FATHERLESS CHILDREN AND LISTENING SPIRITS
Measuring Kinship in Ritual in Northern Laos

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Abstract: Kinship among Khmu villagers of northern Laos is usually presented in anthropology as patrilineal. However, the ritual of a ‘small marriage’ can confirm a child’s belonging to the mothers’ house. The affirmation of the child’s maternal belonging is simultaneously about separation and exclusion from paternal ties and requires for its success careful measurements of kinship. During the ritual, quantities of food, gifts, and money become indicators of belonging. Human measurements are accompanied by spirit measurements that are unknowable but can have fatal consequences. Even though rituals are meant to achieve closure and establish belonging, ambiguities remain as a result of diverging measurements of kinship.

Keywords: belonging, Khmu, kinship, Laos, marriage, measurement, ritual, spirits

In the neighborhood of our house in the Khmu village of Pliya in northern Laos, a young woman named Kaəət lived with her father and her daughter, then two years old.1 Her house was among the less fortunate, with a history of starvation and child deaths, and at that time was short of both workers and money. Kaəət was kept busy cultivating the fields on her own and searching for wild vegetables; meanwhile, her daughter stayed home and was looked after by her father, who occasionally made handicrafts or set traps. With no other male house group member to perform specific tasks or to send for temporary labor migration, Kaəət regularly helped out her classificatory brother in order to get his help in return (such as when clearing new upland fields). Making a living thus occasionally proved quite challenging for her small house group. Looking ahead,
she planned the intergenerational transmission of belonging by envisioning not only her daughter but her future grandchildren as belonging to her house. In her words, she would “let her live with me and have a fatherless child” (uun naa yet po o, pc koon baa). To confirm Koš’s daughter’s position as a ‘fatherless child’ (koon baa, or koon pian)—one who would have no acknowledged ties to the house of her male progenitors—they would have to arrange a ritual, called a ‘small marriage’. Such small marriages are actually fairly common, representing a solution to a core dilemma: when inheritance, succession, and names are usually passed on through the male line, how can maternal belonging be achieved?

Anthropologists usually present kinship among Khmu villagers (a group of Mon-Khmer speakers in upland northern Laos) as structured by patrilineal and especially affinal ties according to matrilateral cross-cousin marriage (Lindell et al. 1979; Stolz 2020, 2021), which resemble those among the neighboring Rmeet (Sprenger 2006). They also emphasize the house as a social and economic unit (Évrard 2006). In particular, matrilateral cross-cousin marriage—also known as ‘asymmetric alliance’ (Needham 1960) or ‘generalized exchange’ (Lévi-Strauss [1949] 1969)—has played an enormous role in the anthropology of kinship, notably in the structuralist school, and is significant in the ethnography of Southeast Asia (Bovensiepen 2010; Fox 1980; Howell 1989; Leach 1951; Sprenger 2006). This implies a division of relatives into matrilateral and patrilateral, which has consequences regarding marriageability, belonging, and relations between kin groups that stand in either wife-giving or wife-taking positions relative to each other. Belonging to a kin group there is usually regarded by both scholarly observers and locals as transmittable only through the male line, with the father assumed to be the sole source of belonging.

However, the local acknowledgment of fatherless children has brought home to me that, despite this amplified importance of patrilineality, belonging can be and in some cases is passed on through women. The existence of a category of ‘fatherless children’ came to my awareness only after I had already become familiar with my interlocutors, although, unlike the category of the widow among Jola villagers of Guinea-Bissau (Davidson 2020), it was certainly not disguised or left unspoken. That women can transmit belonging and social identity under certain conditions is not controversial even though it could be seen as contradicting the patrilineal norm: it is an acknowledged, although not often encouraged social option. In any case, the fact that belonging is subject to negotiation shows the extent to which maternal belonging is possible in a patrilineal context. Belonging thus is not determined at birth: instead the positions of wife-givers and wife-takers are brought into being through ritual practice and then invested in bringing about maternal belonging before birth. During my fieldwork, I witnessed Khmu villagers directing much attention to ritual activities meant to fix belonging.

This attention already suggests that the establishment of a child’s status as fatherless is fragile. Every ritual at some level establishes belonging, which
often happens through exchanges. While this has been well observed in the literature, what has received less attention is how those who participate in rituals measure what is given and taken. Focusing on measurements in ritual draws our attention to people’s ideas about what counts as indicators of kinship. The ritual of the small marriage responds to a particularly difficult challenge and is inherently fragile. For the same reason, there is a heightened awareness and anxiety about the success of the ritual in general, and the specific kinship measurements used in particular. Analyzing how participants in rituals estimate and display quantities and values of specific gifts of food allows a deeper understanding of the ambivalent nature and ongoing negotiation of a person’s belonging, of her claims to care, and finally of the constitution of social units.

