

Encountering Corpses: Notes on Zombies and the Living Dead in Buddhist Southeast Asia

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Corpses are frequently encountered in the Christian religious cultures of Europe and the Americas. Without the need for a quick burial and restrictions on dismemberment in Judaism and Islam, Christians have spent a lot of time viewing corpses, handling corpses, depicting corpses, dissecting them in medical school, employing them in vehicle impact safety tests, and writing and relating both Christian and non-Christian stories about reanimated corpses like Lazarus, Jesus Christ, Achilles, Osiris, and Dr. Frankenstein's monster. People in Christian-dominated cultures mummify or embalm, dress and present corpses in coffins, put coins on corpses' eyes, or prop them up in front of fortresses to warn potential enemies. Writers in modern Christian-dominated cultures (influenced in many ways by West African heritage) have related stories of reanimated corpses often controlled by evil-masterminds or powerful wizards. These have become popular lore as seen in perennially popular stories and films about zombies and other members of the "living dead" like vampires, some types of goblins, and even Tolkien's *orcs*. Popular American television programs like *Bones*, *Crime Scene Investigators (CIS)*, and *Quincy*, and recent books like the best-selling *Stiff* have brought corpses into the realm of everyday experience. Corpses are common agents. Whether reanimated or merely displayed, they act in the world as symbols, decaying statues, messengers, members of mindless armies, and depositories of clues. These aren't the spirits of the dead, they are physical, but dead, bodies acting in the world.

One might assume that the reason corpses are such a part of cultural experience in the Christian West is because Christians embalm, encoffin, and bury their dead. They write what they know. However, in the Buddhist and Hindu cremation cultures of South and Southeast Asia, where bodies are burned and only bits of teeth, hair, or bones are kept as relics corpses play a role in religion, literature, and art as well. They play important roles in protective rituals, religious art, and popular books and films. In this very short paper I will introduce some sources

for the study of corpses looking especially at Buddhist cultures in Southeast Asia and the stories of animated corpses or “zombies” popular among Buddhists in the region.

Corpse Meditation

Employing corpses in protective rituals and meditative exercises is a wide-spread Buddhist activity in Southeast Asia. Let me provide just a few brief examples. Corpses of the recently deceased are used by some advanced trained monks as objects for *asubhakammaṭṭhāna* meditation. Monks in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand are known for meditating while staring at naked corpses. This is still a practice at some Thai monasteries like Wat Khao Yai in Pichit and Wat Hualompong in Bangkok. Here a donated corpse is either hung on a hook in front of meditating nuns and monks who have been given permission to enter into this meditation or meditators sit in charnal grounds viewing corpses before, during, and after they are cremated. These practices have been depicted on mural paintings and told in stories in the biographies of prominent Thai monks like Luang Phu Man, Than Achan Taeng, and Somdet To. These sources depict in detail the stages of *asubhakammaṭṭhāna* meditation including the stages of *lohitaka* (meditation on a bleeding corpse), *puḷavaka* (meditation on a worm-infested corpse), *vipubbaka* (meditation on a festering corpse), *vicchiddaka* (meditation on a corpse cut into two), *vikkhāyitaka* (meditation on a gnawed corpse), *hata-vikkhittaka* (meditation on a scattered corpse), among others. However, one does not need an actual corpse to practice this meditation. There is also a tradition of meditation on one’s own decaying body. Some monks and nuns are instructed to imagine themselves dissecting their own body in meditation in order to examine the different organs, and especially the fact that the body also contains feces, bile, and urine. When I was ordained in the mid-1990s, my own abbot suggested that we could even imagine piercing our own flesh with a knife. Meditators in this practice are supposed to focus on both the “disgust” of the body, as well as the impermanence of the flesh, fluids, and bones. These are not only rites restricted to ordained specialists. Indeed, in nineteenth century Bangkok along the Lot Canal, the bodies of prisoners who died in prison were left out for vultures to consume and for the public to watch. The bodies were deposited at a large monastery, Wat Sraket. Erik Davis, Pattaratorn Chirapravati, Patrice Ladwig, Ian Harris and François Bizot have discussed the use of corpses in Cambodian, Lao, and Thai *pāṇsukūl* rites which not only invite the practitioners to

reflect on impermanence and the inevitable decay of the body, but also conduct rituals to either transfer the consciousness from a dying body to a new body or even to reanimate the body of the recently deceased.¹



Caption: Mural paintings from Wat Sommanat in Bangkok on monks meditating on corpses.

