CHAPTER 19

Grounding the Shifting Political Registers in a Potent Cambodian Landscape

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Introduction

Potency. Life-giving earth energy that is tapped by various acts of Prowess. Every economic act by every species is a manifestation of prowess. This is the knowledge, skill, and practice that translates potency from one form to another. Potency is amoral and creation and destruction are relative. The denuded forest landscapes of capitalist logging, for example, are just right for the exemplary prowess of opportunistic mushrooms (Tsing, 2015). One fellow's destruction is another's delight. Prowess among humans, however, has acquired a moral patina. In the contemporary moment, this morality seems to facilitate the violent transformation of life-producing elements towards satisfying a rather narrow range of delights for an even more narrow range of beneficiaries. This is maladaptive, even for the beneficiaries of the violent extraction.

Joining a growing number of humans from various fields and backgrounds interested in exploring the possibilities within this transformative process, the following pages unpack the morality of exploitation from three distinct sets of political norms visible in contemporary Cambodia. The first is the "cosmic polity" (Sahlins, 2017: 46–61), in which human actions are governed and guided by powerful non-human "chthonic sovereigns", addressed in Cambodia as ancient ones (*neak ta*) and referred to as 'spirits' in academic productions (Work, 2017, 2019). The second is divine or sacred kingship

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(Graeber, 2011; Mabbett & Chandler, 1995), which captures cosmic polities and bifurcates political norms into human-based governance and religion. The third is the contemporary moment of international organisations, banks, corporations, and nation states (Ferguson, 2006; Käkönen & Thuon, 2019), which continues human-based governance and captures earth energies while denying all religious or cosmic premises. Each set of political norms creates different economic possibilities, along with the conditions "to imagine or deny alternative production systems" (Dove, 2019: S310). These are all tangled in multiple mythic inversions and obfuscations.

The following pages claim only to pull at a few of these tangled threads that are already woven into an obscuring cloak. This cloak, like those worn by human and elephant shamans when they shape-shift into each other's collectives (Howell, 2015), conceals one form while revealing another. Michael Taussig (2003: 150) refers to this shaman's technique as the "skilled revelation of skilled concealment". The objective of this chapter is to follow the threads of potent earth energies as they weave through three admittedly 'ideal' sets of political norms. Then to deploy those threads in the weaving of new fabric, the pattern and form of which is not yet known, but whose origin in potency will guide the emerging image.

The discussion begins with an outline of the basic propositions and foundational truth claims from which this analysis begins and proceeds to discuss the overlapping and changing political norms of the above-named systems for moral and effective production. Concluding remarks are put forward in an exploratory and humble spirit (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017), using an ethnographic vignette from my most recent field trip (January 2023) to invoke the discarded third of 'religion' and disrupt the feedback loop created when ancient states are compared to their modern counterparts. The modern seems as if it is something wholly new and different, masked by its utopian stories of education, poverty reduction, and human rights all put forward in the clear presence of voracious extraction, dispossession, and neglect. Throughout the chapter, 'religion' is presented through the stories of autonomous people confronted by 'the state', through the epistemologies of a few generations of academics, and through the author's encounters with the Kingdom of Cambodia and its modern-day councilors in the international development-conservation-climate-change complex from 2005 until the present. This is an admittedly massive cast of characters and the author begs indulgence as she brazenly weaves the argument through a broadcloth, picking up only particular threads and leaving aside numerous others to make a claim about the political norms upholding both utopian ideals and resource capture, and the fecundity and carnage they make possible—together.

Basic Concepts

The discussion begins with a provocation by David Graeber who suggests that states have a dual character, being at once "forms of institutionalised raiding or extortion, and utopian projects" (2006: 65). Graeber points to the disconnect between the written 'utopian' record of state forms and the experiential documentation of autonomous persons encountering those violent entities. This provocation is the starting point of my reading of the data, from which emerge a few propositional hinges that will ground the ensuing analysis. The first hinge suggests that all land and resource use engages directly with a sentient and potent resource base (Chao, 2018; Gibson et al., 2018), and that the work of cutting, building, and eating is *experienced* and *shared* by all participants, sometimes eating and sometimes being eaten. The second proposition is that the sentient and potent resource base, referred to here as 'earth energy', is 'enstoried' by humans engaging with it in ways that establish a certain mutuality of experience between the eaters and eaten (Work, 2019, 2023), "tribute-givers and tribute-takers" (Collins, 1998: 566). My thoughts (Work, 2019, 2022a, 2022b) are situated in a common sense reading of our growing collective understanding of the biosphere, DNA, and the profound interconnectedness of all forms of life.[1] These thoughts are deepened by the fact that particularly potent places identified in Cambodia (and globally) tend to be rich in fresh water, stone, and minerals, also known as 'natural resources' (Baumann, 2022; Guillou, 2017a, 2017b; Povinelli, 2016). The stories that capture earth energy and ground the morality claims of such capture will be unpacked below, but the three ideal types I describe here, the cosmic polity, divine kingship, and the modern state, exist simultaneously. One set of stories does not give way to another in an evolution of ideas, but each way of telling the story gives rise to different kinds of ideas and practices that bump into each other in the contact zones.