Creating and defining belonging, small marriages are rituals that ‘make kinship’ by first undoing another bond. The analytical lens of kinship measurements guides attention to the concrete use of indicators, scales, and yardsticks in these processes. Measurements—whether the standards on which they are based are DNA tests or ritual yardsticks such as the size and kind of a sacrificial animal—are often taken as self-evident by the involved actors and are generally left unexamined by anthropologists. They are, however, authoritative not only in the production of belonging and inclusion, but also in the creation of separation and exclusion, which is rarely noted by those who observe them (but see Carsten 2013). In our case, both are central, as we will see.

Procedures for measuring kinship are not exclusively ‘modern’ or ‘scientific’; they can take many forms, including ritual ones, and revolve around a more general concern to ‘fix’ belonging. This presupposes a broad definition of measuring that refers to quantitative but also qualitative features of entities, as well as acts of gauging, assessing, and judging. The acts of measuring kinship comprise the ritual handling of the prescribed gift—a pig—and in particular the estimation of its size and the pinching of meat from certain parts of it as indicators. The attention given to the appropriateness of the quantities and qualities suggests that not only human actors but also spirits are among the authorities measuring and also enforcing attempts to fix belonging.

As Tatjana Thelen and Christof Lammer argue in their introduction to this special issue, measuring kinship, that is, gauging the nature of kinship based on collecting and valuating indicators (substances, traits, or practices), is ubiquitous. By focusing on the procedures of measuring kinship, we can go beyond merely asserting that gift exchange, commensality, or shared substances produce a state of kinship and develop new conceptual tools to engage with processes for knowing kinship that (un)do belonging. Measuring is a particularly powerful concept: it reveals how—and based on what indicators, forms of knowledge, and techniques—persons, authorities, and institutions come to (eventually competing) conclusions about belonging. The concept of
measuring also allows an investigation of the ways in which persons differentiate degrees of closeness and distance and use indicators to assert certain states of affairs or complain about inappropriate behavior (see Zharkevich 2019). Interestingly, these measurement procedures and their results are commonly taken for granted: they are often unnoticed by the persons involved and also remain undertheorized in anthropology (see Thelen and Lammer, this issue).

However, the procedures of measuring become visible when kinship and belonging are up for debate. This was the case during the attempt at fixing the belonging of Cen’s daughter to which I will move after a short overview on the category of fatherless children. Drawing, then, on the small marriage of Cen that I attended during fieldwork among the Khmu of Pliya in upland northern Laos in 2014, I will show that first humans and then spirits attest belonging based on the collection, manipulation, and display of various indicators of measurement (particularly gifts of food). The involvement of spirits in the process of measuring is necessary, but also feared. And as the spirits’ measurements cannot be fully known by humans and co-exist with additional modes of measuring, the results always retain some ambiguity.

Fatherless Children

The young neighbor whom I mentioned initially might find that the continuation of her house was becoming a challenge. As house group membership is transmitted patrilineally, a lack of male house group members and heirs can lead to the loss of the house (kaag laarc). Due to the (patri)virilocal norm, women move out of their houses and into their husbands’ or husbands’ fathers’ houses when they marry. Staying unmarried is the only possible way for a woman to stay at her natal house and secure its future in the event that she lacks male offspring. Thus, when my young neighbor Kəət imagines her future and the future of her house, the best option for both is for her daughter to stay unmarried and have a fatherless child, as this would ensure the continuation of the house. Moreover, a co-residing daughter seems to her, as an unmarried woman, to be the only way for her to retire from heavier work and receive care in old age. The prospect of retirement is usually best when one has at least one co-residing son, an in-marrying son’s wife, and perhaps grandchildren in the village to stay with and look after. In fact, there are several reasons for having a fatherless child besides sustaining a house: a child might be the result of a brief affair or, worse, of an affair with a married man (if detected, the object of fines and generally hazardous for one’s reputation). Worst of all would be a liaison deemed inappropriate, such as between a woman and a man who belongs to her wife-giving kin group. In any of these cases (and possibly others), having a fatherless child is a viable option. And, indeed, fatherless children are
no rarity: according to my census data—another kind of measurement—as of 2014–2015, one-third of the houses in Pliya included a fatherless child.