Protection and Luck

Corpses are not just used for meditation, but also for protective rituals. For example, at Wat Mahabut in Bangkok there is a corpse of an infant named Siriroth Phibunsin (affectionately known as “Ae” or “Dek Chai Siriroth”) who died when he was only 39 days old. Since he died an unnatural death he was buried instead of cremated. Many Buddhists in Southeast Asia customarily bury those who die of murder, suicide, childhood diseases, starvation, car accidents, snake-bites, execution, or other unnatural deaths. Their corpses are bound with protective white string, their eyes, nose, ears, and mouth are either sewn or waxed shut, and they are wrapped tightly and buried in, often, unmarked, graves. This is to prevent their ghosts from wandering free and bringing misfortune to the living. If you die a “natural” death you are generally cremated if you are a Buddhist in the region. Since “Ae” died unnaturally as a newborn, he was buried. Not long after he was buried there was a terrible flood in Phrakhanong district and the

¹ See particularly the new edited volume by Patrice Ladwig and Paul Williams, *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005): chapter four; François Bizot, *Le don soi-même* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1981): 20-30. I describe these rites briefly in *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 126-128.

coffin of the infant resurfaced. His distressed parents, Pramot (a local police officer) and Sirilak (a nurse), brought his skeletal remains, which still had dried leathery flesh clinging to them, to the abbot of Wat Mahabut. The abbot agreed to take care of the infant (*du lae luk*) in order to avoid upsetting Baby Ae's ghost. He ordered a glass coffin made, placed the coffin in a small wooden freestanding house built specifically for the coffin, and opened the doors to the public. Although not given a monthly re-funeral like Mae Nak, Baby Ae nevertheless receives a lot of visitors.

Baby Ae's coffin is filled with toy airplanes, spacecraft, trucks, boats, several teddy bears, a giant stuffed "Hello Kitty" doll, a cell phone (supposedly if he wakes up and can make a call), and lots of cash. In fact, Baby Ae's entire skeletal corpse (dressed in children's pajamas) is covered in a blanket of cash that drops down on him from donors who slip 20, 50, and 100 baht bills into a small slot on top of the coffin (as well as U.S. and Singapore dollars occasionally). Only Baby Ae's eyeless head, covered with a thin layer of grayish leathery skin with blondish/white hair on top, is clearly visible through the glass. Next to the coffin is a place to give more offerings. One of the more popular gifts, besides toys, is excessively sugary children's fruit punch. A 76 year old woman named Khun Somwong who keeps the shrine clean and generally manages the place sat with me for a long time on several occasions talking with me about visitors and activities at Baby Ae's house. She and her son would even unlock the doors in the evenings for me (as I could often not get there before 6:00 pm). Khun Somwong clearly was very attached to Baby Ae and I suspected it was not just for the cash he generated for the shrine and her family. She spoke of him as her own child. She spoke of Baby Ae's parents who would come once a year to the shrine, about the troop of about 12 to 16 *Kae Bon* (a traditional type of dancer) who would dance in front of Baby Ae for a fee upon request, and the school children and mothers who would visit the coffin. Baby Ae was said to give people who visited him dreams and in those dreams winning lottery numbers would be revealed. Most of Baby Ae's visitors were sports teams though. Local high school and technical school teams would visit Baby Ae to give offerings before or after big soccer, *takraw*, or volleyball matches. They either asked Baby Ae to help them win the game or thanked him when they won. I only observed this twice, but Khun Somwong and the assistant abbot assured me that this was the most common activity. I

asked several people, including most of the monks in residence at Wat Mahabut why an infant corpse could help sports teams.

The display of infant corpses is well-known practice in Thailand. The display of Baby Ae is loosely related to the honoring of *kuman thong* and the collection of corpse oil. There are several groups which employ a staff of “corpse gatherers.” The most well-known of these societies in the Poh Teck Tung, also called the Potek Xiangteng. They are a Teochiu speaking Chinese group originally from Guangdong founded in Thailand in 1909 with members in Thailand and Malaysia. Many of the members who moved to Bangkok in the early twentieth century obtained permission from King Rama V to practice “second burials” for those who had died without relatives. This practice would ensure that these people who didn’t have ancestors and children to honor them, would not turn into menacing ghosts. The ones performing the second burial -- involving digging up corpses, drying their bones, and rearranging them in a mass grave after cleaning them and chanting over them -- would become their adopted ancestors. Originally there is not much evidence that corpse oil was gathered from the corpses. However, Francis Giles observed the practice as early as 1937 and the Teochiu word for a corpse that is mummified when dug up is “kim thong” which is translated in Thai as “kuman thong” (a combination of Chinese and Sanskrit). There is a high likelihood that corpse oil was part of the early ceremonies in Bangkok and seems to be a custom added locally as it is not found in mainland Chinese second burial practices. Today this group runs a large temple in Bangkok, a 44 hectare cremetary in the Bangkok suburbs, and a large number of private ambulances whose drivers listen to radio and police bands and show up suddenly at the scene of motorcycle and car accidents to collect any dead body. They also visit hospitals requesting that the family members of a newly deceased child, sister, or husband, donate the corpse to their society.² Some families donate the corpse of their relative, other corpses are given to the society if no family member claims them. Sometimes these corpses are used for *asubhakammaṭṭhāna* meditation. Sometimes they are buried, as the Poh Teck Tung Foundation does, in mass graves, only to be dug up as a

² Photographs and recent stories of PohTeck Tung’s collection of corpses from accident scenes can be seen at these three websites (last accessed 29 December 2009) among many others: http://www.bangkokpost.com/091108_Spectrum/09Nov2008_spec20.php, <http://pohtecktung.org/>, <http://www.bangkoksvildevije.dk/pohtecktung.html>

group once a year to gather corpse oil (*nam man phrai*) and bone relics from them. Then they are cremated en masse. This mass cremation not only creates merit for the foundation and those who attend, but also allows for the easy centralized collection of auspicious and protective ashes, bones, and oils.

