

Inevitable Ends, Meditations on Impermanence

the final conference of 'Precious Relics: Materiality and Value in the Practice of Ethnographic Collection'

Hosted by Aarhus University and Moegaard Museum
All events at Moesgaard Museum, unless otherwise noted

ABSTRACTS /

in order of appearance

Carole McGranahan, Professor of Anthropology
University of Colorado Boulder

The Politics of Social Death: Buddhism, Impermanence, and Family in Tibet

Nothing is permanent. The idea of impermanence, or *mi rtag pa*, is a core idea in Tibetan Buddhism. Meditating on impermanence helps individuals comprehend the transitory nature of reality, and thus prepare for death. Grappling with this philosophical idea is the responsibility of Buddhist monks and nuns, whose lives are devoted to the practice of religion. But, as with all religious concepts, impermanence also shapes the lives and ideas of lay people in Tibetan society. For ordinary Tibetans, what does it mean to live impermanence, for this notion to ground your understanding of being and possibility? Specifically, if meditations on impermanence prepare one for death, can they also be useful for something less predictable, for the possibility of social death? In this lecture, I present the history of the controversial Pangdatsang family. In the span of one generation, they rose from being local leaders to the wealthiest and one of the most powerful families in all of Tibet. The story of their becoming is also that of their undoing. In the 1960s era of Tibetan exile and Chinese colonization, the family suffered a social death that still resounds today. This story of a family is also a political and ethnographic history of Tibet, offering insights into how *mi rtag pa*/impermanence as a lived concept, and not just as a philosophical ideal, is a strategy for addressing change at personal, national, and global levels.

Ton Otto, Professor of Anthropology
Aarhus Universitet

Making transient cultural worlds

Cultural worlds are in a constant process of being built and rebuilt. I am interested in the details of this process and focus on the concrete activities of people making and remaking their cultural environments and the materials they use for this.

The case I will discuss is a rare ceremony on Baluan Island in PNG, where I have done fieldwork from 1986 to the present. I saw this ceremony being performed only once, but I

have recorded twice that a similar ceremony was mentioned that happened prior to my first stay on the island. The ceremony is called *yiwan kup* and is about the transfer of leadership powers from a deceased person to his successor. As there are different forms of authority and leadership on the island (government, church, traditional), the choice to do such a ceremony is significant in itself. Equally interesting is how the new leader, who lost his father, the former leader, at an early age, has recreated this ceremony from bits and pieces, remembered stories, information from family members, and 'stolen' insights from observation. I will analyze the ceremony as an autopoietic process in which the new leader establishes both the group he wishes to lead and his own key position in that group, by reenacting certain cultural 'logics' that hold in certain contexts but less so in others. He remakes a world in contrast and competition with other worlds that are possible on the island. I will address the question what constitutes the relative permanence or strength of these transient worlds.

Cameron David Warner, Associate Professor of Anthropology and
Director of the Anthropology Research Program
Aarhus Universitet

'Do What You Think About': Fashionable Responses to the End of Tibet

In the P.R.C., Tibetans are migrating to growing cities as the government closes their grasslands ostensibly to prevent soil erosion from climate change. This first generation of truly urban Tibetans are inventing new music and clothing to address the needs of their generation. Combining ancient patterns and shapes, labels such as 1376, Hima Ālaya, Rewa, Lamdo, and Munsel stitch motifs from pre-modern Tibetan clothing onto hooded sweatshirts, winter hats, backpacks, sneakers and other urban wear essentials. Some Tibetan *bricoleurs* respond to pervasive apocalyptic discourses, which reiterate that Tibetan life is dying an inevitable death, through clothing, related popular music, poetry, and even company manifestos. Deliberately avoiding the naiveté or fatalism of the hope or sorrow trap, these designers point to alternative paths that embrace some elements of the impermanence of life on the Tibetan plateau, while simultaneously preserving what they deem to be valuable aspects of their culture. This paper attempts to develop the Tibetan concept of impermanence (*mi rtag pa*) into a nascent theory, in conversation with, not fully dependent upon, North Atlantic social theory. It also harbors a concern for the mercurial nature of the objects we define for study, and thereby tries embrace impermanence within its own epistemology.

