

Bone Transfers: Incomplete Replacement in Rmeet Ritual Exchange*

Guido Sprenger

Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica

This article addresses a central concern of exchange theory: why different objects, and specifically persons, can be exchanged. The relation between objects of exchange in the rituals of the Rmeet (Lamet) in Laos shows an incompleteness of replacement. Bride-prices are thought to “buy” the bride, but are not equivalent with her—wife-givers demand further payments over time, but they also may provide a dowry. During mortuary sacrifices, the meat of a buffalo is distributed in a way that suggests it is identified with the dead, but this raises the question why its skull is placed on the grave. Two models for conditions of replaceability—of brides by bride-price and the dead by buffaloes—are used in the analysis: (1) the employment of a third term that makes exchange objects similar (the *klpu* “soul” of both buffaloes and humans); and (2) the notion that the objects represent contrasting, but ultimately complementary values (affinity, embodied by the bride, and patrilineality, embodied by the bride-price, as reproductive principles). Still, each exchange relation in question is valorized, with one value or party being superior, therefore, no exchange can be complete and balanced. This incompleteness is manifest in signifiers like the skull and the dowry, which signify the gap between the object or person and its replacement.

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Introduction

One of the central problems for theorists of exchange is understanding the conditions that allow for the transfer of one item (service, object, person) for another. Or, put more broadly: How is it possible for one thing to replace another? Not only are the effects and motivations of exchange important here, so is the relationship between the items exchanged. Certainly the exchanging parties act in order to acquire desired objects, establish social relationships, or even constitute themselves. But this does not answer the question of why items of exchange are considered exchangeable or replaceable. It is not even clear if the term “equivalence”—equality of value—describes the relation appropriately (Strathern 1992:170).

The problem becomes particularly pressing when full persons, that is, persons who may figure as transactors, are themselves the items of exchange. How can a human being and social actor be replaced by objects? Here, exchange overlaps with sacrifice, where a human being is replaced by an animal that is identified with the sacrificer (Hubert and Mauss 1964[1898]).

This article reconstructs how the Rmeet (Lamet) conceive and handle this problem. About 17,000 people in Laos are identified as Rmeet, speakers of a Mon-Khmer language who mostly live in upland villages in the northern provinces. They are swidden agriculturalists and address their rituals to a pantheon of spirits, most prominently patrilineal ancestors, house spirits (who are an aspect of the ancestors), the village spirit, sky and earth spirits, and so on. Village society is organized in houses composed of a married couple with their children and often the husband's parents. Houses are grouped into exogamous unnamed patrilineal lines and linked through asymmetrical marriage rules (mother's brother's daughter marriage). The marriage rules divide affines into wife-givers and wife-takers, with givers considered to be superior. The village is the largest traditional unit of society.

The present data were collected in the mountain village Takheung in Luang Nam Tha Province, which is entirely surrounded by other Rmeet villages. Most of my data were gathered from 2000 to 2002. At that time Takheung was only accessible by footpaths. Although many villagers had extensive experience with lowland society and in Thailand, and considered their village progressive, a strong sense of *riid Rmeet* (Rmeet tradition or ritual) pervaded everyday life.¹

¹ The description of mortuary rituals here follows my observation of several of these rituals, mainly in 2000 to 2002, but also in 2005. The description of marriage rituals mostly mirrors informants' views of how marriages are presently performed, since no full cycle

Imbalanced Exchange: A Brief Discussion

The model for the following analysis combines the theory of socio-cosmic societies and Dumont's value hierarchies (Barraud et al. 1994; Barraud and Platenkamp 1990; de Coppet 1995; Dumont 1980[1966]) with some ideas of Jacques Lacan: "I" is the other, that is, the Ego starts as an object (Lacan 1977 [1966]). This approach uses Lacan's ideas as a parallel model that may elucidate hidden connections in the data. The juxtaposition of analytical models based in ethnography and Lacan's concepts produces insight and meaning in the sense that meaning is the possibility of translation into another code (Lévi-Strauss 1978:12). This implies that meaning, like translation, is always to some degree tangential.

The theory of socio-cosmic societies holds that representations (organizational features, exchange, kinship, rituals, etc.) that reproduce a given society or community are ordered by idea-values that stand in a hierarchical relation. In a given context, or at a given level of the overall ideology, each idea is superior or inferior to its opposing concept(s). These hierarchies may be reversed at a different level of the ideology. The relation between idea-values may be one of equistatutory opposition or hierarchical encompassment (Dumont 1983). On the highest level of the ideology, the dominant idea-value ultimately encompasses its opposite, a highly debated concept that is of less importance here (Barnes 1985; Parkin 2003:50-53). One common way to act out these value hierarchies is via exchange, particularly in ritual, and notions of unequal values have proven helpful in addressing some of the problems of exchange (Iteanu 2005).

One of the advantages of this approach is that it allows us to see social dynamics in terms of a structured ideology. The dynamics of social reproduction—and even transformation, although this is not an issue here—do not emerge from the friction between structure and process or a homeostatic ideology and practice. The tensions between hierarchized values, and also between contradicting levels of the ideology, provide the framework for social process. Each singular case in practice can be described—although not exhaustively, but this is a general feature of scientific models—in terms of the underlying imbalances that are a feature of the ideology.

of wedding rituals could be observed during my research. Because this article is not concerned with social transformation, historical versions of the rituals recorded by Izikowitz (1979[1951]) or remembered by present-day Rmeet are not taken into account (Sprengrer 2006b).

The recognition of imbalance in exchange has an advantage over Lévi-Strauss' (1967[1949]) view of asymmetric alliance, as found among the Rmeet. For Lévi-Strauss, the key to exchange as the foundation of society was the exchange of marriage partners, and only a person could be exchanged for another person. Therefore, asymmetric alliance had to be linked to trust, the trust that the cycle of marriage would provide a bride to replace the sister who married out. Bride-price then appears as a surrogate solution when trust is under constraint. But when imbalance of values, and thereby of exchange items, is recognized as a major feature of exchange and social relations in general, the bride-price is not a surrogate, but embodies the central problematic of exchange, the replacement of persons by things. This is also of much more immediate concern for the Rmeet themselves, who do not conceive their marriage arrangement as cyclical and do not see wives as replacements for sisters. As this article attempts to show, the replacement of persons by things is more central to the understanding of exchange in general than is the replacement of persons by persons.²

From the combined perspective of socio-cosmic societies and Lacan, the foundation of exchange is the duality of persons as integrated, living human beings and as "dividuals," being composed of several aspects and relations whose integrity is the condition for being alive or human (Moore 1994:135-136; Strathern 1988). What this analysis of the Rmeet data suggests is that the condition for exchange is the replacement of persons by objects or the division of the person as concept into aspects that can be represented by objects—a point that opens potentials of comparison with Melanesia (Strathern 1992:178). Not all kinds of exchange need to be conceived as those of (aspects of) persons for objects, but these other exchanges build on the ideology that states an exchangeability of objects and persons. The nodal points of the Rmeet exchange system are marriages and mortuary rituals. The relations established there serve as the base for the entire exchange system and valorize it. Two types of relations have to be considered: First, those between the exchanging parties, both living and human, and dead and incorporeal; second, those between the objects of exchange and persons. The value of the objects is a clue to the value structure of the relationships enacted in the exchange.

Two moments of incomplete replacement in the data draw our attention. The word *wei*, "to buy," is often employed in regard to the bride-price; but contrary to an exchange of goods for money, the exchange of bride and bride-

² Even the exchange of person for person, as found in symmetric marriage exchange, can be interpreted as imbalanced and dynamic. The two wives create symmetrical debt that, by itself, cannot be repaid (Godelier 1999[1996]:41).

price does not lead to closure, but initializes an ongoing relationship between two houses. This is due to a number of asymmetries in the relation between bride-price and bride. While the bride-takers lose all rights to the bride-price after its transfer, the bride-givers maintain a relationship with the bride and demand compensation in case of maltreatment. What then is the relation between bride-price and bride that makes this asymmetry possible? A related problem arises with the dowry, which is an optional, though ritually important gift from the bride's parents. If the bride-price would fully replace the bride, dowry would be superfluous. The opposite position would suggest that bride-price is actually exchanged for dowry, the bride moving on her own agency or as a free gift. In that case, a sort of balance between bride-price and dowry would be expected. This is not the case, in two respects: First, the bride-price's monetary value usually exceeds that of dowry, and second, bride-price is obligatory while dowry is not. What does the possibility of giving dowry then signify?