Kuman thong are the mummified corpses of stillborn children, aborted fetuses, and some are children who die in their first few days or even years of life. These corpses are mummified (bled, desiccated, and stored in camphor oil) and then usually covered in gold or blackened by roasting them slowly.³ Erik Davis has studied the use of these *kuman thong* in Cambodia extensively, as well as provided details on the binding of corpses in Khmer ritual.⁴ These practices are mentioned in the most famous premodern Thai adventure and romantic poem, *Khun Chang Khun Paen*. Here, the clever, but devious and lecherous warrior Khun Paen is mentioned as cutting the fetus out of a woman and roasting it while chanting secret verses. Wat Tham Mongkhon in Kanchanuburi Province (Thailand) has a gruesome mural of this scene from the epic poem. He uses the corpse to give him invulnerability in battle.⁵ One of the more famous monks of the 20th century, Luang Pho Te Khongthong (1892-1981) of Wat Samngan in Nakhon Pathom Province (Thailand), produced a great number of these *kuman thong*.⁶ He had audiences with the present king, was put in charge of five monasteries in central Thailand, took on the task of restoring abandoned monasteries, and is much loved among dog owners today because of his care for and training of a little white poodle named Chao Nuat. He is often pictured with this dog,

³ This is not to be confused with the practice of “roasting” the mother after she gives birth. Hanks, “Maternity and Rituals” (1963: 41-57); and Dundes, ed. *The Manner Born* (2003: 134).

⁴ See especially Davis, *Treasures of the Buddha: Imagining Death and Life in Contemporary Cambodia* (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2009): chapter three.

⁵ I thank Christopher Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit their advice on this scene. The making of a *kuman thong* is mentioned in chapter 35 in two different versions of the poem. They note that the use of corpse or spirit oil (*nam man phrai*) is mentioned in four different parts of the poem. Baker and Phongphaichit, *Khun Chang Khun Paen* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010): chapter 35.

⁶ Kamala Tiyavanich also mentions stories of *kuman thong* practice done by Buddhist monks in Southern Thailand -- *Sons of the Buddha* (2007: 195). This practice seems to be particularly popular in Southern Thailand and is one in which Muslims and Buddhist participate together. These practices may be related to the Malaysian practice of using *toyol* (stillborn fetuses used to make protective oils) or *gui gia*, a Southern Chinese belief in the protective powers of fetuses. For Cambodian practices, I rely on Erik Davis (personal communication). See also his PhD dissertation *Treasures of the Buddha* (2009).

who was said to go to the post office and pick up letters for his master and accompany him on alms rounds. He was well known for encouraging his followers to share their wealth with the poor and he famously refused to live in a brand new monastic cell built especially for him. He gave it to one of the youngest novices students in the monastery instead.⁷

Corpse oil is the prized substance in these ceremonies. Unlike statues of saints, Buddha images, or bas-reliefs, the importance of a mummified person is less in its aesthetic beauty or calming meditative affect/effect, than in its ability to be harvested for oil, bones, ash, and wax. *Nam man phrai*, is a oily and fatty substance that is obtained by magicians, including monks, who either dig up corpses, or in the case of Baby Ae, find corpses, to melt. The magician holds a candle or magnifying glass up to the chin, elbows, forehead of the corpse and melts the dried skin. The drippings are collected and are believed to have the power to be transformed through incantations into love potion, protective oil, or even diluted into tattooing ink.⁸

Mummification

Displaying corpses for auspicious purposes, even though according to most books on Thai culture corpses are generally considered inauspicious, is not limited to infants, in fact, the display of mummified corpses of monks is spread throughout Central and Southern Thailand, perhaps the most famous being that of Luang Pho Daeng on the island of Koh Samui. At Wat Nang Chi, a historically important monastery in Thonburi, has a small, relatively unkempt shrine, with the mummified corpse of a maechi (nun) laying in a glass coffin next to the mummified corpse of a

⁷ The use of *kuman thong* is not without controversy. In 1995 there was a high-profile case in which a Buddhist novice, Samanen Han Raksachit, was arrested after he released a video tape of himself piercing, bleeding, roasting, chanting, and collecting the drippings from a baby at Wat Nong Rakam in Saraburi Province (Central Thailand). These drippings, which he called “ya sane” (lust medicine); he sold to visitors to the monastery. Although he was disrobed and arrested, he did not serve jail time and was arrested again in 2005 for tricking several women into sexual acts and defrauding them of money in exchange for dubious claims that he could help them attract their true loves. He is serving time now for a sentence of 23 counts of rape, in addition to other charges. Richard Erlich, “Baby Roasting Monk Caught Tricking Women Into Sex,” posted on <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0507/S00277.htm>. Last Accessed Wednesday, 20 July 2005; James Austin Farrell, “The Hex, The Monk, and the Exorcist,” <http://www.chiangmainews.com/ecmn/viewfa.php?id=2206>.