Anna-Karina Hermkens, Scholarly Teaching Fellow, Department of Anthropology
Macquarie University

Creation, Decay and Destruction: Predicaments of Papua New Guinean Things

Since the advent of European explorers, missionaries, traders and subsequent colonialism, Pacific material culture has lived a double life (Thomas 2013: xi). On the one hand, indigenous material culture was often abandoned, replaced by western products, or destroyed by colonial agents. On the other hand, Pacific objects were systematically collected by these same colonial agents, who included colonial officers, missionaries, traders and anthropologists. Entering European, Russian and North American collections, these objects have been “admired, fetishized even, treated as specimens of one sort or another, classified and published, or put away in museum stores” (Thomas 2013: xi) and private collections. Susan Legêne (1998: 36) has called this the “paradox of colonial process” in which “religious symbols and systems were attacked and even destroyed on location, to reappear-out of context- in European showcases”. However, in Papua New Guinea (PNG), people have always had a complex relationship with things, which dissolves western dichotomies between objects and subjects, keeping and giving, creating and destroying, beginnings and ends. Indeed, in PNG, material culture must be understood as much in terms of its anticipated ephemerality and deliberate destruction, as its creation. Destroying things is often socially and spiritually creative, as is the case in the context of life-cycle rituals. But also in the context of colonial missionisation, local people willingly abandoned, burned or handed over significant objects, in order to create new relationships with Europeans and God. Likewise, the recent destruction of artifacts in the Papua New Guinea Parliament building reveals the tension between this creative destruction and demands to preserve ‘traditional culture’. This paper will further discuss and elaborate on the intricacies of PNG material culture in relation to local notions of the connection between persons and things, values of impermanence, and ideas of creation and destruction in the context of life-cycle rituals, colonialism, recent events, and debates about cultural heritage.

Cecil Marie Schou Pallesen, PhD in Anthropology
Curator, The Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum

On vanishing communities, perishing houses, and the need to hold on to something

Questions of (im)permanence have been fundamental in and for the Indian communities in East Africa for more than a century. Building concrete houses, factories, mosques and temples throughout the first half of the 20th century, they left a considerate mark on towns and cities. The concrete manifested the Indians’ local engagement and will to invest in their new country while it also became a way for them to inhabit and rule the town centers and to accumulate wealth through production, sales, and landlordism. At the same time, they invested in real estate in the UK and made sure to distribute different citizenships within the families in order to secure themselves if it became necessary to leave East

Africa. In 1972, driven by strategies of Africanization, the Tanzanian post-colonial government nationalized primarily Indian-owned companies and buildings. The majority of the buildings have since been owned by National Housing Corporation and host small-scale businesses run by Africans, and they are not being maintained properly. The concrete is crumbling and the walls are getting increasingly porous, and for the former Indian owners, it is a catastrophe to watch what they see as family property slowly perish. The porous walls become linked to a more fundamental porosity, which threatens the maintenance of powerful and 'pure' Indian communities, and the majority of families have chosen to send their young people abroad in search for a more convenient future. At the same time, many Indians keep fighting for their right to own the houses, their parents and grandparents built.

In this paper, I delve into the concept of impermanence through the porous walls and the permeating anxiety of a vanishing community: I look at relations between people and their houses and explore the need to hold on to the concrete. Showing that the perishing concrete of Indian houses are connected to experiences of post-colonial harassment, bureaucracy, cultural pollution, and marginalization, and I argue that the buildings accommodate national and personal trauma and thus form contested spaces encompassing complex and conflicting feelings and stories. Speaking from a future with a low level of Indian control of the market, they become the physical manifestation of the fact that nothing lasts forever; neither concrete nor power, purity or possessions; and thus generate a growing melancholia and anxiety among Indians.

Laura McAtackney, Associate Professor of Archaeology & Heritage Studies
Aarhus Universitet

Impermanence and memory-making at an abandoned institution

Addressing the conference's call to consider the role of impermanence, absence and loss of materials this paper will discuss some initial findings from a collaborative contemporary archaeology project at an abandoned Magdalene Laundry in Dublin, Ireland. The laundry in question is one of only two surviving in the capital city and has recently become the focus of highly public calls for preservation due to the perceived need to retain these 'at risk' sites in order to preserve memory of their past. Following a preservationist logic, retention is tied to an idea that the past is guaranteed to be remembered if we retain its material remains. This site will almost certainly be redeveloped in the near future. I will use this 'under-threat' abandoned laundry to instead consider the potential role of these transitional places of abandonment as unsettling locales of soft violence that can enable different forms of memory-making. The paper will begin with a short context about the site and the heightened place of Magdalene Laundries in contemporary Ireland. It will then present insights gained while conducting site-responsive oral testimonies with survivors. Finally, I will highlight the important role of materialized abandonment, loss, disruption and transformation in shaping the narratives that the women provide.

