Ritual Sociality and the Limits of Shamanic Efficacy among the Luangans of Indonesian Borneo

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ABSTRACT
This article uses a myth of the Luangans of Indonesian Borneo to reflect upon the value of sociality and its role in promoting well-being in their healing rituals. In these rituals, sociality with nonhuman beings and between participants is crucial, yet insufficient for, and sometimes at odds with, success. The article describes the multiple modes and valences of this ritual sociality, and how it is fundamentally predicated on a ‘conditional ontology’ of not-knowing and qualified by human finitude. An inherent risk of ‘reversibility’ of ritual sociality propagates constant efforts and cautionary measures, such as recurrent dramatised ritual acts of ‘undoing and redoing’, to counter the inevitable uncertainty of ritual outcomes.

KEYWORDS
Ritual efficacy; sociality; values; well-being; Indonesia

The possible, so it seems, exists at the limit of the impossible
– Bataille (2004, 19)

In one of the many origin myths of the Luangans of Indonesian Borneo, eight shamans – said to be so ‘magnificent’ (manget) that when they treated a patient that person would ‘not not-become cured’, and so powerful that they could awaken people from death – were killed for the sake of their children due to becoming too occupied in their craft and failing to take care of them. The myth presents the eight shamans as both marvellous and destructive, extremely successful in their profession, even to the extent of defeating death, but at the cost of losing track of what is important in life and what ultimately sustains it. In this article, I read the myth as a commentary on the value of social relations among the Luangans and use it as a vantage point to discuss the conditions of shamanic efficacy. I suggest that Luangan ‘sociality’ – the process of relating to others – has intrinsic value and is indivisible from well-being, yet is fraught with ambiguity, subject to reversibility, and qualified by human finitude and worldly contingency. The myth illuminates the ‘limits of the ethical’ (Lambek 2012, 352) in Luangan perceptions and allows for a reflection on their notions of ‘what is possible with respect to well-being’ (2012, 343). Essentially, it is taken to illustrate the fundamental precariousness of life with others, and how the multiple uses and demands of sociality in the healing endeavour (and life...
in general) set limits on moral aspirations and what may practically be achieved. Hence, it also provides a lens through which to consider how acts generate and qualify certain values – well-being, efficacy, and relationalism – that arise in the healing process. Conversely, through what this suggests about the role of values in sociality, the myth also presents a distinct answer to Joel Robbins’ (2018) question ‘Where in the world are values?’

‘A notion of well-being is by default a notion of lack’, as Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2008, 194) has remarked. It is a notion of something that there is, but not quite in the proportion that we would like it there to be’. Had social life reached its full proportion (of well-being, happiness, or virtue), he observes, the very idea of well-being would be incomprehensible (this is something brought out in another Luangan myth, in which man, originally immortal, could not resist asking the creator God for mortality). Unlike the total empowerment of the eight mythical shamans, present-day shamans work with relative or limited efficacy, I argue, and while sociality forms an important means for achieving their aims, it is also highly unpredictable and needs proportionality. This is not the least since Luangan spirits, with whom ritual sociality is centrally concerned, are ambiguous figures who bring humans well-being but also may inflict adversity and illness upon them. An inherent risk of reversal of ritual sociality prompts constant efforts and cautionary measures, such as recurrent dramatised ritual acts of ‘undoing and redoing’ (pejiak pejiau), whereby attempts to counter the inevitable uncertainty of ritual outcomes are made.

In another context, I invoked the myth to illuminate a widely felt tension between ethical and economic value in some contemporary Luangan rituals (see Herrmans 2017). The eight shamans resemble the increasingly busy and relatively well-compensated present-day shamans who perform such rituals, which Luangans sometimes pejoratively call ‘business rituals’, alluding to their commonly being prolonged for months on end to provide occasions for gambling. By comparing different ways of sharing communal meals and paying for ritual services in two field sites – a village with a marked ethos of social solidarity and a relational ontology, and a nearby multi-ethnic transmigration camp, where rituals are influenced by increasing individualism, shamanic professionalisation, and monetisation of the local ritual economy – I contrasted a ritual economy based on co-operation and the mobilisation of kin relations with one characterised by commodification and the short-term pursuit of individual gain. While these examples illuminate shifting value orientations among the Luangan – who live in an area undergoing rapid environmental, economic, and social change due to the recent arrival of oil palm cultivation – I suggest that the latter example (the business rituals) may simultaneously be seen as strategic acts, serving to maintain precisely some of those values that they are taken to contradict. A key element in this context is the value of social relations, understood in an extended sense to include not only humans but also nonhumans.