⁸ Francis Giles witnessed a corpse oil collection ritual in the early twentieth century “About a Love Philtre” (1938: 24-28).

young child. The nun, Maechi Nopparat, died in 1944 when she was only 19 years old after ordaining for three years with the famous Luang Pho Sot of Wat Phak Nam. Even though she came from a family of poor salt farmers, she was born with great merit and compassion (*chai bun mi mettatham*) and this preserved her body.⁹ Luang Pho Poon and Luang Pho Din of Nakhon Pathom and Chainat Provinces respectively have also been mummified.¹⁰ These mummies are held in glass coffins for people to view and offer gifts. In front of Luang Pho Din's mummy is a life-size bronze image of him that even depicts him wearing his glasses. When famous monks die they are not cremated like normal Thais. Instead the corpses of the highest ranking monks are propped up in seated position (I have been told that a surgically inserted metal or wooden rod is sometimes used). The seated body is encased in thin gold leaf and plaster so that the wrinkles of the skin, the facial features, and muscle tone are frozen. The corpse is made into a living statue to freeze the body in time. These are not old lifeless statues or artificial representations. A dedicated patron or person seeking protection and guidance can visit and prostrate to the image at any time. It can be said that this type of hypostatization has been a regular practice of Central Thai Buddhist image makers over the past century.¹¹

One does not necessarily have to spend a great deal of money commissioning a resin image from Duangkaeo. Indeed, the idea of making an image of a powerful person for the purpose of asking that image to act ritually as if alive is an old Thai practice. The making of "hun phi" (ghost dolls) by sculpting clay into small human figures or creating warriors made out of grass to contain their spirits (so that their ghosts don't move on to the next life) is mentioned in *Khun Chang Khun Paen*.¹² These images are found in many amulet markets today and are usually black, terracotta, or yellowish-gray. They can be placed inside of glass or clear plastic

⁹ I thank the keepers of the shrine (mostly local homeless men supervised by the monks in residence) for guiding me around the monastery on three occasions in 2008 and 2009.

¹⁰ I thank Peter Skilling for calling these mummies to my attention.

¹¹ Drawing on Gell's idea of "technologies of enchantment," Jessica Rawson has shown that creating identical portraits of emperors in early China would allow a follower to perpetually give gifts as an emperor was made to be always present in the world. "The Agency of, and the Agency for" (2007: 95-114).

¹² See Baker and Pasuk, *Khun Chang Khun Paen*, 2010. The popular Thai horror film, *Chom Khamang Wet* (English title: *Necromancer*, RS Films, directed by Piyapat Chupetch, 2005), features an ascetic and magician who creates a particularly fierce spiritual child to protect him.

lockets and worn around the neck serving as a type of guardian angel. These images are not representations, symbols, or simulacra then, they are tools in an individual protective arsenal. They are powerful despite the fact that they are copies of copies of copies of the supposed original. They are to be held, honored, and respected as powerful in themselves. The normative Buddhist values of non-attachment and impermanence are forgotten in this process of hypostatization. Indeed, even the mummies of Luang Pho Pun, Maechi Nopparat, Baby Ae, and *kuman thong* are not less powerful because they are lifeless. They are not empty shells or mnemonic devices. They are objects worthy of gifts and givers of merit. Just as the Buddha has not been permitted to pass quietly onto nirvana, these nuns, monks, women and children are held in this life psychology and even physically. They do not foreground the Buddhist values of nonattachment and impermanence, as well as compassion and the belief in transmigration or rebirth.

These bodies, whether simulacra or actual corpses, are useful and powerful. They bring security and promote the value of abundance. They do not participate in what Marina Warner has identified as the “aesthetics of shock” or gory verisimilitude.¹³ She examined the European fascination with horrific images in wax museums and exhibitions of medical curiosities which were meant to both scare and fascinate. She compared them in some ways to the Catholic display of martyrs being flayed, Mary with bleeding stigmata, or Christ hanging on a crucifix. Although there are Thai museums of torture and medical oddities, Thai Buddhist monastic shrines do not generally attempt to present visceral gore. Even the mummies (of children, nuns, or monks) or statues of ghosts are not meant to frighten. They are covered in gold and wearing dresses, monastic robes, or pijamas. They are surrounded by toys, cash, incense, and candles. They are not display items. They are objects of worship and sites of memory. They invoke the values of love, dedication, and loyalty. They mark historical events of triumph over death.