Haidy Geismar, Professor of Anthropology
University College London

Conserving the Social (in Museums)

In this paper I explore how museums are addressing key questions about the nature of their collections, and expanding the remit of museum practices such as curation and conservation to include the social as well as the material. Whilst museum conservation starts from the assumptions that objects are inherently unstable and continually deteriorating, and attempts to use the particular environment of the museum to arrest those inevitable processes of decay, the emergence of new categories of collection: performance, digital media are provoking new conversations about the immateriality of collections and the remit of museums to understand, and possibly collect, the networks of skill and knowledge, the infrastructures of care and materials, that underpin artefacts they acquire. In this paper, I explore some contemporary conversations about these issues in reference to two projects I am currently a part of: *Finding Photography*, a project developed in collaboration with the Head of Collections Care Research at Tate to explore the networks of skill that underpin contemporary art photography (linked to a broader project called *Reshaping the Collectible*) and *Encounters on the Shop Floor*, a Mellon Funded Project led by the Victoria and Albert Museum which aims to explore embodied knowledge through skilled practice and evaluate the implications for collecting and transmitting understandings of processes of making as well as things that are made. I end by asking, can museums develop practices and interventions to care for the social? Or are they simply producing new kinds of objects? How can categories of care, skill, and infrastructure provide blueprints for museums to contribute to debates about precarity, obsolescence, and immateriality?

Martin Grünfeld, Assistant Professor of Metabolic Science in Culture
Københavns Universitet

The metabolic collection

In museum collections, we attempt to conserve objects to preserve our material heritage and gain insights into the past. In a certain sense, such conservation practices aim at creating a state of *suspended animation*, where objects hibernate solely maintaining their most vital functions for us, such as their significance for our material heritage and value for future knowledge. By establishing such a *hypometabolic state* of reduced metabolism resembling death, objects are 'f_r_o_z_e_n' and removed from the forces of time. In other words, we attempt to suspend time in order to preserve it. This temporal regime constitutes the possibility for the objects to reappear and come back to life in exhibitions and research. Metaphorically speaking, objects live and die at the museum. For example, they may crop up from hibernation providing new insights into the past, they may change cultural significance over time, or they may rest in oblivion. Yet more than metaphorically speaking, indeed, quite literally and metabolically, objects not merely change meanings

and provide new avenues for research over time, their very materiality transforms. Even though we attempt to suspend their life processes, objects change and decay over time. While we aim at permanence and stability, impermanence is always already trespassing on our sacred grounds at the microscopic level. Collections are more metabolic than we (like to) think. This realization opens a provocative questioning into the temporal regime of museums: if objects transform naturally, is the function of the museum always to hinder this process and avoid collections becoming 'metabolic'? If we accept the pervasiveness of life processes always already transforming our collections, then, how can we conceive of a living collection not merely in a hypometabolic and metaphorical sense, but as a truly metabolic collection? And what would be the value of such a cultured impermanence in contrast with the traditional value of conservation? Drawing on my dual role as researcher and curator at the *Center for Basic Metabolic Research* and *Medical Museion*, I will explore such questions through concrete examples from scientific collections and the rich collection we have at *Medical Museion*. Such examples will enrich the conceptual reflections on the permanence and ephemerality of collections and provide the basis for arguing that impermanence not necessarily leads to oblivion and loss of knowledge but may be a crucial condition for the becoming of future knowledge.

