, “porous, allowing spirits and other

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<sup>12</sup> See Sillander 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Sillander 2016: 159.

<sup>14</sup> Taussig 2012.

influences to move in and out, and leaving the person involved open to a loss of personal spirit or to possession, the invasion of the body by an alien spirit.”<sup>15</sup> Among the Luangans, the *juus* may temporarily leave the body, most commonly during dreams, but also as a reaction to fright or chock or because of becoming captured by spirits who, for example, may mistake a soul wandering during dreaming as a game animal, or, in the case of the spirits of the dead, may coax the souls of living family members to come and live with them. For a variety of reasons, the *juus* may also be or become soft or weak (*lome*), a condition which by itself makes it susceptible to theft, fright, or unruly wandering about, while soul hardness or strength (*tokeng juus*) is associated with health, vitality, and some sort of stability. Young children, who per definition have soft or weak souls,<sup>16</sup> are especially vulnerable to soul loss and should avoid situations which may expose their souls, directly or through the actions of their parents, to fright or spirit attack. Such situations include watching an animal get killed, which may cause the *abei*, a category of animal-like spirits, to steal the children’s souls, and thus induce *sengkerapei*, one of the most common illness diagnoses for children, a condition in which a child mimics the death throes of a killed animal. A child’s soul may also be exposed to attack if a child’s clothes are left out to dry overnight, something which I was personally reminded of during a recent field visit by a Luangan woman as she brought in the clothes of my children, which I had forgotten outside.

While soul strength can be gained through gradual exposure to conditions that are dangerous for the soul and through certain meritorious acts, it is perhaps most consequentially through ritual performance that souls acquire strength and some degree of stability. Rituals entail special procedures aimed to fix the *juus* to the body or to strengthen it, such as tying a string around the wrist of a patient with knots, planting plant counterparts of human beings, entering a soul house, or using objects made of iron to increase soul hardness and strength. Payment received in exchange for ritual services, usually presented in the form of white plates containing turmeric, also has a soul-strengthening effect. Perhaps most importantly though, rituals work to strengthen souls by reinforcing human social relations and relations with spirits, the affirmation of which is fundamental to soul strength and health.

While well-being is dependent on containing the soul within the body, and thus in some sense of maintaining boundaries of the self, health is simultaneously adversely affected by alienation, or lack of integration. “The healthy body,” to borrow a phrase by Anna Tsing, “incorporates others in its own

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<sup>15</sup> Wessing 2010: 53.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Roseman 1990: 232; Remme this volume.

definition.”<sup>17</sup> As among the Meratus of South Kalimantan studied by Tsing, health, and well-being more generally, including fortune and prosperity, all ingredients of what Luangans conceive of as “a good life” (*bolum buen*), are essentially associated with social connection, with attachment to a collectivity or fellow consociates, whereas illness and misfortune tend to be associated with isolation or broken connections. The Meratus use the term *kapuhun* for “isolating oneself from others or from one’s environment,”<sup>18</sup> a term which implies, like the Luangan equivalent *tapen* and similar terms which are prevalent throughout Southeast Asia,<sup>19</sup> a failure to partake in social interaction, resulting in “soul weakness” (*lome juus*) for both the offender and the offended. For example, by refusing offered food one exposes oneself, and the person offering the food, to the danger of accidents, such as snake bites, and to illnesses. However, “self-isolation and alienation” are, as Tsing reports for the Meratus, perceived as “unavoidable features of daily life,” just as illness is considered “an ordinary human occurrence.” For this reason, a basic task of shamans is “to reconnect people to health-maintaining social and cosmic networks.”<sup>20</sup>

Connecting people to such networks is a continuous process. Like kin and other relations between humans, human-spirit relations cannot be taken for granted, but must be maintained through social interaction, and through a commitment to further interaction, and rituals form the principal arena in which this is done. It is also partly for this reason, I suggest, that *belian* rituals are so common among the Luangans, at least where adherence to the local Kaharingan religion is still strong. Rituals are rarely about curing illness or repairing some other unsatisfactory condition alone, but always have an illness-preventive, relation-affirming objective as well, this being the principal goal of a large proportion of the ritual activities. For similar reasons, rituals are never restricted only to the spirits suspected of soul theft or of causing illness, but invariably involve a more or less extensive assemblage of other spirits, including a “standard” repertoire of spirits almost always contacted and presented with offerings, as well as a range of spirits more or less specific to particular occasions or types of ritual.

