

## WHEN ETHICS CAN'T BE FOUND: Evaluative Gaps in Ordinary Life

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No one speaks of us in our presence as he does of us in our absence. Human society is founded on mutual deceit.

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

Phòò Thiang's older half-sister, Paa, was sick. He—my host father in Luang Prabang, Laos—told me that the ninety-three-year-old woman was lying in her house, naked and alone, as she neared her end.<sup>1</sup> Her daughter and the daughter's husband did not yet want to include him. When they needed him, he said, they would call. As he waited for the inevitable news, my host mother, Mèè Phòòn, told me that dying like Paa—in an empty quiet, rather than a house full of people and Buddhist merit-making—was her biggest fear (compare [Stonington 2020](#)). She pitied Paa in these final moments and worried aloud that ultimately her own children might be as callous and careless as Paa's daughter, that her own death might be just as austere, cold, and lonely.

At around nine in the evening, Paa's daughter finally called. Paa had died. Phòò Thiang left abruptly. He spent the cold night sitting with Paa's corpse, now covered in a white sheet, as her daughter, Thii, slept fifty feet away in the proper-

ty's other structure. Alone, he lit incense, tended a candle, and played solitaire to pass the time until sunrise.

The next morning, I went to Paa's house early and spent much of the next three days and nights there—filming, talking, and resting—as the funeral, and the festivities preceding and following it, unfolded.<sup>2</sup> From beginning to end, other mourners blamed Thii and her husband, Kham, for almost everything the funeral lacked. The couple was subject to what seemed like pervasive ethical evaluations, and the growing consensus was that while Phòò Thiang, Mèè Phòòn, and their friends and relatives worked hard making merit, spending time with Paa's corpse, and monitoring the funeral's expenses, Kham and Thii did little for Paa or her funeral.

Here is a list of some of their complaints:

- i. *Thii didn't shower and was dirty—people pointed to dirt caked to her neck. She also felt uncomfortable wearing a traditional Lao skirt (the sin4).*
- ii. *Kham hunted eels instead of participating in the wake.*
- iii. *Kham ordained as a novice monk to get money, not to make merit for his mother-in-law, and he didn't study the Pali chants for the ceremony.*
- iv. *Thii did not spend enough time near her mother's corpse, and she didn't re-light the incense nearby, which must be continuously lit during the days leading up to the funeral.*
- v. *Kham and Thii were too affectionate with their dogs. They slept next to them and fed them expensive food, fit for humans.*
- vi. *Kham embezzled money meant for buying stringed lights for Paa's casket.*
- vii. *When Paa was alive, Thii neglected the elderly woman's physical appearance and cleanliness. As Paa lay dying, Thii threw out the nice clothes she was wearing because they had been defecated in. This meant that Paa's corpse lay naked leading into and shortly after her death.*
- viii. *Kham was addicted to methamphetamines and used his money to buy them rather than care for the family.*
- ix. *Thii continued to feed her three-year-old son formula.*
- x. *Kham stole money generated by funeral gambling, which was supposed to pay for the funeral expenses.*
- xi. *When unsupervised, Thii pocketed donations made by other mourners.*
- xii. *As others worked, Thii slept or cared for her dogs, her children, and the ducks she raised for sale—she was unconcerned with the goings on of the funeral.*

I heard variations of each of these criticisms multiple times. Together, they pointed to a consensus: Kham and Thii were unethical, immoral people (*khon2 sual*). Phòò Thiang and Mèè Phòòn said that once the funeral finished, they would no longer visit or help the couple. Salina, my host sister, put it even more forthrightly: now that Paa was dead, Kham and Thii were no longer family.

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Yet even as everyone at the funeral described Kham and Thii as “bad people,” no one spoke *with* the couple as harshly as they spoke *about* them in their absence. Salina never told them they were no longer family; Mèè Phòòn never revealed that she feared her own children would act like them; and Phòò Thiang never accused them of embezzling money. Some conflicts did bubble up, but evaluations of the pair never reached the same intensity when they were present, and sometimes everything unfolded as if no one were judging them at all. A large chasm existed between what people said *with* versus *about* Kham and Thii: there was an evaluative gap that everyone refused to close.

As Erving Goffman has showed again and again, moments such as these are easy to find in ordinary life. How often do people bite their tongues in conversation only to let loose in gossip later? But anthropologists interested in ethics have not given such moments proper attention (but see [Heywood 2015](#)).<sup>3</sup> [James Laidlaw \(2013, 3\)](#) writes that “the claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative.” If Laidlaw is right—and I think he is—then one task of the anthropologist of ethics is to flesh out this “descriptive claim” with reference to the ebb and flow of palpable signs of evaluation.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the appeal of so-called ordinary ethics is the notion’s ambiguity ([Clarke 2016](#)). In [Michael Lambek’s \(2010\)](#) and [Veena Das’s \(2012\)](#) original work, it underpins the idea that life—even ordinary life—is suffused with the ethical (see also [Sidnell 2010b](#); [Das 2015, 116](#); [Sidnell, Meudec, and Lambek 2019, 304](#); [Lambek 2015a](#)). In other adoptions, it is used as a simple call to explore ethics in situations not stereotypically associated with ethical discussion, for example, outside of religious institutions, rituals, and Internal Review Board applications. While the former conception has been accused of spreading the notion too thinly across all of life ([Lempert 2013](#); [Zigon 2014](#); see [Mattingly and Throop 2018](#)), the latter use makes a relatively uncontroversial and benign claim (although see [Robbins 2016](#)). Yet however benign, this claim is not fatuous; it offers more than a “rhetorical flourish and a methodological conundrum” ([Clarke 2014, 421](#)). Heu-

ristic value lies in occasionally looking away from patently ethical subjects and toward quotidian life, as long as we recognize the artificiality of the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary that this move presupposes.

The fact is that in life generally people are often selective about when they voice evaluations and to whom. Reflecting on this selectivity makes clear how often evaluations are themselves subject to evaluation, as it also unboxes a new puzzle: what are we as analysts to do with those meaningful silences in which signs of evaluation seem partially withheld, transfigured, or utterly absent?

To unpack this puzzle, I explore a prototypically ethical scene—a funeral—but I train my attention on its more banal moments, where people appear to minimize their ethical stances on Paa's son-in-law, Kham, so much so that these stances at times disappear. The conversations—recorded with a camera on a tripod and a Zoom brand audio recorder—concerned a set of stringed, colored lights to be draped over Paa's casket, and whether Kham had embezzled the money earmarked to buy them (criticism *vi*). I made the recordings as part of fifteen months of fieldwork in Luang Prabang, during which I explored, among other things, gambling and moral economy (see [Zuckerman 2018, 2020](#)). The records make for a vivid display of two ways people in Luang Prabang deal with an unabashedly problematic person. My host parents' neighbors, Moo and Sii, appeared to make their evaluations go absent when face to face with Kham. They gave him advice and sympathized with him when he was present—leaving no obvious trace of judgment—but they judged him harshly when he left. My host sister, Salina, by contrast, was not kind to Kham when he was there, but she evaluated him even more strongly when he was not.

Salina's approach is easier to evidence than Moo and Sii's. I can quote Salina's sighs and complaints; but what does it mean to show that Moo and Sii really made no signs of negatively evaluating Kham? It is practically impossible to prove an absence. The problem is magnified because of the open-ended nature of the semiosis of evaluation: there always exists the possibility of a later reinterpretation of how some sign should be construed (see [Parmentier 1994](#), xiii). Checking the record—whether a video recording, a documented history of actions, or a general consensus—cannot “settle” the issue because the issue goes beyond the facts of any given moment.

Many anthropologists emphasize the bounty of meaning in ordinary practice. This emphasis is starkly evident in the anthropology of ethics, where—I do not think it is too controversial to say—scholars have a knack for finding signs of moral evaluation in places from which they appear, at first blush, to be absent (a

la Scott 1990).<sup>5</sup> This vision of always richly layered behavior is in part what makes the idea of ordinary ethics so alluring: it allows one to uncover the tacit evaluations that saturate life. Implicit in the emphasis is an expectation of the consistency of some deeper commitment in people, that moral stances might exist across contexts, and that the small things people do in ordinary life—their moods and modes of acting, so to speak (Singh and Dave 2015)—might signal these enduring stances, especially when people encounter the people, objects, and actions that those stances are about. Moo and Sii later said that they did have some evaluation “in their hearts” when they spoke with Kham—perhaps this, too, subtly evidenced itself, carrying through in their small gestures and shifts in tone of voice?

