

“There Was So Much”: Violence, Sovereignty, and States of Extraction in Cambodia¹

Courtney Work

Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University

Abstract: Anthropologists debate the usefulness of an “Ontological Turn” in theory and practice as a way to confront the social and ecological disjuncture at the heart of the Anthropocene. Is it possible, scholars wonder, to validate rather than rationalize the idea that mountains, rivers, and trees are social interlocutors as well as arbiters of justice, resource access, and societal well-being? In a twist of monumental irony, previously market-independent Cambodians are facing, in an odious confluence of fear, need, and desire, an ontological turn toward the rationalized notion that trees, mountains, rivers and all their inhabitants are important primarily as commodities that can be converted to money. This paper explores part of that nexus of fear, need, and desire through accounts of social relationships with the “owner of the water and the land,” whose permission is sought for territorial access and resource use. Successful navigation of relationships with the Original Owner of the territory require respect, solidarity, conservation, and offerings of gratitude. In return people enjoy resource abundance, ritual/technical knowledge, and good health. Improper comportment results in illness, loss of access to forest and water resources, and knowledge loss. In yet another ironic twist, the Development State (defined within) promises poverty alleviation, education, and health care for all those who master the extractive market economy. The paper explores how different ontologies give rise to particular social, political, and economic possibilities, and demonstrates that the punishments of the Original Owner of the water and the land are visited upon those who either will not or cannot successfully navigate the extractive market system.

Keywords: Cambodia, climate change, ontology, development, religion

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Introduction

Spirit practices are evident in all places where humans reside. Their hallmarks are covered over and often unrecognizable, but they poke through from under even the most strident applications of texts and laws.² These traces are most visible in places where people have resisted or been spared the imposition of “religion”³ and/or where state and religious bureaucracies are weak. Even in urban centers, however, many people retain a sociality that includes both living and dead people, plants, and animals in a particular territory, and the earth, water, and elements that also inhabit the space. Elements are often understood in the register of an owner, or ruler that holds sway over the activities of human and non-human subjects within the space.⁴ In Southeast Asia in general,⁵ and in Cambodia in particular,⁶ other-than-human subjects are many and may include rice, rocks, termite mounds, snakes, trees, and various megafauna. In addition to these material subjects, Cambodians also recognize ancestors and *manuss moel min coeñ*, people we cannot see, the most important of which is *mcâs dÿk mcâs tî*, the owner/master of the water and the land (pronounced *maja tuk maja dey* and sometimes called *arak*, *neak ta*, or *lok ta*). The human inhabitants of a given territory understand themselves to be provided for, protected, and also punished by these territorial owners with whom they establish social relationships grounded in fear, gratitude, and respect. They ask permission to take resources, avoid certain places and take care in the others, and in grateful return for access and assistance people throw parties with chickens, pigs, music, and wine. If permission is not requested, if too much is taken, or if individuals are careless or disrespectful in the forest, there are consequences. These take many forms and can be delivered by a variety of vehicles; the most common is disease. Also reported are blocked access to fish and animal stocks, bad harvests, accidents, storms, droughts, floods, and blights. Today in Cambodia, many local people living subsistence lifestyles in or next to forest areas are receiving exactly those outcomes, delivered in the name of development by what I call here, the Development State.

²Cannell 1999; Orsi 2005.

³This term refers to a pantheon of non-terrestrial deities that are connected to particular state formations. The term itself, as something distinct from state formations, is a neologism attached to the emergence of the so-called modern state. See, for example, Asad 2003; Masuzawa 2005; Arnal and McCutcheon 2013.

⁴Howell 2014; Descola 2013; Kohn 2013.

⁵Århem and Sprenger 2016; Holt 2009; Mus 1975.

⁶Ang 1990; Forest 1991; Davis 2016; Work 2017; Guillou 2017.

This appellation refers to the complex system of international, regional, national, and local governance systems, non-governmental organizations, companies, development and conservation organizations, and financial institutions.⁷ It also includes multiple microprocesses driven by individual actors acting and reacting in organic ways.⁸ All these, from bureaucratic to microprocesses, are supported by discursive practices imbedded in policy and planning documents that form a naturalist ontology,⁹ which separates human sociality from all other species and elements on the planet, while promoting particular types of practices. Naturalist practices include the need for financialization,¹⁰ the need for security,¹¹ and the need for economic development,¹² in ways that privilege high-impact neoclassical land-use priorities explicitly valuing them over low-impact subsistence models.¹³ The structural violence of this system belies the promises of the international development community and the national state, as planners and implementers respectively, whose promises manifest in rising GDP, rising skyscrapers, bridges, roads, and internet coffee shops. This paper combines data from 2009–2018, the height of economic development in Cambodia, and juxtaposes the mythic promises of the modern Development State with the practical experiences of people living in spirit territories to suggest that the former is a spectacular inversion of the later.