The second incomplete replacement shares the problem of seeming redundancy with the first. During mortuary rituals, a buffalo is killed for the dead person and distributed. The distribution suggests that the buffalo replaces the dead person in his social network—it stands in where the dead cannot be any longer, thereby transforming the relation. But why is the skull of the buffalo put on the grave, the place where both the actual body and the spiritual remains of the dead are situated? If the buffalo stands in for the dead, this seems to be redundant. Both ethnographic findings basically raise the same question: What is the relation between a human being and the object or animal that replaces him or her in ritual?

The argument proceeds in the following manner. An analytical model or interpretation is applied to the material until it reaches its limits—it proves to be applicable, but only to cover a limited aspect of the problem. At this point, a new model is introduced that builds on the previous one, until it is equally exhausted. Thereby, various levels of analysis and meaning are revealed; even the tentatively placed final one cannot claim to fully exhaust the data. The data presentation develops along the argument, and it becomes itself the argument in a Lévi-Straussian manner of arguing with the concrete.

The first step is to look at a third term that links buffaloes and humans in order to make them exchangeable. The following section on funerals demonstrates how a person's replacement, the sacrificial buffalo, takes his place in his social network and thereby reproduces and transforms it. The third section on marriage explains how marriage prestations and the bride provide complementary values that reproduce the basic social unit, the house. The final section returns to funerals in order to wrap up the argument about

incomplete replacements. Here, replacements like bride-price and sacrifice appear as signifiers of the loss of a person—an imbalance between signifier and signified that is irresolvable and thereby fuels the exchange cycle.

Buffalo “Souls”

Two models for relations between exchange items are relevant here: (1) The items are related to a common scale of value—a third, encompassing term by which they become comparable (for example money or labour in economic exchange). (2) They represent values that relate to each other as a duality and are considered to be ultimately complementary—at least in the context of exchange, even though the duality may be seen as antagonistic in other contexts. A classical example is the “male” necklaces that are complemented by and exchanged for “female” arm rings in the Massim *kula* (Malinowski 1922:356).

Both approaches have to be taken into account here. The first one comes into play in the relation between humans and buffaloes. As Godelier (1999 [1996]) has pointed out, the prevalence of the symbolic in exchange theory has eluded the importance of the imaginary. In his argument, any exchange hinges on its links to objects that cannot be exchanged, which are endowed with imagined powers and origins. These objects validate any exchange between unequal parties and of unequal objects. They embody the imaginary, placed beyond human control, in order to create symbolic links between other objects and their values.³ The material existence of such unexchanged objects and their separation from exchange items is a crucial point in Godelier’s argument. But there is no reason why these two types of objects must be kept apart, or why the imaginary should only manifest itself in the unexchanged ones. Godelier’s argument can be pushed further into abstraction: The imaginary provides a point of view from which symbolic relationships are created, that is, there is a level of the imaginary built into an exchange system that creates exchangeability.

Rmeet ethnography supports this argument. Here, the imaginary is the world of the spirits (*phi*) and the way they see things. The differences and identifications that mark this world off from that of living human beings influence relationships that are expressed by exchanges. From the point of view of the spirits, which is similar to dreams, living humans are like buffaloes. A dream about purchasing a buffalo hints at a future marriage, the bride being represented by the animal. Dreaming about a number of buffaloes entering the

³ Godelier suggests a different understanding of symbolic and imaginary than does Lacan.

village predicts the arrival of the same number of guests. In reverse, dreaming about erotic conquests predicts the acquisition of a buffalo. In several myths, spirits talk about humans as buffaloes.

Various rituals mirror this identification: When the Rmeet perform a buffalo sacrifice for their house spirit, the individual spirits of the dead are invited as well. On this occasion, the living paint red stripes on their cheeks, from their nostrils to their ears. This enables the spirits to recognize the living and keeps them from leading their *klpu*-souls to the graveyard, which would result in illness. According to one informant, the stripes actually represent the strings that are pierced through the nostrils of a buffalo and fixed behind its horns; they let the spirits know that “this buffalo has an owner.” The identification is even more explicit later in the sacrifice: The buffalo is killed explicitly in order to regain the lost *klpu* of an ill house member. The *klpu* has been abducted by the spirits; or rather, the person’s relationship with these spirits is disturbed, most likely by not paying them due respect, which leads to an unwanted exchange. The person’s *klpu* has left for the spirit’s place, while a spirit enters the person’s body. The spirit in these explanations appears just as twofold as the human person. At once it is an agent, the remains of a person that exist in a particular place (the graveyard), and it is a state of illness, only defined with regard to the affected human being and his or her relationships. To rectify this situation, another exchange has to be effected. In this, an animal is offered as a replacement for the *klpu* of the living. “The buffalo dies in our place,” is one of the verses that are pronounced when it is presented to the spirits.

But how does the replacement validated through the imaginary world of spirits work? There is a third term necessary to make the identification of persons and buffaloes possible and create exchangeability. This is *klpu*, an immaterial, invisible, but individualized aspect of the person, which only buffaloes and humans are endowed with.⁴ Its crucial role shows when only a pig is killed for the house spirit instead of a buffalo. In this case, a small object is created and placed at the site of the house spirit where the sacrifices are performed. It is called *klpu liik*, “the pig’s *klpu*,” and consists of a wooden peg with seven entwined *talaeo* around its middle (Figure 1). *Talaeo* are star-shaped objects of bamboo strips, used by many societies in the region to ward

⁴ This refers to the Rmeet of Takheung. Data from Izikowitz (1979[1951]) and other present-day villages indicate that the spirit of the rice is sometimes identified as *klpu* of the rice. This type of *klpu* differs significantly from those of buffaloes and humans, in that it is less embodied and more volatile. For the present argument on exchange it is less important.

off or bind spirits. The peg itself has the same shape as another *klpu*-related object, the “navel-piercing wood” on graves. Both have a carved-out ball under their quadrangular tips, and both are explicitly identified with each other. The Rmeet insist that pigs do not have *klpu*. The creation of an artifact named “pig’s *klpu*” implies that to effectuate the exchange of the abducted *klpu* for the sacrificial animal, animal *klpu* has to be provided in the sacrifice. The object is not necessary when a buffalo is killed, as it has *klpu*, but the lack of *klpu* in pigs demands a replacement of it.

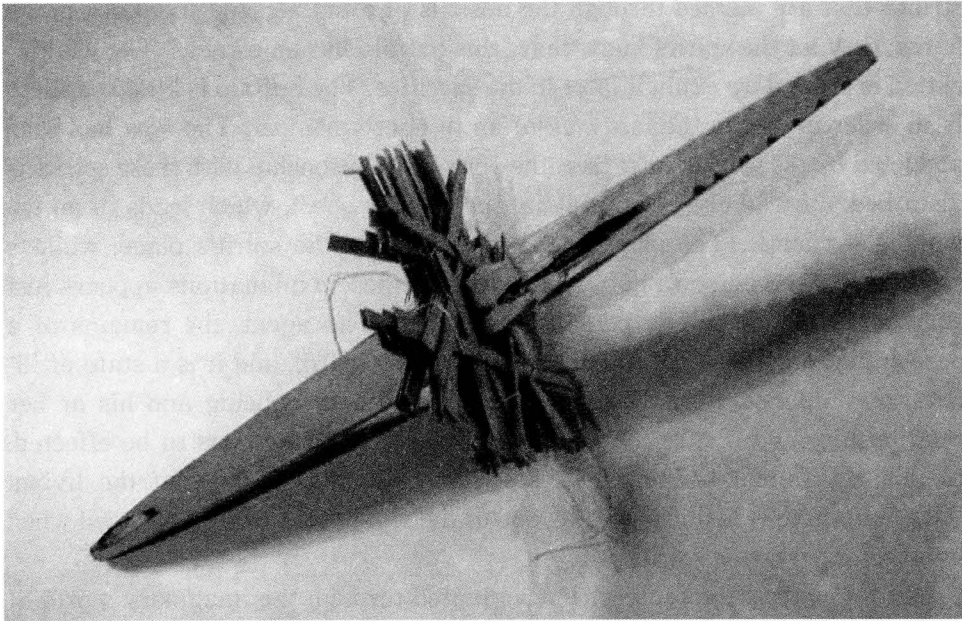


FIGURE 1. *Klpu liik* (“the pig’s *klpu*”). This item is 27 cm in length.