In this sense, Luangan rituals testify to an “animic” ontology whereby spirits and human beings, in Ingold’s vocabulary, “continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence.”<sup>21</sup> Luangan sociality is extended to non-human

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<sup>17</sup> Tsing 1993: 191.

<sup>18</sup> Tsing 1993: 189.

<sup>19</sup> See Bernstein 1997: 67–70; Dentan 1968; 2000; Howell 1989: 6; 2011: 47–48; Karim 1981: 10; Robarchek 1986: 182.

<sup>20</sup> Tsing 1993: 191.

<sup>21</sup> Ingold 2006: 10.

beings, to which they attribute an interiority basically similar, if generally not identical, to their own.<sup>22</sup> This is true especially for spirits, who, as recounted in the Luangan myth of human origins (*Tempuun senaring*), a myth chanted during major rituals, share a common origin with human beings and are regarded as their older siblings, with whom one should engage in kin-like relations, sharing food with them and showing them respect (a common origin is also shared with animals, but their status as kin, and sentient consociates, is often overlooked and less prominent in rituals). Through this extension of sociality and through socialization of the natural environment, the Luangans – like other “animistic” peoples, such as the Nayaka of South India, whose ritual performances similarly work to objectify human spirit relations as kinship relations – affirm both the “mutualities” and the “pluralities” that are in the world, “living jointly with the animated” rather than focusing on individual selves.<sup>23</sup>

That said, human-spirit relations are also fraught with a great deal of ambiguity. While spirits in some ways are remarkably similar to human beings, sharing similar habits, desires, and ways of life, for example, they are invariably different in others. Born out of the incestuous relationship between father and daughter, as told in the myth of human origins, Luangan spirits are generally characterized by some deformity or other deficiency, and to some extent look or behave differently, and are often considered more or less immoral and deceitful. In addition, as Luangans often emphasize in discussions about spirits, the spirits are invisible (*gaib*), a condition which makes them unpredictable and evasive.

To be dependent on someone who is like, yet unlike, is hence an inexorable dilemma for human beings. As a result, Luangan human-spirit relations are variously characterized by an orientation of association and disassociation. Spirits, as spirit helpers of shamans (*mulung*), are called for in times of sickness as mediators and negotiators, and they are invoked as the “protectors” (*pengiring*) of human beings, and are conceived as sources of health and prosperity. But spirits are also antagonists, the party negotiated with, the humans’ adversary, the ones hurting people by stealing souls and inflicting illnesses, and because of this they should generally be kept at a certain distance.

This doubleness not only reflects a division between malevolent and benevolent spirits, but the fundamentally ambivalent nature of spirits, and human-spirit relations. More than a role differentiation, it reflects a contextual variation, the same spirits often being able to act in both capacities in different, or even the same, circumstances. For this reason, attentiveness to the unpredictability of

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Descola 1994; Howell 2011: 45.

<sup>23</sup> Bird-David 2006: 44–45; cf. Sillander 2016: 171.



spirits, and the circumstances in which negotiation with them is implemented, is an essential characteristic of *belian* rituals and the attempts to retrieve errant souls within them.<sup>24</sup> Negotiating with spirits entails a difficult balancing act and is essentially an uncertain endeavor which plays out differently in different contexts, continually unfolding and taking final form only within the particularity of ritual performances. So as to convey this openness of human-spirit relations and their contextual configuration, as well as the continuous need to renegotiate such relations, I will here present an example of a concrete ritual performance, in which their negotiation became a prime concern.

## 2 Kakah Tuha's request and techniques for negotiating boundaries of the self

In July 2011, Kakah Tuha, the spirit helper and personal protecting spirit (*pengiring*) of Nen Pore's late father Kakah Unsir, came to Nen Pore in a dream, asking her for the sacrifice of a red chicken. This was at a time when both Nen Pore and her husband Ma Buo had been ill for quite some time. Three *belian* healing rituals had already been arranged for them during the past months and they had also visited a *dukun* – a Malay-style healer living downstream – but to no avail. When alive, Nen Pore's father, who was a shaman himself, had established a personal relationship with Kakah Tuha, a powerful but highly demanding and blood-thirsty male spirit, who was described as a *blis*, a malevolent spirit, by one of Kakah Unsir's sons. Contrary to relations with ordinary spirit familiars (*mulung*), who mostly are shamans of the past, personal relationships with spirits categorized as *blis* are avoided by most shamans, as their demands tend to be excessive, and not meeting them is considered to be dangerous. The spirit often possessed (*sua*, enter) Kakah Unsir rather uncontrollably during his lifetime, demanding sacrifices, and after his death it continued to regularly possess both his sons, especially during larger rituals, and it also repeatedly visited Nen Pore in her dreams. The request for the red chicken was refused by Nen Pore, however (why remained unclear to me but probably reflected a reluctance and fear of hers to get too involved with the highly demanding spirit). The spirit then returned, with another request, this time for a four-day *buntang* ritual, a combined thanksgiving and healing ritual, to be performed instead.