There are striking similarities between the promise of access to territory and resources, the provision, protection, and punishments, provided by the Development State and the Original Owner. My method to discuss this is a limited structural analysis following Lévi-Straus, to compare the promises and punishments of the Development State to those of the Original Owner of the territory. When analyzing these two sovereign entities together, there are certain “constituent units,” like territorial access or education, that come together as “bundles of relations.”¹⁴ For example, each sovereign power (spirit and state) requires special literacy (ritual or textual) that must be learned in order for humans to obtain territorial and/or resource access with positive outcomes. When taken together, these relations present an opposition. In this example the Original Owner grants resource access and prosperity according

⁷See for example, Margulis, McKeon, and Borrás 2013; Peluso and Lund 2011.

⁸Li 2005.

⁹Descola 2013.

¹⁰Le Billon and Sommerville 2017.

¹¹Ybarra 2016.

¹²Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012.

¹³Geisler 2015.

¹⁴Lévi-Strauss 1963, 211.

to ritual adherence, respectful resource use, and social solidarity, while rewards and rights to territorial access in the Development State come through mastering bureaucratic literacy for land titles, 'productive' resource use for market extraction, and cultivating exclusionary hierarchical relationships.

In making this comparison for a special issue on Religion and Violence in Asia, I explicitly position both the Development State and the Original Owner of the territory as "religion" in ways that can expand our definitions of both religion and violence. To make this move, I draw two lines. One describes communities in environments with sovereign and invisible owners, understood as nature in a naturalist ontology,¹⁵ and as religion in academic taxonomies. The other deconstructs the boundary between religion and state by attending to the structural similarities between the Development State, religion, and the Original Owner.¹⁶ Critiquing the concept of "religious violence," William Cavanaugh suggests that "the best way to unmask a myth or an ideology is to show that it does not do what it says it does."¹⁷ Cavanaugh shows how labeling a particular type of violence "religious," makes space for "secular" activities to maim and kill, but not to be violence. In this article, I make a similar move by presenting the ecological devastation of the Development State alongside the reports of healthy and bountiful lives under the sovereignty of the Original Owner, unmasking one mythic system in light of its long discredited Other. Through this treatment, more cracks in the semiotic illusion of the legitimate sovereign state become visible,¹⁸ revealing its inherent fragility and making space to consider other configurations of human history, sovereign legitimacy, and socio-ecological relationality.

Below, I first support my claim that the Development State can (and should) be analyzed as both religion and state through a structural framework, I introduce my methods, and then lay out ethnographic vignettes to illustrate my theoretical suggestions. The short conclusion draws together my main points, while pointing out key elements for further excavation of the contact zone where the Development State meets individuals living on land controlled by an Original Owner. This paper opens more questions than it will answer, while illustrating how the promises of the Development State are not forthcoming, but the punishments of the Original Owner are clear and

¹⁵Latour 2016.

¹⁶Arnal and McCutcheon 2013.

¹⁷Martin 2012, 1; see also, Cavanaugh 2009.

¹⁸The legitimacy of sovereign rule is a constant issue for the rulers, whose machinations and obfuscations have been the basis of many studies of kingship. For example, Kantorowicz 1957; Wolters 1982.

present as the multiple apparatuses of today's global system inflict social and environmental violence and call it development.¹⁹

Structure, Violence, and Mythic Inversions

The structural violence of extractive hierarchal relationships is well known, and has been well documented.²⁰ Cambodia enjoyed over 70 percent forest cover when the Development State returned in force in the late 1990s after a thirty-year war hiatus, and its first activities were to exploit timber and other natural resources, “liberalize the economy” and strengthen the state.²¹ Local protests and unethical business and banking practices conspired to force a change, and the 2001 land law shifted the focus from raw extraction to extractive agriculture techniques. The ensuing economic land concessions destroyed more than the timber extraction they replaced and people started losing entire landscapes in which they previously made their living. In addition to the environmental violence of clearing and transforming ecosystems, companies destroyed village homes, graveyards, fields, and lok ta forests, and individual protestors and activists suffered intimidation, prison, and death as they struggled against it.²²