The argument for a third term that enables exchange becomes more problematic when the nature of *klpu* is considered. As detailed elsewhere (Sprengr 2006a), *klpu* is an important aspect of the person. It sees future events in dreams, it becomes a spirit after a person dies, and it is bound to particular social relations. Its integration in the body is secured by stable relations with both the patrilineal ancestors and the wife-givers. These two types of kin are the complementary sources of life and reproduction, and a person’s health is in danger if he or she does not treat them well. If the ancestors are unhappy, *klpu* goes to the patriline’s graveyard, if the wife-givers are neglected, *klpu* moves to their house—both resulting in illness. *Klpu* is therefore a specifically social aspect of the person, in contrast to *püäm*, a more encompassing form of “living movement” shared by all animals and plants.

But buffaloes lack these specific qualities. Buffaloes are not thought of as having spirits of the dead or kin relations. Their *klpu* is independent from the defining features of human *klpu* and after death it disappears into the forest. This indicates not only a fundamental difference between humans and all other beings—which is reflected in the exchanges—but also a distinct meaning of *klpu*. While human *klpu* is defined by its relationships to spirits and kinship categories, buffalo *klpu* is exclusively defined by its relation to human *klpu*.

Thus, the need to negotiate the gap between exchange objects involves a problem. The exchangeability of buffaloes and persons is explained by their sharing of *klpu*, but *klpu* falls into two different types: one that remains after death and one that disappears, one that is embedded in differentiated kin relations and one without kin. The explanation that works in the moment of exchange turns out to be problematic when the consequences of exchange and additional data are taken into account.

There is another, more theoretical problem with this type of explanation, even when it works on the level of ritual practice. As Lévi-Strauss warned in regard to the *hau*, the “spirit of the gift,” one should not take an informants’ explanation as a general explanation (Lévi-Strauss 1950:xxxviii; Mauss 1990 [1925]). *Klpu* is itself a relational construct; it does not exist outside the system it reproduces. The exchanges and sacrifices of buffaloes for persons reproduce ancestral and affinal relationships, and it is precisely these relationships that establish and integrate *klpu* in the first place. The agents that make the conversion of humans into buffaloes possible—the spirits and *klpu* of the dead—are themselves incomplete parts of the person. The relationships *klpu* is supposed to explain are themselves constitutive of it. The argument for a third term, an overarching idea valorizing the exchange, becomes circular. Therefore, from the perspective of an analytical terminology, *klpu* cannot be seen as an explanatory principle, only as a value-idea that derives its meaning and function from the context in which it operates.⁵ Therefore, a look at the funerals and marriage exchanges is necessary.

⁵ Similarly, *hau* may be understood as the “spirit of the gift” in the Maori context, but is difficult to separate it from this context. Yet, on a side note, *klpu* can be classified as one specific form of a cultural strategy that is comparable to *hau*. Both belong to a different and larger analytic category: reifications of equivalence. What the Maori informant quoted by Mauss’ (1990 [1925]:11-12) states in the first place is that the returning object—which he stresses is different from the original one—is a replacement of the first, and that the word for the replaceability is *hau*. At least in certain cases, equivalence cannot be stated in the abstract, but demands a third term that negotiates between the items of exchange; it may even be that money is one of these reifications.

Funerals

Funerals do not only involve large expenses and a great range of people. They also initiate a series of rituals and sacrifices that only ends at the beginning of the following year. Further, they impose a regime of taboo days and rules on a household that will last until those who performed the initial rituals have died. In short, the funeral is the largest ritual of a single household. At the center of this complex is the killing of a buffalo. The buffalo's meat is distributed to several categories of kin according to a particular scheme, but the deceased is also fed with it. In the process, the buffalo becomes increasingly identified with the dead person. The whole ritual highlights the social embeddedness of the deceased by assigning differentiated roles to his relatives and acquaintances.

The objective of the rituals is to remove the dead person from the house. Living humans are closely connected to their house as a socio-cosmic entity, their *klpu* being integrated with the *klpu* of other house members through the shared protection by the house spirit. Any change in membership has to be announced to the spirit with a sacrifice. As mentioned above, the loss of *klpu* is rectified by addressing this spirit. Therefore, the removal of the deceased from the house and his integration in the realm of the ancestors is a step-by-step process.⁶ Time and again, the deceased is assigned to separate food, separate water, separate social relations. "Look for new parents, look for a new spouse" is one of the most common mourning verses—the deceased is told to seek new relationships in the graveyard and to cut ties with the living so as not to be dangerous to them.

The rituals begin immediately after a person dies. The death is announced to the village by one or two gunshots. Mourning sets in, the dead person is placed on his bedstead and dressed in his good clothes. It is especially the members of the his house who care for him. A close male relative, the dead person's brother (for men), husband, or son fulfills the role of the "person who carries the bag" (*ii ngyan ngyai*). He performs most of the ritual acts and presents gifts to the dead. The bag referred to here is a cloth bag put into the grave, filled with useful things such as a comb, a razor, soap, a notebook, a pen, tobacco, chewing tea.

The same day, the wife-takers of the deceased hand a gift of eggs and liquor to the household members, as well as a small pig for sacrifice. A small

⁶ Funerals for men and women are essentially the same. For simplicity, I use the male form throughout.

group of agnates then leaves the village to “fetch water for the dead,” as well as bindweed leaves that are used to wash the hands and face of the deceased before each ritual meal. The water is filled from a regular bottle into a gourd bottle—the dead only accept it from this type of container. “You drink different water, we drink different water,” the performers announce. After their return, the deceased is laid in state. Contrary to the bodies of sleepers, his is placed parallel to the floorboards and the gable, his feet pointing to the entrance. He now lies in the half of the house where the house spirit resides in a wall. He is covered with a type of valuable red blanket that is often received as part of the dowry. The blanket is removed before the burial.

Then, a series of sacrifices begins: First an egg is boiled, then a chicken is killed and its blood smeared on the dead person’s feet. The next day, a pig is killed. These animals come from the household of the deceased. The procedure always follows the same pattern: The “carrier of the bag” washes the dead person’s hands and face, while the sacrifice is cooked in a small bamboo tube on a fire outside the house. Only the liver of the chicken and the pig are used for the soup offered to the dead, while the rest is prepared on a different fire for the living. The “carrier of the bag” holds three spoonfuls of soup in front of the dead person’s mouth and then pours them into a rice container. This container collects all gifts of prepared food offered to the dead during the funeral. All the while the female relatives sing mourning verses and take turns fanning the deceased’s face with the left wing of the chicken placed on a stick.

On the same day—if the death occurred in the morning—or the next, relatives arrive bearing condolence gifts. All gifts, as well as the silver ornaments belonging to the household and its patriline, are arranged at the dead person’s head, creating an image of wealth. The silver ornaments are hung from a rack made of bamboo sticks. The gifts distinguish agnates and affines. Close wife-takers bring a small pig or chicken and kill it, smearing the blood on the dead person’s feet, while wife-givers do the same with a dog. The “brothers” of the house, the members of the same patriline, bring their entire stock of silver coins and display them on the dead person’s chest for a few hours; they also lend their silver ornaments, bronze drums, gongs and cymbals for the duration of the funeral.

The day after his death, the deceased is buried in the graveyard, where usually only men go. The graveyards are situated in the forest and are central for the construction of patriline. Each line buries its dead in a cluster of graves there (Sprenger n.d.). The deceased is buried in a coffin, and some small items from his belongings as well as cigarettes are placed within it. The *ngyai* bag, the rice container with the food offerings, his clothes and other

personal objects are all placed on top of the coffin before it is covered with soil. Seven small stone slates—only six when no buffalo is killed—are put in a row on the grave, as well as a bamboo pole doubly spliced at the top, with a horizontal bamboo cross in the slits. The grave is also decorated with two pillars, the aforementioned “navel-piercing wood” (*khe lüing puun*, see Figure 2).



FIGURE 2. Erecting the “navel-piercing wood” on the graveyard.