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24 See Herrmans 2015: 71–90.

Contrary to ordinary healing rituals which usually are arranged by the immediate family of a patient, a *buntang* is a community ritual, involving a much larger network of relatives, and attracting many guests. By demanding a *buntang* Kakah Tuha now forced not only Kakah Unsir's children, but their extended kin as well, into his web of relations. Perhaps for this reason, the ritual also came to require collective action to a particularly high degree, joining human as well as spirit participants in an effort to redefine social relations after the death of Kakah Unsir. Whether they wanted it or not, Kakah Unsir's descendants were drawn into a relationship they had no part in initiating, but which nevertheless defined their well-being long after his death.

The ritual was highly reminiscent of another *buntang* ritual that was arranged in Kakah Unsir's house, for the same protagonists, during the last weeks of my fieldwork in 1997, fourteen years earlier. At this time Kakah Unsir was still alive, although very old, with an impairing health. Nen Pore and Ma Buo had just married, and Ma Buo, whose previous wife had died some months earlier, suffered from listlessness and general feelings of ill health (which was basically the condition from which Ma Buo and Nen Pore suffered in 2011 too). During this time Ma Buo's soul was sought after at Mount Lumut, which is the realm where the spirit (*liau*) of a dead person's body is thought to reside, as it was suspected that Ma Buo's late wife, envious of his new marriage, was guilty of capturing his soul. Both in that *buntang* ritual and the later one in 2011, Ma Kerudot, Nen Pore's brother, served as one of the leading shamans, and both rituals were arranged to affirm and renegotiate social relations within the family, including relations with those already passed away.

While specifically initiated on the demand of Kakah Tuha, the *buntang*, like other rituals of its kind, reached out to a wide range of other spirits as well, including both spirit helpers and malevolent spirits. Food and other ritual offerings were presented to these spirits on repeated occasions during the ritual. Sharing food is a fundamental way of keeping up relations among Luangans, whether between humans or humans and non-humans, and the *buntang* ritual to an important extent consisted of the presentation of food of various sorts for a diversity of spirits, food which afterwards was eaten together by the ritual's human participants. Whereas Kakah Unsir, or more precisely, the *kelelungan* spirit into which his *juus* had transformed upon death, was served cooked food, including rice, meat, and vegetables, as refined spirits of the dead properly are, Kakah Tuha preferred fresh blood, as he made violently evident.<sup>25</sup> During the

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<sup>25</sup> Upon the death of a person his or her soul, *juus*, ceases to exist as such. In its place, two spirits of the dead come into being: *liau*, who is associated with a dead person's body and bodily desires, and *kelelungan*, who is associated with the person's head. During secondary



third day of the *buntang*, Ma Unsir, one of Kakah Unsir's sons, suddenly became possessed by Kakah Tuha. Rushing forth to a chicken that was tied to the floor to be sacrificed later in the evening, he bit off its throat. He then drank the blood of the chicken directly from its throat, to the horrified looks of people watching him. Thus "overpowered by non-human subjectivity," to borrow an expression by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro,<sup>26</sup> he quite palpably reminded people of Kakah Tuha's insatiable taste for blood (and of why many of them were so hesitant to engage in relations with him in the first place). On a more reflective note, his possession also demonstrated how selves are continuously constituted in relation to other selves, human and nonhuman alike, and how individual agency can never be separated from the agency of others, and the history of such agency.

Later in the afternoon, an old headhunt skull, normally stored outside the main door of the house, was brought in after a mock headhunt had been performed in a nearby forest grove, and was fed small portions of sticky rice, which together with pieces of chicken meat and some blood, was served on top of the blade of a jungle knife. The presence of the skull, and its associated potency, or perhaps the memories of particular ancestors which it might have invoked, again caused Ma Unsir, as well as some other ritual participants, to become possessed by spirits, the exact identity of which remained unclear in this case.