There does seem to be a set of loosely shared ideas about earth energies that are visible in the skills, stories, and practices of people whose systems have been consistently overtaken by state formations during the past five or so thousand years. Philip Descola (2013) shows the outlines of this global sentient-world political economy and Marshall Sahlins (2017) posits that this is the original political society. Sahlins (see also, Wessing, 2017) shows some of the mechanisms through which the sentient base is captured by kings for extraction. This act of appropriation consistently gives rise to a symbolic utopia that connects the king to locally-enstoried earth energies using the ritual technologies of priests who de-localise them into universal cosmic systems (Collins, 1998; Mabbett, 1985; Tambiah, 1976; Wolters, 1999; Work, 2019). The symbolic

[1] My DNA and that of a tree share striking similarities. Contrary to the machine model of Descartes, DNA is not a code, but seems rather to be a set of possibilities for environmental interactions. The idea that the human animal is uniquely sentient in this amazingly complex system is, I suggest, a superstition cooked up in a particular environment, which created a perhaps short lived (in planetary terms) selective advantage.

utopia of kings was labelled 'religion' by a collection of scribes re-working sentient-world stories during the decline of priest-king collaboration in Europe (Asad, 2003; Masuzawa, 2005). Today the collection of skills, stories, and ritualised acts that have been and continue to be used by (still) colonised people to engage with enstoried earth energies is also labelled 'religion'. This religification of the foundations of political economy obscures the potent energies that fuel it and causes the prowess used to tap it to be set aside from, and analysed as if outside of, modern political and economic pursuits. Thus obscured, sentient-world politics and techniques of prowess were removed from the contact zone of 'modern' states and their political norms, creating an echo chamber in which the ancient and modern states became the only models for political order.

Having set up the founding "truths" of the world from which this chapter springs (that sentient-world politics are obscured first by ancient and then by modern states through resource capture and religification) the discussion will now shift to describe indigenous economics through the lens of (recently dispossessed) shifting cultivators in Cambodia with whom the author is most familiar, using some corroborating data from other places.

Potency and Cosmo-Political Norms

The oldest and perhaps only sustainable form of human-manipulated production and consumption is shifting cultivation (Dove, 2015; Dove & Kammen, 1997). It is a highly adaptive system that consistently increases biodiversity and carbon stores in the landscapes where it is practised (Fox et al., 2009; Scheidel, 2018). Nonetheless, modern state actors have labelled it 'slash and burn' agriculture and continue to blame it for forest destruction and biodiversity loss (Fox, 2000), this will be picked up again below. Analysis begins here with the cosmic polity and the "enstoried earth energies" sometimes called spirits or gods (Work, 2019), that are embedded in swidden landscapes (Condominas, 1977; Padwe, 2020). Cosmic polity is a term coined by Marshall Sahlins (2017) in an essay that posits social hierarchy in all human societies. Even in an 'egalitarian' social order (Howell, 2012), there is an ultimate authority that can, as Carl Schmitt famously suggests of the sovereign, "decide on the exception" (1985: 6). That authority, in a cosmic polity, is not human. Sahlins calls them meta-persons; I have referred to them as "chthonic sovereigns" (2019), and their stories twist them in and through natural forces of volcano and wind, elements of water and stone: they can be 'found' on mountains, in caves, in the sea, in clouds. In Cambodia, mountains, islands, and water sources are consistently recognised as local authorities, chthonic sovereigns of a cosmic polity.