Here I use the myth, along with description of contemporary ritual activity, to bring up a related but distinct problem. I look at how ritual sociality with spirits, and between the human ritual participants, is crucial to what constitutes the efficacy of Luangan shamanic healing rituals (belian) and a condition for well-being, yet ultimately is insufficient for – and sometimes at odds with – ritual ‘success’ (i.e. healed patients). My purpose is twofold: to explore the multiple modes and valences of Luangan ritual sociality and to formulate a critique against instrumental views of shamanic efficacy. Drawing on the notion of ‘reversibility’ of Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Rane Willerslev, I look at how
a concept or institution, such as Luangan healing performances, and the sociality they essentially produce, carry with them an ‘invisible double or shadow, which can turn back upon it so that one crosses over and becomes the other’ (2007, 528). This state makes for an uncertainty and open-ended quality of Luangan rituals, which have a profound bearing on their form as well as the conditions of their efficacy. By highlighting the reversibility and flipside of sociality, I follow recent studies that have shown how danger (such as witchcraft) lurks at the very ‘core of sociality’ (Geschiere 2013, 62), how empathy produces radical alterity (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015), and how intimacy breeds mistrust (Carey 2017).

Looking at Luangan ritual sociality ‘through its shadows’ (Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007, 528) is not primarily motivated by a theoretical agenda, however, but by Luangan conceptions of how the possibility of failure and destruction is immanent to social reality, both as shown in the myth and as reflected in performative ritual action. In fact, I propose that it is by embracing that destructive potential through a sort of dialectical reversal that Luangan rituals gain part of their efficacy. The structure of Luangan ritual performances is consistently based on turning the negative into its opposite through tactile re-presentation, a process that involves mimetically evoking the potential for failure and adversity so as to overturn them, and using the reversible potential as a resource, as a means to re-create reality. In this sense, the efficacy of Luangan healing rituals is conditioned upon the very contingency of reality that they serve to overcome.

The article is based on over two years of intermittent ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 1993 and 2017 among Luangan Dayak living in the border region between the provinces of East and Central Kalimantan, an area I have called the central Luangan area.1 This is a rather remote upriver area, covered with secondary and – to a decreasing extent – primary rainforest, which until recently could only be accessed through logging roads (and, before that, footpaths), since local rivers are shallow and largely unnavigable. Most Luangans subsist on the shifting cultivation of rice and a great variety of other food crops, complemented by hunting, fishing, and the domestic rearing of chickens, pigs, and water buffaloes. Since 2011, extensive oil palm plantations have replaced much of the forest and most villages are connected by roads.

The Luangan Myth of Ritual Paraphernalia

Formulating and describing the conditions of existence of a problem, the myth of the eight shamans, known as the myth of ritual paraphernalia (tempuuun ruye), presents an ethical dilemma to which it provides but a partial solution. It relates how ritual empowerment and efficacy may run up against the limits set by life – and social life – itself. Yet, it also presents sociality, and the material means to produce such sociality, as the only remedy against life’s precariousness. The account given below is a condensed version of the myth, as told by the late shaman Kakah Ramat in 1997.

There were eight shamans, women and men. Lalung Reun and Lolang Ame. Tiris Mamis and Kemang Lingau. Rente Ile and Renak Datai. Apen Rodok and Kupang Belang. Magnificent shamans. When healing someone, that person would not not become cured. They had magic these shamans, bringing the already dead back to life.
They were called to perform belian healing rituals from all over, the eight shamans. Starting off in their home village, and in villages close by, they were soon called to places further and further afield. They had no need to make swidden fields, to plant rice, but lived on rice received as ritual salaries, on meat from the chickens and pigs sacrificed during rituals. Even when they did get children, they would not stop but were away performing belian all the time. Not even between rituals did they return home. Their children were left to be brought up by their grandparents, to be fed by relatives.

As one might guess, this would eventually turn against the shamans. As they grew older, the children started to ask questions: ‘Don’t we have any real parents? What happened to them?’ Learning that they indeed did have parents but that these had left them, hungry, starving, a long time ago, no one having seen them for years, the children became so angry that they arranged for their parents to be killed. Hence, it came to be that Putes Lalung Jues and Joreh Lalung Tukah, the two appointed assassins, decapitated the eight shamans. Ironically, this happened at the very moment when the shamans, who had gone their separate ways years ago, had finally decided that it was time to return home together. Having gathered at the Eight Crossroads, the place where all paths intersect, they met their fate as their heads were cut off.

Condemned to death because they neglected to maintain their close relations even while pursuing the recognisably commendable goal of curing illness, the eight shamans form exemplars of immoral behaviour. Yet they were also magnificent, a source of great empowerment, bringing people back from the grave. Even for shamans today, they form a source of empowerment through the plants and trees that grew out of the remains of their bodies – namely, their heart and liver, whose potency did not just dissipate. These plant species provide material for the construction of paraphernalia of present-day rituals (flower decorations, incense wood, spirit houses, various figurines given to the spirits, and a sword made of leaves), as shown in the second part of the myth, which refers to another place and time.

In the village of Neten Pali, belian ritual upon belian ritual was performed for the leader Nalau and his wife Ape, both of whom were seriously ill. But to no avail. Shamans ascended and descended (into the invisible realm), but the illness persisted. In desperation, Kilip, one of the shamans, decided to visit the tomb of his late father, Renatun Mulung, to ask for advice (his father was a renowned healer during his lifetime). Bringing offerings of rice and a black chicken (this being the death realm), and cakes of sticky rice, he approached the tomb, telling his news. ‘We have arranged innumerable rituals for Ape and Nalau, but the illness has not been cured’, he told. ‘Ritual upon ritual has been performed, but in vain.’