My repeated viewings of the video lead me to believe that such gestures and shifts in tone did not occur, but making this argument requires me to move upstream against the predominant hermeneutics.<sup>6</sup> As such, it also offers an opportunity for identifying and describing local accounts of such apparent absences of this or that evaluation, in a way that moves beyond assumptions that evaluation is, so to speak, always *there*.

Why do people voice evaluations in one moment but not another? A core part of the answer seems to be rather simple: evaluations are evaluable. People can hold others to account for making them as well as for not making them. Those who voice their stances on an issue may be accused of “stirring things up” or “being mean,” just as those who withhold judgment may themselves be judged for “staying silent.” The lurking possibility that any evaluation may be evaluated is something that people orient toward as they choose what, when, and where to evaluate (see Sidnell, Meudec, and Lambek 2019, 304).

Moo, Sii, and Salina all said they did not accuse Kham of stealing the lights to his face to avoid overt conflict. The idea is common, although not all-pervasive, in Laos: that the *ethics of interaction*, of handling others with care and kid-gloves, should supersede the need to voice *ethical evaluations within interaction*, whether judgments or suspicions. The idea is ethical in the broad sense that I use the term here: it implicates concerns about “how one should live” (Williams 2006; see Keane 2016, 16–21).<sup>7</sup> But it is also meta-ethical: it evaluates evaluative practice itself based on what that practice means for the possibility of a good life lived with others.

This ethical and meta-ethical commitment perhaps constitutes the most common account of when to evaluate that circulates in Laos. But it troubles many classic accounts in moral philosophy, where consistency of stances across events makes for the ideal and where interdiscursive inconsistency is conceived of as in-

herently immoral. Immanuel Kant and his categorical imperative's almost pathological universality stand out historically, but many moral philosophical systems have been built on the notion that humans should, and at times do, voice the same opinions from moment to moment (see Appiah 2008, 39 on situationists and character).<sup>8</sup> But this is not just a case of Lao ideals coming into friction with philosophical ideas in the West. The commitment to withhold evaluation for the sake of an ethics of interaction also conflicts with other ideas and practices circulating in Luang Prabang, where people at times argue for a consistency of stance by emphasizing the ethical value of speaking “straight” or unmasking hidden “corruption.”

A view of Moo's, Sii's, and Salina's conversations with Kham gives a sense of how these different ideas are articulated and lived out in the ebb and flow of interactional time. These conversations give flesh to the descriptive claim that people are evaluative. They make clear that while the claim captures a generic truth, it fails to capture the uneven way in which this truth can operate in the signs people produce to evidence evaluation. At times, whether a particular human is being evaluative in a particular moment is uncertain (cf. Sidnell, Meudec, and Lambek 2019). At other times, people appear to be not only evaluative but so omnivorously evaluative—so fundamentally oriented to evaluation's possibility—that they keep their evaluations to themselves.

### INTERRUPTED EVALUATIONS

Phòò Thiàng sat near Paa's casket. Holding a 50,000-kip bill in his hand (about USD \$6 at the time), he impatiently called out, “Who's going to buy these lights?!” The lights were meant to illuminate and beautify the casket, and to index Paa's continued presence. As Phòò Thiàng called out, his granddaughter, Salina's eldest daughter, stood near him with her hands outstretched, offering to relay the money to whomever would head to the store. But ever mindful of sticky fingers, Phòò Thiàng jerked the money away and said he wanted to know who was going to buy the lights first. Kham approached the platform of the house, and Phòò Thiàng met him at the platform's edge to hand him the money directly. He told Kham to hurry and then promptly returned to a small notebook to record:

“Kham”—“50,000 kip”—“stringed lights”

Two hours later, Kham returned with the lights. He then publicly discovered they were broken. As he plugged them in and out, he cursed the Chinese shopkeeper from whom he had bought them. He then left the scene, presumably to buy new lights. Sii, ThòòngSaa, and I, some of the only guests at the funeral at that

point, began talking about what had just happened. My camera, balancing on its tripod, continued rolling.

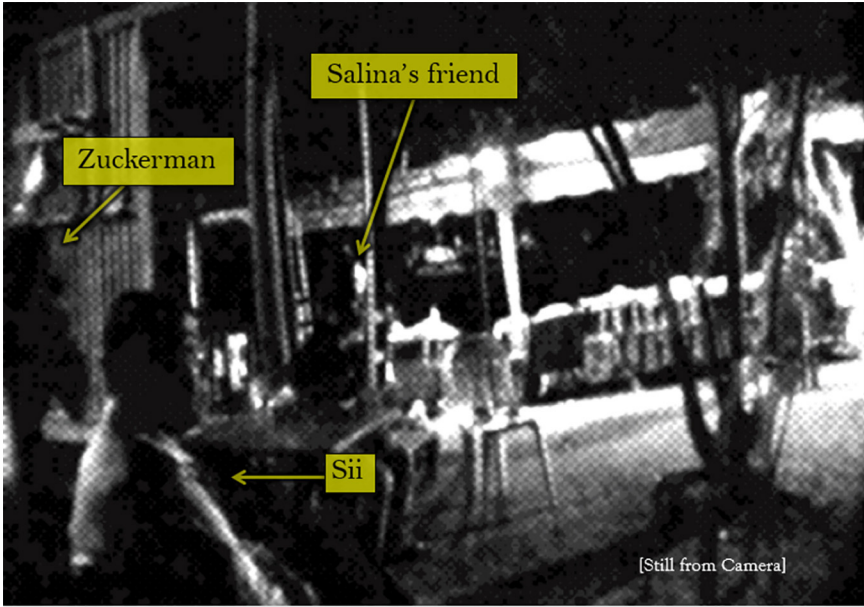


Figure 1. Sii, ThòòngSaa, and Zuckerman. Photo by Charles H. P. Zuckerman.

It was dark now, and Sii and ThòòngSaa sat on rented plastic chairs on the ground outside of the main house. I sat cross-legged on the edge of the wall-less structure’s platform floor. An unwatched movie was playing in the background. The three of us looked toward the other structure on the grounds, where Kham and Thii’s children slept beside their dogs. Sii said he did not like the closeness of the dogs and the children—it might make the children allergic. ThòòngSaa remarked that the couple treated their dogs better than their children.

The night was black and cool, and the pace of the conversation reminded me of sitting around a campfire in the United States. ThongSaa, who had arrived only a few minutes before, then turned toward Paa’s casket and asked about what had happened with the lights:

**ThongSaa**

*paj3 sù4 maa2 lêqo-bòø-hung1 vaa3*

“[Kham] bought [the lights] and they didn’t light-up?”

**Sii**

*sù4 faj2 ñaap4 ñiip4 maa2 nii4 nê1 vaal man2 khaat5 mot2 lèw4 vaal san4*

“[He] bought blinking lights, he said they all broke, he said that.”

(Sii says this as he turns and points with his left hand to the broken lights still strung around the casket.)

**ThongSaa**

*qaaw4*

“Wow.”

**CZ**

*maa2 lèw4...bò-daj4...=*

“...he came...but didn’t.”

**Sii**

*saaj3 bèp5 daj3 man2 qaw3 qan3 khòng3 kaw1 maa2 qan3 nii4 kao-thò1 daj3*

“What kind of lights were they? [Kham probably just] brought old ones, how much do those cost?”

**CZ**

*lêo-kao-laaw2 vaal laaw2 sù4 juul han5 dê1 saj4 daj4*

“He said [that when] he bought them [at the store, they] worked.”

**Sii**

*(h) (h)*

“ha-ha.”

**Sii**

*qoo3 saang1 vaw4*

“Ohh, [he] can really talk.”

Sii subtly questions whether Kham had even bought new lights, or just brought some old ones and pocketed the cash. He does not directly claim any wrongdoing on Kham’s part, but he does imply this by quoting Kham’s words and presenting their patent unbelievability. ThòngSaa’s response, *qaaw4* (wow) points to something unspecified and suspicious in the recounted tale. When I mention that Kham had said that the lights had worked at the shop before he brought them back to the house, Sii replied that Kham can “really talk” (*saang1 vaw4*). The insinuation is clear: Kham stole the money.