Beyond the dramatic violence of land conversion for plantation agriculture, the Development State entails a restructuring of the relationship between the environment and human culture. This is experienced as a cultural revolution, in which old ways give way to new in the context of a strengthening state.²³ “Now we have roads and the doctor’s medicine. We don’t rely so much on lok ta anymore” (Female Khmer villager, 40s, Kampong Chhnang, 24 Nov 2017). It is also attended by “threads of mythic thought”²⁴ that exemplify the global faith of development that provides prosperity, education, health, and security.²⁵ A structural analysis of myth provides linguistic cues that map this cognitive re-ordering of mind with environment. The “purpose of a myth,” Lévi-Strauss famously suggests, “is to provide a logical structure capable of

¹⁹This is not a new critique of development. See, for example, Ferguson 1994. It becomes more acute as the Development State attempts to combat climate change. See Spash 2016.

²⁰See for example, Escobar 1995; Schoenberger, Hall, and Vandergeest 2017; White et al. 2012.

²¹World Bank 1992, ii.

²²CCHR 2013.

²³Corrigan and Sayer 1985.

²⁴Reid 1995, 18.

²⁵Rist 2008.

overcoming a contradiction.”²⁶ Latour makes a similar suggestion about policy design,²⁷ and the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG), unrealized and expired, but now updated, expanded, and sustainable,²⁸ are a useful foil to explore this and the “timeless patterns” that operationalize social systems and make the myths of modern societies.²⁹

Conceived in the year 2000, the MDG promised to eradicate hunger and poverty; provide universal primary education; promote gender equality; provide good health by addressing infant mortality, maternal health, and combating diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and create partnerships for development. To achieve these ends, the Development State requires that children attend school, promotes biomedical procedures, and regulates particular types of land use that demonstrate “productivity” through, for example, agriculture, commerce, or industry, and through which individuals are granted use rights to resources.³⁰ Those unable or unwilling to adopt these modes of comportment can be subject to marginalization through exclusion, denigration, and the self-imposed poverty born of laziness, indolence, and stupidity. “The villagers just don’t know about hard work, they get money and just spend it on drinking or whatever. If they save it can be good, like my son—he has a car now, and sends his children to a good school” (Male Kuy asst. village chief, 50s, Steung Treng, 20 Jan 2018). Loss of access in this man’s understanding does not come directly from the state, but from individual capacity. In complementary contrast, the territory of the Original Owner provides access to food and raw materials, venues for knowledge acquisition as well as direct knowledge transfer through dreams or spirit mediums, access to medicines and healing assistance, provided they follow particular rules of comportment that ensure sustainability. The requirements imposed by the Original Owner are: Respectful behavior toward all—animals, humans, elements, and plants, asking before taking, gratitude and offerings in return for receiving, and avoiding excess through sharing. Those unable or unwilling to adopt these modes of comportment receive intentional illness, injury, bad harvests, and failure with hunting, fishing, or other economic activities. The irony upon which this paper is based is that each of these punishments has come to pass, through the activities of the Development State. I suggest

²⁶Lévi-Strauss 1963, 228.

²⁷Latour, *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*, cited in Mosse 2005, 230.

²⁸United Nations 2017.

²⁹Lévi-Strauss 1963, 209.

³⁰Borras, Franco, and Wang 2013; Work and Beban 2016; Locke 1823, 118 #31.

this is an inversion of the mythic structure, and such inversions signal the obfuscation of empirical reality.

Through his exhaustive studies, Lévi-Strauss finds that mythic inversions like those I describe, are masking changes in the environment in order to maintain coherence of the story.³¹ For example, after a discussion of the degraded environment and the difficulties finding food and forest products, one man remarked, “Yes, now we are so poor. But, the United States has extra money, so they bring it here to help Cambodia develop and stop being poor” (Male Kuy activist, 50s, Preah Vihear, 25 Feb 2018). In this example, the poverty was self-reported to have come from the plantation and the subsequent environmental changes brought by loggers, migrants, and roads. Nonetheless, the empirical reality is that access to food and resources now requires money, available through market crops or wage work, neither of which happens without development. Below I present other suggestive inversions ripe for analysis in the context of climate change and increasing resource extraction, with the explicit understanding that this is an “uncompleted operation,”³² a preliminary “carving out” of a “certain constellation of phenomena” that seem to form a set.³³