When a couple of pigs and half a dozen more chickens were to be sacrificed the next day, the organizers of the ritual, and some of their close kin, gathered together by the front door where the sacrificial animals lay on display. In turn they all blew some fake darts from a blowpipe on the pigs, while holding on to each other, and the person blowing the dart. Then they all drew out a few bristles from the pigs and some feathers from the chickens, demonstratively tossing them up into the air, dedicating the sacrifices to the spirit recipients. While the shamans verbally presented other ritual offerings to the spirits – including spirit houses, small figurines representing human beings and spirits, along with bowls of uncooked rice, betel nuts, and flowers

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mortuary rituals *liau* is guided to Mount Lumut, a mountain located in the upper Teweh River area, while *kelelungan* is guided to Tenangkai, a mountain in heaven. *Liau* is generally perceived of as a bad influence for human beings, with whom people usually seek to avoid contact, while *kelelungan* is associated with benevolent influence, and may serve as a protecting spirit. Both are offered food during major rituals, in the case of *liau* mainly to keep them away, and in the case of *kelelungan* so as to gain protection and well-being.

**26** Viveiros de Castro 2004: 468. According to Viveiros de Castro's notion of perspectivism, to have a point of view amounts to being a subject, which makes animals and other non-humans subjects in the animist Amerindian societies he studies.

– the members of Nen Pore’s extended family sat in a circle, tied together by a rattan string, which in turn was tied to the offerings. In this way they were corporeally joined as one family and in the act of presenting offerings to the spirits. Tangibly re-connected, having become separated after the death of Kakah Unsir, in whose house they had previously lived together, they collectively confronted what one might call the alienating aspects of everyday life, and what centrifugal forces life in general might involve, by reasserting social unity, the established connection here additionally serving to accrue soul strength and as a health promoting technique in its own right (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Ritual participants tied together, and to offerings presented to the spirits.

While collective and integrating ritual activities of various kinds are common in all *buntang* rituals, they played an especially prominent role in this particular ritual. This was in part because relations within Nen Pore’s family and between it and some other families in the village had long been quite strained, even since before Ma Buo’s former wife died, due, among other things, to the fact that her marriage with him, and another man, had been polyandrous, and the family had accused some villagers for having caused the illness that later

killed her by sorcery.<sup>27</sup> Also, as typical in *belian* rituals, it was not only the souls of the principal patients, Nen Pore and her husband Ma Buo, that were searched for (*berejuus*) and called back (*pekuli*) by the shamans during the *buntang*, but those of all other ritual participants present as well. Somewhat paradoxically, besides being seen as health-promoting, the concentration of people and spirits during larger rituals is perceived as a potential cause of soul-loss in itself, because souls may be lured away by the lost souls addressed during the rituals, or by some of the various spirits present, which is why Luangan rituals always end with calls by the shamans for the souls of all ritual participants to return.

Through *kerek keker*, a practice whose name onomatopoeically evokes the sound uttered to call chickens (*krrr, krrr*), the souls were coaxed to return to their respective bodies, just like chicken are called to their cages by their owners at nightfall.<sup>28</sup> Called with honorific titles and enticed with poetic language (*bundrung juus, juus june, bulau juus* etc.) the souls were cajoled to stay put. Repeatedly grasping with their hands in the air, the shamans snatched the souls with their fingers, hurriedly containing them in small lidded brass or plastic jars filled with coconut oil (so-called “soul oil,” *olau juus*) and eight grains of rice (a symbol of life and humanity). From the jars the souls were then returned to their owners, inserted into an invisible hole at the top of their heads, the shamans using *belian* charms (small anthropomorphic wooden figurines and bear canine teeth), dipped into the oil for the purpose. The shamans performed this activity again and again during the course of the ritual, retrieving souls from various locations, negotiating with multiple spirit parties, in an effort to combat the evasiveness of souls and the unpredictability of spirits by engaging in repetition as a form of security and precaution.

As always in *buntang* rituals, plant counterparts, *samat*, of both patients and family members were also planted: the shamans walking around in the room, beating long bamboo sticks against the floor, planting *samat* in a way reminiscent of how rice is planted by making holes in the ground with dibbling sticks. These unseen plant counterparts were then ascended to heaven by the shamans, where they were to be tended by *seniang* guardian spirits, in whose hands the fate of human beings is thought to ultimately reside. This was done in the hope that the procedure would ensure ritual participants with vitality and a long life, the souls expected to grow strong and healthy with the plants. As in

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<sup>27</sup> Polyandry is not permitted by Indonesian law and considered improper by many Luangans, even though it occurs at times.