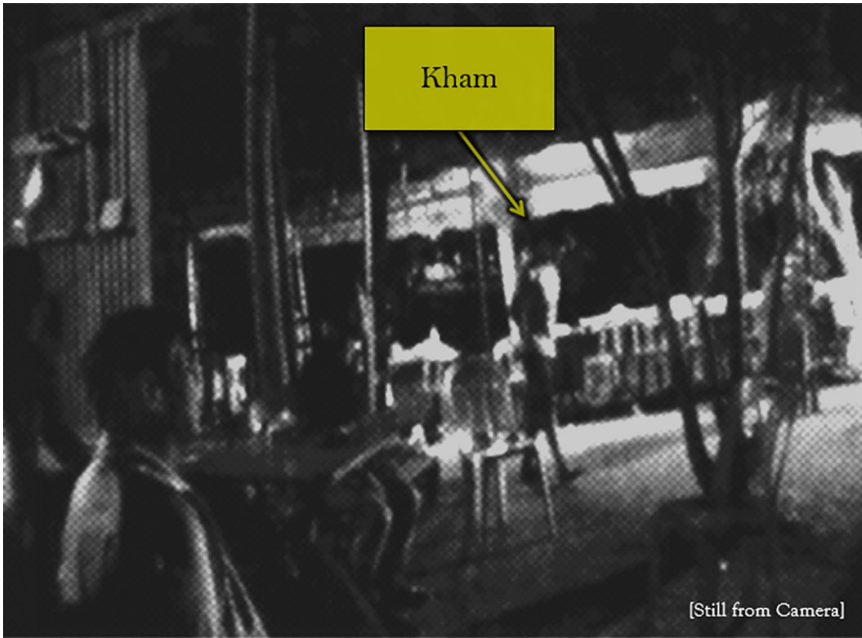


Figure 2. Kham entering the scene. Photo by Charles H. P. Zuckerman.

As Sii chuckled about Kham, we heard Kham's voice come from behind his house. He hadn't left yet. He was walking past us and saying to someone else that he needed to buy a better brand of lights this next time. We went silent and turned toward him as he talked. Had he heard us talking about him? He hadn't seemed to.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, even when I watch this moment on my monitor at home, I get that feeling that comes when someone enters the room as you are speaking about them; when the care with which you habitually handle a person's face crashes against the carelessness with which you talk about them as an absent, third person—a "non-person" as [Émile Benveniste \(1971\)](#) put it.

What is this feeling? Why did everyone go quiet when Kham approached? Anthropologists have studied this issue most directly under the banner of *gossip*. Because *gossip* is surrounded by negative connotations, and thus disagreements about when it applies, the term proves especially difficult to delimit ([Haviland 1977](#); [Besnier 2009](#)).<sup>10</sup> At its analytic core, however, seems to lie a concern with presence and absence (see [Mangardich and Fitneva 2019](#)). Identifying gossip often presupposes that the same conversation would be (more) inappropriate, rude, or vulgar if the person being gossiped about were present. Gossip is what you say *without* rather than *with* someone. As [Max Gluckman \(1963, 313\)](#) puts it: "The main moral norm is that you must scandalize about an opponent behind his back,

if your allegations are at all open, to his face, you must be delicate and never give him ground to state that you insulted him. For insults of this kind, if open, make impossible the pretense of group amity.”

While anthropologists studying gossip have gravitated toward moments of gossip qua revelation, where people wield cruel facts and rumors about absent others, conversation analysts have tended to focus on the care with which people treat those who are present (see Sidnell 2010a). This line of research resonates with Adam Smith's (1880, part 6, section 2, para. 15) reflections on interaction. Smith wrote that humans have a “natural disposition to accommodate and to assimilate, as much as we can, our own sentiments, principles, and feelings, to those which we see fixed and rooted in the persons whom we are obliged to live and converse a great deal with.” This disposition, he continued, “is the cause of the contagious effects of both good and bad company.” Work in conversation analysis has documented this contagion, indicating that often people agree with others not because they are passionately committed to their opinions, but because they care about defending pleasant sociality itself. Anita Pomerantz (1984, 60) showed this in her research on assessments. She found that when someone evaluated something, their interlocutor tended not only to agree but to upgrade what they said. Thus, “it’s not too cold,” was followed by, “*Oh it’s warm.*” And, “It’s really a clear lake, isn’t it” got the response, “It’s wonderful” (see also Stivers, Mondada, and Steensig 2011). In those cases where second speakers did disagree, they tended to frame their disagreements as partial or qualified.<sup>11</sup> The “preference structure,” as conversation analysts characterize it, was found to be so pervasive that when someone agreed without upgrading, their utterance was construed as a disagreement.

This work resonates with Erving Goffman's discussions of “face,” and Goffman's (1967, 5–6) account itself builds from “the Chinese conception of face.” *Face* has emerged as a key term in the academic essentialization of how East and Southeast Asians think about prestige, polite social interaction, and dissemblance (see Kipnis 1995).

In Laos and Thailand, scholars have treated face (*naa5* in Lao) as a trope for understanding what they see as a broad pattern of conflict avoidance (e.g., Bilmes 2001, 189; Ukosakul 2005, 117). Joseph Westermeyer (1973, 743), for instance, wrote that “politeness, reserve, and indirect confrontation through intermediaries are the Laotian norms for [interpersonal] relations” (compare Phillips 1966, 79). These discussions, my own included, risk bolstering orientalist generalizations about the prevalence of superficiality and dissemblance in social interactions among Lao and Thai people.<sup>12</sup> Much like Roma in Russia have been racialized as

“natural performers” (Lemon 2000), Lao and Thai sociality run the risk of being treated as surfaces without substance (see Van Esterik 2000).

But avoiding the discussion ignores a predominant meta-ethical idea about interaction. The fact is that accounts that prioritize smooth interaction over supposedly straight opinions have currency among many Lao and Thai people themselves (Bilmes 2001, 187–88). In the political discourse of both nations, “a love of the disciplined surface” (Morris 2000, 181) provides a justification for what is deemed speakable (Jackson 2004; Zuckerman 2018). In these contexts, authenticity is not always valued (see High 2021, 68), nor are private utterances always considered more revelatory of truth. Instead, many people treat public declarations that might appear rote or formulaic as deeply revealing of character (compare Mulder 1979). As Pierre Petit (2013, 160–61) found, some politically censored Lao are nevertheless committed to the project of censorship itself, to the ethical goodness of presenting things in one way rather than another. The same goes for censorship in more private moments, say, where Moo “resisted the urge” (*qot2 qaw3*) to unload on Kham: this was the sort of silence one might proudly exhibit.

In accounting for these censorships to me, people often suggested that they put on a good face to protect the harmony of social interaction itself (compare Jackson 2004; Aulino 2014). They offered formulas that sounded like Gluckman’s (1963, 313) description of gossip: insults, accusations, and evaluations should not be made openly because they destroy the pretense of amity and solidarity. Whereas some readers might view the silence of Sii and ThòongSaa as a kind of dissimulation of their opinions, in Luang Prabang, people generally viewed the direct articulation of suspicions and opinions as much more aggressive and problematic. The desire to interact smoothly and without conflict, they told me, should overtake the desire to broach a topic or “speak straightly” (*vaw4 khwaam2 sùl1*).

This ethical and meta-ethical idea produces a challenging standard to live by—to keep one’s evaluations to oneself, to restrain oneself in another’s presence. Its standard is so challenging to fulfill, in fact, that people generally agree that the best thing to do with difficult people is to avoid them entirely. When this proves impossible, as my interlocutors told me repeatedly, you should resist your urge to criticize them, so as to avoid “yelling,” “noisiness,” and “offense.” This does not make gossip an ethically neutral activity—but it is much more tolerable than open discord. One should “observe” (*sang3 kêêt5*) bad actions, not sanction them or convince those who do them to change. One friend described his observations as a kind of investigative work. He stressed that he would use his findings to guide his opinions and future interactions, not as ammunition for argument. A Lao etiquette

manual put the rationale like this: “When you see someone doing something that you do not like, do not criticize them out loud except if [that person’s action] will affect society as a whole; [if it will] then tell them politely.”<sup>13</sup>

“The volatility of a dispute is what is often most feared,” wrote [Herbert P. Phillips \(1966, 30\)](#). In Luang Prabang, this volatility often becomes glossed in idioms of “noisiness” (*khwaam2 nan2*; see [Zuckerman 2018](#)). When I asked Phò Thi-ang, for example, why he did not broach the issue of missing money with Kham and Thii, he said: “I didn’t want to say anything because, if I said anything, it would just cause noisiness.” Maybe, he continued, if Kham and Thii had some sense [of right and wrong], he would have said something to them. “But,” he continued, “people with sense wouldn’t steal the money in the first place. [We’ll] ignore them.”