Hearing his news, accepting the offerings, Renatun Mulung told his son to fetch incense wood, various flowers, olung and jie leaves, biyowo, and teraran wood. ‘These are the remains of the eight magnificent shamans’, he said, ‘to be used by humans to make ruye, ritual paraphernalia’. Instructing Kilip in how these should be manufactured, the flowers placed in bowls, the incense burned, the wood cut into figurines, the leaves made into a weapon for the shaman, he sent Kilip home to arrange another belian ritual. After four days and nights of conducting a belian, of making paraphernalia, presenting it to the spirits along with offerings of food, Ape and Nalau thus became healed.

It is by using such paraphernalia that we Luangan shamans have negotiated relations with spirits ever since, Kakah Ramat concluded. The objective of ritual paraphernalia is to open up to social relations, but also to keep them within the right proportions, which is
a concern not only in human–spirit relations, but also in Luangan social life more generally, as I shall show next.

**Luangan Social Relations and Their Materialisation Through Rituals**

For the central Luangans, who spend much of their time at their swidden fields in the forest or increasingly along roads, belian healing rituals, along with collective work parties, form main events during which they gather as a community. In the past, they did not occupy nucleated villages but lived dispersed in the forest, alternating their residence between impermanent single-family farmhouses and frequently moved multifamily houses. Even after the Dutch colonial government imposed habitation in nucleated villages around the turn of the twentieth century, many people continued to practise dual residence, sharing their time between more permanent single- or multifamily houses in the village and impermanent farmhouses, often at several-hour walks from the village. This residence pattern mirrors and augments an enduring value pluralism in which the values of personal autonomy and self-determination co-exist with an ethos of social solidarity and togetherness.

With Luangan social structure being ‘open-aggregated’, entailing ‘flexible association and dissociation of individuals and families with social units, and flexible initiation and termination of interpersonal relationships within and beyond them’ (Sillander 2011, 141), people have to engage extensively in ‘relational work’ (Robbins 2018, 182) – including visiting, sharing, commensality, and ritual participation – to maintain social relations. As among the cognatic Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, who appear to share a similar predicament, this makes for a situation in which sociality is vital for obtaining social resources and integration. As among them, we find that what Robbins calls ‘relationalism’ – ‘the creation and maintenance of relationships’ – is a paramount value (2018, 182). What the Luangans value most, however, is not the creation and maintenance of any relations, but specifically close relations, which either are or become (classificatory) kinship relations. Furthermore, while the value of relationalism – which among the Luangans is imbued with a range of social values delineating an idealised ‘close sociality’, such as mutuality, sharing, and responsibility – is consistently affirmed in discourse, it is recognised also that sociality, as a precondition for acquiring social resources, is fundamentally interested. For this reason, it is sometimes driven by selfish or divisive aspirations, and liable to complications and reversibility, a condition which, along with the intimacy of the small-scale setting, promotes the valuation of autonomy and self-sufficiency, and in some contexts – notably when dealing with spirits – separation and detachment. Hence, affirmation of the value of relationalism cannot be taken for granted, but is, as in the Urapmin case, largely dependent on its exemplary invocation (Robbins 2018), and crucially in the Luangan case, on rituals as exemplars. It is also facilitated by the inclusive nature of Luangan kinship, which simultaneously contributes to the dialectical nature of Luangan social life.

As generally found in Borneo, Luangan kinship is bilateral and inclusive. Most people are either kin or ‘made kin’, and classificatory kinship is largely equivalent to kinship by blood. Local social relations are couched in an idiom of kinship (Sillander 2011), amounting to what Alan Barnard calls ‘universal kinship’ (1978). Until a few years ago, when oil palm plantations were established in the central Luangan area, which led
to a quick monetisation of the social economy, kin obligations were generally adhered to through mutual help and sharing. At the same time, personal relations are easily ‘forgotten’ if not activated through interaction, and close relations cannot be maintained with all relatives at all times. For Luangan kinship to exist it needs realisation and rituals may be arranged specifically to re-unite relatives who have become distant (oro).

Luangan kinship is notably extended to include not only human beings but also non-humans, especially spirits of different kinds, who, according to the origin myth of human beings, share a common origin with humans and are regarded as their elder siblings. This implies that one should engage in kin-like relations with them, sharing food and showing them respect. I have suggested (see Herrmans 2017, 2020) that the need to maintain relationality with spirits, at least in part, also explains the rather remarkable frequency of belian rituals. During my early fieldwork in the late 1990s, belian rituals were arranged roughly every second night and often there were several rituals going on simultaneously. In Sembulan, the small village of about 90 inhabitants where I stayed the longest, there were 15 actively practising shamans. This ritual profusion has remained largely undiminished in many non-Christian Luangan villages, although there is now a shortage of shamans in some. Lack of access to modern healthcare only explains part of this enduring popularity, for Luangans commonly arrange rituals as a preventive measure when no one is particularly ill, and often in combination with healthcare when it is available. A commitment to relate and continue relating with spirits is considered a precondition of health and well-being, essential elements of what constitutes a ‘good life’ (bolum buen) as articulated in ritual chants and dialogue with spirits, and as shown in the case of Nen Pore’s ritual presented below.