Having or being a fatherless child is tied to ideas of hardship and poverty but certainly does not have the negative moral associations we might think it has. Fatherless children often belong to houses that lack an adult male workforce; these so-called women’s houses (kaay cmkɪm) are generally economically disadvantaged compared to other houses. Emphasizing this, the fatherless child is sometimes referred to as an orphan. Included in the rhetoric about orphans is the image of the disadvantaged person asserting her/himself against all odds. The figure of the orphan is prominent in Khmu stories featuring a fatherless son or orphan—both terms are occasionally used interchangeably—who originates from a woman’s house and has to sustain his position against a much more powerful antagonist. In the end, his wits and the help he gets from animals make the heroic orphan the unlikely winner of the competition. Men, especially those who were themselves fatherless, enthusiastically related such stories to me.

But how do children become acknowledged as fatherless? In order to discuss the rituals aimed at undoing the tie to the progenitor and effectively rendering the child fatherless, I will describe one particular instance of the ritual of a so-called small marriage (plu bɔɔ ŋɛ) in detail. While birth itself is not accompanied by much social or ritual attention, certain preparations and cautionary measures need to be adhered to. Among these is informing the village and ancestor spirits of the arrival of new souls (hrmaal) before a birth. The announcement of a pregnancy is often part of marriage rituals, but it may also be the center of a small marriage. This ritual is similar to a full marriage ritual, mobilizing reproductive ties between persons, houses, and kin groups, but—antithetically to marriage—it is aimed at undoing these ties. Often, the small marriage occurs when a full one cannot or must not. The case of Cen Thɔɔŋ was locally perceived as tragic because she was rejected by her former fiancé, Thɔɔỳ Kham, by whom she was allegedly pregnant for the second time. Both wanted to marry initially, and their marriage was deemed an appropriate match, given the affinal ties between the kin groups to which they belong. But Thɔɔỳ Kham’s mother, I was told, did not want her son to marry a young lady from a ‘poor house’ and successfully opposed this plan. Because Cen was diligent, modest, and humorous, sympathies were with her and her house, who had little chance of overcoming their plight. However, the solicitude of her kin was not enough to make her as-yet-unborn child belong to her maternal house: a series of ritual measurements was required.

The Small Marriage of Cen

The neighbors did not fail to notice that Cen’s blouse had begun to strain over her belly and started insinuating that she had resumed her liaison with Thɔɔỳ
Kham. As indicated above, she had first been pregnant a few years before, and his house had not cooperated during the small marriage. Back then, Cen had given birth to a son, who was much loved by her grandmother Ya Sii Hak, the female head of the house. Most unfortunately, he died at the age of three months. Cen’s grandmother, others related to me, ‘cried’ (yaam) for days and weeks in grief over the baby boy, who might have helped the house to prosper. Because these events were widely known, her recent pregnancy was observed keenly. During this pregnancy, Thɔɔy Kham showed no signs of ‘pity’ (sla eey) toward Cen. Instead, he confronted her at night outside of her house and, in earshot of the neighboring houses, accused her of having invented their relationship, thus, publicly denying any closeness to her and the child she was expecting. By that time, the young man had become engaged to a girl from another village. Soon after, the day of the small marriage ritual approached. Partaking in the ritual and ‘giving the pig’ could be seen as embarrassing for the young man’s house—he would have to admit to having had an affair with his former fiancée and thus being ‘too close’ to her after he had become engaged to a young woman from another village—so the negotiations were expected to be difficult. Indeed, the process unfolded with repeated public measurements attesting to the delicate situation.

The ritual took place in mid-August at a nearby workhouse—a type of relatively open house-like building that was used as a workshop, for public gatherings of the neighborhood and passers-by, and also for certain rituals that were not permitted to take place in ordinary houses. Around mid-day, several members of Cen’s kin group, as well as wife-givers and wife-takers, came there to sit and to help with the ritual work. She herself sat at a secure distance on her own house’s veranda, facing the workhouse, and watched what took place from there with her grandmother, Ya Sii. Cen’s mother rushed in and out of the workhouse, occasionally interacting, while arranging and fetching things, managing the technical side of the procedure, or standing at the side, closely but silently listening to what was being said. Around 22 persons were present: the men sat around the rice beer jar inside the workhouse and, accompanied by women, on the bench outside, and were served tobacco and cigarettes. Their talk was about procedural issues: for the upcoming negotiation, two mediators had to be found to settle the matter with the young man’s father, Ta Loŋ. The goal was to persuade Ta Loŋ to give a pig to Cen’s house for her to sacrifice and then a thigh to Cen’s wife-giver. By giving the pig, or its monetary value, he would be admitting to the presence of fruitful reproductive relations between a member of his house and one of the house of Ya Sii shortly before his son’s upcoming marriage with a young woman from another village. Obviously, he was not willing to give in, which would mean publicly admitting that there had been an inappropriate closeness between his son and Cen, and also wanted to save any pig he might have had for the upcoming wedding. Thus,
the mediators returned unsuccessfully from the first round of negotiations with Ta Loŋ at his workhouse. Ta Loŋ’s sister’s husband, who admitted that he had not mediated wisely due to his hot-tempered nature, immediately got upset about this news. He raised his voice and sarcastically commented about Ta Loŋ’s reluctance, asking, “Was he so afraid that he didn’t come participate in the negotiations face-to-face with his wife-givers and -takers?” Others threw in, half-jokingly, that someone should go ahead and just take one of his pigs by force. Both comments were, however, not meant seriously. Negotiations in such cases are always mediated and never direct, and stealing a pig would have no effect as the ritual could only be based on a gift, not theft.