From this perspective, certain patterns of dissemblance and contradiction are not ethical failures but signs of virtue. The ideal is to be someone capable of “letting things go” (*qot2 qaw3*). But not all the time. As Phò Thi-ang’s comments imply, while Kham and Thii are not worth the “noise” that comes with broaching uncomfortable subjects, some difficult, senseless people—those you care for—are worth outrage and straight talk. With these folks, one should be “truthful” (*vaw4 khwaam2 cing3*). For instance, when a friend of mine named Muu started to annoy many of our mutual friends, they began to ignore him as much as they could—excluding him from a new WhatsApp group, choosing driving routes that avoided his house, and not inviting him to events (see [Zuckerman forthcoming](#)). But Dii, who was closest to Muu, took it on himself to explicitly ask Muu to change. Ultimately, Dii’s appeals failed, and Muu and the group of friends fell out of regular contact. By the time the whole gang—Muu included—attended my farewell party at the end of a long stretch of fieldwork, the dynamic had morphed. They interacted politely, but when Muu, along with an uninvited companion he had brought, hastily left, Dii and others surmised that the companion had only come for protection. “He was afraid that we would beat him up.” The tension, once worth trying to resolve with straight talk, had become unspeakable even for Dii, cloaked in the polite cheersing of beer and high fives. The time for caring, for saying what they really thought, had passed. Muu had become someone to tolerate and placate until he could be avoided.

## POVERTY AND EMBEZZLEMENT

The substance of evaluations about Kham and Thii mostly concerned how the couple used and accounted for money. These economic issues are often en-

tangled with ethical notions in Laos, but the mismanagement of money took on particular moral weight at Paa's funeral. In Lao wakes generally, everyone is oriented toward producing merit, and money is a mechanism for such merit. At Paa's funeral, Kham and Thii's misuse of money also became an explanation for why Paa had lived in such squalor. She was poor and landless when she died, and most people blamed Kham and Thii. Thii, Phòò Thiang said, liked to party and drink, games of cards and beer, mostly; and Kham liked to free-base crushed-up methamphetamine pills, four to five pills a day. Mèè Phòòn quipped that the couple was not *thuk1 ñaak4*, "in difficult poverty," but *thuk1 ngaaj1*, "poor, but living easy."

The couple's house exhibited their poverty starkly. Its two open-air structures were cold and rickety, and people still noted how "dirty" (*khii5 diat5*) they were even after a hired professional had cleaned them for the funeral. Salina's nine-year-old daughter pointed to piles of toys scattered on a roof, broken, rusted, and discolored. "Look!" (*beng1*), she said to me with amazement and disgust. When I asked Mèè Phòòn if I could film the wake, she first hesitated, not because my camera would desecrate the event (people often encouraged my filming wakes), but because she was ashamed to document such a poor and derelict place. These ugly things at her in-laws were not worth capturing. (When she deferred to Phòò Thiang, he told me to "go ahead, film.")

In Luang Prabang, one's own house normally makes for the ideal place to die—whenever possible, people bring dying family members home from the hospital in their final moments—but the guests agreed that Paa's dirty platform was not conducive to a good death, nor was it an ethical location to host the two-day wake that followed (Stonington 2012).<sup>14</sup>

Whereas I viewed Kham and Thii's poverty as an understandable hindrance to their taking proper care of Paa and her surroundings, most everyone else assumed that Kham and Thii were poor because they were bad, not the other way around. Such views are common in Luang Prabang, and they resonate with prevalent interpretations of Theravada Buddhism, in which wealth functions as a sign of merit (see Spiro 1966; Keyes 1983, 858; Reynolds 1990; Aulino 2014, 430). From the perspective of most, Kham and Thii had caused their own economic and social poverty, not because of actions in a past life (or at least, no one said this to me), but because of their actions in this life. As one newspaper article put the idea, "Those addicted to gambling and drugs are always to blame for their poverty" (Vientiane Times 2004; compare Hanks 1972, 101).



Figure 3. One of the structures of the house, full of monks, with my camera in the foreground (image is distorted to preserve anonymity). Photo by Charles H. P. Zuckerman.

Throughout the funeral, Phòò Thiang was especially preoccupied with controlling what he saw as the couple's pervasive graft. He sat next to Paa's corpse throughout the wake—and left replacements when he couldn't—in part to keep Paa company, but also to safely receive offerings from visitors. When he was there, these visitors would hand Phòò Thiang cash that he would tap onto Paa's casket to get her attention, telling her how much money was being given and asking her to bless the giver. As he sat on the platform, he repeatedly counted and checked the basket of donated money against a ledger he kept, and in the process put to memory most of the transactions it recorded, citing them off effortlessly weeks later when I asked him how much he had paid for the bottles of water or the rented chairs, or who donated what. Phòò Thiang's desire to keep the finances at the funeral "transparent" (*cèng4*) also came into evidence in the way he gave Kham money to buy lights for Paa's casket—he wrote the amount down, made sure he handed the money directly to Kham, and even suggested a store to buy them from.

### ABSENT EVALUATIONS IN PRESENCE

In an effort to capture the ebb and flow of a Lao wake, my camera ran on a tripod in front of the structure where Paa's corpse lay for more than five hours, where the lights were to be hung. The video allows me to trace how these flickering bulbs emerged as a topic of conversation, and how signs of evaluation of

Kham arose and went absent throughout the event. The lights first appear in the recording twenty-four minutes after Phòò Thiang gave the money earmarked for them to Kham. At this point, a group of monks are chanting on the platform, with guests gathered around them. A hand enters the camera frame, grasping the lights. The hand, presumably Kham's, passes the lights to one of Paa's relatives who is sitting, hands in a prayer position (the *nopl* or Thai *wai*) and absorbing the chanting. The man then stands up and slowly drapes them around Paa's casket. As the man fumbles with the lights, he occasionally crouches downward toward the monks, aware of a momentarily taboo arrangement of bodies—he so high, the monks low. The lights do not work even when plugged in. The man briefly leaves the scene, and when he re-enters, he bows three times, sits, and resumes his *nopl*, apparently resigned to have Kham deal with the lights later.

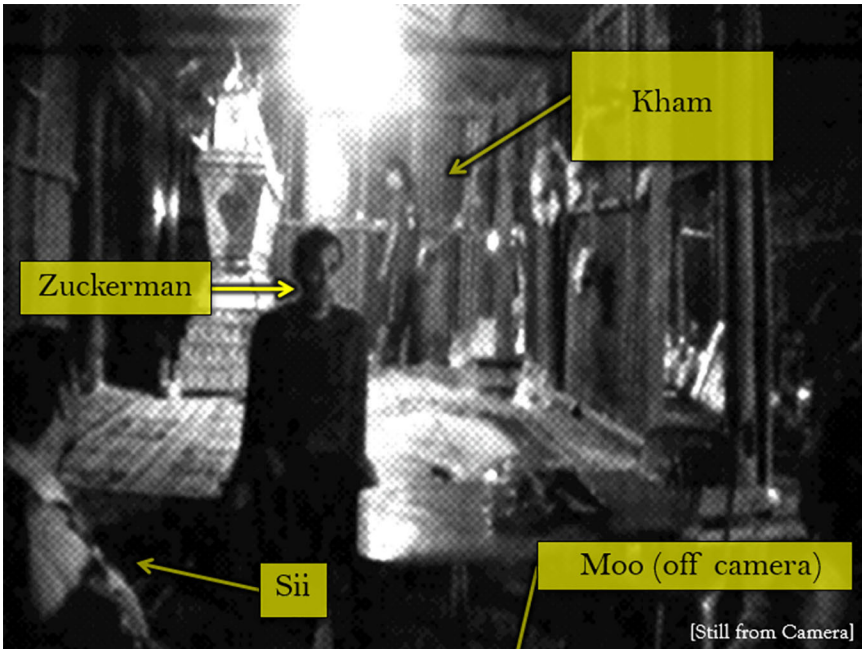


Figure 4. Kham fiddling with the lights. Photo by Charles H. P. Zuckerman.