My point of departure is that the overarching structure of the two sets of myths is the same, both the Development State and the territory of the Original Owner provide the means to avoid poverty and hunger, as well as the means for education, for good health, and sustainability (provision and protection). These “constituent units” align, however, with opposing modes of comportment. Asking permission to cut a swidden field for household consumption and having entitled rights to transform diverse landscapes into market-bound monocrops are two distinctly different ways of avoiding hunger and poverty. They are inversions of each other. Reading and writing, abstract skills learned in a classroom, are inversions of ecosystem knowledge gained through experience and experiment. Yet, both are education. Another key inverted “constituent unit” is that punishments in the form of illness and/or loss of access to resources reported in traditional myths, comes swiftly and without remorse directly from the Original Owner, while under the myth of the Development State the loss of access comes from the deficiencies of certain individuals. The final, and most important, inversion I unpack here is that people are receiving the Original Owner’s punishments at the hands

³¹Lévi-Strauss 1973, 14–15.

³²Descola 2016, 42.

³³Lévi-Strauss 1963, 285.

of the Development State. Complicating Lévi-Strauss’s observations, we find here an inversion at the level of empirical reality rather than myth.

It is important to clarify that no one suggests their current poverty, the loss of fish and game, their increased illnesses, and loss of solidarity come from the Owner of the water and the land. This is where the inversion is important. The Original Owner provides the means of subsistence through access to territory, and when ownership of the territory shifts to the state, the coherence of provision, protection, and authority remains the same even though the empirical reality has changed. This is one small example, but maintaining coherence in the story of provision, protection, ownership, and authority courses through Cambodian history, where the Original Owner mediates religion and state in ways that are ripe for further excavation.³⁴ The environmental changes and obfuscations that these inversions signal open a Pandora’s box that traces through the civilizing missions of stranger kings,³⁵ god kings,³⁶ and into the modern state, providing rich soil for critique and transformation. Cavanaugh shows how the obscured entanglement of state and religion manifests in the contemporary fiction of “religious violence,”³⁷ which transforms state violence into a positive force. In the following narrative, constructed through multiple voices, I follow the violence delivered by the Development State against all inhabitants of the Original Owner’s territory, whose ecocide is only just becoming visible under the myths of sustainable development and a more peaceful and prosperous world.³⁸

Method

The data presented here comes from over eight years of ethnographic collection from seven provinces and Phnom Penh in Cambodia. Participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews and group discussions were conducted among rural people who self-identify as Khmer and indigenous Kuy people, among local and national authorities, development donors, company managers and executives, and representatives from civil society. Data were collected in either Khmer or English. Provincial-level data come from Kampong Speu, Kampong Chhnang, and Pursat provinces in the west, and from the Prey Lang forest that sits between the Mekong and the Tonle Sap Rivers in Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Steung Treng, and Kratie provinces.

³⁴Forest 1991.

³⁵Sahlins 2008; See also, Sahlins 2017.

³⁶Tambiah 1976.

³⁷Cavanaugh 2009, 165–180.

³⁸Kopnina 2014; Yusoff 2012.

My original inquiries in rural Cambodia were related to Buddhism, and the role of *lok ta* in village political economy emerged through the course of my fieldwork. Climate change policies were the focus of my next project and again, *lok ta* was present as part of people's social and political activities. The long history of war in Cambodia has its own coloring effects on people's experiences, memories, and relationships to the state, the spirits, to Buddhism, the land, and to each other. Many of these are explored in other papers.³⁹ For this paper, I began collecting what people said about *lok ta* and the *arak* in the forests alongside what they were saying about development and the changes they were experiencing, and also alongside what people delivering development were saying about what they were doing.

In the next section, I mix evidence from the different areas where I conducted fieldwork in Cambodia to tell a dialectic story of land use, violence, and development that implicates both the Development State and the Original Owner. The words I mix here come from government officials, development donors, and company representatives, but mostly from Khmer and indigenous Kuy subsistence cultivators, some of whom are now activists against the companies and new encroachments. I do not conflate Khmer and Kuy, although generations of proximity inform similarities between them in Prey Lang.⁴⁰ Rather, I combine their stories to show the persistent significance of the spirit owner of the water and the land, especially for those living market-independent existences. The story begins with local accounts of social and economic relationships with the Original Owner, the environment, and the expectations, benefits, and punishments within that interaction. From there, I discuss contemporary state land claims, corporate extraction, and development detailing the benefits and punishments that emerge in this encounter.