The Book of the Zombies

Examining the wide variety of rituals that employ corpses in Buddhist Southeast Asia begs the question – why? Why would there be so many religious uses of corpses by a culture that

¹³ Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (2006: 31-46).

promotes cremation? Certainly some customs, especially regarding the particular ways of sealing and binding the body after death are indigenous. One source is the influence on burial rites and the *kuman thong* were most likely brought by from Fuzhou, Quanzhou, Zhangzhou and Teochiu (or Chaozhou) laborers and merchants from in Fujien, Taiwan, and parts of Guangdong in the 18th and 19th centuries as we saw above. Corpse meditation was documented in early Indian and Sri Lankan Buddhism. However, another source may be Indic, but not Buddhist. Most often scholars of Southeast Asian Buddhism are trained in Pali and the Indic origins of Buddhism. However, Pali literature and Theravada Buddhist lineages are not the only Indic source for religious narrative and practices in Southeast Asia. Non-Buddhist Sanskrit literature like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Hitopadeśa*, and the *Pancatantra* are all well known in manuscript libraries, the dramatic performance, in mural art, and in oral culture in the region. Speaking specifically of zombies and corpses, one of the least studied, but best known local sources is the *Vetāla-prakaraṇam* (*The Collection of Stories of the Zombie*).¹⁴

The *Vetāla-prakaraṇam* is part of a whole genre of prakaraṇam texts that have circulated in Southeast Asia since, according to manuscript evidence, the 15th century.¹⁵ Some of the most

¹⁴ Skilling, writing on Indian and Tibetan Vinaya commentaries clarifies the meaning of *vetala* in Sanskrit. He shows that the oldest Sanskrit spelling of *vetāla* was “*vetāḍa*” (Pali: *vetāla* or *vetāḷa*). He also believes that the closest English translation is zombie versus Burton’s (see below) use of “vampire.” See Skilling, “Zombies and Half-Zombies: Mahāsūtras and Other Protective Measures,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 29 (2007): 315fn7.

¹⁵ Louis Finot first identified these types of texts in Laos in 1917. See his “Recherches sur la Littérature Laotienne,” *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient* 17:5 (1917): 5-224. Jean Brengues documented vernacular Lao telling of the stories in his “Une version laotienne du Pancatantra,” *Journal Asiatique* 10.12 (1908): 361-362. Henry Ginsburg helped identify the twenty manuscripts of the *Tantropākhyāna* in the National Library of Thailand (there are also many in Northern Thai collections). See Ginsburg, “The Thai Tales of Nang Tantrai and the Pisaca Tales,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 63.2 (1975): 279-314. Furthermore, Ginsburg wrote a fascinating Masters thesis in 1967 on the *Tantropākhyāna*, especially collection of ghost stories called the *Piśācap(r)akaraṇam* (Ginsburg, “The Literary Tales Derived from the Sanskrit Tantropākhyāna.” Master’s Thesis, University of Hawai’i, 1967). This vernacular Thai text, unlike the rest of the *Tantropākhyāna*, has little connection to any known Sanskrit text. It seems to be the creative work of Thai authors. It was quite popular in the mid-nineteenth century in Bangkok, there were several manuscript copies, and was actively studied by both Thai and foreign scholars in the late nineteenth century. Bishop Pallegoix, adviser to the Siamese king, included it in his list of important vernacular Thai “secular” texts in his 1850 Thai grammar. There were some English and German translations made of the stories in 1872 and 1894 respectively (this was a time in which there were very few translations of any Thai text available). Adolf Bastian hand copied these ghost stories in 1864. It was certainly seen as an important collection. These texts were copied and circulated among monks as well as lay people and clearly influenced modern Thai understandings of ghosts and the ritual needed to protect against them. They also are the precursor to modern Thai films and novels that depict ghosts and the practice of protective magic that are extremely popular among Buddhists (Ginsburg, 40, See examples of magical ritual in the *Piśāca*, especially on pp. 54, 61, 64, 65, 69). The manuscripts include both

important prakaraṇam texts include the *Vetāla-prakaraṇam* (the Collection of Stories of Zombies), the *Nandaka-prakaraṇam* (Collection of Stories of the Bullock, but it is actually tale which includes all manner of animals visiting a single bullock in Indian, Javanese, Tamil, and Lao tellings), the *Maṇḍūka-prakaraṇam* (Collection of Stories of Frogs), the *Piśāca-prakaraṇam* (Collection of Stories of Ghosts), and the *Pakṣī-prakaraṇam* (*Collection of Stories of Birds*) which is also titled the *Śakuna-prakaraṇam* in some tellings (both words mean bird in Sanskrit). These are usually collections of short stories featuring monsters and animals. However, the term can also be used, at least in one case, for a historical collection of stories about the founding of certain cities or the travels of certain statues and relics. They are similar in some ways to the *Setsuma* tales of medieval Japan or the *Zhiguai* stories of China, but not bestiaries like we find in Europe. They are not descriptive guides to the worlds of fantastic or grotesque creatures, but stories in which the agents are animals and humanoid demons, ghosts, and hybrids. The prakaraṇam genre does not see collections of stories of birds or frogs as different in kind than collections of stories about other species or supernatural ghosts and monsters. Many of these stories contained within individual prakaraṇam texts in Southeast Asia are drawn from Sanskrit stories in the *Pañcatantra*, *Hitopadeśa*, *Kathāsaritsāgara*, and other Indian collections. Like other Indian stories though, many telling in Southeast Asia are quite different from their Indian counterparts. The Lao and Thai *Pakṣī-prakaraṇam* in particular are drawn indirectly from different stories in the *Pañcatantra*, especially the third book. Directly though, they were first introduced in Southeast Asia (especially Java, Northern Thailand, Shan region, and Cambodia) through the *Tantrapākyāna* (Lao: Mun Tantai; Thai: Nithan Nang Tantrai; Javanese: Tantri Kāmandaka or Tantri Demung).