All life in the house comes to a halt at the moment the deceased is taken to the graveyard. The women carry furniture and belongings outside, put out the fire, and cover the hearth with a winnowing tray. When the men return from the burial, they storm the house with their shoes on, bang on the walls and make a loud noise to chase the spirit away. This act, called “to pull down the house” (*yah ña*), dramatically highlights the importance of funerals. Houses appear as integrated social and cosmic entities, without differentiated single members. This makes the extraction of a dead a difficult, at times drastic process, that involves the virtual “death” of the house as a dwelling place. In fact, the “pulling down” may damage the building itself, and in some cases it is later moved elsewhere in the village for fear of the return of the dead.

Immediately after the men stop their shouting and banging the women pour pots of hot water on the floor to clean it and relight the fire.

On the third day, a buffalo is killed and some parts of it put into a basket in a way as if to feed the dead. This, as will be argued later, shows the ambiguity between the identification of the dead person and the animal, on one hand, and their dissociation as food and consumer, on the other. The head and hind-quarters of the buffalo are carried to the graveyard and distributed to all participants. At the same time, a wooden shack, “the house of the dead” (*ña ii yoom*, see Figure 3), is erected on the grave and a “rice field of the dead” (*mää ii yoom*) is built close to it in the forest. The graveyard is thus conceived as a village and appears as such in dreams.



FIGURE 3. A “house of the dead” with an exceptionally high pillar for the buffalo skull.

On the fourth day, the deceased is once again called from a place near the village border to eat. Food is presented to him outside the house, but when he arrives the dishes and the steaming pot are toppled over. This is the final event in the ritual sequence. After it, the members of his household and those who participated in all steps of the ritual observe a period of sixty days which is marked by certain prohibitions. The dead person is still present in the

house, and his relations with it are only severed by a sacrifice of a pig at the end of this period. Another pig sacrifice has to be performed at the beginning of the next year in the Rmeet calendar, when the first rains end the dry season and the sowing begins. The taboos of the sixty-day period also have to be observed by all household members on the day of the death or the burial within the Rmeet sixty-day cycle, for the rest of their lives.

One of the central events of the ritual is the killing of a buffalo, and only this sacrifice qualifies it as a complete funeral. Those too poor to kill one used to be buried on a different graveyard.⁷ In the ritual, the buffalo is dissected and the respective parts distributed to the relations of the dead. The buffalo is thus understood as a whole that is taken apart, while the parts go to those persons they rightfully belong to—the division can be seen as an analysis, a statement on the composition of the whole in question. In this respect, the buffalo becomes a representation (“making present”) of something else, an entity that is either not physically available or cannot be dissected and distributed. What the buffalo stands in for has to be put to death, taken apart and ultimately consumed, in order to remove a dead person from the society of the living and turn him over to the community of the dead.

This entity is, at least at first sight, the person of the dead, person here understood as the social, culturally constructed existence of a human being. The dissection of the animal traces the social relations the deceased was embedded in or produced by in life. Various categories of persons receive different parts:

- (a) The blood is distributed to all villagers who ask for some.
- (b) Everybody who helped gets an equal share of meat, composed of muscle, bone and skin.
- (c) Everybody who gave a condolence gift also receives an equal share of the meat, similar to, but somewhat less than the former category. Wife-takers also receive a container (a jar, bowl or bottle, according to their gift's size). People who both helped and gave gifts receive two portions.
- (d) The neck and the hindquarters go to the members of the patriline, who act as a group during the funerals. A special portion goes to the relative who carries a ceremonial lance used to separate the living and the dead and scare the deceased in the graveyard.

⁷ This seems to have fallen out of use; the poor men's graveyard was mentioned, but even when one of the poorest persons in the village died who clearly had no chance of a buffalo funeral she was buried on the “buffalo” graveyard. Her relatives reasoned that a buffalo would be killed “later.”

- (e) The head and the behind are carried to the graveyard where they are cut up and distributed to those who worked there, often members of the patriline.
- (f) One hind leg goes to the wife-givers, usually the house from which a dead in-married woman or a dead man's wife came. When the deceased was unmarried, their mother's brothers receive this share.
- (g) The skull is placed on the "navel-piercing wood" on the grave.

Let us examine these categories of gifts:

(a) Blood, as the most formless and liquid, but also most abundant part of the body, lends itself to objectifying the unspecified relations the deceased has to the other villagers. A Rmeet person is usually capable of tracing or constructing a kinship relation to any other person in his village, but this level of relations is not addressed in the blood distribution. In a situation that allows one to see all types of relatives, close and distant, as just fellow villagers, actual kin ties are subordinated. Blood embodies a context in which the undifferentiated belonging to the same village prevails over specific kin ties. The same context also dominates the annual ritual for the village spirit, when the sacrificial animal (pig or buffalo) is distributed, with a few exceptions, in even shares to every household.

(b) Other categories of persons are recognized in a similar manner. Helpers and guests also are less specified; notwithstanding their actual genealogical ties, they receive a portion that mirrors their degree of involvement in the ritual. Persons who gave gifts, helped during the funeral, and specifically worked on the graveyard, all walk away with a bigger share than do closer relatives who only gave gifts. In this context, formally recognized kinship is not the dominant way to classify people, even though people tend to describe most of their relations in kin terms. Exchange, help and caring rise above kinship. This category of receivers of meat covers both agnates and affines, but usually contains many people from the same grave cluster as well as the wife-takers of the household of the deceased.

(c) The condolence gifts highlight an important aspect of the sacrifice. Givers do not explain their gift by notions of love or compassion—otherwise common among the Rmeet—but say that it keeps the dead spirit away from their house. Otherwise, the dead person would continue his relations in the same way after death as he did in life—he would visit the houses of friends and relatives, for rituals or other reasons. This type of relationship now has to be replaced by gifts. The condolence gifts do not simply continue the relation but at the same time transform it—it acquires the shape of objects. In the same manner, the return gifts of buffalo meat at once replace the deceased in his

relationships and turn these relationships into objects.

(d) and (e) Members of graveyard groups are called “children of the square” (*goon cheweal*), referring to the several open places in the village surrounded by houses. The “close children of the square” form a patriline of two- to three-generations depth from the oldest living generation. These people bury their dead in one section of the graveyard and form the grave cluster proper. The “remote children of the square” have their graves on the same graveyard, but in different sections, and they are not necessarily seen as agnates.⁸ Yet it is the “close children” who help each other performing the big rituals. This group receives the largest shares of the buffalo, since it is most intimately involved in the funeral, including the digging of the grave and the building of the “house of the dead.” They obtain the most prominent parts of the animal: the meat of the head and the section closest to it, the neck. The topography of graves and houses corresponds to the distribution of the meat. From one grave or house, the agnatic relations expand to the grave cluster or a group of houses (this is what “children of the square” suggests; brothers and sons tend to build houses near each other when possible), and from there to more remote graves and houses. These steps are mapped upon the body of the buffalo, the skull, and the meat of the head and neck.

(f) The gift to the wife-givers demands detailed consideration. It consists of one hind leg of the buffalo, three or six silver coins (colonial piasters) and a life cow or half a (co-owned) buffalo. This gift is called “the bones of the dead” (*seng'aang ii yoom*). The name points to the identification of the dead with the animal. But at the same time, identification here involves the downgrading of what the receiver is entitled to, to some substitute. The wife-givers are considered superior to their wife-takers; in marriage and the rituals for birth, house building and rice cultivation they figure as life givers. They do not only give a wife to a man, but also enable him to found a house; infertility can be overcome by a gift of containers from the wife-givers; and exchanges with them precede the harvest, in order to make it plentiful. At the same time, wife-takers are obliged to obey their wife-givers. This is complemented by the recurrent demands for bride-price the wife-givers are allowed to make.