<sup>28</sup> Similar practices of calling souls like chicken are called are widespread in the Indo-Malaysian region (e. g. Wilken 1912; Errington 1989: 53; Forth 1992; Rousseau 1998: 110).

birth rituals, when plant counterparts of a child in the form of actual plants are planted in “flower groves” (*baang bunge*) located outside the house of the child’s family, next to the plant counterparts of their relatives, the ritual participants were, besides strong, expected to become united, like the branches and roots of their plant counterparts would become densely intertwined with time. Planted in clusters, like similar plant images among the Iban, mirroring “the collective unity of a family,”<sup>29</sup> growth and health was here associated with integration and convergence, bearing testimony to how persons, like “dividual” persons in Marilyn Strathern’s understanding, are “constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them.”<sup>30</sup> This relationalist imagery is carried even further among the Iban, where the plant counterpart of an individual withers when he dies, but its “source” or “rootstock” survives, suggesting to Clifford Sather the “persistence of the family as a social unit [even] in the face of individual mortality.”<sup>31</sup>

How personhood is constituted relationally, and how boundary-making and the effort to contain the soul is dependent on ritual techniques aiming at the integration of the person, was even more clearly shown by another ritual practice central in the *buntang* ritual, namely the activity of “entering the soul house” (*letep blai juus*). As the ritual was reaching its end, the members of Nen Pore’s extended family all entered the soul house together by each person at the same time putting one of their feet at the ladder of a small wooden house, a miniature version of Kakah Unsir’s own extended family house (*lou*). This was done so that their souls would stay together sheltered in the house. The soul house was then ascended by the shamans to a special place in heaven where the souls, like the plant counterparts, were to be guarded by *seniang* spirits. Functioning as a “hiding place” for the souls, as a shaman put it, the house, and the spirits guarding it, protected the souls not only from potentially malevolent spirits, but, one could say, also from their own propensity for slipperiness, and from the danger of becoming too closely associated with spirits and their habits. In this way, entering the soul house served to strengthen the souls of ritual participants, both by providing physical boundaries in the form of walls, sealing selves off from potentially harmful others, but also by enhancing sociability, providing protection and soul strength through social connection between people and with some categories of protecting spirits (the *seniang*, a group of celestial guardian spirits who oversee proper human conduct).

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<sup>29</sup> Sather 2001: 61.

<sup>30</sup> Strathern 1988: 13.

<sup>31</sup> Sather 2001: 65.

During the ritual it was not only the souls of human participants that were enclosed within the walls of houses, however, but also the spirits thought to potentially have caused the illness. These spirits received gifts of small houses in various shapes and materials, with small replicas of human beings made of rice paste inside, given in exchange for human souls. These houses were made of materials mimicking the appearance or nature of particular spirits or categories of spirits. For instance, *juata*, a water spirit, received a house in the shape of a raft, while *timang*, a feline spirit, received a house with red dots painted on it, resembling its fur. Following this logic, different categories of spirits received houses representing the particular point of view, appearance, or habitus of that particular spirit, with the intention that the spirit would be attracted to the house and choose to stay there, away from human dwellings. At the same time, the spirit houses, in their capacity as “exchange objects” or “gifts” to the spirits (their status in this respect varying in shamanic chants), served to affirm the relationship between humans and spirits, along with gifts of food and sacrificial animals, as did images and effigies portraying the spirits themselves, which were given along with representations depicting human beings. In this respect, image-making, which is a central aspect of all Luangan rituals,<sup>32</sup> was about both separation and affirmation of relations, testifying to the general co-presence of boundary-making and boundary-opening strategies in Luangan rituals. Perhaps this may even be a more general characteristic of images, as Anselm Franke has suggested.<sup>33</sup> As a prerequisite for knowing the world, never knowable directly, but only in relation, images, whether mental or material, are “by definition boundaries: conjunction and disjunction at the same time, creation of difference and of a relation.”<sup>34</sup>

### 3 A language of things

*To make an image is to resurrect a soul – invisible counterpart of the (mimetic) world*  
– Michael Taussig<sup>35</sup>

One thing which becomes evident through the case of the *buntang* ritual and the techniques used to negotiate boundaries of the self in it is how a social ontology

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<sup>32</sup> See Herrmans 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Franke 2010: 26.

<sup>34</sup> Franke 2010: 26.