At the Ground

Life Under the Original Owner

"We only did a little bit just because that's how it was, we weren't poor" (Male Kuy villager, 30s, Kratie, 7 July 2017). "We didn't need much from the market, everything came from the forest" (Female Kuy villager, 50s, Steung Treng, 27 June 2017). "There was so much. We would just walk in—right there, just across the stream—and we would just go in and get all the fruit and vegetables we needed, all kinds, so much variety, and no chemicals!" (Female Khmer villager, 30s, Pursat, 19 November 2017). "We had so many jobs to do . . .

³⁹Work 2014; Beban and Work 2014; Work 2017; Work, forthcoming.

⁴⁰Keating 2012; Swift 2013.

after the rains, we would get all the fish from the streams and lakes and make prohok [fish paste to store]. In the dry season, we repair boats and make traps for fishing and hunting” (Male Kuy activist, 60s, Kampong Thom, 28 February 2016). “We make soap and baskets, we treat baskets with resin to make them waterproof. . . . Weaving leaves for roofs and walls, we were always busy. There was so much . . . everything came from the forest, the lakes and streams” (Female Kuy villager, 40s, Steung Treng, 2 August 2016). “We did lack some development, like roads, schools, and doctors. We didn’t have any medicine tablets, we just found medicine in the forest. We had such good health then. I’m eighty-one years old and my brother is ninety. My aunt lived to be one-hundred and twenty-five years old in this forest” (Male Khmer villager, 80s, Pursat, 20 November 2017).

The forest is open for everyone, but lok ta is the owner and master; “at the place where lok ta is, we never go there, we show respect. Lok is dangerous” (Male Kuy activist, 50s, Steung Treng, 27 June 2017), and people “take care” (*thaerakasā*), suggesting both alertness and protective nurture. But, the social relationship is cultivated with hope, and people ask permission, make offerings and “take care” to ensure both abundance and protection. Everything people do is connected in some way to lok ta, there are no “profane” activities, but activities are not really “sacred” either. It’s more like a habitus informed by particular ontological realities where certain activities require special attention. Creating villages or cutting new fields always entails rituals to ask permission: “When we came here at first, it was nothing but forest. We made an offering to lok ta the very first thing. We said, ‘we are just small people. We will cut the forest here to grow rice and raise our family. Please protect us, lok ta. Please give us good harvest. We will not take much. Only just enough for our family’” (Female Khmer villager, 30s, Kampong Chhnang, 16 February 2010). Receiving bountiful harvests requires collective celebrations in gratitude, with meat, wine, music, and dance. Hunting also involves negotiations: “Lok ta, please send us an animal whose energy is weak. We will take it to make us strong” (Male Kuy villager, 70s, Steung Treng, 7 August 2016). And, when members of the Prey Lang network patrol for illegal loggers, they stop to greet lok ta on the way out of the village. They light incense, open a bottle of rice wine or a can of beer, and share a drink all around with a measure poured into the ground for lok ta. “Lok ta, we are going on patrol. Please help and protect us on the road and protect our families in the village. Keep us all healthy, safe, and happy” (Male Kuy, activist 50s, Kampong Thom, 2 February 2016).

But it is not just access to resources and protection that entangle the Original Owner. Good health comes from knowledge of the medicine and collaboration: “Lok ta, my child is sick. Please make these medicines I gathered