**Relationalism Through Ritual Exemplars**

When Nen Pore, an elderly woman, suddenly fell seriously ill during my fieldwork in June 2017, a belian buntang thanksgiving ritual was arranged as a result of a promise made to the spirits during a short two-day healing ritual, drawing together friends and family to present offerings of food and respect to the spirits in return for her soul. Long rows of plates with cooked meat from sacrificial animals, including chickens and pigs, along with various vegetables and banana leaf packages of rice, were laid out across the floor and served to all ritual participants, humans and spirits alike. Collective cooking preceded this, with women gathering in the kitchen to wash, cook, and pack rice, cut up vegetables, and grind chilli. Water was fetched from the river by children and carried in large buckets, bamboo tubes were brought from the gardens on motor bikes, and young men climbed coconut trees to get coconuts needed for the cooking. Fires were lit outside the house to cook bamboo sections filled with sticky rice and to burn the feathers of the slaughtered chickens and the hair of the sacrificed pigs. Food was served several times during each day of the six-day ritual, after the shamans had devoted it to the spirits through their chants, and elders had given speeches, eulogising the importance of sharing and mutuality, of remaining kin (kaben). Similarly, each night of the ritual ended with the distribution of plates of sweet sticky rice, an abundance of various cakes, and pieces of grilled chicken to everyone present; ‘spirit food’ (okan penyewaka) that had been displayed and presented along with other ritual paraphernalia as offerings to the spirits earlier during the evening.
Such displays and collective preparation and sharing of food are crucial in forming and affirming human–spirit relations and in solidifying the Luangan value of relationalism. As Michael Lambek (2013, 147) observes, ‘formalized acts of this kind [of gift-giving, for example] are not merely representations of some prior state of action, after the fact, but are themselves socially constitutive and consequential – acts that create the facts’. The displays and presentation of food through the shamans’ chants and the speeches of elders, along with various collective ritual activities, entail a public – and often explicit – celebration of relationalism as a value, and, simultaneously, a realisation of relations. In Lambek’s words (2013, 147), they ‘exemplify the working of society and sociality’, generating and maintaining ‘ethical value’ by ‘instantiating criteria for the guidance and judgement of practice’. In this respect, the preparation and presentation of food during rituals are notably as important as its actual consumption. They form privileged media of exemplary exposure, providing a vivid sensorial experience and enabling collective consolidation of values. In this capacity, they also serve to put a positive spin on what is fundamentally fraught with ambiguity. While relationalism and its constituent sub-values (sharing, unity, mutuality, etc.) are widely affirmed, at least publicly (some people confess to accepting individualism and interestedness as unavoidable mores of the present era), sociality itself, along with the various forms of association and intercourse that it consists of, is always potentially perilous.

Another way in which relationalism was sensorially demonstrated through performative activity during Nen Pore’s ritual was by literally binding people and spirits together during the act of presenting the offerings to the spirits. During olol kolak, the ‘final day’ of the ritual, members of Nen Pore’s family were tied together by a rattan string, which in turn was tied to the ritual offerings – including a large variety of spirit houses made of plant materials, containing figurines representing human beings and figures of the spirits themselves, along with bowls containing uncooked rice, an egg, a betel nut, and a candle, decorated with flowers and coconut leaves cut into intricate patterns. In this way, people were corporeally joined as a family and with the spirits through material representation. Tangibly reconnected (many of the participants lived in other villages or at the oil palm camp), they collectively confronted what one might call the alienating aspects of everyday life by reasserting social unity and togetherness. While drums were being played at a fast tempo, everyone then stepped on three large pigs that had been tied to the floor, pulling some bristles from their backs and throwing them up into the air. Picking up a chicken each, the shamans danced around the crowded room, holding the birds over the heads of every person present, each person in turn plucking out some feathers and flinging them into the air. With the drums being beat louder and more rapidly, the shamans dancing faster and faster, the air thick with feathers, the necks of the chickens were then cut and their blood was used to anoint the foreheads of people.

The day when all this happens (olol kolak), the day of blood sacrifice, indicated by flags raised outside the house, forms the climax of larger Luangan rituals. It contains moments when what Durkheim called ‘the sacred’ becomes a felt reality, owing, not the least importantly, to the abundance of spirits present and the sheer potentiality of this presence. Such moments of ‘collective effervescence’, when people and spirits are virtually joined together through ritual activity, might in Robbins’ (2016, 779) terms be said to exemplify ‘what it feels like to realize a value fully’. Rituals, as he puts it, present
people with, and allow them to perform, ‘transcendent’ versions of values – for the Luan- 
gans in this case, the values of relationalism, unity, and mutuality – imbuing them with 
‘powerful affective meanings’ (Walker 2015, 179). Through an experience of ‘the sacred’, 
the state of intensity and exaltation during which people transcend their everyday selves, 
the desirability of a value may ‘gain a hold on’ people in a way that it seldom manages to 
do in everyday life (when people are often pulled by conflicting values) (Robbins 2016, 
780).