The encompassment of takers by the givers and their demands is addressed in “the bones of the dead.” The funeral is the last occasion for wife-givers to demand bride-price for the marriage of the dead person; especially when a woman has died, bride-price is sometimes transferred to them. But “the bones

⁸ There are thirteen patrilines (grave clusters) and four graveyards in Takheung. It is likely that all graveyards were originally based on patrilines but later became more differentiated, either because immigrated families were integrated or because marriage between distant parallel cousins caused the line to split.

of the dead” belong to a different order—it is a separating gift. It marks the end of demands for bride-price, especially so, when both partners of a marriage have died.⁹

The form of the gift corresponds to the wife-giver/wife-taker relationship. Their hierarchy is expressed by the verb *soon*, which can be translated as “to negotiate.” *Soon* precedes many gifts and payments, including those at marriage, divorce, and land lending. The common definition of *soon* is: “They ask for much, but we give little.” This imbalance is couched in terms of the other’s right to make excessive demands and one’s own inability to meet them. The people on the giving side of *soon* are always in a position of indebtedness, forced to beg for a cut.

The paradigmatic case of *soon* is found in affinal relations. Even when the amount of bride-price has been decided in advance, an elaborate discussion takes place immediately before it is handed over. The employment of the term *soon* suggests that the parties settle for an amount that is necessarily conceived to be smaller than what the wife-givers had asked for—it is a replacement for what the wife-givers have a right to demand. The payment at the same time maintains the subordination of the wife-takers.

Soon also precedes the transfer of “the bones of the dead,” although the amount of this gift is fairly fixed, and actual cases as well as normative statements give a more standardized picture than bride-prices. But the name and the negotiations explain what is at hand here. Being superior to their wife-takers, the wife-givers’ power even allows them to ask for the mortal remains of the dead. After all, they are the sources of a house. When asked about the origin of someone’s wife, a Rmeet replies: “His house comes from this (wife-giver’s) house.” But this statement conflicts with the patrilineal succession of houses, manifested in the house spirits and the graveyards. The house spirit, who cares for the life of the inhabitants, is the spirit of a line of male ancestors and their wives. The graveyard is organized by the same principle. Without the notion of patrilineal descent, the relations with the ancestors would be nonexistent, and the living would be left unprotected and dissociated. A claim for the bones of the dead, the actual body that is buried, made by the wife-givers, undermines this principle. This claim, to be sure, is only implied by the name of the gift. But its gravity is highlighted by the (imagined) case of a burial on the wrong graveyard. Such a case would entail a huge compensation, probably as high as the one for a murder. Murder victims are also not buried

⁹ The way the Rmeet explain the “bones of the dead” does not seem to differ in cases of a wife, a husband or an unmarried person dying, or if one spouse dies before the other. It is always thought to close the bride-price transfers. This repetition of closing exchanges is similar to the step-by-step removal of a dead.

on the graveyard they belong to, but in the forest, and they turn into dangerous spirits. A dead person buried wrongly does not meet this fate, but the confusion of the order of patriline is similarly serious. Therefore, the actual bones cannot be given away.

At this point, everything points to a rather neat strategy of replacement, informed by a conflict of commitments. The reproduction of the patriline and the relations with the ancestors demand that the actual bones of the dead be placed on the patriline's graveyard. But the wife-givers, as the opposing source of fertility and reproduction, also have to be compensated. Therefore they receive a token dead body, composed of what is actually a diminished bride-price: half a buffalo, a few silver coins and a part of the sacrificial animal. It is still called "the bones of the dead," but results from negotiating the implied original claim.

While this reasoning explains why the gift is called "bones of the dead," it does not answer the question of whether buffaloes and coins really substitute for persons in exchange. It also leaves open the question why the buffalo's leg is accompanied by a diminished bride price, and also, why it is the wife-givers who have to be content with a bargain. The marriage exchanges and the wedding shed more light on this point. Only after these have been explored can we properly address the final and most difficult part of the buffalo distribution: the placing of the skull on the grave.

Marriage

The preferred person for a man to marry is his mother's brother's daughter (MBD). The marriage rituals consist of three steps: a formal request by the future bridegroom's family for the girl, accompanied with small gifts; followed by a "small" wedding soon afterwards, when the bridegroom enters the house of the wife-givers for bride service; and finally the "big" wedding, usually after one or two years, when the couple moves out to found their own household or move back to the bridegroom's parents. Both weddings consist mostly of gift transfers, the killing of animals, and feasting.

The bride's parents usually receive the bride-price, or its largest part, at the big wedding, graphically called "killing the big pig." The actual killing is performed by the bride's agnates, the "children of the square," who are paid for this service by the groom's family. There are two more types of wife-givers that claim gifts. The bride's mother's house of origin, wife-givers of the bride's house, can ask for a reduced type of bride price called *chengji*. Even their wife-givers—the wife-givers of wife-givers of the bride, or the house of the bride's MMB—may demand a small gift called *ang ktu ää* ("chicken stom-

ach”); though this is recognized in Takheung it rarely occurs there. Additional gifts claimed by the bride’s brothers and paternal uncles are classified with the main bride-price, called *gooi* (“price”).

All gifts from the groom’s side are “answered” (*doob*) by counter-gifts, although this exchange is often delayed, just as the initial transfer of gifts sometimes does not take place on the day of wedding. Still, there is no notion that bride-prices and counter-gifts balance each other. Such a balance would imply that the bride is not exchanged at all, but moves from one house to the other for nothing in return.

But this is not the case. First, bride-prices usually exceed the counter-gifts, although generous wife-givers may, in the course of the years, give more in terms of monetary value than the bride-price. Second, the transfer of a bride is often equated with “buying”—the word *wei*, “to buy,” is used. But third, and most importantly, bride-prices are obligatory while counter-gifts are not. Wife-givers may ask for bride-price until both partners are dead, and there is a formalized manner for such requests. But there is no form for wife-takers to demand dowry. They may complain to others when dowry is not delivered, but it seems as if they do not have the right to ask. There is no *soon* for dowry, no negotiations—it is conceived as a voluntary, optional gift by which the wife-givers express their “loving and caring” (*kho am*) for the wife-takers. Independent of the actual gifts transferred, this fundamental asymmetry in the relation between bride-price and dowry recognizes the authority and agency of the wife-givers.

Thus, marriage features a similar ambivalence of identification as the funeral sacrifice. Seen from one angle, the bride is replaced by objects, the bride-price; therefore, at least in the context of the wedding, the objects are identified with her. From another angle, the objects do not replace her, for two reasons: First, they are countered by other objects, the “answering” gifts of the bride’s parents (and any wife-giver who receives bride-price). The assumption of an identity of objects and bride makes the “answering” gifts seem superfluous and therefore not an answer at all. Thus, there must be an aspect of the bride-price that invites another reply in form of objects. Second, the fate of the bride, the bride-price and the “answering” gifts are very different—this elucidates a profound difference in the value of the gifts themselves and therefore undermines any notion of their equivalence.

The destination of the exchange items will become clear through a discussion of their value in relation to socio-cosmic reproduction. The bride, as elaborated above, is a condition for the continuation of the house, which is defined by the unity of its members and the house spirit—this is, as part of a patrilineally organized set of units. She is even identified with this unity in

everyday language use, in that “the house” of a man comes from his wife-givers house. The ancestors-as-house spirit can only attain a bounded form due to the marriage and reproduction of sons with other people’s daughters. The house spirit, the de-individualized ancestor within the village, is disembodied and formless; the gift of a bride gives him a boundary, a container in the form of a house. The classifier used to count houses (as architectural units) is *pläi*, the same as for containers, limbs (bones covered with flesh), and fruit (kernels in a shell).

The relation with the wife-givers defines the patrilineal relations as “inside” through the contrast with “outside” affinal relations. Here, descent does not appear as the primary organizing principle, with affinity as an attachment (as British functionalism would have it; see Dumont 1961; Kammerer 1998), but rather descent and affinity define each other, with affinity, at least in some contexts, being the dominant principle.

This inside-outside relationship is found metaphorically in the gifts themselves. Covers and containers are typical gifts from wife-givers. For example, a piece of edible dried buffalo skin (*nguu traak*), classified as container and outside, is given on numerous occasions when wife-givers bless their wife-takers. On the other hand, the “bones” given by wife-takers are classified as content and inside.¹⁰ The two most prominent items of dowry are a clay jar, as used for fermenting rice into rice wine, and the red blanket that is placed on a dead person before burial and also used during buffalo sacrifices for the house spirit. About 40 percent of those asked what they received as dowry started their lists with these items.