There is a growing body of work grappling with other-than-human agency, which can be immaterial, like a meta-person or the wind, and material, like water or stone. Part of what this chapter explores is the ways that the material

and the immaterial, the concrete and discursive, are intertwined and self-referential. Chthonic sovereigns are semi-historical figures in the stories people tell about them, and are also the rock, or the fresh water stream. In fact, a number of the gods and spirits I have met in former swidden landscapes look suspiciously like 'the landscape'. They are rock formations, swamps, springs, ponds… and this earth energy, this pond god, constitutes society in very mundane ways. The pond physically connects the biological actors in the area: everyone comes here for a drink, and the water seeps into the ground, is held by tree roots and flows into rivers and streams. In Southeast Asia (and elsewhere, Povinelli, 2016) the pond is ritually engaged and enstoried as part of long-standing life-enhancing kinship relationships with the 'ancestors': Pond, Termite, and Rock (Baumann, 2022; Hocart, 1953; Povinelli, 2016; Sahlins, 2008, 2017). It is through these locally particular, yet globally structured (Descola, 2013), politics that the human inhabitants of a given landscape engage with the 'resources' they use to make a living. Their continued success in a region depends on proper comportment and the skillful deployment of particular technologies in order to access food (and to enhance comportment). The former is dictated by the potent earth energies, and the latter is prowess.

This is a place-based system (Guillou, 2017a, 2017b; Mus, 1933), and I take certain liberties with its generalities and particularities in this section, sketching a pervasive logic that is visible in my own data from Cambodia and generalisable to data on "cosmic polities" from other times and places. Within the political norms of the cosmic polity, failure to acknowledge the non-humans managing an area, or unskillful execution of the prescribed techniques for procuring resources, can result in a variety of calamities. The most common of these are illness, accidents, sudden death, or the withholding of plants and animals from the hunting-gathering human. Other calamities include storms, floods, droughts, and other potency-disrupting phenomena (Allerton, 2013; Wright et al., 2020). The resulting system is not one in which people are paralysed by fear, but rather one in which the rituals, procedures, and taboos offer a sense of security and comfort (Howell, 2012). There is a mutuality of existence and an understanding that elements and energies are produced, consumed, and redistributed within cycles of inevitable dearth and abundance (Dove & Kammen, 1997). The overriding political project is communal well-being, with the "prerogative of forest regrowth" (Ironside, 2013: 185). Importantly, the community is conceived beyond human actors and is understood to include all the creatures and elements that create the system, what Mario Blaser calls an "emplaced collective" (Blaser, 2019: 84).

The idea of anarchy in this political-economic system is impossible. There is never a situation in which land, resources, and the procedures necessary to procure them are not governed. This was one of the most surprising revelations gained while deeply hanging out in a 'settler' collective at the frontier of development in western Cambodia (Work, 2019, 2020). Even in the absence of national infrastructure, the land was 'owned' by the invisible non-human ancestor. With promises that they were "only poor" people who would not

"eat you to bits", individual settler families negotiated for permission to dwell, and for support and protection in their pursuits (Work, 2019: 86). Wealth is seen as evidence of skillfully navigating potency with insight and hard work, but especially of having ritual skill that is used to manage relations with earth energies. Ritual skill is both a collective and individual endeavour. Individual hunters would observe certain taboos, and the hunting collective would perform particular rituals for the various guardians of the land, the plants, and their animal kin. The rituals are performed in the register of kinship: land and water are coded as ancestors (Povinelli, 2016; Work, 2019), prey animals are often engaged as potential wives or lovers and their non-human guardians treated as brothers-in-law, the cultivated plants are often the children of the women who tend to them (Århem, 2015; Descola, 2013).

Elements are enstoried through encounters. In the settler village, dreams informed people to come to particular "potent places" (Allerton, 2013; Guillou, 2017a), an underground freshwater stream for example, and build huts, make offerings, and throw parties (Work, 2020, 2022a). In the Prey Lang forest in north-central Cambodia, former swidden agriculturalists now venture deeper into the damaged forest to tap resin trees and find forest products. In these new landscapes, they encounter new ancestors, recognised through accident, illness, and dreams. Not every rock formation, pond, or termite mound is an ancestor, but each one could be. When a hut is placed at a potent location, people know that an ancestor requests recognition at this place. Travelers, prospectors, and settlers know to introduce themselves, to be careful, and to make an offering as they pass by: accidents stop once the appropriate comportment is established. Non-human ancestral sovereigns exist on a spectrum from unknown, unpredictable, and dangerous to known, still unpredictable, still dangerous, but open to communication. The unknown entities exist in the deep forest and are especially dangerous precisely because they could be anywhere and no one knows their particularities. Shamans and village founders would encounter these unknown energies and learn how to dwell with them in a new place. These roles often entangle village founders personally with enstoried elements (Tannenbaum & Kammerer, 2003; Wessing, 1999).