Another wife-giver present, Ta Sen, who often eloquently raises arguments in public discussions, told me meanwhile that Ta Loŋ should act wisely and cooperate during the ritual negotiation. Otherwise, the headman could make it a public matter: if one followed the law (kot maay, a Lao term used in Khmu as well), Ta Loŋ’s son would have to make ongoing payments to support his child. So far, no case has come to my attention in which such a deeply local affair involved an appeal to external state authorities, but this statement shows that villagers are well aware of other ways of measuring kinship in relation to claims of resources and support. Within the ritual process, these different understandings are negotiated through the application of measurements. Ta Sen’s projected scenario entailed another, rather exterior measuring of kinship: from the state’s point of view, kinship measurements are based on genealogical—understood as biogenetic—ties. Although these different kinds of measuring are at odds, it is noteworthy that Ta Sen could handle both perspectives with ease: that the young man, based on another mode of measuring, would remain the father of Cen’s child did not disturb his commitment to the other, locally established mode of measuring, according to which Cen’s child was becoming a fatherless child.

Apart from these comments, the atmosphere was generally focused, even sober, and the arguments were pragmatic. A pig—either Ta Loŋ’s or another for which he would pay compensation—had to be found. The discussion then centered around the question of where to get a pig, and how much to demand from Ta Loŋ. A consensus was reached on the price of a pig the size of two fists. This sum would also include the amount of money Ya Sii would pay to the whole village to inform not only its community but also its spirits (via the priests) of the arrival of a child. Here, the pig was used to indicate (in)appropriate closeness through size or value as a kind of yardstick for the measurement.

Before the mediators went off for the second round of negotiation, an elderly man, a widely respected healer, urged them to be modest and succeed. He reminded them of the unsuccessful negotiations about Cen’s first pregnancy two years ago and hinted that their previous failure might have been connected to the child’s death. Back then, the house of the young man had declined to
cooperate, and Cen’s house had finally sacrificed their own pig without being compensated. Cen’s first child’s death indicated, tragically, that this ritual procedure had not had the intended effect. Here, instead of the state, he invokes yet another measuring authority—spirits—whose measurement did not turn out to have the expected results.

Meanwhile, Aaw Man, a member of Cen’s kin group (taay-heem), and Yoŋ Liaŋ, the direct wife-taker, had arranged for a pig (one of Aaw Man’s own) and went about sacrificing it to prepare the soup, the blood, and the other representative parts that had to be given to Ya Sii’s wife-giver. The mediators returned successfully so that Ya Sii, together with her close kin group members (especially her husband’s brother’s son), could arrange the khan miay, a tray of gifts dedicated to the village level, the village priests, and the elders. Glasses of whiskey were given on the tray to one of the priests, together with a sum of money. Next, after informing the village spirits (pnme rooy kuŋ), Ya Sii gave the tray with the pig’s thigh and two glasses of rice whiskey to the representative of the house she regards as her great wife-givers’ house, the house that is regarded as the mother’s brother’s house. Then, the center of ritual action shifted to the opposite side in the workhouse, facing the valley, where a large bowl of soup made from the pig’s meat, a second, smaller bowl with its raw blood, and its head, tail, and heart were arranged on a bamboo tray used for winnowing rice (see fig. 1). Around the tray sat several men who were regarded as close kin of the house of Cen.