<sup>35</sup> Taussig 1993: 111.



such as that of the Luangans is constituted not only cosmologically, but materially, as a sensuous-performative process. It is within a “language issuing from matter,” to borrow an expression of Benjamin’s.<sup>36</sup> that Luangan shamans can be said to operate in demarcating human souls.<sup>37</sup> For Benjamin, all things have a language of their own, communicating the linguistic being of a thing; the language of a lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp, but a lamp in communication, a lamp in expression.<sup>38</sup> This idea follows from his understanding that things, like the material (e. g., acoustic) properties of language, are more than mere vehicles of meaning, more than mere objects on which mental meaning arbitrarily imposes itself. Beyond what is communicable semantically, beyond the “content,” a distinct, irreducible quality inheres in all things and in materiality.

Such a language of things is “magical” for Benjamin because, as Kathrin Busch expresses it, “language acts here as a medium [...] for a potent transfer,” having the capacity to influence or *affect* directly and latently, as if by contagion.<sup>39</sup> The importance of such a thing language is pervasive: “ways of negotiating the world – our dealings, operations and practices – but also relations to the world are bound to things.”<sup>40</sup> It is arguably especially important in Luangan healing rituals, in which a multitude of material objects are used in different ways to influence souls and spirits.

My interest in this last part of the article is with how such a “thing language,”<sup>41</sup> and the manner in which we are “addressed by an object,”<sup>42</sup> operates in these rituals. In this case, it is perhaps especially evident that the material properties of the “things” concerned are not secondary to what they communicate, but essential for what they communicate, and for how they communicate. Along with the objects, I am also concerned with the material embeddedness and sensuous qualities of the practises in which they are used, and with how they contribute to enact or bring into being what they represent.

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin 1978: 330.

<sup>37</sup> This language is also operative in ritual language, in the ritual chants which also form an essential aspect of *belian* rituals, although they fall outside the scope of this article (see Herrmans 2015: 96–99, 184–189 for a discussion and examples of ritual chants). The acoustic aspect of ritual language is essential to what and how it communicates to people, and to spirits (the primary audience of such chants).

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin 1978: 316.

<sup>39</sup> Busch 2006: 3.

<sup>40</sup> Busch 2006: 3.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin 1978; cf. Holbraad 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Franke 2010: 45.

As Webb Keane states, “practices are not merely expressions or enactments of concepts, they are objects within experience to which people respond with intuitions and interpretations.”<sup>43</sup> In the Luangan case, making the otherwise absent or imperceptible sensuously present is a crucial component not only of negotiating relations with spirits, but of constituting these relations. It is to an important extent through a non-verbal language, a language of things, and of the body, that relations with spirits are negotiated. Focusing on imagery and material form, I will show how the techniques variously used to reinforce and open up boundaries of selves in Luangan rituals work through objects and through the body, and how these techniques constitute both vehicles for ontological knowledge, and the prerequisites for such knowledge.

As Luangan shamans grasp after the souls with their hands, sometimes catching a small seed or fruit pit out of the air, but mostly just grabbing an invisible entity, and as they hurriedly insert them within a small lidded jar, usually doing this repeatedly in many contexts and places during a ritual, they “objectify movement,”<sup>44</sup> conjuring the souls in their ephemerality, attempting to temporarily arrest their flight and reconnect them with their owners’ bodies. Attributing material properties to the souls, appearing to hold them within their hands and then confining them within the jar, they constitute the *juus* as tangible, physically and experientially. Placing them on top of the heads of their patients, they make them sensuously part of the patients’ bodies again. Throughout the process, the shamans work prophylactically as much as therapeutically, trying to persuade the souls that they belong to particular bodies, from which they should not stray too far, and spirits inclined to feed upon them to stay away.

Using sounds similar to those used to summon chickens at nightfall, shamans audibly coax the souls to return to their owners, imprinting them on them, one could say. By the same token they tame the souls, reducing their otherness by confining them within the boundaries of human sociality, transmuting their alterity through “familiarization.”<sup>45</sup> Like chickens, confined to village life, they are allowed to wander off temporally (but during the night rather than the day) and never too far or long.

Through soul-strengthening practices (*kahing*), including the display and touching by ritual participants of objects made of iron (knives, chisels, axes, and spears, among other things, collectively known as *besikahing*) the shamans mimetically produce soul hardness and resilience, making it a tangible,

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<sup>43</sup> Keane 2008: 123.

<sup>44</sup> Pedersen 2007: 157.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Fausto 2012.



sensuously perceptible reality, holding these objects over the heads of ritual participants. Presenting ritual participants with a white plate containing some turmeric (a cooling substance) on behalf of the family sponsoring the ritual, they draw ritual participants into a network based on reciprocity (plates are tokens of reciprocal relations and the principal mode of compensation offered to shamans and others helping out during rituals), which also promotes soul strength and long lives (and coolness as a condition for it). Similarly, when all ritual participants tie knots on a string, the string then being tied around the wrist of a patient, they collectively act to lengthen the life of the patient through the tying together of lives, symbolically and materially.