The entanglements of village founders with earth energies are not ordinary acts of prowess that ensure the health and productivity of the every day, these are entanglements of exceptional prowess enacted by skilled technicians. Even still, in every swidden landscape there are places where known and enstoried earth energies refuse all access, founders and settlers alike. These 'sacred forests' are places where people tread lightly and only when necessary, and also places that both conceptually and practically organise the boom and bust economies of the forest (Coggins & Chen, 2022). Even within the settled and known territories, not all things are open to negotiated extraction, but through attempts at negotiation and the attendant encounters with potency, lineages emerge and get ensconced in stone (Baumann, 2020; Janowski, 2015; O'Connor, 2003). There is an important distinction between the shaman and

the chief, however. The shaman taps potency using exemplary prowess to direct it into and out of sick bodies, their own bodies, and to communicate with enstoried energies (Kim, 2015; Taussig, 2003; Viveiros de Castro, 2007). The political norms of chiefs on the other hand can rely on the shaman to act (discursively and/or actually) as an intermediary with enstoried energies of rice, water, and stone that are deployed towards production, but the excess is managed and redistributed by a chief cosmically bound to enrich the emplaced collective (Dove & Kammen, 1997; Reynolds, 1995).

Cosmic polities in which ultimate authority rests in non-human forces, whether they have egalitarian or hierarchical social structures for humans, consistently present collective systems that favour system health over individual success and produce landscapes of high biodiversity (Dressler et al., 2018; Fox et al., 2009; Maharani et al., 2019). The political norm of the cosmic polity tends towards subsistence production and collective solidarity, mediated through communications with non-human ancestors achieved through trance, dream, and possession events. Norms are upheld and adjusted through this process and norm-defying acts are uncommon and maladaptive. What is important and interesting is the political power of norm-defying acts. In the stories of non-human 'gods', 'spirits', 'meta-persons', earth energies, etc., they are anthropomorphised and are attributed with human or non-human origins. Their stories of power often begin in some norm-defying act of deception, of incestuous union, of self-sacrifice, or of cataclysmic violence (Graeber, 2011; Guillou, 2017b; Herrmans, 2020; Sahlins, 2017). It is from these "enstoried earth energies" that the king grabs his power.

Kings and Priests Capturing Potency

While the chiefs of the cosmic polity may emerge from within the collective, conquering big men (non-lineage chiefs/kings) explicitly mark themselves as external to society or the dominant lineages (Norén-Nilsson, 2013; Sahlins, 2008), often through acts of norm-defying, violent, or deceitful acts. In Cambodia, the legend tells of an Indian prince who landed in the Mekong delta where the Naga princess paddled out to meet him. He shot at her with his magical bow, frightened her, and clothed her, after which her father the Naga King gave her in marriage to the prince and sucked up the waters to give them land (Chandler, 2008: 18). In another version of this same story, the prince receives the quest and the magical bow from his personally entangled and enstoried tree energy. When he arrives at the foreign shore, he is attacked by the local ruler, Liu-ye, whom he defeats with his magical bow and marries, taking over the kingdom (Coedes, 1975: 37). Both stories recount exceptional violence and intimate relations with enstoried earth energies (Davis, 2008). In the first story, the earth energy is Cambodia and the Naga king sucks away the water to give the prince and his new "bride" the land. In the second story, the earth energy is a tree that supplies the magical bow used by the prince to subdue and "marry" the autochthonous ruler. Either way, the stranger obtains

the land through rape and violence supported by enstoried earth energy. Even more importantly, and often glossed, is the new political norm this acquisition of land and lineage creates in the region (see Ladwig, 2022 for an important discussion of this).

Even though kings can be made through arbitrary violence, they are consistently sacralised through ritual (Graeber, 2011: 1), and their control of any territory continues to depend on appropriate relations with earth energies (Aeusrivongse, 1976). In Cambodia and other Theravada Buddhist-influenced polities, these relations are mediated by Brahmin priests (Leclère, 1899: 377–379; Tambiah, 1970: 252–263). The significance of layered Buddhist and Brahmanist ritual technologies for territorial appropriation is beyond the scope of this paper (see, Davis, 2022; Thompson, 1996, 2016). The line I am following here is how the exemplary prowess of land-appropriating kings obscures potency, which like the stranger king is external to human society but engaged through the idiom of kinship. These are the propositions upon which the entire edifice of 'civilization' hinges (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017). The king reveals himself as the potent centre, re-signifying and concealing nodes of enstoried earth energy with his universal gods, and appropriating the customary offerings (Aeusrivongse, 1976; Coedes, 1975; Davis, 2016; Mus, 1933). This is the shaman's trick (Taussig, 2003: 153), and the theme of revelation and concealment helps to make visible the enduring political elements of economic engagements between prowess and the potency it seeks to harness.