However, a much less assertive, tacit sociality (and experience of ‘the sacred’, if you 
will), is equally important in Luangan healing rituals and for the exemplarity they may 
hold. Most belian rituals, including buntang rituals, are – or at least start out as – 
small and unspectacular affairs, where mere presence is required from the audience. 
People sleep through the event, with the performative activities being left to shamans, 
who at times may appear almost as distracted. Given their frequency, there is an every-
dayness to many belian rituals, characteristic also of most of Nen Pore’s buntang ritual, 
that may nonetheless be as effective in producing an experience of connectivity and 
mutuality as any form of transcendent elevation (such as that experienced during olo 
kolak). In a way, these rituals, or stretches of ritual, gain their appeal (or exemplarity) 
precisely from the lack of grand gestures or elevation. Here, low-key sociability – with 
people playing cards, weaving rattan baskets, quietly gossiping, smoking cigarettes, 
drinking a cup of sweet coffee, taking a nap (only to wake up to spit on ritual parapher-
nalia before they are offered to the spirits, or to eat some of the cakes at the end of the 
evening’s program) – renders an almost self-evident quality to relational becoming, 
accentuating the ordinary and continuity over the transcendental. Such rituals weave 
the ordinary and extraordinary together, gaining efficacy from an experience of transcen-
dence which is ‘immanent to life’, as Simmel put it (see Lambek 2016, 783). Their very 
habitualness lends them a quiet and unspoken allure and suggestive habitual power 
through which co-relating takes on an easy, almost taken-for-granted character (which 
is far from always present in local social life, in which envy, demands, and prying into 
the affairs of others often impose an overbearing intimacy). The habitualness allows ritual 
sociability a proportional quality, which may reduce its inherent potential for rever-
sibility and the danger of excess, always present during olo kolak, while still retaining the 
power of the exemplar.

**Proportional Relations and the Allure and Danger of Excess**

As Nen Pore’s ritual was reaching its climax, temporarily reverting into a belian bawo 
ritual (the genre of ritual preceding the buntang), and as Ma Kerudot, the head 
shaman, was dancing to the rapid drumbeat of the bawo curing, spinning around 
faster and faster, rattling his heavy brass bracelets, while holding a black hen in his 
hand, a bloodthirsty spirit suddenly possessed a young woman in the audience. Scream-
ing and shouting she tried to grab the chicken, fighting people who tried to hold her back, 
causing a tumult during which some people were pushed over and a knife hurt Ma 
Kerudot. Simultaneously, one of the younger shamans involved was possessed by one 
of his grandfather’s protecting spirits, demanding blood to drink. With a sharp knife, 
someone cut the throat of the pig and the shaman lay face down, drinking blood straight 
from the pig’s neck, while grunting and shivering. There was blood splashing around,
feathers floating everywhere in the heavily crowded room, dogs trying to lick the blood, and a cat was thrown violently out the window. A teenage boy started to cry hysterically as his grandfather, another shaman, rushed out of the house, screaming for the knife and asking for blood for his protective spirit. The people present looked scared, standing up against the walls, holding onto their children. A woman who had fallen and hurt her leg during the commotion told me she was afraid of the malevolent spirits (blis) present and went home and locked her door.

The intensity and expenditure associated with blood sacrifice and trance behaviour during olo kolak, as well as other similar high intensity ‘liminal’ ritual moments, were in fact regarded with quite a deal of ambivalence by many Luangans I worked with. With their propensity towards excess and identity transgression, these moments hardly typify the ‘gentler side’ of transcendence that Robbins seeks to foreground (2016, 771). Luangans generally value restraint and a quiet demeanour, avoid expressions of violence, and possession by spirits during rituals is an exception rather than the rule. In contrast to many other Borneo peoples, who drink tuak rice wine during the culmination of major rituals, Luangans have abstained from alcohol for several generations, specifically to avoid fighting and transgressive behaviour. In some villages, people also choose to slaughter pigs outside the house, beyond the sight of most ritual participants to avoid such problems. There is a paradoxical production of otherness at the heart of ritual sociality that needs to be both incorporated in order to negotiate relations (which demands taking the perspective of the other, such as bloodthirsty spirits) and expelled to avoid blurring of identity boundaries. To contain what ultimately cannot be contained (life and souls) means to work both with and against the perpetual processes of coming into being and becoming other which characterises Luangan being-in-the-world.