João Biehl, Susan Dod Brown Professor of Anthropology and Co-Director of the Brazil LAB and of the Global Health Program
Princeton University

TRACES-OF-WHAT-ONE-DOES-NOT-KNOW | Storying Affective Archives of War and Transcendence |

History has haunted ethnography since its inception. Does the fixity of history overpower the plasticity of people? How do the historical and the unhistorical combine in the refiguring of social life and futurity? How can affective archives transform stories of what happened, and help us recuperate ideas of a forgotten otherwise? In this presentation, I address these classic yet always unfinished debates as I reflect on archival traces I have found in returning to the place of my beginnings in southern Brazil. I am a fifth-generation descendant of German immigrants who came to the region in the mid-1800s, and I here discuss a little-known fratricidal conflict I grew up hearing about from the elderly: the 'Mucker War' of 1874 that profoundly reshaped ideas of humanness and social belonging in the region. The Mucker, as they were called, were a group of settlers who gathered regularly at the house of Jacobina Mentz and João Jorge Maurer, where they sought community and healing through trances and herbal medicines. Denounced as mad and criminal by disgruntled neighbors, in summer 1874, over one hundred of these settlers were hunted down and killed by the Brazilian National Army, called in by a local germanist elite and newly arrived missionaries. In this talk, I draw from erstwhile remnants of the Mucker that have come my way throughout the years: from elegiac tombstone inscriptions and earthly iconography to communal registers and unwritten reminiscences; from oral testimonies of Mucker survivors to intergenerational botanical knowledge. I think of these opaque things and the sensorium they were once a part of as an 'unfinished system of nonknowledge' crafted in the face of death. Resurrected from

the archive of the horrific, these Mucker traces-of-what-one-does-not-know confront us with the impunity of those who made war inevitable and speak to a whole anthropology of the sensible—the inscrutability and renderings of affected, affecting bodies, contemplating transience and marking out alternative futures in the everyday.

Caitlin DeSilvey, Associate Professor of Cultural Geography
University of Exeter

Foundering

The English word ‘foundered’ has its roots in the Latin *fundus*, and is used in diverse contexts to describe falling away, failure or collapse. This paper will explore the use of the term in relation to a specific landscape feature—a coastal path that girds the Lizard Peninsula in the far south and west of the UK. The paper will reflect on the qualities of both the word and of the state it describes, reflecting on how its intransitive character (it is no longer possible to say ‘the river foundered the wall’ or ‘the sea foundered the path’) prompts questions about agency and intention. It is a word that describes a terminal and permanent state, beyond relations of care and repair. Working through close description of a specific stretch of path, the paper will explore the range of possible alternative theoretical and situated responses to ‘foundered’ features.

Ulrik Høj Johnsen, Ph.D. Candidate in Anthropology, Aarhus Universitet
Curator, The Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum

Permanent stairways to heaven?

During the devastating earthquake in Nepal in 2015, the magnificent temple construction on the Kathmandu Durbar Square, *Kashtamandap*, collapsed. The temple was not only the oldest standing public structure in Nepal; among Newars it was also – and still is – considered an important ritual and cultural space linking them with ‘Newar tradition’. Although several initiatives have been pushed for the temple’s reconstruction, differences in approaches among ‘heritage activist groups’ and the authorities have put the process on hold so far. The ‘heritage activists’, which constitute a heterogeneous group (mainly Newars) with fluid affiliations, overall call for a ‘traditional construction process’ using ‘traditional materials’. The centuries-old construction, allegedly, collapsed because its foundation was ‘enforced’ before a royal British visit in the 1960s with concrete, which removed the flexibility of the structure necessary to withstand major earthquakes, which happen in Nepal every century. Although the physical construction of *Kashtamandap* collapsed in 2015, the *idea* and *value* of *Kashtamandap* as a ‘connector’ to tradition, to the ancestors and ultimately to the divine, is indeed intact. For my interlocutors, it simply awaits a new physical form. Although the materials and techniques used to make the physical construction are important, the central value of *Kashtamandap* is intangible. The real value is resting in the (idea of tradition); and the Newars need the tangible

construction (defined as heritage) to connect to their traditions. This connection – or idea of it – is elevated from the laws of ‘inevitable ends’ of all matter, but is constantly transformed and reevaluated.