“common” *samut thai dam* (blackened khoi tree bark paper) and expensive and elite *samut thai khao* (unblackened white khoi paper)(Ginsburg, 24-34). From the colophons we can see that these manuscripts were copied by monks and have Pali blessings written at the end. These manuscripts are not just found in rural homes, they are kept in royal libraries and museums. For example, on one *Piśācapakaraṇam* manuscript, a monk named Phra Phimontham, pays homage to the triple gem (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) in his colophon (Ibid., 40). The *Piśācapakaraṇam* is one of many vernacular narrative collections (not to mention the vernacular ritual and astrological manuals) that have not been studied by scholars working in Buddhist and Religious Studies. Ginsburg, who was one of those rare scholars who felt comfortable in both fields, realized this as a very young man in 1967 when he translated this colophon in one of the manuscripts he was studying: “you who have heard these tales, honor them well and make your hearts pure and clear from vice and in the future you will have happiness in the heavenly city of Nirvana.”(Ibid., 79-80). I thank Henry Ginsberg for his advice and for conversations on these stories and sundry. I discuss the importance of studying vernacular and Sanskrit literary tales in Southeast Asian Buddhist Studies in McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost*, 117-119.

The oldest manuscript of this collection in India was found in Mysore and dates from 1031 CE. Sanskritists and South Indian literary specialists Edgerton, Venkatasubbiah, and Artola have traced different versions of the Sanskrit text, as well as Tamil, Kanada, and Malayalam tellings attributed to the Indian authors like Vasubhāga, Viṣṇuśarman, and Durgasiṃha. There are similarities with the stories about the Jain sage Pārvaṇātha composed by Bhāvadevasūri.¹⁶ Of course, more widely known tellings of these stories also appear in Central and Middle-Eastern languages.¹⁷ For example, the Pahlavi, Persian, and Syriac tellings of the *Kalilah and Dimnah* story (also known as the *Fables of Bidpai*) shares close similarities with several birds stories in the *Pakṣī* and the *Pañcatantra*.¹⁸ Some of these stories were also translated in Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, and Spanish. The very popular *Conference of the Birds* (Persian: *Manteq at-Tair*) by the twelfth-century poet Farid ud-Din Attar is extremely close to the plot and bird characters of the *Pakṣī-prakaraṇam*.¹⁹

Syam Phathranuprawat and Kusuma Raksamani have undertaken extensive studies of these possible Indian progenitors, as well as comparing them to the Javanese telling (although they do not compare them to Buddhist texts). Although Kusuma concentrates on the *Nandakaprakaraṇam*, he shows that this text, as well as the *Pakṣī*, *Maṇḍūkā*, and *Piśāca*, were introduced into Northern Thailand in the mid-1400s and probably came from the tradition of

¹⁶ Maurice Bloomfield, "On Overhearing as a Motif of Hindu Fiction," *American Journal of Philology* 41.4 (1920): 301-335. See particularly pages 314-316.

¹⁷ The *Book of the Birds* is briefly in Southeast Asia in the context of comparing it to examples from the Islamic and Indic world in Theodor Benfey, ed., *Orient und Occident* (Volume 3) (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1864): 171-172. The first European to study these connections to Southeast Asia seems to be Adolf Bastian who traveled extensively in the region, especially Thailand, in the 1860s.

¹⁸ For Indian influences of *Kalilah and Dimnah* and information on the Syrian, Arabic, and other tellings see Ion G.N. Keith-Falconer, *Kalilah and Dimnah or the Fables of Bidpai: An English translation of the late Syriac Version after the text originally edited by William Wright with critical notes and variant readings preceded by an introduction, being an account of their literary and philological history* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1970): introduction.

¹⁹ See Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (New York: Penguin, 1984) and Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, translated by S.C. Nott (London: Cirwen Press, 1954). Recently, a beautiful children's telling was published by Peter Sis (*The Conference of the Birds*, New York: Penguin Books, 2011). Although none of the numerous scholars of these texts which circulated widely in the Islamic world has undertaken a serious comparative study with the Sanskrit manuscripts nor the Southeast Asian tellings.