While spirits form a principal source of human well-being, acting as people’s protecting spirits (pengiring) and as the shamans’ spirit familiars (mulung), they are also, as mentioned, antagonists, the ones who hurt people by stealing their souls and inflicting illnesses. Often the same spirits may act in both benevolent and malevolent ways. Born out of an incestuous relationship between father and daughter, as told in the origin myth of human beings, spirits are generally considered immoral, deceitful, and unpredictable. Ultimately, they cannot be trusted or fully known, not the least since they are invisible, and relations with them are forever subject to uncertainty and potential reversal. Hence, while maintaining reciprocal relations with spirits is an essential objective of Luangan rituals, the rituals are as much about maintaining difference and distance.

A somewhat similar dynamic also operates in relations between humans. Sociality between human participants is considered beneficial in its own right, indexing as well as contributing to well-being. Collective ritual action and ritual action establishing connections between people (e.g. receiving payment or gifts from others in rituals) are perceived as soul-strengthening. Conversely, isolation and alienation may cause soul weakness and vulnerability to spirit attack. Overtly behaving in ways that signal a rejection of social relations, such as failing to invite someone to eat or rejecting such an invitation, may cause a vulnerable condition known as tapen. However, while strong attendance and human participation are necessary to perform major rituals, inviting people from afar carries risks. People may harbour sentiments of envy and ill wishes, which can interfere with the ritual, with unanimity being perceived as detrimental and
capable of upending the ritual endeavour. Furthermore, while being in company with others and having close relations represent a principal quality of the ‘good life’ asked for in rituals, Luangan sociality is characterised by a conspicuous degree of reserve and formality. For good reason, it is recognised as carrying many demands and obligations. Consequently, people often host suspicions about ‘others’ (ulun) and are noticeably inclined to disengagement, silence, and withdrawal to the relative solitude of their farmhouses.

Proportionality – or an ‘image of rightful balance’, to follow Corsín Jiménez (2008, 180) – may thus be seen as foundational for well-being, obviating the dangers of alienation and separation, on the one hand, and excessive sociality, on the other. As Corsín Jiménez outlines it, social proportionality is the degree of society one wants to make available to others, for example, through processes of gift-giving. ‘The part that we give is an indication of the whole that is not given’, he states, with gift-giving thus forming ‘an expression and effect of proportionality’ (2008, 186). Rane Willerslev and Morten Pedersen (2010, 303) have applied this concept to show how the right balance of proximity and distance in the relationship between humans and spirits among the Mongolian Darhad and the Siberian Yukaghir was not originally given ‘but only became established through acts of joking by which the cosmos was apportioned in a certain way’. For the Darhad and the Yukaghir, joking allows them to keep humans and non-humans sufficiently separated, with the ‘cosmos bifurcated into incongruous realms’, to avoid a ‘totalizing holism’, which would imply death (Willerslev and Pedersen 2010, 302). Similarly, Jon Henrik Remme (2016, 150) describes the various means by which the Ifugao of the Philippines preserve the ‘perilous potency of spirit actualizations’ in correct proportions. These include keeping spirit relations within the controlled environment of ritual.

For Luangans, non-relationality means the end of being, but so may its opposite. Presenting the spirits with ritual offerings thus forms a means for reapportioning and managing social relations. For Nen Pore, lying on the floor surrounded by a variety of spirit houses, each containing a small human figurine made of rice paste, to meticulously spit on each of these figurines (even while being so weak she could hardly sit up) allowed both for reconnection, by giving something of herself, and for separation, through what was not given (the figures are tellingly called ganti diri, ‘replacements of the self’). As a final act, the houses with their inhabitants were then thrown out the front door.

**Ritual Reversibility and Well-Being**

Building on Derrida, Corsín Jiménez (2008, 192) discusses how gift-giving and debt-honouring are paradigmatic expressions of the inescapable ‘asynchrony of human sociality’. He suggests that

they are both indicative of a form of life that is always, existentially, out-of-synch with itself: a shadow of its own condition. In this view, social life is always falling short of itself, gesturing towards its own disproportion, because of its own phenomenology as a process of becoming. (2008, 192)

This quality is a particularly conspicuous feature of Luangan rituals whose outcome cannot be known in advance.
Luangan social life always entails a risk of reversal. The minds and inclinations of people can never be fully known or predicted – and those of spirits even less so – and their actions cannot be controlled. Invoking spirits involves a risk of souls being stolen rather than procured (hence, shamans always call back the souls of everyone present at the end of a ritual). Moreover, as the myth of ritual paraphernalia outlined earlier in the paper suggests, patients sometimes do not recover and performative ritual action may turn into something else than intended. In short, healing rituals carry a potential for their own ‘failure’.

One way to deal with such reversibility is an activity central in all Luangan rituals, pejiak pejiau. Meaning ‘to overturn’, the concept designates a two-stage process of ‘undoing and redoing’, whereby a dramatised transformation of a potentially bad condition into a good one is evoked concretely by doing something in the wrong way first and then redoing it the right way. According to this scheme, offerings given to the spirits are first presented incorrectly seven times (a number associated with death and misfortune) ‘towards the setting sun and the waning moon’. A transformation is then concretely executed as the shaman turns things around eight times, presenting the offerings ‘towards the breaking day, the new moon’, conjuring continued life and prosperity. Similarly, incompetent spirit familiar spirits are first summoned by throwing defective rice seeds into the air and by burning charred incense wood, after which potent spirit guides are called by scattering unblemished rice seeds and burning pristine firewood. This pattern is repeated over and over again during the ritual (through chants and sensorial imagery) in a variety of contexts and ways: when presenting ritual paraphernalia, summoning spirits, and healing patients.