**Figure 1:** Ya Sii is about to pinch meat from the sacrificed pig and serve it with small balls of the sticky rice that is served in the bamboo tubes. To her right sits the great wife-giver, to her left, a member of her kin group. Immediately after the pinching, the elders will eat a few spoonfuls of the soup that is in the middle of the tray. Photograph © Rosalie Stolz
Ya Sii proceeded with the Ɂyak, the ritual pinching of meat from the sacrificial animal, shaping rice balls and pinching meat from the representative bodily parts of the pig as the elders constantly murmured verses and scrutinized whether she had pinched meat from all the important parts—the head, the heart, and the tail—so as to prevent any mistakes. She pressed the meat she pinched onto the balls of sticky rice she had formed in her hand and laid them on the tray as an offering to the ancestor spirits present and also as a food medium for ‘letting the ancestor spirits know’ (primic rooy). The elders watched this procedure closely, and one man prodded her to try once more to pinch meat from the ear: it is not easy to tear pieces from the cooked, gristly ear. The comment was not meant to admonish her but to safeguard that enough meat was presented to the spirits—who are assumed to measure the child’s belonging based on these gifts of food—so as not to jeopardize the success of the ritual.

The elders then recited verses that were intended to enhance the anchoring of the child to the house group and bring prosperity and well-being for the child and its house. Immediately after Ɂyak, everyone was encouraged to start eating. After the small circle of eaters left the food tray to retire to the back side of the workhouse, where the drinking took place, the next column of eaters approached the tray. When no more guests wanted to eat, the tray and food were removed and replaced by a large stereo, which was placed at the side of the building where, shortly before, the Ɂyak had taken place. The center of action shifted to the back side, where people drank rice beer from a jar, while outside a small crowd gathered around a fire, smoking, chatting, and drinking in moderation. The stereo, which seemed too big for the occasion, most explicitly illustrated the similarity with today’s wedding procedures.

**Fixing Belonging of the Fatherless Child**

This ritual was intended to firmly anchor Cen’s fatherless child to her mother’s house and announced her presence to the village spirits. As a fatherless daughter, she would be entitled to receive a share of the inheritance and land of the mother’s kin and to transmit her affiliation with the house and kin group to her children, which is remarkable given that transmission of belonging and things is usually patrilineal. Although produced by the small marriage ritual, the anchoring of the child does not depend on its ties to the mother; it is a bond between the child, the house, and the kin group. When the mother eventually moves out after (re)marrying, her fatherless children will remain in the woman’s natal house and kin group. Among fatherless men, this bond is visible after death: male fatherless persons are buried in the plot of their mothers’ kin.

In order to achieve this goal, key kinship relationships and indicators of closeness are mobilized in ritual: co-kin group members shoulder the larger
part of the ritual work, close wife-givers need to be present, and close wife-takers support by way of mediating the negotiation. Representative elders and a priest (lkuun) also need to be present on behalf of the village as a whole. Wife-givers (eem) figure particularly prominent here as the source not only of wives but also of well-being and fertility: thus, they are treated with respect by their wife-takers to whom they are in socio-ritual contexts superior. As mediators during (ritual) negotiations and conflicts—like Aaw Man in the case discussed above—wife-takers also fulfill important functions for their wife-givers.

Notably, it was not just any kin of the right category who were present during the ritual: close ones played a particular prominent role. For instance, a representative of the great wife-giving house (eem nam) sat directly next to Ya Sii during the ritual pinching of meat of the sacrificial pig. Thus, ‘kin reckoning’, another kind of vernacular measuring of kinship, is not restricted to genealogical or categorical approaches but includes a mixture of both, predicated on the rather shallow depth of kin memory. Closeness is also produced and measured based on ritual means. For instance, Aaw Man, whose pig was eventually sacrificed, originated from another village and married into Pliya. In order to be fully incorporated—and in order to have co-kin group members (taay-heem), wife-givers (eem), and wife-takers (khəə)—he ritually entered Ya Sii’s kin group during her house ritual. Since then, he has been the close wife-taker (khəə les) of this house. The success of the ritual also depends on the participation of kin who are locally accepted as ‘close enough’, which speaks to the role that various indicators of closeness play in other contributions to this special issue (see Moretti and Thelen and Lammer, this issue).

However, it is not persons but houses that are the primary kinship units. Houses have been shown to be endowed with various meanings and functions (e.g., Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Sparkes and Howell 2003; Waterson [1990] 2009). The house as a social unit and its physical container are both denoted by the same term for house (kaaŋ). The house group (khon kaaŋ) is simultaneously a ritual, economic, and kinship unit. On another level, houses are not occupied by humans alone but are also assumed to be the abode of house spirits. Like other tutelary spirits, house spirits act as benefactors but might also harshly sanction behavioral transgressions (Stolz 2018). The villagers assume that the house spirits watch over the house group and discriminate between who belongs and who does not, a determination with potentially lethal consequences. No wonder, then, that introducing children-to-come, like Cen’s daughter, to the house and resident house spirits during pregnancy was deemed important. During the ritual, the elders reminded the mediators of Cen’s first child’s premature death upon the unsuccessful negotiation. They stressed the imperative of a firm and efficacious ritual anchoring of the child to the house and kin group.
How is the category of the fatherless child made effective when the hidden history behind the fatherless children is widely known in most cases, even if it is not talked about? This brings us to the role of measuring spirits in rituals.