Vasubhāga, although much of the *Pakṣī* seems to come from the Viṣṇuśarman textual lineage.²⁰ There are no Pali equivalents found and the Northern Thai manuscripts are in *nissaya* form which draw from Sanskrit texts and not Pali. In some cases the Sanskrit terms have been rendered into Pali, but there seems to have been no full Pali translation of these texts before the Northern Thai vernacular translations and glosses. Syam emphasizes that in the Northern Thai, Lao, and Central Thai tellings of the *Tantropākhyāna* are quite different.²¹ The *Tantropākhyāna*'s title comes from the name of the woman, Tantrī or Tantrū in Sanskrit and Nang Tantai or Nang Tantrai or Tantri in Lao, Thai, and Javanese traditions, who tells the various stories to a king and this initiates ideally almost 360 stories, although there are usually only 80-90 stories in Southeast Asian collections.²²

The *Vetāla-prakaraṇam* or more commonly in Thai – *Nithan Wetan* -- is well-known in Thailand and over the past few years there have been several modern editions of the 20-25 stories in the Sanskrit collection that have circulated in Lao and Thai over the last four

²⁰ See Kusuma Raksamani, *Nandakapakarana attributed to Vasubhaga: A Comparative Study of Sanskrit, Lao, and Thai Texts* (PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1978): 12-15. See also studies of the Indic and Javanese manuscripts by George Artola, *Ten Tales from the Tantropakhyana* (Madras: The Vasanta Press, 1965); Sivasamba Sastri, *The Tantropākhyāna* (Trivandrum; Government Press, 1938); Christian Hooykaas, *Tantri de Mittel-javaansche Pancatantra – beworking* (PhD Dissertation, Leiden University, 1929); and three articles by A. Venkatasubbiah, “A Javanese version of the Pañcatantra,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 46 (1966): 59-100, “A Tamil version of the Pañcatantra,” *The Adyar Library Bulletin* 29 (1965): 74-142, and “The Pañcatantra version of Laos,” *The Adyar Library Bulletin* 33.1-4 (1969): 195-283.

²¹ Some *Tantropākhyāna* manuscripts do not include the *Maṇḍūkā* and most do not include the *Vetala*. Most manuscripts include the *Nandaka*, *Pakṣī*, and *Piśāca*. There are many Northern Thai *Nithan Nang Tantrai* manuscripts available, including complete ones (with at least four of the prakaraṇam collections). For example, there are four in Chiang Mai monasteries, one in Lampang, one in Phayom, two in Phrae, and one in Nan. In Laos, the National Library has collected two large manuscripts of the *Mun Tantai* and the National Library of Thailand has two as well, although both exclude the *Maṇḍūkā* and seems to have come from a very different Indian source. For a relatively complete bibliography of manuscript and printed editions of the various prakaraṇam texts in the region see Syam Phathanuprawat's three articles in different stages of publication: “Nithan bhisatbhakaranam: chak rueang phi lueak nai ma ben rueang bhisat taeng ngan kap manut,” “Kan bhlaeng nithan sansakrit ben chatok nai rueang kalithat,” and “Nithan rueang chao chai okatanna kap mi: rong roi nithan sansakrit nai lanna.” I thank Syam for sending these articles and for his advice and guidance. For a general study that draws from this research see his thesis *Bhaksibhakaranam: kan seuksa bhriaptiap chabap sansakrit lanna lae thai* (Bangkok: Silapakorn University, 2546 [2003]) and his “Lanna bhaksibhakaranam,” *Damrong Journal of the Faculty of Archaeology* 4. 1 (2005): 39-51. I also thank Jacqueline Filliozat for her kind help with this research. There are a large number of vernacular Thai editions including comic book tellings.

²² The South Indian telling of the text often include an initial six verses dedicated to Śiva, but these are not always present in the Southeast Asian manuscripts.

centuries.²³ The collection is found in various tellings in Sanskrit and some modern South Asian languages. The oldest collection most likely contained 25 stories and was titled the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* from approximately the tenth century. It was later incorporated in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* compiled by Somadeva.²⁴ Theodore Riccardi wrote his dissertation on another telling by Jambhaladatta known in Nepal.²⁵ A popular telling of eleven of the stories was made by Richard Burton called *Vikram and The Vampire* and Arthur Rider's *Twenty-Two Goblins* is another incomplete translation.²⁶ The text claims that the stories were originally told by a king named Vikramāditya and this is the author acknowledged by Southeast Asian manuscript copies.²⁷

In the Southeast Asian tellings, Vikramāditya is a king who has a series of conversations with a corpse hanging in a tree. This is a living corpse or a zombie known as a *vetāla* (Thai: *wetan*). The king wants to capture the zombie, carry him on his shoulders, and bring it to a Brahman seer (Sanskrit: ṛṣi/Thai: phra reusi) in order to gain magical powers from the seer. The zombie continually escapes by tricking the king with riddles involving extensive and often quite