strong enough to cure her” (Female Kuy villager, 30s, Kratie, 17 March 2015). Lok ta also educates, and “the arak teaches us the right way to do the rituals” (Male Kuy ritual specialist, 60s, Preah Vihear 16 Feb 2018); “Some of us had never danced before, but when we did the celebration for lok ta after our first harvest here, suddenly we danced like we’d always known how. Lok ta did that” (Female Khmer villager, 50s, Kampong Chhnang, 22 June 2010) “I learned from my parents, which medicines and which plants are good for eating. But I learn in the forest everyday . . . everything comes from the forest, from lok ta” (Female Kuy elder, 70s, Preah Vihear 15 Dec 2017). Education includes punishment, and there are consequences for transgressions: “if we ask for this much, we take this much. If we take that much, then next time, lok ta won’t give us the fish” (Male Kuy villager, 30s, Kampong Thom, 17 July 2017). The plantation workers in newly cut areas have high incidents of malaria, “They say it’s malaria, but we know lok ta did that” (Female Khmer activist, 40s, Pursat, 19 November 2017). People report a malaria-type fever that afflicted a few individuals in the past, but nothing like the numbers and new varieties today, which lok ta cannot cure. Punishments from the Original Owner are understood experientially, rather than in the register of belief. “If we make an offering to lok ta and get better, we know the illness was from lok ta” (Female Kuy villager, no age, Preah Vihear, 25 Feb 2018). “One soldier was here [at the lok ta hut], drunk and joking around. He went home, got sick, and no medicine would cure him, so he went to the traditional healer who said it was our lok ta that did it. He had to travel back here and have a celebration. He recovered—right away” (Male Kuy villager, 40s, Steung Treng, 22 Jan 2018). It is this experiential base that informs relationships with the Original Owner, and also facilitates shifts toward naturalist ontologies as will be discussed below. What I want readers to take away from the above snippets, is how the Original Owner grants access to territory, cures illness, and provides education, abundant harvests, hunting, and safety. In return, the people abide by the pledge of respect and caretaking, make communal offerings in gratitude, and expect punishments for transgressions.

Life Under the Development State

The fact of the Original Owner informed all movements and settlements, but the rural areas of Cambodia were not idyllic forests of subsistence living. Residents lived through brutal conditions under the Khmer Rouge, through displacements and prolonged civil war. Change came through the 1990s as the socialist era closed, the civil war ended, and the Development State emerged. In much of Prey Lang, long-settled villages resumed shifting cultivation immediately after Pol Pot, and in the western regions, Khmer communities were

slowly repopulating native villages or migrating to clear “available” forest after the wars. These were subsistence lifestyles that continued through international interventions from the UN, the World Bank, and others that aimed to strengthen the bureaucracy and alleviate the poverty of the Cambodian state. The first initiative was timber concessions.⁴¹ “Some of us went to work for money. We knew where everything was in the forest” (Male Kuy activist, 50s, Kratie, 14 February 2015). “But then we saw it was just so much, they took so much and had no respect. We said, it’s too much, but they didn’t stop they just took more” (Male Kuy villager, 60s, Preah Vihear, 29 April 2016). Massive community protests forced their suspension,⁴² and Economic Land Concessions took their place.

This new form of extraction administered by the national state, awarded concessions in state forest land, often classified as degraded or waste lands, toward the goal of economic development in a war-torn country. The representatives of donor institutions, companies, and the national government are not without critique of these initiatives, but their voices echo the mythic elements described above about productive land use, poverty, and proper education. “Before we came there was nothing here, just forest. Now look, we’ve planted rubber, built roads, and provided jobs to the people. We are planning a clinic in the coming years. The people should be happy” (Manager, Chun Hong Rubber, 40s, Kratie, 3 Nov 2015). Economic land concessions claimed land that was already in use by villagers, trees, streams, and myriad species. This claim was made in the service of Development: jobs, roads, schools, and hospitals. In a news article, the acting minister of the environment said, “What we are trying to do is develop our agriculture industry to create jobs for our people, so hopefully they don’t have to depend on the forests anymore.”⁴³ And, recently I was told, “We don’t want the indigenous people to continue with their traditional ways, we want them to move beyond the forest and go to university” (Director of Community livelihoods, Ministry of Environment, 30s, 27 November 2017). The Development State seems to be executing a particular vision in Cambodia, “really, Cambodia is already an adaptive society. . . . They build houses on stilts and have so many different rice varieties, some for deep water, some for dry land. . . . But this is not good and is associated with poverty. We’re moving to a more modern kind of infrastructure and planning . . . to improve agricultural productivity” (Male, JICA climate change advisor, 30s, 17 Oct 2016).

⁴¹World Bank 1992; Le Billon 2000.

⁴²Global Witness 1999; Carmichael and Lon 2002.

⁴³Blomberg 2015.