The earliest king-based social formations in Southeast Asia emerged directly from forms of territorial organisation in which non-human ancestor-mountain-water-stone life-creating power was the centre around which villages formed (Aeusrivongse, 1976; Baumann, 2020; Mus, 1933; Sahlins, 2017; Work, 2019). This shaman's trick is accomplished through violence and marriage into autochthonous clans. The shift to patrilines embedded in this process is important (Thompson, 2016) as is the re-signifying of locally potent earth ancestors into universalised gods that are then pacified and mediated by priests. We see these processes consistently throughout the history of the region. The priest with his cosmologies and temples regularly travels out in advance of the king, converting locals, placing new iconography down on top of already potent places, and receiving the traditional offerings for the gods of the land (Aeusrivongse, 1976; Ang, 1990; Guillou, 2017b; Hayashi, 2003).

It is commonly asserted that chthonic sovereigns eat people, in the same way that people eat pigs, and when someone cannot be cured of an illness or dies suddenly in an accident, this is framed as a tribute for the angry and/or hungry earth energies (Gibson, 2006; Sprenger, 2018; Valeri, 2000). Similarly, the king eats the kingdom across South and Southeast Asia and both kings and priests are tribute-takers, eating the food produced by others (Chandler, 2008; Davis, 2016; Forest, 1991; Heine-Geldern, 1942). Padi rice is the food of kings in Southeast Asia. Rice cultivation predates all state formations in the region (Dove, 2019), but irrigated padi is commonly held to distinguish the lowland agrarian states from the upland shifting cultivator (Coedes, 1975). It

is the padi rice that pays the king in taxes and feeds both kings and monks, but "foodgetting" is not for either. This activity is "an aspect of a lower animal nature and thus appropriate to slaves, peasants, and women" (Davis, 2009: 50; Friedman, 2000: 481). Peasants were both forced and persuaded to put hunting aside and come down from the hills to join the Buddha in peaceful and bountiful rice production (Porée-Maspero, 1962: 586–587).

Padi cultivation is not as productive per capita as swidden and requires considerably more labour (Dove, 1985). As such, it is unlikely that people would switch to padi rice to enhance their subsistence. Violence was one method, but some suggest that there were other enticements, like status or honours for chiefs. It is possible that the "theatre state" described by Clifford Geertz (1980) was also a mode of persuasion and spectacular enticement. The real wealth of ancient kings does not come from the padi, however. It comes from trade, largely facilitated by "tribal people" whose access to the luxury goods, woods, resins, spices, animals, and people of the "wild" forest and mountains, fuelled imperial expansions (Reynolds, 1995: 426; Scott, 2009; Zucker, 2013: 29). Padi rice had a different function. It fed the priest-king ensemble and bound the life-giving potency of food and the labour required to create it into the irrigation schemes of the king (Davis, 2016). This intensified land use, transformed space, created excess and social hierarchies, and bound people to their padi fields, all of which increased the influence of the king and destabilised the power of cultivators as well as their potent base.

Rituals that give thanks to the rice and bind it to the village fields and granaries were once ubiquitous (Ang, 2004; Porée-Maspero, 1962), as were rites reconstituting the intimate ties between non-human resource 'owners' and kings (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017). Sahlins follows Hocart's presentation of his data to argue that "the gods precede the kings who effectively replicate them" (Sahlins, 2017: 23). The possibility of human-based authority over resource access comes from the cosmic polity and the original non-human resource 'owners' in a given territory (Graeber & Sahlins, 2017: 14; Work, 2019). In pursuit of territory and to justify a share of local production, a king must deal with the locally enstoried energies of the water and land in a way that exceeds the shaman who clears the forest and founds the village. In Cambodia, Brahmin priests ritually create the king out of enstoried earth energies, Buddhist monks control those energies, and the king proclaims adherence to Buddhist moral codes (Ledgerwood, 2008; Thompson, 2004). Buddhist monks also control ghosts and the dead (Davis, 2016). Through Buddhist/Brahminist technologies, the king is substantiated by the ability to consume life and manage death (Davis, 2016; Thompson, 2004), mimicking the earth energies. This inversion conceals the avarice of the ruler behind the revealed cosmic morality of the Buddhist monk. One last story helps illuminate the explicit revelation of one thing within the concealment of another.