In these examples, as well as others presented in this article, things can be said to be “operative” in the making of human selves, they are actants that have a formative as well as transformative effect on human beings and personhood, and human relations with other beings.<sup>46</sup> Through image-making and materialization Luangan shamans not only express but manipulate reality “by means of its image,”<sup>47</sup> the imagery being not only a necessary part of Luangan rituals, but of their transformative potential. In Luangan conceptions no negotiation between human beings and spirits is possible without material mediation. This suggests that these practices should not only or primarily be regarded as representations, but as activating, performative acts, which are transformative of relations.

The soul house, and the act of entering the soul house together by ritual participants who all put a foot on the small ladder of the house, thus both sensuously joins and constitutes ritual participants as a family, a family which includes both present members and those already passed-away (as Kakah Tuha quite palpably remind them of, both in the dream and by possessing people). In contrast to houses given to spirits, which are discarded after rituals, the soul house is reused and belongs to an extended family, who stores it in the rafters of an extended family house (*lou*) in-between rituals (the use of soul houses, and similarly stored soul searching ships, *sampan benawa*, thus roughly demarcate major social alignments and divisions within a village). Owning and entering a soul house together in this way materially constructs the family, or rather the network of people associated with an extended family house, as a relational unit. At the same time it also defines its inhabitants in distinction to other people (inhabitants of other soul houses), and to those potentially malevolent spirits that the house was made to protect them from in the first place (Figure 2).

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Miller 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Taussig 1993: 57.



**Figure 2:** Soul house (*blai juus*) outside the house in which a *buntang* ritual is performed.

While the soul house is a replica of human dwellings, and thus demarcates the domain of a human being, spirit houses are abodes of spirits, mimetically associated with particular spirits through imitation of their bodily appearances or ways of being. By mimetically adopting the point of view of a particular spirit in negotiating with it, the shaman, in a perspectivist manner, as described by Viveiros de Castro,<sup>48</sup> crosses ontological boundaries, at the same time as he maintains difference, and distance. The houses, through their unique material properties, perceptively alluring in the way they bring the spirit points of view alive, mimicking the spirits physical being and habitats, create contact, while they simultaneously create boundaries, seeking to fix the spirit points of view within a confined form (or usually, a multitude of forms, as spirits are normally presented with numerous differently shaped houses, reflecting their multiplicity and ultimate ephemerality). Similarly, as the shaman demonstratively discards the spirit houses after the ritual is finished (throwing them out of the main door and down on the ground), his actions re-establish in physical space the distance that the ritual and the spirit houses temporarily reduced for the duration of the ritual.

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<sup>48</sup> Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2004.

It is thus largely through non-linguistic communication that Luangans open up to the spirits' points of view, the ritual objects serving as what Pedersen has called "ontological tools," which "imbue shamans with the magical capacity to crosscut boundaries between humans and nonhumans,"<sup>49</sup> while simultaneously reinstating them. Objects also make what is otherwise invisible or imperceptible present and hence facilitate communication between people and spirits.<sup>50</sup> For these reasons the material properties of ritual objects are not secondary to what is going on, but essential for how the objects work, for the creating of a connection, and for breaking the connection. Just like the material properties of the "soul oil," its "stickiness," contains the soul (and allows it to be transferred back to the patient), so the material properties of spirit houses make spirits present, a precondition both for relating with them and affecting them.

It is also essentially through ritual objects, and their manufacturing, that most Luangans get to know spirits. What we are dealing with here is a relational and essentially tactile form of knowing, attained through repeated engagement with spirits through the mediation of objects during rituals and the making of such objects according to instructions received from shamans, and the spirit helpers of shamans. This is a form of knowledge that cannot easily be translated into other means of communication, a knowledge born out of "sensory perception and practical engagement," to borrow Ingold's phrase<sup>51</sup> (due to the frequency of rituals, most Luangans have been engaged with such image-making on numerous occasions). It is also fundamentally an emergent form of knowledge, acquired in particular circumstances, and derived from the information received through interaction with spirits in those circumstances (shamans often revise their instructions about ritual objects and offerings over the course of a ritual, as the process of interacting with spirits provides them with further information about their preferences and demands).