Agricultural productivity requires land, and Cambodia's land tenure system was mostly instituted through semi-formal village-level registration,⁴⁴ but land titles were scarce as was the money and literacy to obtain them. Companies coming in to develop their concessions, having both money and literacy, arranged formal agreements signed by government ministries. "The company followed the law, but people didn't understand. This is state forest land and if they don't have title, well . . . you see?" (Kratie, Commune Chief, 50s, 14 February 2015). "Their grandparent lived on this land and they think the land is nature and it belongs to them. . . . Not like civilized people, who think you must have a land certificate" (Advisor, Guangdong Hengfu Group Sugar Industry Co., Ltd, 50s, Phnom Penh, 14 March 2017). When the Hengfu sugar concession came to clear the land, people report: "We showed them our documents, the commune chief made them in 1996. The authorities looked at them and said they were invalid. They tore them up" (Female Kuy villager, 50s, Preah Vihear, 30 April 2016). "They say we are the ones breaking the law by living on state land. They say the company has the right to develop the land. The permission comes from the government. For us, this is our ancestors' land who already had permission. From lok ta and from the kings of Angkor too, we have always lived here" (Male Kuy villager, 60s, Kampong Thom, 28 February 2016).⁴⁵ Local people lacked the proper literacy to negotiate with the Development State, but they will soon receive the schools in which to gain it. They will also have appropriate jobs that pay money, and will have access to health care.

Violence All Around

All across the country people protested against the massive transformation of land, waters, and forest that was bringing development and jobs to the Cambodian people. "The logging companies were bad, but we still had the forest. Now the company takes all the forest and we have nothing" (Male Kuy villager, 40s, Kampong Thom, 11 September 2015). "They said they would bring us jobs, but we don't want their jobs. We have so many jobs" (Female Kuy spirit medium, 60s, Preah Vihear, 12 December 2016). "We weren't against having jobs, but they didn't tell us they would take the forest. Now the company doesn't pay us and the forest is gone, we are sick all the time and there are no roads, no doctor, no school" (Male Kuy activist, Kratie, 9 March 2016). "They burned and destroyed everything. Our ancestral lands, the honored forest and lakes, the streams, the ancient sites. It's all gone" (Female Kuy villager,

⁴⁴Guérin 2012.

⁴⁵See also Keating 2012.

30s, Preah Vihear, 4 July 2015). “We protested, and they called us criminals. They said we were ‘against development’ and threatened to arrest us” (Male Kuy activist, 50s, Kratie, 13 February 2015). “Even when the opposition parties come before elections, they only talk about development like schools and roads, but they don’t address our problems. They don’t talk about land” (Male Khmer villager, 40s, Kampong Speu, 15 May 2015).

There is an ambivalence about development. Many liked the idea of jobs, especially as more market goods were available to buy. Roads are a universally welcomed addition to forest life, “we used to walk and sleep two nights on the road to get to town, now we can get there in two hours!” (Male Khmer villager, 50s, Kampong Thom 11 Feb 2018). Despite this ambivalence, the violence and injustice of development invoked more than protests from affected humans. “We filed so many complaints with the authorities, but there is no solution. From the cursing ceremony, we get results. Six officials who helped the company are dead in these three years. Lok ta did this. The police chief broke his neck falling out of a hammock” (Male Khmer activist, 40s, Kampong Chhnang, 10 November 2015). This is ritual literacy, and people take it seriously. “They didn’t let us do the annual lok ta ceremony at the temple, they blocked us. They were afraid because of the prime minister’s visit the next day.” “We had to do it, so at the village, we lit incense and begged lok ta for help and for rain. . . . The next day a storm came. You saw the newspaper. The storm destroyed the stage.” “What they didn’t say is that one of the Prime Minister’s bodyguards was killed. . . . Lightning hit a tree and the branch went right through him” (multiple Kuy voices, group discussion Preah Vihear, no age, 1 May 2016).⁴⁶ Lok ta’s violence against the companies and government officials is understood in the same register of cause and effect discussed earlier. Accidents do happen in factories, bankruptcies do plague land speculators, and when people die after a cursing ceremony these all confirm that the Original Owner does not agree. “We ask first, and wait. If lok ta doesn’t agree we know from a dream or event, like an accident” (Male Kuy villager, 50s, Preah Vihear 24 Feb 2018).