Spirits in Ritual Measurement

Remaining silent concerning the supposed progenitor of the child is not enough to make a child fatherless: ritual acts are needed. While acknowledging that daily sociality is shaped by a stream of mundane acts, Michael Lambek (2011: 3) argues that “marked rituals … formally, substantively, and conclusively constitute or consummate our relationship as one of kinship and publicly affirm our mutual commitment to it.” My case also illustrates this point: orchestrated ritual acts are needed to make the child effectively fatherless. However, I add that measuring is not only central to these processes but also poorly understood.

I speak here of measuring in order to show how the actors effect an irreversible change in the state of social affairs and in the being of the person(s) through estimating indicators—such as food from sacrificial animals, gifts, or money—in rituals. The ritual described here is, despite its name, not a marriage that establishes an affinal bond between houses and does not turn the marriage partners into wife and husband or the wife into a member of her husband’s house. However, it is still a small version of what happens in the course of larger marriage rites, and there are several similarities that make this ritual appear like a marriage, albeit one that comes with its own negation. Like marriage, it first comprises negotiation as a compulsory element and, second, includes the ritual pinching of meat, especially of a pig given by the wife-taker. However, unlike in full marriages, the outcome is the anchoring of the child to the mother’s kin group.

Any marriage, including a ‘small’ one, requires negotiation (cf. Sprenger 2006: 155). While during bridewealth negotiations the content is usually discussed and agreed upon in advance, here a degree of uncertainty was involved. What was perceived as a tragic failure of the rituals during Cen’s first pregnancy led to a heightened awareness. There were to be no ambiguities concerning Cen’s child’s belonging so as not to threaten the child’s souls, as in children they are considered vulnerable and not yet firmly fastened to the body. Accordingly, the mediators were instructed to show restraint. Knowing that the young man’s house would be difficult to negotiate with, their demands were to be modest, which departs strongly from bridewealth negotiations. To everyone’s relief, even though he did not give up one of his pigs, the young man’s father finally agreed to pay the pig’s agreed-upon value in ‘Lao paper money’, and the negotiations came to an end.
The second stage of the ritual—the pinching of rice and meat—points to a non-human source of authority in measuring kinship and producing closure and obligation. If at a certain point “the criteria and commitments constituted through deliberate ritual acts” (Lambek 2011: 3) become irreversible, in this case there is a powerful third party involved: the spirits (cf. Stolz 2018, 2021). Among the great diversity of spirits, several are particularly close to human affairs and not only oversee but also can intervene in them, for better or worse. Acts of ritual gifting thus constitute ways in which humans try to communicate with spirits and influence their measurements. Among those acts is the pinching of rice and meat. The small balls of sticky rice and the pieces of meat that Ya Sii pinched from representative parts of the sacrificed pig were directed as gifts of food toward the village spirits who were thus ‘informed’ (phnemc) about the changed state of affairs among the living. These acts of pinching rice and meat to feed to the spirit(s) (ʔyak mah, ʔyak ah) are meant to be acts of ‘sealing’ that publicly announce a changed state of affairs that is regarded as irreversible and binding, since it is not merely an agreement between persons. However, and for various possible reasons, the spirits might not come to the same conclusions. This is interpreted as resulting from different measurements of the value and kind of the sacrificed pig, as in the case of Cen’s first child. Then, the ritual (including what is claimed to be a ‘sealing’) would fail from the perspective of the persons involved.