By acknowledging life’s reversibility, evoking it and then overturning it, performatively undoing it, shamans sensuously turn the asynchrony of social life into a possibility, enabling re-presentation. Aiming to counter the inevitable uncertainty of ritual outcomes, they let the lack of finality, the transitoriness and instability of any relations, be part of the solution. Allowing ‘social life continuously [to] re-dimension itself’ (Corsín Jiménez 2008, 192), Luangan rituals affirm society’s very own otherness (cf. Bataille 1985), its interior exterior, to overturn it. The reversibility thus contains its own potential for transformation (which does not eliminate its destructive potential).

Tactile re-presentation is a principal means in Luangan rituals to mimetically re-create and manipulate reality by means of its image (see Taussig 1993). Pejiak pejiau, a continuously enacted reminder of the need to anticipate and actively undo the potential for failure, is a salient case in point. By means of performative action, it works to conjure and restore human–spirit relations and their desired transformation for human and spirit audiences by bringing them into being through verbal and material representations; it is a cautionary measure, aiming to reduce uncertainty, but also a recognition that sociality is predicated on indeterminacy. In a sense, the myth of ritual paraphernalia itself exemplifies this pattern of coming into being through destruction (and re-construction) as it shows how the efficacy of curing rituals springs from annihilation and regeneration. What Kilip’s deceased father advised for him to do when he came to seek his help was to go home and gather exemplars of the plants which grew out of the remains of the eight shamans, in order to use them to make ritual paraphernalia. Through ritual performance, these were then consecrated and made efficacious and endowed with some of the original potency of the ancestral shamans who had gestated them. The potency
of ritual paraphernalia thus springs from their capacity to reinstate relations – by opening up to communication, which is what ritual paraphernalia are used for – through a negation of the negation (obliterating the effects of the original killing). At the same time, humans were left with a residue of something always less than perfect.

This leads me back to the question of what efficacy Luangan rituals entail. Whereas the eight shamans of the myth held an absolute power over life, a total and rather marvellous efficacy that could bring the dead back to life, present-day shamans deal with a much more limited, proportionate, and tentative efficacy. Rituals are based on a continuous negotiation of relations, and as such they are not just unpredictable, but essentially lack finality. Often rituals follow upon rituals, or different ritual genres overlap with each other within the same ritual; as a standard measure, they reach out in multiple directions and include a large variety of different spirits in the negotiation, among them spirits ‘not yet known’. Moreover, promising further rituals is an important way to bargain with spirits. Well-being is hence always conditioned on a sociality-in-becoming, which is uncontrollable, malleable, and situational.

When Nen Pore became ill, she quickly turned payeh, or mortally ill. Because of her rapidly deteriorating condition, most people – including herself, it seemed – regarded her chances of recovery as rather slim. When the belian ritual started, she had difficulty breathing, and she could not eat or drink. Lying on the floor, eyes shut and moaning from a severe stomach ache, she was surrounded by family and friends, who dabbed her forehead with cold water and massaged her legs. With great effort, she whispered how to distribute her belongings, should she die. Therefore, when some days into the ritual she was suddenly able to sit up and drink some water, it was to the astonishment of most people present. The healing ritual was soon turned into a buntang thanksgiving ritual, to fulfil an earlier expressed promise of compensation to the spirit helpers, should she get better (some people also attributed Nen Pore’s recovery to the antibiotics that were hesitantly given to her by the anthropologist upon the request of desperate family members). Towards the end of the buntang, as the sacrificial animals were presented to the spirits, she was already dancing, stepping on the pigs to be sacrificed as she did so, her frail body held up by family members.

Simultaneously, in a neighbouring village, a middle-aged woman was suffering from very similar symptoms as Nen Pore, although she had been ill for a longer time. She was treated through very similar ritual procedures (a buntang ritual, preceded by belian rituals) with some of the same people present (some of whom came to fetch me to participate in the hope that she could be given the same medicine that was believed to have saved Nen Pore). Although extremely weak and malnourished, she sat up during the culmination of the ritual, plucking some feathers of a chicken held in front of her and throwing them into the air, spitting on human figurines shaped from rice paste. Sadly, in contrast to Nen Pore, she passed away only a few days after the ritual was finished.

Neither ritual was described in terms of its success or failure, however. Not to arrange a ritual when someone is ill, even when the chances of recovery are deemed slim, was out of question for most Luangans I worked with. As Jane Atkinson (1989, 290) has shown for the Wana of Sulawesi, ‘the idea of having a loved one die without the care of a powerful shaman is grievous … Engaging the talents of a renowned shaman validates the outcome of an illness, be it life or death’. Essential to belian rituals is to create preconditions for healing by opening up to relations with spirits (and by forfending their potential
for reversal through *pejiak pejiau*). Ritual efficacy, then, is linked with the value of relationalism through a process of ‘continuous becoming’, whose operation often cannot be confined to individual patients or even single rituals.

