

CENTRE FOR ASIAN AND  
TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES

INSTITUTE OF  
ANTHROPOLOGY



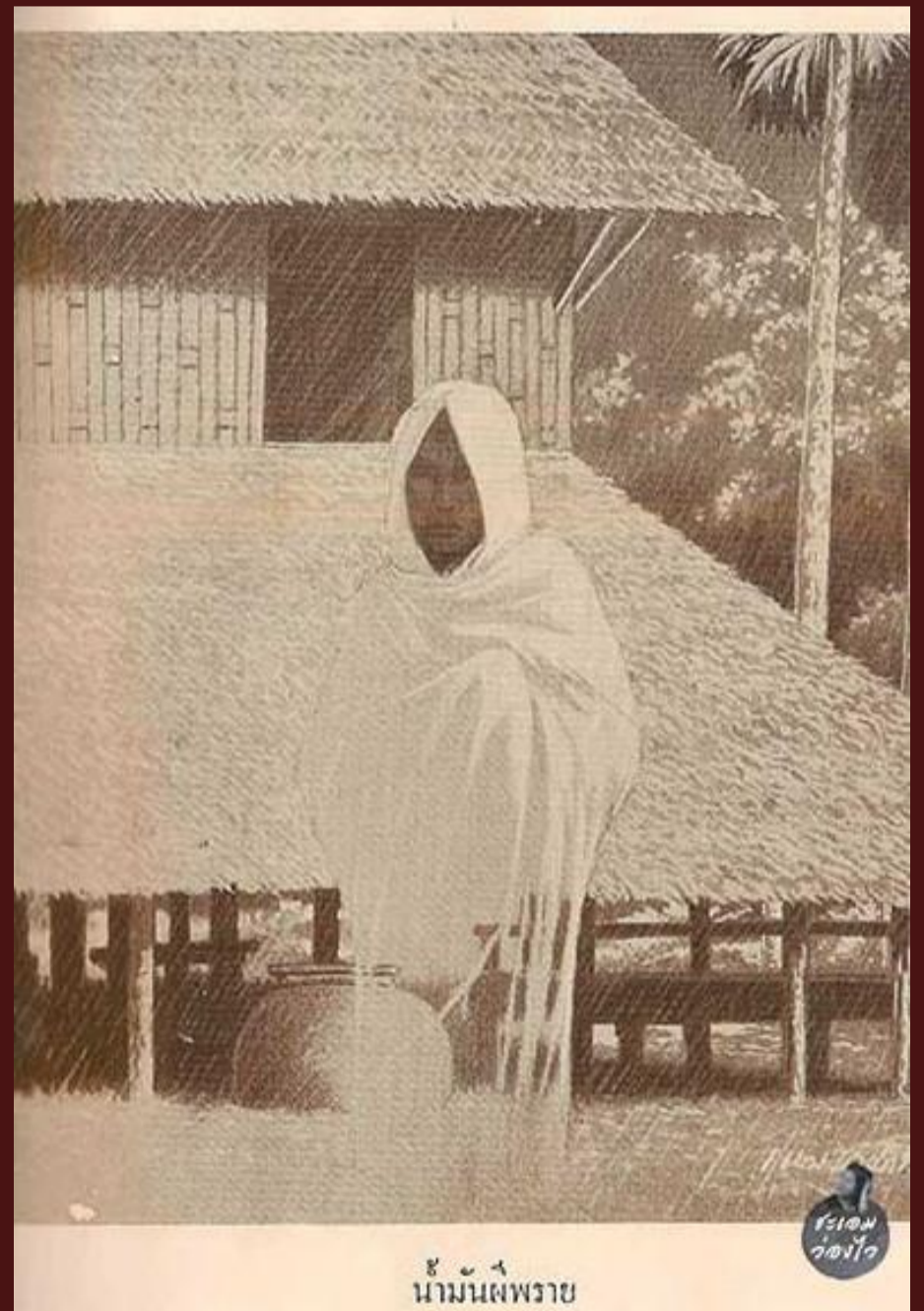
UNIVERSITÄT  
HEIDELBERG  
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**COLLOQUIUM SERIES OF THE INSTITUTE OF ANTHROPOLOGY**  
**Public Lectures**

# **Anthropological Turns on Ontology: Spirits, social ontologies and ontologies of possibility**

The agentive, person-like non-humans often labelled “spirits” or “ghosts” are a pertinent challenge for anthropological thought and research practice. While being a pervasive presence in the everyday lives of countless people – including numerous ones that would call themselves “modern” or “rational” – these non-humans frequently figure as mere symbols, representations or imaginations in anthropological theorizing. Mainland Southeast Asian social formations pose a particular challenge to such forms of scientific rationalization, as people there sometimes seem to contradict themselves when asked about the ontological status of these non-humans. On occasion, they deny their existence categorically with reference to their education or religion, only to recount personal encounters with them a little later. In this dialogue of two anthropologists working in two related field sites in the region, we attempt to find new ways of understanding the presence of these non-humans in everyday life. We ask how actors in worlds where these non-humans form important members of social collectives rationalize their sociality, Baumann from the vantage point of his work with Khmer-speaking Thai in Thailand’s lower Northeast, Sprenger from his fieldwork among Mon-Khmer-speaking uplanders in Laos. Beginning with some of our ethnographic puzzles, we explore ambiguity, emplacement, possibility and communication as avenues to decolonize our perception of beings we have learned to classify as “spirits”.

**Prof. Guido Sprenger /  
Dr. Benjamin Baumann**



**TUESDAY, November 21**  
**17:00 c.t. – 19:00**

**LOCATION: South Asia Institute, Lecture Hall (010.01.05), 1st Floor**