Almost two hours later, the monks are gone and I am sitting on the platform of the house chatting with Sii and Moo, Sii's wife (Figure 4). With a headlamp on his forehead that he habitually uses to hunt eels, Kham stands behind me and fiddles with the lights, tangling and untangling them, plugging and unplugging them, and eventually saying, "So, the lights can't be plugged in?"

This draws our attention. I turn but sit quietly, and Sii and Moo respond as he continues to fiddle with the lights.

**Moo**

*qan3 daj3 kòq1*  
“What’s that?”

**Kham**

*faj2 sii3 nii4 naq1*  
“These lights.”

*siap5 nii4 man2 kaø-thùng3 juu1 daj4 sam4*  
“The cord *will* reach the outlet.”

**Moo**

*pên3 ñang3 bòø-siap5 san4 naq1*  
“Then why don’t [you] plug them in?”

**Kham**

*laø-lèw4 laaw2 pên3 ñang3 ñang2 bòø-siap5 sam4 qaql*  
“Then why didn’t [the other man] plug them in?”

**Moo**

*man2 bòø-mii2 hua3 tii3*  
“The cord probably doesn’t have a plug, right?”

**Sii**

*mii2 hua3 siap5 qaql*  
“Does it have a plug?”

**Moo**

*man2 bòø-mii2 hua3 siap5 tii4 qaaj4*  
“The cord probably doesn’t have a plug, right, older brother [i.e., Kham]?”

**Sii**

*luuk4 kaø-lòng2 siap5 lòng2 beng1 san4 vaal*  
“Child [i.e., Kham], you should plug them in and try, then.”

**Kham**

*ñang3 vaa3 bòø-khaw5*  
“Why aren’t they working?”



**Sii***bòo-khaw5 nòq1*

“They aren’t working, huh?”

*man2 khaat5 lèw4 tii4*

“They’re broken, right?”

No signs of suspicion, distrust, or judgment emerge from Moo’s and Sii’s questions to Kham. They refer to him politely with kin terms (Moo calls him “older brother,” Sii, “child”), and offer patently helpful—albeit obvious—advice and questions: “Plug them in”; “[Do the lights] have a plug?”

Moo, Sii, and I again begin chatting with each other and Kham resumes his previous activities—fiddling with the lights, tangling and untangling them, plugging them in and unplugging them. As he works, he occasionally comments on the broken lights—twice to himself and once to someone on the phone. More than a minute elapses between each of these lines:

**Kham**

Time: 1:44:18

*paa khon2 ciin3 nii4 man2... faj2 sii3 khaat5 man2 maa2 khaaj3 haj5 kuu3...*

“What, this Chinese guy, he sold me these broken lights.”

Time: 1:45:30

*qaw4 kuu3 vaal faj2 sii3 nii4 vaal saaj3 khaat5 laaj3 kuu3 vaal*

“What, these lights!... The cord is really broken.”

Time: 1:46:38

*qooj3 khit1 qòk5*

“Oooh, think!”

These ostensibly self-directed comments crescendo over a three-minute period. With a fourth comment, Kham draws Moo and Sii to talk to him about the lights again:

**Kham**

[somewhat unclear] *qòj ciin3 nii4 khit1 paj3 khit1 qòk5 khoot4 phòd1 mùng2 qeej  
...hung1... khaan4 vaw4 dii3*

“Oh, this Chinese guy, I understand now, fuck his parents, wow, I’m too tired to speak politely now.”

**Sii***(h) (h) khaw2 pên3 ñang3*

“Haha, what happened with him?”

**Kham***lòng2 mù4 kii4 kao-daj4 hung1 dii3 dak2 bat2 maa2 hòt4 phii4 lêqo-man2 saaj3  
khaat5 mot2*

“I tried [the lights] a second ago and they were flashing perfectly, then I got here and they’re all broken”

**Sii***nêl1 khaw2 hêt1 khaaj3 saaj3 sòt5 lèw4*

“See, he sold already broken lights.”

At this point, Salina walks closer to the platform house.

**Salina***leqo-man2 bòo-daj4 naql qan3 nan4 naql*

(walking into the frame of the camera) “So the lights don’t work, huh?”

**Kham***khit1 qòk5 khit1 pên3 nòql mm*

(to himself) “Way to think, jeeze!”

**Salina***lêqo-man2 bòo-daj4 sam4*

“And the lights don’t work, right?”

**Kham***bòql*

“Nope.”

**Salina***paj3 pian1 paj4*

“Go change them, go [now].”

*paj3 pian1 kòn1 paj3 sù4 qaw3 maj1*

“Go change them before [we] need to buy new ones.”

**Kham***pian1 ... pian1 nèw2 daj4 man2... phen1 kao-pit2 haan4 kòn1*

“Change them? How am I going to change them? He, he closed the store already.”

**Salina**

*paj3 sù4 lèw4...khaw2 khaaj3 juul saj3 san4 naq1*  
 “[Where did you] buy...Where did they sell you the lights?”

**Sii**

*bò-pit2 thua1 dòk5 phòq1 vaa1 bak2 qan3 nan4 bò-khaaj3 kaang3 vên2*  
 “No, they’re not closed yet, because that guy he doesn’t sell during the day.”

**Kham**

*naa5 naa5* [landmark name] *nii4 naq1*  
 “No, [the guy] in front of [landmark name]”

(talk continues)

A lot happens in the subsequent conversation. Here I draw pieces from it to contrast how Moo and Sii speak to Kham with how Salina does. Their approaches exemplify two varieties of interdiscursive gaps, just as they also exemplify two varieties of locally recognizable characters in Laos: the “polite person” (*khon2 suphaap4*) and the “yeller” (*khon2 mak1 haaj4*). Moo and Sii, acting politely, did not leave any noticeable hints to the epistemic and ethical positions they later took. They left no evidence that I could find within the interaction itself to support a claim that they had a “hidden transcript,” to borrow [James C. Scott’s \(1990\)](#) term,

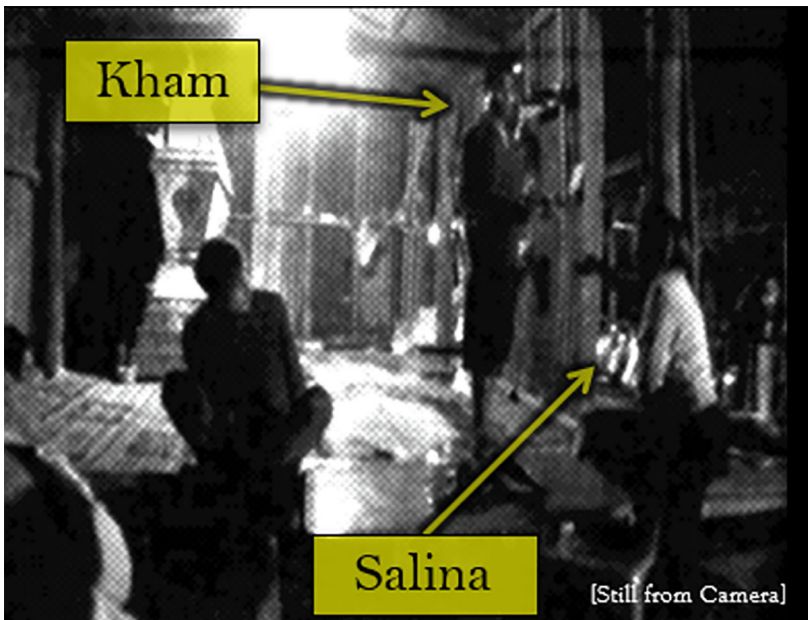


Figure 5. Salina enters the scene. Photo by Charles H. P. Zuckerman.

but instead studiously avoided implying that Kham had done anything unseemly. Salina, in contrast, played the relative straight-talker. She signaled that she was critical of Kham as she spoke with him, even if the criticism came disguised as hints, muted and obscured with hedges like “I’m just kidding.”

Let me begin with Salina’s evaluations of Kham. While Kham blames the Chinese vendor for cheating him, Salina repeatedly blames Kham. She questions his thoroughness in checking the lights, emphasizes the money lost, and twice shows frustration with a sigh she often aimed at her young daughter: *qooj4*. As she bends down to pick up something, she mutters, “Oh, stupid,” but Kham, who is also speaking at the time, does not appear to hear. After she gives him more money for new lights, she warns him to “test them well,” adding, “if [you] don’t test them well and they don’t work, watch out!”