Viewing shamanism as ‘merely a system of techniques intended to cause concrete things to happen’ (Willerslev 2007, 138) would be to miss much of the point in Luangan shamanic practice. Citing Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994, 11), Willerslev (2007, 139) declares that the central question asked in Yukaghir shamanism is: ‘Has it worked?’ In this view, success or failure is the crux of shamanic practice. Luangan shamanic rituals are seldom judged on their immediate results alone, however. In fact, excessive shamanic power, as the myth of ritual paraphernalia shows, might even be counterproductive. Instead, rituals are based on a ‘conditional ontology’ of not knowing, in which the endemic uncertainty of (social) life – its very contingency – forms an essential precondition for its transformation. What we are dealing with in Luangan rituals is not an instrumental but a suggestive efficacy. It involves convincing spirits of their ‘ethical obligations’, moving them from predating on people to helping them (see Lambek 2012), a process that deploys ritual exemplarity and ‘sensate actualization’ (Taussig 1993). Relationalism here is presented not just as a value worth pursuing, but also as transformative of being. For Nen Pore, dancing at the end of the *olo kolak* meant dancing not just because she was recovering but out of the intensity of its effervescent potentiality (and most probably also from the felt and overwhelming presence of her own mortality).

**Conclusion**

About a week after Nen Pore’s ritual ended, a new ritual started in the same house, this time for a sick child (which did not exclude continuing healing of Nen Pore). Simultaneously, two other rituals were underway in the same hamlet. People muttered that the families should join forces, since a lack of shamans forced one of the officiants to perform in two different rituals at the same time and rush from one house to another. Overlapping rituals are not uncommon in Luangan villages, and modern shamans are sometimes almost as busy as the eight shamans of the myth. This surely speaks to a perception of ongoing vulnerability to harmful (outside) influence (which has only increased with recent environmental degradation and social change) and a continuing lack of modern health care in the area. It nevertheless also points to something essential about Luangan sociality and its relation to well-being.

This article started from the premise that well-being is social (as is being itself). As Michael Jackson (2017, 67) observes, we owe our life ‘to the lives of others’. Although this might seem self-evident, exactly how to live with others is often less than clear, as is how to measure sociality through well-being, as exemplified by the myth of ritual paraphernalia. Somehow, sociality is always out of proportion: there is either too much of it or too little. This is perhaps most evident in Luangan ritual sociality, which is forever thwarted by unpredictability and the potential for reversal. It nonetheless applies also to non-ritual sociality, where managing an approximation of the ‘good life’ requires balancing mutuality and autonomy, social resources and demands, and engagement and disengagement. Consequently, well-being depends on the continuous exercise of a ‘proportional sociality’, involving a marked dialectical orientation. The value of
relationalism and the enactment of sociality, which sometimes – but only sometimes – affirms it, are complexly conjoined with the goal and value of well-being. Sociality is valued as both a means and an end of well-being, being perceived as what sustains life, and providing the very nucleus of well-being. It is nonetheless ambiguously valued since it is interested, since the interiorities of others (especially spirits) are unknown and potentially deleterious, and since it is subject to reversal, forming a source of trouble through unwanted entanglements.

Like well-being itself, ideal sociality is always beyond reach, an approximation at best. When Luangan shamans through performative action present relationalism as a value constitutive of well-being, or when then they re-create reality by performatively overturning failure and adversity, they invoke valued goals whose referents forever elude fixed status. Similar to well-being, sociality’s relatively successful realisation is also subject to achievement and continuous effort, and in rituals and beyond it requires conjuring hope and idealised conditions through exemplary actions as a way of coaxing reluctant and unpredictably disposed humans and nonhumans to participate in the effort. The values of well-being and relationalism thus emerge as resources whose efficacy and cogency obviously depend on their expressive exemplary invocation (Robbins 2018), but which in equal measure derive from their fundamental indexical importance as means for overcoming the contingency of worldly conditions and sociality itself. What the myth of ritual paraphernalia, like the practice of pejiak pejiau, shows us is that the realisation of well-being and a salutary sociality often requires an active affirmation of the reversible potential of things (see Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007, 539) and may require undoing to enable redoing.

**Notes**

1. I conducted 6 months of fieldwork in 1993, 12 months in 1996–1997, and another 6 months during shorter periods between 2007 and 2017.
2. Around half of the Luangans are Christian, whereas the other half consider themselves Kaharingan, a designation for the local religion.
3. The preference for low-key, restrained behaviour is evident also in the valuation of different shamans. The most respected Luangan shamans are generally those with a deep and understated knowledge of ritual chants, while shamans who form conspicuous personal relations with bloodthirsty spirits involving uncontrolled possession tend to be dismissed as incompletely trained (and their rituals sometimes avoided out of fear).

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This work was supported by Academy of Finland [grant number 1276848]; Koneen Säätiö.

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