²³ See especially the seventh printing of Phrarajaworawongthoe Korommuenphitayalongkaran, *Nithan Wetala* (Bangkok: Amarin, 2554 [2011]) and the book published in honor of the cremation of Mom Chao Winita Raphipha. Edited by Kriangkrai Sambhacchalit, *Brachum pakaranam* (Vols. 1-5) (Bangkok: Saengdao, 2537 [2003]0: chapter 4. A modern Thai translation of the text is found in Kriangkrai Sambhacchalit, ed., *Bhrachum bhakaranam bhak thi 1-6* (Bangkok: Saengdao, 2553 [2010]), chapter two. I thank Arthid Sheravanichkul for providing me with a copy of this book. The original edition was published in six volumes between 1922-1927 as cremation books. J. Crosby (*Journal of the Siam Society* 7 (1910): 1-90) translated the Thai text into English based off a manuscript in the Wachirayan Royal Library in 1910. He noted that there were both metrical (*khlon*) and prose manuscripts available. He was unable to find another *lilit* (mixed measured classical Thai lyrical poetry) manuscript mentioned in the 1904 Vachiranana Magazine (no. 113). I thank Peter Skilling for sending me a copy of this translation. The Royal Press in Bangkok published a printed copy of the *Nandaka-prakaraṇam* (Thai: *Nonthuk Pakaranam*) in 1876 and Ginsburg mentioned that there is a lost copy from 1870 (314). A copy of the *Pakṣī-prakaraṇam* was given to King Chulalongkorn on the occasion of his coronation in 1868 (Crosby, *Book of the Birds*, introduction).

²⁴ There are many modern English and Sanskrit editions of this collection. See for example N.M. Penzer (ed.) and C.H. Tawney's translation *The Ocean of Streams) of Story* in ten volumes (London: Chas Sawyer, 1926) or the more recent translation by Arshia Sattar, *Somadeva: Tales from the Kathāsaritsāgara* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

²⁵ Riccardi, A Nepali Version of the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati Nepali Text and English Translation* (Dissertation from the University of Pennsylvania, 1968). This was later published in a slightly reduced form by the American Oriental Society, volume 54 (New Haven, 1971).

²⁶ Burton's telling were published by Longmans, Green, and Co. (London, 1870) and Ryder's 1917 translation is now available on-line at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/ttg/>

²⁷ Kusuma Raksamani, *Pakaranam-nithan* (Bangkok: Mae kham phang, 2547 [2004]): 70-75.

funny stories of various creatures. After he tricks the king (strangely, by allowing the kind to guess the right answer) he jumps off his shoulders and climbs back up the tree. For example, in one story there are a parrot and a myna who are arguing over who are more ignorant – women or men. The myna tells a story about an ungrateful man who despite being loved by a beautiful and wealthy woman continually stole from her and abandoned her. The parrot tells the story of a woman who despite being married carried on a long-term affair with a Brahman. However, one day the Brahman was mistaken for a thief sneaking into her room. He was struck in the head by a servant of the woman and as he lay dying the woman tried to revive him by breathing into his mouth. However, in his death throes he accidentally bit her nose off! She blamed her disfigurement on her husband who, if not for her guilt, would have been executed by the king. The zombie asked the king who was indeed more wicked, the man or the woman. The king answered “woman,” which was deemed, for no objective reason, correct by the zombie. In another story a Brahman mother and father are lamenting the sudden death of their young son. They took him to a cemetery where an old yogi first cried when he saw the child, but then jumped up and danced and used his magic to spiritually possess the child’s corpse. The parents were delighted when their child seemed to come back to life. The child decided to practice as an ascetic yogi for the rest of his life though! The zombie asked the king why the yogi first cried and then danced. The king answered correctly again that the yogi was sad for losing his old body, but happy to now have a new, young, Brahman body. There are many other stories of riddles involving love affairs, poisonings, harlots, and magical sex-changes. In the end of these stories of the king and the zombie, the zombie uses his insight into the ways of humans and beasts to warn the king about the ascetic’s intentions to kill the king and use the zombie’s power for himself. The zombie doesn’t frighten the king, but, in the end, saves his life and becomes his magical ally.

As seen from the stories of (or perhaps “conversations with”) the zombie from Sanskrit, there has been a certain level of comfort with the notion of the living dead giving advice, being a source of protective power, and serving as a source of auspiciousness or luck. These stories which were circulating throughout most of mainland Southeast Asia, as well as Java, are sources for rituals and story-telling today. Indeed, they are also sources for the hugely successful horror film industry especially in Thailand (the film industry of Burma, Laos, and Cambodia is still in

its infancy). Many of these films involve the use of zombies, corpses, ghosts, and other members of the world of the living dead. Films including *Maha-Ut*, *Arahant Summer*, *The Coffin*, *Eternity*, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Remember his Past Lives*, *Nang Nak*, *Nak*, *Chom Khamang Wet*, *Ahimsa*, and many others have included features corpses or ghosts that can provide power and knowledge or can torture and kill. These films often feature Buddhist monks and lay people as characters as well. It is time to start investigating the multiple sources for these cultural features so distinctive in the region.

Conclusion

Even though most Buddhists in Southeast Asia practice cremation, stories and rituals involving corpses and animated corpses abound in the region. I hope that I have provided some possible sources, both textual and ethnographic, for these relatively widespread aspects of Buddhist religious repertoires in the region. What should be emphasized in the end is that scholars of Buddhist history and practice in Southeast Asia need to pay more attention to both Southern Chinese and Sanskrit literary sources for supposedly the Pali-based Theravada Buddhist history instead of labeling those non-Theravada/non-Pali elements of Buddhist culture in the region simply “local” or indigenous or even animist. The binary between “Indic” and “local” in the region needs to be completely reimagined or perhaps re-animated.