Salina is clearly unhappy with Kham. The *ohs*, *qooj4s*, and frustrated warnings paint a picture of an angry woman. Yet almost none of her criticisms or signs of frustration put the main crux of Kham’s story in doubt. Kham’s claim that he bought the lights new at a store run by a Chinese businessman goes unquestioned. She does not accuse him of having stolen money, but only for being stupid and for not ensuring that the lights worked before he brought them back to the house.

The one exception is telling: here, she accuses Kham of lying about how much the lights cost, only to immediately backpedal.<sup>15</sup>

**Salina**

*thòd1 daj3 saaw2 haa5*

“How much, 25?”

*(Kham walks up toward Salina, in front of casket, as she searches through her purse for money just in front of the platform house)*

**Kham**

*qee3*

“Yeah.”

**Salina**

*khii5 tua2 tii4*

“You’re lying, right?”

**Kham**

*qee3 paj3 sùù4 qaw3 leej2 mèè4 san2 naq1*

“Go buy [the lights] yourself, if that’s [what you think].”

*(Kham looks away toward the wall as he says this)*

**Salina**

*caang4 kao-bòo-paj3 vaal jòòk5 sùl sùl*

“[I wouldn’t go] if someone paid me. . . I was just kidding.”

**Kham**

*mm*

“That’s right.”

**Sii**

*(h) (h)*

“ha-ha.”

**Salina**

*kao-haj5 jòòk5 daj4 lao-bat2 bòo-jòòk5 dèl kao-qio-muan1 nang1 ngaw3 ngaw3. . . juul.*

“[You] have to let [me] joke, when we are not joking are we going to have fun, just sitting here quiet and sad?”

**Kham**

*[Salina] dang3 diawl lêqo-nii4 nêq1*

“Salina is the only one being loud, now.”

**Moo**

*bòo-mii2 khon2 laaj3 haj5 man2 jòòk5 dèl*

“There aren’t many people, let her joke!”

Perhaps sensing an argument, Moo here asks Kham to “let [Salina] joke,” because the wake had few guests (and therefore needed liveliness). Moo and Sii played peacemaker in this way throughout the interaction, deflecting blame from Kham and orienting to practical solutions. Their approach drastically contrasted with Salina’s. When Kham first cusses out the Chinese shopkeeper, for example, Sii supports this reading of what had happened and offers that the shopkeeper “sold already broken lights.” Moo and Sii both suggest that Kham might still manage to exchange the lights, because the shop that he bought them from might still be open. When Kham says he bought them somewhere else, Sii agrees that that place has already closed, and that Kham can no longer return the lights.

At one point, Kham suggests (apparently as a joke) that the lights broke because Paa, lying in her casket, had judged that she did not like their color. Moo laughingly upgrades this idea, saying that “[the lights] hurt [Paa’s] eyes, they hurt [Paa’s] eyes.” Just afterward, Moo implies that it was not Kham’s fault that the

lights were broken, because they worked when Kham first brought them to the house. When it turns out that they had in fact not worked when he first plugged them in at the house, a damning fact that Salina highlights repeatedly, Sii offers that the lights probably broke because they shorted when first plugged in.

Tellingly, the only thing coming from Moo or Sii that might be construed as criticism or contradiction is followed by backtracking that works to absolve Kham of blame.

**Sii**

*paj3 lèqo-lòng2 ... paj2 lèo-lòng2 vaj4 dee4*

“Once you go, test [the lights], once you go test [the lights] for sure.”

**Moo**

*khaw2 lòng2 haj5 [lèèw4 naa1 khaw2 lòng2 haj5 lèèw4 dèè1 léo-caw4 qòòk5 maa2  
lon4 khaat5 lèqo-caw4 daj4 sùù4 maj1*

“They tested them there for you and you came here and they were inundated and broke here, and now you will go buy more.”

**Kham**

*[kao-lòng2 bat2 nii4 daj4*

“[I] tested [the lights] this last time.”

**Sii**

*man2 maa2 khaat5 juu1 phii4 nêè1*

“The [lights] broke here.”

**Moo**

*man2 maa2 khaat5 juu1 phii4 dèè1*

“The [lights] broke here.”

**Salina**

*mùù4 kii4 nii4 mêp2 lèèw4 san4 naq1*

“So, they were just working fine?”

**Kham**

*bòo-mêp2 cak2 bat2 leej2 qaq2*

“They didn’t work at all [here].”

Here, Sii tells Kham that he should “test [the lights] for sure” when he buys the next set, implying that Kham had not tested them, or at least not tested them thoroughly enough before. Then Moo reminds her husband that Kham had tested

them already and Kham agrees. The couple take this telling of the event as fact in their next turns of talk, reiterating to Salina that the lights broke at the house, not at the shop, supporting Kham's claim that he could not return the lights because they were working when he bought them. In the latter two lines, Moo and Sii present a united, helpful front. They mirror one another's stances with a perfect poetic parallelism (Lempert 2008), repeating each other word for word, only differing in the nearly synonymous particles *nêl* and *dèl*.

Obviously, one could point out many ethical concerns implicated in this moment. So too could one find countless evaluations. Yet these concerns and evaluations differ from those to emerge later. They form a part of an ethics of care toward an interlocutor and toward respect for keeping the peace at a wake. Negative evaluations of Kham of the sort that seemed otherwise ubiquitous to me—if these evaluations were ever to be there—have been scrubbed from the scene.

### PRESENT EVALUATIONS IN ABSENCE

After much back and forth, Kham leaves. Salina, Moo, and Sii quietly debrief. This is ten minutes before the moment at which Kham unexpectedly reappeared as we were talking about him.

#### Salina

*bòø-vaal sùù4 dòòk4 faj2 mot2 sòòng3 kòq2 bòø-beng1 bòø-hung1 ñang3 nòq1*

“Wow, he bought two sets of lights and didn't look [at them], they didn't work at all.”

#### Sii

*luuk4 qan3 nan4 lêqo-luuk4 kheej3 laan4 kheej4 laaw1*

“That kid, that's her son-in-law?”

#### Salina

*qee3*

“Yeah.”

#### Moo

*luuk4 kheej3 kan3*

“The son-in-law.”

#### Salina

(unintelligible)

**Sii***(h) (h)*

“ha-ha.”

**Salina***...qaw3 khòng3 khaat5 khòng3 man2*

“...he just took one of his own broken lights [and brought it here].”

**Moo***jaan4 juul*

“I’m afraid [that’s probably right].”

*[unintelligible]**sio-qaw3 maa2 siap5 lêq1 tang4 bòo-hung1 vaa3*

“Was (he) going to come and plug it in and just have it not work?”

**Salina***bòo-huu4 bòo-huu4 nam2 lee2*

“I don’t know, I don’t know what (he was thinking) at all.”

*luam2 taa3 tii4 naqo-[Paa]*

“Do your eyes hurt [from the lights], Paa?”

**Sii, Salina, Moo***(h) (h) (h)*

(laughing together)

Here Salina begins by criticizing Kham as she had when he was present, as irresponsible. But she then voices a more damning accusation: Kham probably just pretended to buy broken lights he had lying around. Rather than defend Kham, as she had moments before, Moo says she is afraid Salina is right.

A week after the funeral, when I spoke with Sii and Moo at their house, the criticisms became even more excoriating. After some discussion of how he wasn’t really sure what Kham had done or was thinking, Sii explained that Kham, as a methamphetamine addict, was good at dissembling, or “talking really well.” And Moo spoke even more confidently about what Kham had done.

**Sii***khan2 man2 kh. . . khaw2 kin3 jaa3 lêq1 khaw2 kao-vaw4 kêng1 han5 lêq1*

“If he. . . if someone takes drugs then he’ll be able to talk really well.”



**Moo***qee3*

“Yeah.”

**Sii***[phòò-man2 maw2 dii3 qaql*

“Cause he’s high...”

**Moo***[vaw4 kêng1*

“[He] talks really well.”

*ngen2 man2 kao-qaw3 vaj4 man2 kao-qaw3 qan3 kaw1 khaw5 maa2*

“He took the money and then brought some old [lights] back”

**Sii***qee3*

“Yeah.”

**Moo***haa1 man2*

“Curse him.”

Others described what had happened similarly. Mèè Phòòn had not even heard about the lights during the funeral itself, yet when I started to ask her about them, to narrate that Phòò had given Kham money to buy lights, she immediately assumed that Kham had pocketed the money. Salina, likewise, told me that Kham had definitely done so. These evaluations had been almost entirely absent when Kham was present, but they were ubiquitous in his later absence.