Sarah Schorr, Ph.D. in Media Studies

Artist

Winnie Soon, Assistant Professor of Information Science, Aarhus Universitet

Artist

Screenshooting Impermanence

Two artworks, *Unerasable Images* (Soon 2018, 2019) and *Saving Screens: Temporary Tattoos and Other Methods* (Schorr 2019), both arise from the shared impulse to capture online impermanence through artistic practice. In this presentation, we invite methodological and forensic reflection about screenshooting, taking a screenshot, as a way of thinking, capturing, and revealing a subject that resists permanence in post-digital culture. Soon’s work examines different modes of operative images, from networked search results and digital screenshot pixels to physical photographic slides and temporal projected visual, that is understood through performing and executing screenshots. Schorr appreciates the overtly subjective capacity of the selective screenshot in the context of the ontology of photography: through an interactive performance that occurs in a portable tattoo booth, Schorr considers the way screen images transform and mutate in form--even imprinting on the body. Though Soon and Schorr have distinct perspectives, their works come into dialogue through their post-digital thinking around impermanence, in particular to online/offline traces and digital/analogue dust, in which screenshooting is a sense-making method in their reflexive art practice.

Ralph A. Litzinger, Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology

Duke University

Dust and Decay: Black Lung and the Un-Making of ‘Shenzhen Speed’

This paper thinks through impermanence in relation to the struggle of rural migrants who contracted silicosis on construction sites in Shenzhen over the last thirty years. This is a story of deadly dust and the decaying bodies of those who blasted hundreds of meters deep into the granite rock to build the global city of Shenzhen. I offer a counter-narrative to the dominate trope of “Shenzhen Speed” long used by architects and city planner to celebrate the efficiency by which Shenzhen’s tallest buildings were built in the 1980s and 1990s, when a once isolated fishing building was turned into a global city. Rather, I focus on a different temporality – the slow death of silicosis – and a different spatiality – the work of blasting into the subterranean geologies beneath Shenzhen. Additionally, I draw attention to the slow and exhausting work of repeatedly traveling over a thousand kilometers, while sick, to protest against the city government and construction bosses, who

have refused to recognize most migrant claims for medical assistance, compensation, and for justice. While Shenzhen Speed signifies China's entrance into spaces of global modernity, especially for China's tech industry, for the migrant blasters and deep earth pneumatic drillers it signifies something very different: a space of sacrificed lives, decaying bodies, lungs turned to stone, a zone haunted by an unjust impermanence. This paper, then, is a mediation on how miners with silicosis struggle to be seen as something other than a disposable "useless people." It is a story about those who sacrificed to build the dreamworld of Shenzhen and yet whom refuse to remain silent, refuse to die and be forgotten, who refuse the deadly logics of Shenzhen Speed.

Henry Llewellyn, Ph.D. Candidate in the Marie Curie Palliative Care Research Department
University College London

The disclosure of impermanence in the care of people with terminal disease

Patients with terminal disease, their families and clinicians live in a peculiar state of heightened impermanence: when death is an inevitable end, imminent but unknowable; when the irreversibility of disease is moot and unbalanced by hope; and when a pervasive avoidance of death-talk seeps into the clinic through idioms of "radical" (curative) treatment. It is peculiar because impermanence is simultaneously known and denied. At stake, is the preparation for death and the moral approbation of those that care, for, while such preparation is a key tenet of end of life care policies across many countries, these stubborn and socially contingent forces often confound timely planning. In this paper, I examine the practices through which impermanence emerges, taking the care of people with aggressive terminal brain tumours in England, United Kingdom, as my ethnographic case. I consider disease progression as a critical site of temporal disclosure (prognosis) in which impermanence is reaffirmed and care is reoriented to either fight disease or accommodate dying. I argue that while disease progression is naturalised in the hospital as a biological phenomenon, its constitution is also very much social. I show how disease progression (and impermanence) is arranged through a progressional ordering of new moments, misattributions, missed opportunities, and positive characterisations of tumour growth and transformation given in the interpretations of brain scans, tissue, and symptoms. If we see tumour progression and the disclosure impermanence in this way—as unfolding and socially contingent, mutable and disclosed through a progressional ordering of reality—we more faithfully represent how it is lived. From here, we are better able to understand how difficult it is to determine the moment when disease is said to have progressed in a way that is irreversible and as such, the acute moral ambiguity that accompanies timely planning. We are better equipped to understand the peculiar state of impermanence which characterises the lives of people with terminal disease.

