

SUMMARY OF A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

Working Title in English: Vitality Along the Mekong: An Anthropological Study of Devotional Objects in Buddhist Laos

Working Title in Slovenian: Vitalnost ob Mekongu: študija predmetov čaščenja v budističnem Laosu

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Module: Anthropology: Understanding Worldmaking Practices, Comparative Study of Ideas and Cultures, Postgraduate School ZRC SAZU

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Guided by a pre-field experience in Laos, the study of anthropological literature on the region, and consistent engagement with local newspapers, websites, forums, vlogs, and interdisciplinary scholarly work, the dissertation proposal suggests that devotional objects are often attributed a pivotal, yet complex and sometimes contrasting role in contemporary Laos; both in the context of everyday life and in the country's vision of its cultural, political, and economic trajectory. What stands out in particular is associating such objects with vitality – be it that of a human, river spirit, crop, sacred space, or politico-economic space.

By engaging with the perspectives of local artisans, healers, fishermen, farmers, monks, museologists, tourism- and heritage-workers, state representatives, and French archaeologists, this research proposes to investigate taking care of devotional objects as well as the sites of their worship in the light of their life-nurturing capacities. In dialogue with anthropological literature, both regional and global, which has discussed materiality and vitality in analyses of diverse ethnographic phenomena, this proposal reflects –theoretically, methodologically, and ethically– on the intricacies of researching said cultural phenomenon.

This ethnographic, field-based research of 12-15 months is suggested to take place in Muang Champasak with short-term stays in Pakse and Vientiane; all located along the Mekong river. Muang Champasak is proposed as the primary fieldsite due to its historical context as the former capital of the Kingdom of Champasak, a treasured Khmer heritage site, lived Buddhist culture, and for its proximity to sacred and archeological sites such as the Wat Phou temple.