Both are used for the reproduction and stability of the house. The jar causes pregnancies; a childless couple turns to their wife-givers for such a gift that will make the wife-givers’ ancestors send a child. Other gifts from wife-givers classified with this one are bottles, pots and bowls, like those “answering” the condolence gifts. The blanket is necessary to properly bury a dead or confront the ancestors. With both objects, the wife-givers provide the groom’s side with the ability to reproduce the house by having children and maintaining good relations with the deceased. They continue relations within the patriline toward both the past and the future.

¹⁰ The contrast of skin and bone reminds one of the “bone and flesh” contrast associated with lineality and affinity in many Asian societies, both in the region near China and in India (Lévi-Strauss 1967[1949]: Ch. 24). But the similarity hides a number of differences. Skin here represents a surface that connects inside and outside, or “containedness,” while bones represent the inside. As representations of kin relations, they are not associated with the origin of body parts. The word for “flesh” (*dou*) has no immediate role in this classification. Therefore, a more detailed comparison than this article can provide is needed to align the Rmeet case with “bone and flesh” dualities of other societies.

Yet the two items share an important feature with other parts of dowry, and this is where the difference between dowry and bride-price comes in. Various kinds of basketry, an axe and a knife, a winnowing tray and a rice sieve, piglets, a live chicken—all these objects are meant to stay in the house of the wife-takers. Most of them are household items that will be used in everyday life, but are not valuable as items of trade or further ritual exchange. There are exceptions to this pattern—sometimes the dowry contains a single silver coin—but in general these items are not meant to create new relations outside the wife-taker's house.

On the other hand, the items given as bride-price have multiple uses, with the potential to create and reproduce a wide range of relationships. The two most important parts are a buffalo and a number of silver coins. Both may play a role in funerals, the buffalo as sacrifice and the coins as temporary gifts placed on the dead body. But they may as well be given as another bride-price or simply sold. There are no bonds on the use made of them; these items become full possessions of the house of the wife-givers.

Hence there is a broad division between gifts from wife-takers and those from wife-givers. Both have reproductive and ritual value; both sets of objects contain items that support ritual exchange and the relations with the dead. But what separates the categories is that the gifts of the wife-givers cannot be given away again. The bride-price, by contrast, may be re-used at whim. The blanket will become an heirloom, and the jar, should a child be born after its transfer, has to be protected since its destruction will harm the young child. There are no such explicit bonds on household items, but these have no value in other exchanges. In fact, basketry will only be given if the wife-givers know how to make it, and thus these items do not originate from some other, external source.

The bride is, of course, the most difficult item to assess. She is not given to her husband's whims either; she retains relations with her natal house. In cases of maltreatment or her untimely death her house of origin may claim compensation. Yet, she should not return to her house of origin, even when divorced, as this would anger the house spirit who would try to kill her. She therefore remains in a state of being given until her death, neither fully belonging to her husband's group nor her parents' house. Only through the gift of "the bones of the dead" does she become, as a dead body and spirit, a full member of her husband's patriline and graveyard. She joins the house spirit, understood as "the spirit of mother and father." Thus, the relation between her and the items of bride-price is as ambiguous as the one between the dead and the sacrificed buffalo. The bride-price replaces the bride, but this is not a claim of identity.

This is where the second model of replacement comes in. Buffaloes and humans are exchangeable, in funerals and marriages, due to their *klpu*—the first principle of replacement, which constructs a third term. But in both exchanges the incompleteness of the replacement is stressed. Buffalo *klpu* is different from human *klpu*, and bride-prices do not equal brides. The second model of replacement consists of the ideological construction of the items, parties or sources of items as representing values that are opposed but ultimately complementary. This is the case with affinal and patrilineal forms of reproduction. The result of the exchange is clear—all parties receive objects or services they need to reproduce the relationships that are constitutive of them. There are no houses without brides (affinity), and no protective house spirits without ancestors (patrilineality) who need buffaloes and coins. In each case, the relationship through which brides and sacrificial objects are channeled is a constitutive element of the entity defined by the exchange. The exchange creates reproduction and substantive, bounded entities—in this case, houses, but also persons and patrilineal.

But where does the imbalance between items come from? The relationships that they represent are always contextually valorized and unequal; one side is always considered superior. Therefore an exchange has to be incomplete, because the gift of the inferior side never balances the one from the superior party. The gift of the living, reproducing bride cannot be balanced by any counter-gift. As a living human being, the bride belongs to both categories of giving and given entities. We can assume that this, not the simple fact that she is human, makes her a gift that cannot be fully reciprocated, under conditions of asymmetric alliance. Thus, the wife-giving side, as their continued demands and the “bones of the dead” suggest, has the right to ask for what cannot be given—any return is just a reduction of the original claims. The notion of replacement becomes paradoxical. The wife-takers’ gift is, first, a metaphorical substitute for something that they can not give lest the system in its entirety would collapse—that is, another person. The value of their gift is measured against what was originally given, and whatever the wife-takers may give, this value is “not sufficient.” But at the same time, their gift has its own reproductive value. The items of the bride-price enable the wife-givers to reproduce other constitutive relations of their house, be it with ancestors, affines or outsiders. In this respect, the bride-price is independent of the bride. It can be understood as embodying reproductive principles that are oppositional to those represented by the bride. This in turn makes it possible to conceive an “answer” to them: the dowry.

In terms of the relational definition of social entities by exchange, the house of the wife-givers is defined by the loss of daughters and sisters. While

the bride-price is an attempt to substitute for the loss, the dowry at the same time acknowledges the futility of the attempt; dowry stresses the aspect of the exchange in which the bride-price is not related to the bride. It is therefore not surprising that the ritual function of dowry items belongs foremost to the reproduction of patriline: the birth of children (represented by the jar) and the creation of ancestral relations (represented by the blanket). These items have a closer relation to the items of bride-price than does the bride.

That the dowry does not receive an answer itself, which would initiate an endless series of responses, demonstrates the hierarchical nature of the relation. The bride herself can never be fully transferred, the wife-givers claims never fully satisfied. This constitutes the two asymmetries regarding bride-price and dowry. Dowry is optional, bride-price obligatory; dowry is supposed to stay with its receivers, bride-price can be fully separated from them. It is this hierarchy, in which wife-givers are endowed with authority and agency, which provides the exchange with some stability and keeps it from multiplying into infinite responses. From this perspective, the problem of exchange is not how to start it, but how to stop it. The irreversible hierarchy of wife-givers and wife-takers may actually help in this task, by restraining the possibilities of exchange. This brings us back to the funeral exchanges.

Skulls and Other Bones

The funerary exchanges address the same imbalance between the gifts, between what can be given and fully transferred and what can not. In marriage, it is the bride that can not be balanced. The funerary rituals feature a gift that finalizes the marriage exchanges, and this gift corresponds to the logic of marriage exchanges. It involves an object that can not be fully transferred. The object that can not be given is named, the replacement clearly indicated in the gap between the gift and its description—it is “the bones of the dead.” It represents a loss symmetrical to the bride. A daughter is balanced by an ancestor, and both are conceived as parts of houses and patriline. The daughter can never be fully transferred, but the same is true for the ancestor. His bones have to remain on the patriline’s graveyard. Thus, a replacement for him is sought, one that is just as incomplete and asymmetrical as the initial bride-price. In fact, it is a diminished bride-price, three or six silver coins being a one-quarter or one-half of the standard bride-price of twelve coins, the cow or co-owned buffalo being half of a buffalo (cows are always counted as half buffaloes). The hind leg of the sacrificial buffalo assigns the wife-givers a place different from the members of the patriline of the deceased, but as a part of his social network.

The imbalance constituted by the impossibility to transfer a human being remains, just as affinal hierarchy does. The rule of mother's brother's daughter marriage implies that even though claims for bride-price cease with the "bones of the dead" the asymmetrical relation does not. The next generation of wife-takers should continue taking brides from the old wife-givers. There are even hints of its continuation during the funerary rituals. The wife-givers ask for the "bones of the dead" when they bring the condolence gift. On this occasion, they have an opportunity to see the silver coins displayed by the patriline and assure themselves of the takers' potential to finance future bride-prices.