### ACCOUNTS OF EVALUATIVE GAPS

“Corruption” was what Salina called it when I spoke with her a week after the funeral, using the English borrowing rather than the Lao, *kaansòòlaat4 banglu-ang3*. Her friend, a Thai national living in Laos who was chatting with us as well, put it bluntly: “In this town, there’s corruption all the time [*baan4 nii4 corruption talòòt5*].” Like the corrupt civil servant who uses a road project to siphon money to his friends, Kham had used the broken lights as a front, a way to embezzle money for himself. “He,” Salina said, was “good at lying.”

Many people in Luang Prabang with whom I spoke saw connections between the economic embezzlement that happened among family and friends and the em-

bezzlement that happened in the wheeling and dealing of Laos's late-socialist political and business world. The kid who silently pockets the change after an errand is recognized as doing something similar to the road builder who secretly turns a profit on the trees he had to clear along the way. But *corruption* as a term is "above all a category of accusation" (High and Petit 2013, 426). People use it selectively, to slander and delegitimize their targets. That this accusation has force in contemporary Laos surely in part results from the nation's relationships with NGOs, international businesses, and other countries. But the currency of ideas like *corruption* and *transparency* (*cèeng4*) also makes plain that alongside ideas that justify obscuring one's "real feelings" for social harmony, other discourses separate and disentangle surface from substance and imply that a mismatch between the two can constitute a problem. Thai politicians are said to have "sweet mouths" but "meaningless words" (Morris 2004, 225). So, too, is Kham said to be able to "really talk."

The relation between surface and substance thus proves more complex than any simple account of a Lao emphasis on supposed harmony implies. People frequently allude to this latter emphasis, but it is not easy to disentangle from their other justifications for choosing when to speak and when to stay silent. Fundamentally, if Salina unequivocally believed that appearances were all that mattered, then Kham's embezzlement of the money for the lights would not be a problem—let him have the money, she might have said, the lights were "broken."

But things were not so simple. In fact, Salina prided herself on her penchant for a "directness" that cut through pleasantries. Others often talked about her, as they talked about her mother, Mèè Phòòn, as a bit of a "yeller." My neighbors even jokingly asked me whether I was scared to live in the house. When I spoke with her about Kham and the lights, she claimed this dimension of her personality emphatically and without my explicitly raising the subject: "If something is worth yelling about, I yell," she said. And she did, in fact, speak harshly to Kham. She remembered that she had called him "stupid" (*caa4*). "I scolded [*daa1*] him," she told me, and stressed that this scolding made it so that Kham would not dare steal money from her again. But this directness had its limits: her supposed scolding was barely muttered, and it seemed unlikely that Kham had heard her. Salina recognized some of these limits. At the funeral itself, she told me she did not want to drink any beer because she was worried she wouldn't be able to "resist the urge" (*got2 qaw3*) to talk "straight" to Kham and Thii. A week later, she told me that although she never called Kham *qaaj4* or "older brother," even though she technically should, she also did not use the dis-honorific title *bak2* to Kham's face. Her Thai

friend chimed in: “If you are in front of his face, you can’t call him *bak2*, you can’t say that, you’ll lose discipline [*maalañaat4*], but if you are behind his back, then you can say it freely.”

That is, even Salina, a self-identified straight-talker, suggested that she modulated her evaluations depending on circumstance. All her criticisms of Kham (except for the “joke” that he was lying) took him at his word. She did not accuse him for having embezzled the money in an act of corruption but for being stupid insofar as he did not inspect the lights more carefully. That is, the actions being evaluated from one scene to the next changed, even as the quality of the evaluation—the anger and outrage involved—stayed similar. In this sense, Salina left clues to the stance she took after Kham left, but she did not embody that stance clearly (see Table 1).

Table 1

	As Kham ‘discovered’ the lights were broken, and they spoke with him	When they spoke about Kham in his absence
<b>Moo</b>	“The [lights] broke here”	“He took the money and then brought some old [lights] back. Curse him.”
<b>Sii</b>	“The [lights] broke here”	“I don’t know about what he did after that... Did he go to buy lights? Did he buy them? Or did he bring some old broken lights, instead? [Kham] said that that the lights broke [there], that’s what he said happened.”
<b>Salina</b>	“You didn’t look at [the lights at all], did you?”	“He brought old [lights] and took the money and said he bought them anew, he then took money from me and bought new ones again.”

In contrast to Salina, the straight talker, perhaps some readers might view Moo and Sii as conniving in their dissimulation of their opinions of Kham as they spoke with him. But in Luang Prabang, personalities like Salina’s more often emerge as the problem. Moo’s and Sii’s style of evaluating, in fact, matched how the couple had described and valorized their way of handling conflict. In several situations during our time as neighbors, they advised me to take their lead and stressed that I should not broach issues of possible corruption with suspected parties. When, for instance, we discovered that the envelope I had given them for a party had 50,000 less kip than I had originally put in it, and when it became clear

that the person I had entrusted with the envelope had taken some of the money, they told me I did not need to say anything, and made a point of telling me I should not bring it up with the person I suspected of stealing. This person was close to me and to them, but they nevertheless told me that raising the issue would just lead to “noisiness.” One should observe and remember such events, they said, without broaching them. Likewise, when I asked why they had not said anything about the lights, Muu responded that her desire to not be *nan2* or “noisy” outweighed her desire to talk straight. Sii agreed.

Salina was closer to Kham than Moo and Sii, related by marriage rather than friendship. She was also more invested in the wake’s success. This surely affected her approach. If Moo and Sii were the ones footing the bill for Kham’s embezzlement, perhaps they would have been more forthright. But her approach did not only result from this circumstance. Salina had a reputation as a somewhat difficult character; Moo and Sii were respected elders and movers and shakers in the neighborhood. How and when they negatively evaluated others in public and semi-public spaces contributed to these reputations, as it also proved fodder for other’s judgments. Simply put, choosing when to make a stink and when to zip up marks a choice of how to live. In Luang Prabang this choice is not just construable as a sign of one’s relationship to the target of an evaluation or of one’s sensitivity to the context of situation (*kòðlanii2*). It is a sign of character (*nitsaj3*).

## CONCLUSION

Consider again our silence when Kham entered as we were speaking about him. Moments like this silence make plain that evaluations are, like all kinds of action, contextually sensitive utterances, shaping and shaped by their surrounds. When people evaluate themselves and others in perceivable ways, they are often attuned to how their evaluations might be evaluated. In monitoring whether Kham was or was not present as Moo and Sii spoke about him, the couple appears to anticipate that they themselves will be judged, that they might be taken as rude or distasteful straight-talkers. With Kham present, their negative evaluations of him go absent. This propositional shift makes Moo and Sii recognizable as certain kinds of ethical figures: polite people who avoid social noise, elders with virtuous capacities to remain silent.

Many people in Luang Prabang find characters like Salina, who tend to yell and cause noise rather than resist the urge, troubling. Yet polite people like Sii and Moo are more troubling for those committed to uncovering tacit evaluations in every moment. Personalities like Salina maintain a similar evaluative force across

interactions, modulating their signs of stance and evaluations slightly, but leaving Hansel and Gretel like crumbs to the epistemic and ethical positions they will later take. Characters like Sii and Moo force the analyst to deal with what appear to be radical mismatches of discursive stances on who deserves blame and why.

What are we, as anthropologists, to do with the latter, more radical shifts in signs of evaluation, and the meaningful silences within them? The predominant hermeneutics in anthropology suggests a possible answer: perhaps, in some relatively underhanded channel of communication, people leave signs of their ethical stances sprinkled across their interactions. While this view has much to commend it as a methodological impulse,<sup>16</sup> it proves deeply problematic as an assumption about practice generally. Whether a given evaluation is semiotically absent rather than present can matter to people themselves (Lempert 2013; Stafford 2013, 112). Moo and Sii treated their resisting the urge to evaluate Kham to his face as a calculated absence—a sign of virtue, of consistency of character, and of the ability to let things pass. They saw the gap in how they evaluated Kham as explicable and compelling. They referred to it when they narrated what was behind their behavior (Mattingly 2008), and thus brought those signs into new forms. In doing so, they implied that for them, as for many others in Luang Prabang, the *ethics of interaction* should take precedence over the suspicions and judgments of the moment.