Maria Louw, Associate Professor of Anthropology
Aarhus Universitet

Atheist endings

My paper takes a point of departure in the efforts of young neo-atheists in Kyrgyzstan to emphasize the impermanence of human existence and death as an absolute end. They do so in a context that has undergone a profound Muslim revival in recent decades; where atheism has gone from being the default position taken by most people during Soviet times to being highly controversial, and where a narrative that makes life here and now a mere prelude to the afterlife has gained in prominence. I will explore the concern of the young neo-atheists that their physical remains as well as their digital heritage, upon their death, are treated in ways that emphasize that their existence has come to an absolute end, and that they are not ritualistically transformed into the foundational ground of a community they feel at odds with. More generally, the paper discusses the relationship between finitude and community: the way finitude lends intensity to the way community, or being-with, is lived and experienced.

Miki Chase, Ph.D. Candidate in Anthropology
Johns Hopkins University

A reflection on impermanence, self-effacement, and bodily undoing in the Jain fast until death

Sallekhana or santhara, fasting until death, is a revered practice in the minority Indian religion of Jainism. For Jains, it is the ultimate expression of an ascetic ethic in which the ideal relation to the world is realized through complete withdrawal from it. Withdrawal takes embodied expression through an individual's enactment of a carefully curated and canonically prescribed process of progressive abstention and dissolution. Based on ongoing anthropological research, this paper offers a current ethnographic account of one man's exceptional fast until death. At the time of writing this abstract, the man is still alive and on his 116th day of fasting from food and water, an extraordinarily extended period and the longest documented santhara in the history of the Terapanth sect of Jainism. By the time this paper will be presented, he will be deceased. Tracing his remarkable case is a scholarly form of anitya bhavna—meditating on impermanence—paying homage to the conference theme as well as the purpose of santhara. Crossing the bridge between the ideal and the material, santhara lauds voluntary death as a kind of dispassionate bodily undoing. Impermanence of the body and transience of life is meant to be experienced as neither agonizing nor especially desirable. It is a fundamental reality, acknowledged by all Jains, yet endured in santhara only by individuals possessing tremendous determination and the devout resolve to give themselves up to this reality. Recounting this man's fast is a way to contemplate Jain ethics and doctrine as a cultural formation that structures thought and action around

impermanence through self-effacement, made present in life while at the same time insisting on mortal finality.

Ward Keeler, Associate Professor of Anthropology
The University of Texas at Austin

Asserting one's identity vs. subordinating to power in the face of impermanence

A Western concern to preserve old monuments, old houses, old furniture, and even old art forms contrasts with the little interest I have found among Southeast Asian friends (in Burma and Indonesia) to care much about such things. The exceptions in Southeast Asia that I have found, in places such as the Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay, or in objects such as old daggers in Java, hinge on a belief that in such places and things people can find nodes of power. Only objects in which power exists matter because only they are of actual use, and therefore interest. --Whereas Westerners, I believe, having only a vestigial sense of old objects' instrumental power, instead find in an object's "aura" less power that we can tap into than validation of who we believe ourselves to be. A genealogical sense of links in transmission shores up claims we make about our identity, something we need to find within, rather than outside, ourselves. The contrast is not absolute, yet it can stimulate thinking about differing ways in which people conceive of themselves in relation to others and the world, both current and past.

Julia Cassiniti, Associate Professor of Anthropology
Washington State University

Certainly Uncertain: Thai Buddhist religious practice as a critique of Malinowski's Uncertainty Hypothesis

Bronislaw Malinowski famously suggested a strong correspondence between ritual and uncertainty, claiming that rituals are performed in large part in order to decrease a sense of uncertainty in one's life. Others have heralded or developed their own versions of this claim since, but while it has transformed over time, for the most part a connection between ritual and the attempt to decrease or deny uncertainty has remained entrenched in our current discourses about the psychology of religious engagement. In this talk I will discuss the role of uncertainty in Northern Thai religious and psychological life, as understood through the Thai term *khwam mai ne non*, a local interpretation of the Pali teaching of *anicca* (impermanence). The use of this term and its related ideology, understood to be true as one of the *tilakkhaṇa* (or "three marks of existence") circulating in local Buddhist discourse, asks followers to recognize and embrace uncertainty, rather than deny or attempt to counteract it. Based on findings from my recent book *Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community*, along with data gathered through additional long-term (but always changing!) ethnographic fieldwork, I describe some of the expressions, permutations, and implications that embracing uncertainty has for people in Northern Thailand, and for our understanding of the role of uncertainty in religious life.