Therefore, in order to continue the "verse of the wife-givers," as repeated MBD-marriage across the generations is called, the imbalance has not only to be maintained, but it has to support the superiority of the wife-givers. The imbalance of the human-object relation is matched with the wife-giver/wife-taker hierarchy. From givers to takers, a real human being, the bride, is transferred, but for a "price" that is insufficient in two respects: it is never enough—therefore the repeated claims for more—and it is not identical with a bride—therefore the dowry. From takers to givers, a real human being should be transferred, too, but a dead one: the "bones of the dead." But as the real corpse is crucial for the very existence of the wife-taking unit—that is, a house and patriline—the transfer is denied, and it is replaced with gifts that, again, resemble the bride-price.

Once again, we are confronted with the ambiguity of the relation between the items of exchange. The animals and things are supposed to replace humans, but they never fully do so. They are similar—through their *klpu*, for example—but not similar enough. They represent complementary but not equivalent forces. On the other hand, the dissimilarity is a condition of the exchange—both because it reproduces the asymmetry of exchange relations and because it is the only way both sides of the exchange are provided with the means for the reproduction of their patrilineal and affinal relations.

But is there another way to conceptualize this state of things, without falling back on indecisive cover-all terms like "ambivalence"? There is a final item left that poses the same problem again in a different way. This is the buffalo skull placed on the grave.

Buffalo skulls are important remnants of large rituals. Those of animals killed for the village spirit adorn the front of the *cuong*, the ritual house. In traditionally oriented houses, the skulls are placed on the site of the house spirit for whom the animals were killed. These rituals, the killings and the other events, literally "make" the spirits. The generic terms for these rituals are *plo phi ña*, "to make the house spirit" and *plo phi ying*, "to make the

village spirit.” It is only through them that the spirits gain their full existence.¹¹ Indeed, the less traditional houses prefer to throw the skulls away after a sacrifice for their spirits, in order to make them less strong and demanding. A skull in the house leads to stronger prohibitions on who may enter, how they enter, and what they can do there without angering the spirit. This array of taboos is handled with more ease or is largely ignored in houses with no skulls (Sprenger 2006b).

Therefore, the skull is not only a passive signifier of a signified spirit. It is a medium that renders the spirit extant and gives it a specific form—it represents it in the sense that it makes it present again. At the same time it remains separable from it. House spirits with no skulls still exist, as do spirits of the dead without large animal sacrifices, although the latter, the spirits of murder or suicide victims, are extremely dangerous. Their existence highlights the necessity of skulls and proper burials. The spirits of the dead in the graveyard are at times dangerous as well, making people ill when demanding a sacrifice. But this only extends to the members of their patriline (or, for women, of their husbands’ lines). The danger of the spirits of “bad death” results from a lack of boundedness. They are buried in the forest and not fixed to a specific graveyard, that is, to a patriline. The dangerous influence of these “dirty things,” as they are called, spills over to the entire community, even to strangers. But a proper burial changes the nature of the dead spirit. Having a sacrifice and a “house” in the patrilineal graveyard restricts its activity outside the graveyard to his own relatives. What role does the head of the buffalo play here?

This problem was already present in the classical study of Hubert and Mauss (1964[1898]). The relation between the sacrificer (the person on whose behalf the sacrifice was performed) and the victim of sacrifice is one of identification. The victim is transferred to the realm of the sacred, which is dangerous but crucial for human existence. Therefore, the sacrificer is replaced by the victim. But Hubert and Mauss pointed out the ambivalence of the sacrificer-victim relation. The victim is the sacrificer, as it partakes in the sacred in lieu of him, and at the same time is separated from him, as otherwise the sacrificer runs the risk of sharing its fate, that is, death (ibid.:32). Hubert and Mauss solved this problem with a model of differentiated intensity of sacredness. The moment of full identification, when the sacrificer touches or consumes the victim, occurs either before or after the most sacred moment, the killing itself. In the phase of identification, the sacredness of the victim is diminished to a

¹¹ It is probably unnecessary to assume an invisible and unnamed “power” that links the skull and the spirit in order to grasp the efficiency of the skull to substantiate the spirit (Needham 1976).

degree that makes contact less harmful (*ibid.*:48). This solution is problematic because it blurs a model in which the sacred and the profane are qualitatively distinguished realms with one where the difference is one of degree. At the same time, it conflicts with the conclusion of their essay, in which the victim is identified as an intermediary between the realms (*ibid.*:98–99). If the victim is identified with both sides of the partition, then there is no real need to employ a model of graded sacred energies, for in that case the sacrifice creates something by itself—it is not a simple act of substitution of sacrificer with victim.

Thus, Hubert and Mauss suggest two different points: The victim either stands in for the sacrificer—making the sacrifice symbolic—or it is established as something that has not been there before, an imaginary intermediary. The split between these two aspects in Rmeet ritual, the replacement and the creation of an intermediary, becomes visible in the distribution of the meat. As pointed out earlier, the meat represents the relations of the deceased. The gifts of the “bones of the dead,” a part of a dead animal, as well as a living one and coins, in fact represent the dead corpse.

But the relations that the meat distributed to patriline members and co-villagers embodies seem to be not so much one of identification. One conspicuous moment of this ambiguity is the filling of a basket with buffalo body parts during the funeral. At this time, the deceased is already buried, and a basket is placed where he was laid out in state the day before. The basket is of a type that is used to contain pieces of meat and other food and is not specifically made for the occasion. A thread made of plant fiber is fixed to it, linking it to the site of the sacrifice under the house, and a number of body parts of the buffalo are tied to it immediately after the killing: the left ear, the left foot, a part of the tail—all are considered to be halves and connotative of incompleteness. The “carrier of the bag” winds up these pieces in the thread until he reaches the basket. He speaks the same verses that were addressed to the dead person when he received gifts, then puts the pieces in the basket. In another version of the ritual, recorded from the village of Chomsi, the buffalo is killed before the burial, and the thread is tied to the dead person’s wrist (Suksavang 2001). The immediate link seems to convey a notion of identification while, on the other hand, the relation of food to consumer subordinates the buffalo to the dead person.¹²

¹² The totemic clan taboos clarify the hierarchy of food-consumer relations. Totemic relations come about when an animal—usually of the wilderness—acquires power over the life or death of a human, thus making prey and hunter equal and turning it into a “brother.” This excludes the food-consumer hierarchy for future generations, resulting in a prohibition on eating the totem (Sprengrer n.d.).

What the meat distribution embodies are the relationships people had with the deceased, though in a rather formalized manner, based on kinship and participation in the funeral. From this perspective, the sacrifice is still symbolic, but the buffalo does not represent something material or ideal—it represents a relationship. Like the condolence gifts, it materializes the social embeddedness of the dead person in order to replace him.

What remains is the buffalo's head. If the buffalo represents the dead, this would imply a redundancy in the "house of the dead." At once, it is the site of the actual dead body, but also a part of the buffalo is placed on top of it, combined with the "navel wood." What are the skull and the "navel wood" good for? They are not markers for memory, since this is the explicit function of the stone slabs on the grave. Thus, they do not replace something missing but create something new: the new part of the dead person that links the dead to, and simultaneously distinguishes him from his patriline. They also represent a relationship, but one that has no precedent: the relation of the dead with the living, one that, other than the incompletely buried "bad" deaths, will contain the dead and not harm the living at random.

What becomes visible here is the gap between signifier and signified, one that Weiner (1995), arguing along ideas of Lacan, identifies with the origin of exchange objects. The origin of objects that can be exchanged—that are identified as being exchangeable—does not lie in their acquisition, but in their loss.¹³ This is where Lacanian ideas come in. A child at first makes no distinction between its own body and the objects or parts of persons (the feeding breast) around it. It becomes aware of the distinction of self and object through the withdrawal, the loss of objects; the notion of self, or rather, the awareness of it, is not the recognition of a substance, but of a loss. The self emerges as a function of "not mine." At the same time, the "I" is what is identified in the mirror—the recognition of one's own appearance becomes reified as "I." Thereby, the "I" is an idealized object of desire, of a self that conceives itself as lacking. Thus, the notion of objects that represent persons is not an invention, but just an acknowledgement of an original state (Lacan 1977[1966]). The subject is defined by what it loses, what escapes its grasp. Completion and reclaiming of the lost object must remain futile, yet the attempt is constantly renewed—it seems that the repetition of the attempt in various manners provides social life with its form and dynamic.