While the spirits measure fatherhood by the food that is given to them, the houses and kin groups are informed about the state of affairs by the communal meal. As with the offerings to the spirits, the quantity and quality of food distributed to specific persons is key to the human measurement of a successful ritual. In particular, the close wife-giver was given the thigh of the sacrificed pig and with it honored as wife-giver; the relation to him was actualized with regard to the expected child, who would someday “ask after the wife-giver” (maañ eem te). By accepting the portion and eating the sacrificial animal’s meat, they have shared this knowledge and accepted the new state of relations. Drawing on an example from West Africa, Nikolaus Schareika (2010: 104) shows that the shared consumption of sacrificial meat produces a social reality: swallowing the meat amounts to swallowing the kin relations that were declared by means of offering this sacrificial meat. Whereas Schareika gives priority to the “memory of the pieces of meat in the minds” of the participants (ibid.: 105; my translation), I focus on the consubstantiality produced by those literal acts of swallowing. In contrast to purely verbal agreements, not only mutual relations are changed here but also the state of each participant’s being through the shared consumption of meaningful substances (cf. Carsten 1997; Kerlogue 2007). However, the consubstantiality produced by those literal acts of swallowing ultimately relies on acts of measuring. This process involves mutual agreement on the ‘appropriateness’ of the quantity and quality of meat and on weighing the closeness in
kinship of the participants. In addition, this meal shared among human kin, as mentioned above, does not ultimately suffice to make the child fatherless; it is the spirits’ measurements that literally count.

The spirits’ measurements of fatherhood are not visible to humans and can only be guessed after the fact, for instance, through the occurrence of misfortunes. A case in point was Cen’s first child: a child that is not properly anchored in the mother’s house—one whose status as fatherless is not recognized by the listening spirits—might attract their attention. Ancestor spirits radically dispose of what appears to not properly belong. While it was obvious that something must have gone wrong, it remained unclear whether the spirits’ measurements of the child’s kinship relations came to a different conclusion or whether the spirits did not conduct any measurement. Perhaps they did not recognize the gifts of food for what they were intended to be. After all, the house of Ya Sii had not received a pig or payment from the alleged father as is the norm and, thus, sacrificed their own pig after their negotiations with the house of Ta Loŋ failed. In the case of Cen’s second child, the pig was obviously accepted as evidence by the spirits, even though it was not an actual pig but only an equivalent value of money given by Thɔɔy Kham’s house. The uncertainties around the spirits’ measurements do not weaken but strengthen the persuasive power of the ritual.

If naturalizing kinship means that the measurements and their results are taken for granted, it could be said that in this case kinship was ‘spiritualized’ through measurements. It is the spirits’ perspective that provides a key framework for people’s lives, although certainly not the only one (Lutz 2021: 79). For my Khmu interlocutors, the spirits’ presence and power are unquestionable, even though their precise intentions and actions are ultimately unknowable. When entering a house (or not), when declining an invitation to a joint meal, or when attending a work event, the Khmu residents of Pliya keep in mind that spirits oversee human behavior and will eventually intervene, if they deem something inappropriate. This attention to spirits is widespread in Southeast Asia, even outside the animist contexts that are again gaining attention in anthropology (Århem and Sprenger 2016). As I have discussed elsewhere (Stolz 2018) and hinted at above, the spirits, their actions, and the measurements they apply are neither visible nor entirely clear to humans. There is a lot of uncertainty, leaving space for various interpretations that are themselves based on measurements conducted by human observers.

A tragic misfortune, such as Cen’s first child’s premature death, was subject to various interpretations, but the one that got established was that the death resulted from the failed measurement by the spirits during the small marriage conducted in anticipation of the child’s approaching birth. Then, they had sacrificed a pig from her mother’s house, not that of the alleged progenitor, and the reasoning went that this made it the wrong kind of pig. In attributing the
child’s death to this cause, my interlocutors aimed to understand the spirits’ measurement by considering the indicators and evidence they were assumed to use. The resulting death was perceived as a tragic yet inevitable result of the flawed ritual procedure, making the spirits the key source of authority for establishing belonging through measuring kinship.

Concluding Discussion: Measures of Belonging?

In this article, I have highlighted interrelated dimensions of measuring kinship for achieving apparent closures of belonging, based on an ethnographic example from the Khmu of Pliya in upland northern Laos. Here, I have focused especially on the role of measuring kinship in ritually undoing fatherhood and thus producing fatherless children. In small marriages, a kinship tie previously known through everyday measurements of kinship is ritually undone. This establishes that the child belongs to its mother’s house and has long-term implications in terms of succession and inheritance. The end of the negotiation is marked by the ritual act of feeding the spirits as well as the human participants. The ritual procedures of measuring kinship draw their persuasiveness from the display of the sacrificial meat, along with the actions performed with it, and from the shared consumption of meat and liquor. Through the spirits’ measurements, the negotiation is thus made a shared and binding reality.