Such accounts and explanations of absent evaluations constitute a form of ethical and meta-ethical practice. They make for ethnographic objects in their own right, similar to claims of “sincerity” among Protestant converts (Keane 2007, 208), accounts of having “flipped the script” among those undergoing drug treatment (Carr 2010), or notions of “constancy” in Jane Austen’s writings (MacIntyre 2010, 183, 242–43). With a focus on the circulation of these ideas, one can observe how people hierarchize interactions, how actors turn “flat” worlds (Latour 2005) into interdiscursive landscapes with peaks and valleys of straight and polite interactions, and how disagreements emerge concerning which meta-ethical view of the landscape is the right one. Analyzing such evaluative terrain properly requires recognizing that “consistency of stance” is—like many other phenomena—both an empirical claim about people in the world and a characteristic subject to ethical evaluation and debate (Sidnell 2016).

This is not just a minor point. A focus on the flickering signs of evaluation, and on how people account for evaluative absences, leads us to thicken the descriptive claim that people are evaluative. It makes clear that evaluation often exists as a potential intervention rather than an omnipresent dimension of life (Lambek 2015b; Sidnell, Meudec, and Lambek 2019). Any suggestion that humans are eval-

uative tout court must reckon with the unevenness of signs of evaluation. The former claim is akin to saying that the copper wires running through a home are pulsing with electricity. These wires need to be fed and put in a closed circuit to electrify. But that potential lurks. It lurks over any anthropologist who claims that a sign of evaluation is or is not present, ready to contradict them at any moment. And, more to the point, it lurks over people generally, who often seem attuned to the idea that this or that wire may be hot, that an evaluative outburst might follow from what they do. Sometimes, as people in Luang Prabang tell it, people are so oriented to this potential of evaluation that they keep their evaluations to themselves.

### ABSTRACT

*At a sparsely populated wake in Luang Prabang, Laos, the guests appeared to restrain themselves from evaluating the deceased's son-in-law to his face, even as they said to one another that he had neglected his mother-in-law and pocketed the funds for her wake to feed his methamphetamine habit. What are we to do with moments of apparent restraint like this, those meaningful silences in which signs of evaluation seem partially withheld, transfigured, or utterly absent? What do they mean for accounts of ordinary ethics? In unpacking the events of Paa's wake, I suggest that such moments force us to reckon with the relation between signs of evaluation and meta-ethical accounts of them, as they also give flesh to the descriptive claim that humans are evaluative. Doing so makes clear that, at times, whether a particular person is being evaluative in a particular moment remains uncertain. At other times, people appear to be not only evaluative but so omnivorously evaluative—so fundamentally oriented to evaluation's possibility—that they keep their evaluations to themselves. [ordinary ethics; anthropology of ethics; Laos; evaluation; face-to-face interaction; sincerity; character]*

### NOTES

*Acknowledgments* I owe everyone mentioned in this article a tremendous gratitude, especially Paa, whom I never met while she was living, and her brother Phòò Thiang, whom I now miss dearly. I dedicate this piece, and whatever merit it may generate, to them. This article began as a paper for the 2016 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I received incisive feedback from Jane Guyer (the panel's discussant), Webb Keane (the panel's chair), John Mathias, Jack Sidnell, and Jason Throop. A version of this paper was subsequently awarded the 2017 Becker Research Prize from the University of Michigan's Center for Southeast Asian Studies. I thank Judith Becker for her inspiring work and the center, and its director, Christi-Anne Castro, for their support. At various points in the writing process Meghanne Barker, Nick Enfield, Bradford Garvey, Judith Irvine, Webb Keane, Michael Lempert, Alaina Lemon, John Mathias, James Meador, Heather Paxson, Peter Railton, Jack Sidnell, and Brad Weiss have offered comments on my written argument in one form or another. The final manuscript benefited tremendously from the suggestions of anonymous reviewers, the editing of Petra Dreiser and Kate Herman, and the guidance

of Christopher Nelson. Finally, my research on which this project is based was supported by funding from the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Fulbright-Hays Program.

1. My relationship with Phòò Thiang and Mèè Phòòn has and continues to be best framed in the language of kinship. I use kin terms here to refer to them throughout (*phòò1*, for instance, means “father”) as I used kin terms when I spoke to and about them while I was conducting fieldwork. I use *host family* as a natural gloss of this relationship in English, but note that the English term often invites the sense of a firmer boundary between fictive and supposedly real kinship than existed between us. For example, when I first gave Mèè Phòòn “rent” money, and treated it as such, she reframed that money as a gesture of love from a child to his parents and told me not to worry about the amount. After Mèè Phòòn sponsored my becoming a novice Buddhist monk, this bond was proclaimed even stronger.
2. On Buddhist funerary cultures generally, see [Williams and Ladwig 2012](#).
3. [Jarrett Zigon \(2007\)](#) grapples with a similar idea of the unevenness of ethical and moral life, but his distinction between ethics and morality does not neatly pattern with the issues I highlight in this piece.
4. As [Jack Sidnell \(2016\)](#) puts it, “If ethics is centrally about our relations to the lives of others then an account of ethical life will have to begin with an understanding of what those relations actually consist in.”
5. See [Susan Gal \(1995\)](#) for a critique of Scott’s underlying assumptions.
6. Some believe that ethics is not the sort of thing that can be captured by mechanically generated recordings of events. One can only respond to the latter critics by affirming that they are of course partially correct: my recordings of moments during the funeral, for instance, miss much of what made those moments matter—the history of the people, their private experiences, and everything before and after the events that made what was happening meaningful. And one can never remedy these deficiencies or fulfill the “fantasy that the other could be made wholly transparent if only we had enough recording equipment to replace the human ear with the ear of the machine” ([Das 2015](#), 86–87). But this is not a limit of recording technologies, it is the limit of evidencing any argument. On this issue, also see [Lempert 2013, 2015](#) and [Lambek 2015b](#), 131.
7. On the problem of delimiting ethics, and one intriguing solution, see [Mathias 2019](#). Note that throughout this piece, I do not make any strong distinction between morality and ethics.
8. In the new so-called anthropology of ethics, the issue of the continuity of the person is a key one. Many have found inspiration in virtue ethicists such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Bernard Williams, who, in different ways, argue that each life has a narrative arc. For these philosophers, understanding the ethical question of how one should live requires a view of life as a unified whole (see [Mattingly 2014](#) for an incisive summary). It is this contention that led [MacIntyre \(2010, 32\)](#), for example, to accuse Erving Goffman, along with Jean-Paul Sartre, of having “liquidated the self.” These philosophical projects can simply not “do without a very robust notion of the arc of a life and some kind of biographical integrity. The whole notion of cultivating one’s character depends on it” ([Mattingly 2014, 18](#)).
9. After Kham passed, Sii and ThongSaa resumed talking about him: “[He] pays more attention to his dogs than his kids,” ThongSaa said. “Yeah,” Sii chuckled.
10. Many who have studied gossip have been drawn to functional explanations. See the debate between [Max Gluckman \(1963, 1968\)](#) and [Robert Paine \(1967, 1968\)](#).
11. Except, tellingly, those cases where the first statement was self-deprecating.
12. [John F. Embree \(1950, 187\)](#) writes: “To tell a lie successfully, to dupe someone else, is praiseworthy in Thai culture. . . .” On lies, see [Johnson 2020](#).
13. “ເມື່ອເຫັນວ່າໃຜເຮັດຫຍັງຜິດ ເຖິງວ່າເຮົາບໍ່ມັກ ກໍ່ຢ່າອອກປາກຕີຕຽນ ຍົກເວັ້ນແຕ່ຈະເປັນຜົນເສຍຫາຍແກ່ສວນ ລວມ ເຮົາຈຶ່ງຄ່ອຍເວົ້າໃຫ້ຄວາມເຫັນຕາມສົມຄວນ.”

14. Among ethnic Lao, the cremation ceremony (*songsakaan3*) happens a day to a week after death, and the intermediate time is spent as a wake at the house, ideally with a crowd. Paa's house did not have a crowd (see [Zuckerman and Mathias 2022](#)).
15. To claim that one is joking like this is often used as a way of anticipating or responding to someone having taken offense (see [Zuckerman 2016, forthcoming](#)).
16. My aim here is not to underplay the evaluative work that indirect action can do (see [Lempert 2013, 378–79](#)), but to discourage assuming that such indirect action is omnipresent.

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