This logic can be applied to the incompleteness of ritual exchange, which has a similar effect. In the model of incomplete exchange, the function of the

¹³ This is quite contrary, at least on the surface, to Godelier's (1999[1996]) thesis that it is unexchanged property that guarantees exchangeability.

subject—which is, by any means, difficult to essentialize across cultures—expands to other social entities with a reproducing identity, like houses or patriline. If the village or the living members of the patriline are similar to the self, then a dead person is a part that has to be removed. By the removal, a gap is opened between the presumed unity of the “self”/group and the fact of its internal division. This gap must be acknowledged in order to set off the cycle of exchange, which consists of unequal replacements. This happens by a split between signifier and signified. The dead body disappears into the ground and becomes invisible and inaccessible, while something new takes its place: an arrangement of objects and body parts that make the site of the dead person visible—the buffalo skull, the house of the dead, the “navel wood,” and so forth. The arrangement stresses the internal division of the person as well as the internal division of the social units it takes part in: houses, patriline, and villages. The skull on the grave is therefore not redundant, although it is at the same time a double of the dead. Because it is quite obviously the double, it represents the difference between the body and integrated person who has died and its original constitution through relationships, now embodied in the distributed parts of the buffalo—it makes the doubling itself an object of signification.

As the relationships making up the patriline change and dwindle away, so do the house of the dead and the skull on the grave. Old graves of people nobody knows anymore are much less respected than new graves are. While graveyards are thought to be dangerous and should not be visited, the path to the graveyard in Takheung—that also leads to a neighbouring village—actually crosses an old graveyard, gravestones sticking out of the ground. These old stones are often used on new graves and recently were completely removed when villagers turned the path into a road; the spirits of the old graves have disappeared. Thus, the relational aspect of the grave arrangement is also recognized as transitory, just as human relations are. The navel wood in particular embodies the loss or the missing of something. It is telling that only one navel wood is placed on a grave when only a pig and a dog are sacrificed, but that the second one is used as a post for the buffalo’s skull. Thus, it is a representation of *klpu*—representation here as both a signifying and a creative function. As such, it is transferred to the pig sacrifice for the house spirit, where a peg in the shape of a navel wood represents what is not there—“pig *klpu*.”

A similar argument can be made for the bride-price. Here again, the gift reacts to a loss, the loss of a daughter. But the bride-price does not so much stand in for the bride, but embodies or signifies her loss—it turns her loss from a negative event of disappearance into a positive sign (positive and negative

not as value judgments, but as existing/non-existing). In the latter function, bride-price retains its character as a gift of objects that can be answered with other objects. The dowry acknowledges the idea that the bride-price is only the signifier of the loss. The bride thus is separated from her house, and the loss can never be fully balanced. The claims of the wife-givers remain. But this does not mean that she is still fully part of her house of origin. If she should return, the house spirit would not accept her and probably kill her. Thus, a doubling similar to that of the dead, where a disappeared person and the embodiment of the loss in form of a signifier can exist in the same place, is not possible for a living person.

Conclusion

As Iteanu (2005) observed, ritual exchange is characterized by hierarchical relations, one party being superior to the other in terms of values and cosmology. This hierarchy is mirrored in the relative values represented by exchange items. Therefore, ritual exchange often includes an imbalance between the items, as well as between the parties, that cannot be resolved. The need to reciprocate a gift—the gift of life, fertility, a reproducing person—is counteracted by the impossibility to fully replace it. The solution to this imbalance that the Rmeet exchange suggests is to transfer it to the realm of signification. The incompleteness and the loss implied by it are acknowledged as a physical part of the exchange. The skull that doubles as the dead body and its representation, the bride-price whose incompleteness and independence as a gift is acknowledged by the dowry—these are signifiers of incompleteness that stress the gap between the objects and the person they represent. But one has to be careful: This is not to suggest that persons are essentially and universally superior to objects for the same reasons one can not buy a person in modern, humanist societies. While the question why persons cannot be fully substituted by gifts has to remain open at this point, there are at least two possible answers that are in accordance with the data:

- (1) Persons are not only objects of exchange, but also subjects. Those who are replaced appear as active replacers, ritual agents, in other contexts.
- (2) What is valorized in persons is their integrative completeness. Although composed of aspects that can be found in other entities—like the *klpu* of buffaloes—the way human persons integrate social and cosmological relations, kinship, *klpu*, and body, makes them unique and not exchangeable for the mere sum of the same aspects, when they are represented by objects.

The foregoing analysis suggests, when tentatively formulated in more general terms, further conclusions in regard to the relation of persons and objects in ritual exchange.

The identification of objects and persons is not a pathology of “fetishism,” but intrinsic to the conception of the person itself. Any concept of the person works with notions of internal divisions, starting as the relation between a lost object and the self. The self is not something that creatively emerges from nothing, but is what remains, what is recognized as being abandoned by the object that left. Any object that represents the self in this relational aspect, or the lost object, represents first of all the loss. It is not a trade-in, but an imaginary recognition of the loss. No object, no exchange relationship ever fully and durably completes the divided human being, that is, still, recognized as a specific kind of integrated whole in other contexts.

At the same time, this incompleteness is a necessary condition for continued exchange. The condition of the person as being split is not only a deficit, but creates the ability to find imaginary others in objects like buffaloes. This constitutes exchangeability in the first place. Therefore, the initial problem an exchange system has to address is the relation between persons and objects. Two possible models emerge from the Rmeet material: exchangeability via a third term that links person and object, or complementarity of values represented by them. But this does not exhaust the possibilities. Each exchange system, ritual or not, makes its conclusions in this regard by different value-ideas. Often, this involves part-whole relationships and notions of unity and dispersal. For modernity, the attempts of classical economists and Marxists to link the value of objects to human labor or the individualization of consumption may be viewed in this light (Dumont 1977; Gregory 1982; Mintz 1986[1985]).

Psychoanalytical inspirations serve to broaden the understanding of these phenomena. Yet, they have to be treated with some caution. They may be universal truths or mythic stories that structure the perception of social and symbolic behavior. But they also may display features of structural and processual organization that can be found in different areas of human intellectual and social activity. Whatever they are, they create some resonance between the data on exchange in other cultures and the analytical notions of the West employed here. This is especially true with representations that refer to a primordial unity being destroyed in order to produce the world as we know it. This form can also be found in Rmeet origin mythology (Sprenger 2006a, 2006c). In these stories, incompleteness appears as a loss, but also as a necessary foundation of social reproduction. The mythical incompleteness is the narrative form of the imbalances found in ritual exchange. Both are cen-

tral features of the reproductive system, open up ways to frame and enact practice, and demand signification.

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Guido Sprenger

Postdoctoral Fellow

Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica

Nankang, Taipei, Taiwan 11529

gspr@gate.sinica.edu.tw

骨的遞轉： 拉莫特人儀式性交換中的不完全替代

史季陶

中央研究院民族學研究所

本文將處理交換理論中的一個核心議題：為什麼不同的物品——特別是關於人——可以被交換？寮國北部拉莫特（Rmeet，即 Lamet）人在婚喪儀式的交換中，交換物所呈現的關係是一種不完全的替代。在婚禮中，聘禮被當地人視為是用來「買」新娘的，但這二者其實並不等值——因為給妻者會繼續提出更多的需索，雖然同時也可能會提供嫁妝給討妻者。而在喪禮的犧牲祭祀中，就肉的分配方式而言，所獻祭的水牛可說是等同於死者，但這樣的論點卻無法解釋，為什麼水牛的頭顱骨最後要被放置於墳上。

針對這些在交換中不同的可替代狀況——亦即「聘禮↔新娘」以及「水牛↔死者」——本文採取兩種模式進行分析：其一是透過第三項物的運用，讓交換物成為類似的東西（例如，水牛和人都具有的 *klpu*「靈魂」）；其二是採用交換物呈現對立、卻同時也有互補價值的觀念來分析（例如，由新娘所具體化的「姻親關係」觀念，以及聘禮所具體代表的「父系世系」觀念，二者皆為繁衍的原則）。然而，這裡所討論的每一種交換關係中的特定價值或一方，其實都已具有其既定的優勢，因此沒有一個交換的結果是圓滿或可以達到平衡的。在拉莫特人的儀式性交換中，透過水牛的頭顱骨和嫁妝等物，具體地顯現了這種不完全替代的特性，並象徵著被交換的物或人及其替代物之間的差距。

關鍵詞：寮國，拉莫特人，犧牲，交換，喪禮