By focusing closely on an ethnographic context that is dominated by asymmetric alliance, patrilineality, and the idiom of houses, I have shown that kinship belonging is not a given but needs to be established or dissolved in rituals for which measuring kinship is key. As is also shown in the other contributions to this issue, when the question of belonging is at stake, procedures of measuring—ubiquitous but rarely noticed—become notable. In this case, I have presented different acts, modes, and actors of measurements. The key acts of measuring involved choosing a pig of a particular size and determining the correct compensatory sum, as well as pinching correct amounts of meat from selected bodily parts. In addition, measuring the closeness of participating kin was relevant to making the ritual efficacious. Finally, the negotiations showed that different modes of measuring kinship co-exist. Although Cen’s child is fatherless according to the ritual measurements, it is also shared knowledge that according to state measurements the father is the progenitor. Not only human participants but also spirits were regarded as enactors of measurements who could sanction humans when their measurements of kinship differed. Considering this, applying the concept of measurements while embracing the quantitative and qualitative aspects mentioned above helps to explain the importance of meticulously executing ritual acts when establishing kinship belonging.
The efficacy of the ritual measurements is connected to the presence of spirits as a potent third party. ‘Letting the spirits know’ refers to acts of sealing, which imply that all those who partake in the ritual and meal commit themselves to the outcome of their agreement. What is the role of spirits here? Are they parties to the contract, or are they witnesses? From my interlocutors’ points of view, a general problem with spirits is that neither their reasoning nor their consent or actions can ever be exactly known (Stolz 2018). Nonetheless, their potency remains unquestioned: the death of Cen’s first child appears to have been an example of the existential side of exclusion.

Still, the spirits’ general take on kinship matters is anticipated by Khmu in Pliya. The sociality of spirits and the sociality of human persons are described in strikingly similar ways. The more anthropomorphic spirits, at least, have wife-givers and wife-takers just like humans, and, what is more, they observe and sanction the kinship behavior of persons. As I realized during my fieldwork, inappropriate kin behavior (such as marrying in the wrong direction or giving birth in the house of one’s wife-givers) is often not mainly an issue of violating social norms and offending others: my interlocutors primarily brought up the potentially harmful intervention of spirits that they feared. Needless to say, the Khmu participants in the ritual described here, being eager to avoid any unwanted outcome of the spirits’ measurements, aimed at anticipating and adapting to the spirits’ perspectives, which were granted authoritative weight even though they are notoriously difficult to know for certain. So, what is discussed as naturalizing kinship in other contexts (e.g., blood typing or genetic testing)—that is, attempting to measure kinship in a way where the outcome is taken for granted and appears inevitable and where the procedures of measuring become invisible (see Thelen and Lammer, this issue)—could be reframed here as spiritualizing kinship. The spirits’ authoritative and above all efficacious measurements of kinship are the invisible foundation on which negotiations of belonging appear to rest.

Even though this seems to be carved in stone, ambiguities remain. Not only did Cen claim to be sure who her child’s progenitor was, but other women also confided to me who ‘gave the pig’ or who refused to do so. Although this semi-secret knowledge, circulating but never publicly acknowledged, has no effect on children being fatherless, additional vernacular modes of measuring kinship obviously persist.

Finally, this case highlights the existential side of belonging. While belonging and the desire to belong are connoted positively and are regarded as only natural (Edwards and Strathern 2000: 152), it has been widely shown that belonging may be comforting but also eventually goes along with exclusion and comes “at a price” (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011: 7; see also Gammeltoft 2018: 77; Yuval-Davis 2011). The belonging of a fatherless child to its mother’s house requires separating some possible kin ties from others that are asserted. While
this ultimately implies the child’s exclusion from entitlements and belonging on the father’s side, the positive connotation of (kin-based) belonging and the negative one of exclusion might, as the editors suggest in their introduction, be misleading (see also Edwards and Strathern 2000: 152) and, I would add, might curtail our understanding of what kinship measurements do. Still, the present case of northern Laos differs in that processes of separation and (un)doing specific kinds of possible belonging are regarded as preconditions for proper belonging and, ultimately, a person’s well-being. Belonging and separation, as this case shows, are two sides of the same coin and depend on successful measurements of kinship.

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Notes

1. All names have been changed.
2. Italicized terms are, if not specified otherwise, Khmu Yuan terms. The transcription of Khmu terms largely follows that proposed by Svantesson et al. (2014).
3. Note that I use the terms ‘wife-giver’ and ‘wife-taker’ based on common practice in anthropology and in awareness of Rubin’s (1975) justified critique of Lévi-Strauss’s model of the exchange of women.
4. The fieldwork on which this article is based was conducted over 14 months in the period from 2013 to 2015.
5. At that time (2014–2015), 300,000 Lao kip was equivalent to about 30 euros.

References