In this same register of experiential knowledge other stories invoked the power of the Development State. “We called on lok ta to help us, we made offerings and asked for protection from the company and government officials, but the machines were too strong, lok ta can’t fight against them” (Female Khmer activist, 50s, Kampong Chhnang, 15 July 2010). “If you don’t believe, you can take whatever you want. . . . It’s only us that gets punished. Only us that suffer. The rich are not affected and the companies just continue . . . even though we tried to protect [the forest], lok ta can’t protect us” (Male Kuy

⁴⁶Phak Seangly 2016.

activist, 30s, Kampong Thom, 6 March 2017). “Nothing can protect us, now. It’s not just the companies, it’s everyone. We are so poor now, we have to join them. Before we sold them resin, now they only want the trees” (Male Kuy, community forest chief, 40s, Kampong Thom, 28 August 2015). In my most recent field trips, 2017–2018, all villagers were involved in the quest for cash, most through the informal timber trade and expanding market crop plantations. New homes, new motorcycles and tractors, new temple buildings, and new clothes ornament the once forested landscape. Only a few refuse the gifts of development, “I don’t have everything they have, because I’m not willing to cut the forest for myself. People say I’m crazy, but I just can’t do it” (Preah Vihear, 25 June 2017). In the wake of these environmental shifts, the ontology also changes and today no one considers their new illnesses, the extended droughts, unseasonal floods, bad harvests, and decrease in local knowledge to be lok ta’s punishment. “This comes from the companies, not lok ta,” people said. They also said, “That’s not lok ta, that’s nature.”

Conclusion

Shifting ontologies and inverted myths dot the physical and cognitive landscapes in the contact zone where the Development State claims sovereignty and changes both the environment and the rules of comportment. New types of activities are given meaning and value under a mythic structure of provision, protection, and punishment that seems to be very old, older than either religion or states. It is as old as the water and the land itself, perhaps. Nonetheless, the violence at the heart of the ecocide that is development is realizing lok ta’s punishments for carelessness and disrespect, even as the people begin to think of lok ta’s territory as “nature.” Even though ontologies are shifting, I suggest that the shift in empirical reality may be great enough in the current era that the myths can no longer contain the contradictions.

I discuss religious violence in this paper at the nexus of the largely obscured relationship between states, territorial spirits, and religion, following Cavanaugh to expose atrocities obscured by constrained notions of violence. If we count only wars between humans, then development does indeed reduce violence,⁴⁷ but if we include the ecocide of environmental destruction and species extinctions, and the culture-cide of subsistence lifeways in our measures of violence, the picture changes. The disrespect toward so-called nature is evident in how violence is both evaluated and valued. And the contradiction of economic comportment that has long marked the distinction between the civilized and the primitive, the modern and the traditional is implicated in

⁴⁷Salehyan 2014.

what is and is not considered violent. The events and circumstances of the contemporary era, often referred to as the Anthropocene because it is human-induced, highlight the implications of this contradiction and the naturalist ontology that privileges an extractive and hierarchal political economic system.

The people who have been comporting themselves in accordance with the laws of the Original Owner of the water and the land are being punished for the actions of the people following state (market) law. The fish and the game are gone, the forest is falling, and people are sick all the time. While at the same time, the Development State says it is doing development for the benefit of these very people whose access to benefits is mediocre at best, with the best going to those more developed with higher status and finances. There is nothing new in this configuration, it is what started the communist revolutions of the early 1900s. The communist revolution in Cambodia resulted in what is sometimes called an auto-Genocide, where class and not race determined who lived and who died. Participants in my research activities who all lived through the Khmer Rouge brutalities are explicit in their assessment: “Pol Pot only killed the people. Afterwards, we still had the forest.”

In yet another twist of monumental irony, scientific humans have dubbed the current era the Anthropocene because of the magnitude of expected planetary transformations.⁴⁸ By placing the activities of an extractive hierarchal state-market system (a human creation) as the driver of the planetary transformations currently underway, the myth of the anthropocene overcomes the contradiction that only elite and industrialized humans can be counted among the Anthropos ushering in said anthropocene. Assigning blame is not my purpose here, only to point to important obfuscations. I close this paper with a provocative and forward-looking quote from H. M. Hocart, that says: “The functions discharged by king, prime minister [and the Development State] . . . are not the original ones. . . . They were originally part, not of a system of government, but of an organization to promote life, fertility, prosperity by transferring life from objects abounding in it [elements] to objects dependent on it [plants and animals].”⁴⁹

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⁴⁸For an introduction to the anthropological discussion surrounding the Anthropocene, see Tsing et al. 2017.

⁴⁹Hocart, *Kings and Counselors*, 1952 (1970), cited in Sahlins 2017, 22.

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