## 4 Conclusion

What the example of Kakah Tuha's request and the *buntang* ritual that followed upon it perhaps most forcefully illustrates is what we might call the uncontrollable agency of others, and how the agency of others, whether of spirits or people, qualifies every relationship, which is never reducible simply to a

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<sup>49</sup> Pedersen 2007: 142.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Sprenger 2016: 40.

<sup>51</sup> Ingold 2007: 13.



function of one's own. Tackling the inherent evasiveness of what Luangans call the "hundred souls and eight essences" in a large measure comes down, as this shows, to a continuous effort to mend the plurality of relations through which their transient personhood is formed. The example of Kakah Tuha bears out how the historicity of multiple entangled relations, with their intersecting obligations, and the indirect extensions beyond people's own relations to absent and even dead agents, imposes itself even over their immediate and acquired relationships, and is always to some extent beyond any individual's control.

It is through a multitude of efforts, and by employing repetition, precaution, and inclusion as means to confront the evasiveness and unpredictability of souls, and spirits, that Luangan shamans seek to mend relations between humans and non-humans. To contain what ultimately cannot be contained (life and souls) means to work both with and against the perpetual process of coming into being and becoming other that characterizes Luangan being-in-the-world. Like spirits, souls have an agency of their own, and are subject to the predation and abduction by spirits, meaning that they can never be effectively controlled. Like chickens which scatter at daybreak, and are called back to their owners at nightfall, souls are in perpetual movement, which makes for a dynamic and transformative potential (allowing for shamanic practice, for example, and interrelation with spirits), but also for vulnerability. In this process, otherness, as Rupert Stasch observes for the Korowai of West Papua, is not "antithetical to social connection and social closeness but an integral aspect of social involvement."<sup>52</sup> As evidenced by the example of Nen Pore's and Ma Buo's *buntang*, separation and integration are inseparable aspects of the same process.

When a Luangan ritual is finished, a temporary state of taboo (*pali*) follows for up to three days, indicated by an *areca* palm inflorescence which is hung by the front door of the house in which the ritual was performed. During this period only people who participated in the ritual may enter the house (breaking the taboo puts both the patient and the person entering the house at risk and is considered a serious offence). Significantly, I suggest, this practice is not only about sealing off the house from harmful outside influence, which might interfere with the healing process, but also about not breaking the social connection established through the ritual, as suggested by the fact that those who attended the finale of a ritual may freely enter the house in spite of the taboo. The taboo thus demarcates social connection (between ritual participants, people and spirits alike), as much as it creates separation.

In a similar way, extension and contraction are mutually enforcing categories in Luangan attempts to negotiate boundaries of a permeable personhood,

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<sup>52</sup> Stasch 2009: 14.

reflecting the ambiguous character of Luangan relations with spirits, and the elusiveness and distributedness of human souls. The techniques deployed to temporarily halt the movement of the intrinsically multiple or fractal entity that constitutes the soul are, as we have seen, both about opening up to relations with others, converging life substances by enhancing sociality, and containment and boundary-making. In this respect a parallel can be made with Luangan social life generally, in which autonomy and integration form opposite but equally affirmed values, reflected in oscillation between concentrated village or *lou* settlement, and dispersed swidden residence.<sup>53</sup>

Borrowing a term from Pedersen,<sup>54</sup> I argue that Luangan objects and ritual imagery explored in this article work as “indispensable ontological tools.” They serve to “provide extra-bodily material forms by means of which nonhuman perspectives can be entertained, and, consequently, the appearances of humans from the point of view of humans as well as nonhumans, can be altered.”<sup>55</sup> In exploring the techniques used to restore and strengthen souls by Luangan shamans, I have emphasized the importance of imagery and material form for both maintaining and extending boundaries, showing, among other things, how souls are sensuously seized and contained within jars and soul houses, how human counterparts are planted by bamboo sticks, how sociality is constructed physically and corporeally by clustering and tying together ritual participants, and how spirits are confined within spirit houses. In all these examples, “the medium is [...] the message,” as Busch synthesizes Benjamin’s thinking,<sup>56</sup> the imagery being what both constitutes and transforms reality. To make an image then is, as Michael Taussig so aptly has put it, “to resurrect a soul,”<sup>57</sup> and with souls coming in the “hundreds,” as among the Luangans, so should images.

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<sup>53</sup> See Sillander 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Pedersen 2007: 161.

<sup>55</sup> Pedersen 2007: 161.

<sup>56</sup> Busch 2006: 2.

<sup>57</sup> Taussig 1993: 111.

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