The story comes from Davis' (2016, 2022) treatment of the establishment of the sanctified *vihear* of the Buddhist temple complex in Cambodia. The *vihear* is bound by a string that makes the boundary *sima* (Carbine & Davis,

2022; Kent, 2022; Kent, this volume), within which Buddhist monks can be ordained and other specialised rites can be conducted. The ceremony establishing the *sima* boundary involves (among other things) dropping a string that is attached to head-sized stones at eight points around the space to be sacralised, and at its centre. Prior to the *sima* ceremony, another ceremony to *Kruṅ Bālī* must be performed in order to use the land. This common ceremony that precedes all building projects in Cambodia involves offerings to the Naga king, *Kruṅ Bālī,* an "explicitly non-Buddhist, nonhuman, original sovereign power" through which the land is transferred from the original sovereign to the king (Davis, 2016: 133). The *sima* ceremony conducted afterwards enlivens the new temple and cedes the land to Buddhism through "an act of symbolic, sacrificial violence" in which blood is dripped onto the centre stone that is dropped into the temple foundation by the king or a representative (Davis, 2016: 129). For Davis, the ways that the king establishes himself through the violent appropriation of "wild" earth energies, which are then controlled and "civilised" by Buddhism, are ritualised in the ceremony to create a Buddhist temple (Davis, 2022: 206). It thus conceals the violent appropriation of the king, which I suggest remains incomplete as evidenced by the necessary tribute to the Naga king. It also conceals the human sacrifice rumoured to empower and protect buildings across Asia, through a ceremony in which blood is dripped onto the five stones that drop with the *sima* into the ground (Davis' discussion and footnotes, 213–217; Kent, 2022: 156, fn, 44–45).

The exceptional prowess of revealing a sort of utopian benevolent care while concealing the institutionalised violence of extraction and construction necessary to bring it into being continues in the present condition of modern political economy, which will be drawn out in the next section.

Extractive Industry, Conservation, and Consuming Potency

Modern states modelled on Euro-colonial political norms, cleansed of religion, and focused on extraction and economic growth, were put in place directly on top of political and economic norms that had been created by kings masquerading as cosmo-political representatives (Baumann, 2020; Beban & Work, 2014). By inventing "world religions" as a social category separate from political economy (Masuzawa, 2005) and creating the possibility for kings to 'own' the land that their priests had appropriated from enstoried earth energies (Asad, 2003), the European colonisers obscured the potent base from which both politics and economies emerge. So-called modern rational scientific propositions created a mechanical world that local priests and kings also used to enhance their sovereignty over the still-potent sentient world and to cleanse both politics and religion of their self-organising potentials (Edwards, 2007; Hansen, 2007; Thongchai, 1994). This is an unfinished

project, as evidenced by earth energy's potent responses to extreme extraction and economic growth and the discourses rising up in their wake.

Nonetheless, mechanical world propositions continue to inform powerful projects of extraction and accumulation that have transformed global systems of human sociality as well as the systems of its potent base (Chakrabarty, 2020; Dunlap & Jakobsen, 2020). This transformation did not take place independently of previous political economies, neither have their traces disappeared (Ladwig, 2022). Just as the kings exploited sentient land and labour using the political norms of the cosmic polity to increase their wealth and power, modern colonising states deployed norms from the kings for their own exploitation. The most recognisable was slavery, and 'uncivilised' persons who had been enslaved by the kings, with the help of powerful chiefs (Padwe, 2020), slid naturally into the labourers on colonial era plantations and then all plantations thereafter following the colonial model (Baird, 2011; Ironside, 2013). Plantation labour is made possible by land ownership, and property is only possible when sentient actors can be made into things (Strathern, 1999). Following this, I argue that modern nation states were only possible after sentient earth ancestors were captured by kings and their priests.

The trade that made kings out of chieftains also made colonisers out of European kings. With industrialisation, the potency-disrupting accumulations of extractive, hierarchical territorial state formations increased palpably, giving rise to the 'modern' equivalent of the sacred forest. Yellowstone National Forest was the first such landscape, established on volcanic land already designated potent by the original inhabitants of the region. The United States government created a precedent in 1872 to withdraw the land from settlement and private industry, which conveniently facilitated the removal of the original inhabitants (Whittlesey, 2002). Conservation initiatives spread to the extraction colonies of Asia in the early 1930s, where the disturbing morality dyad of conservation and industrial state-making became even more visible. Conservation was not only an act of legitimate protection of important 'natural' formations in the face of rampant landscape transformation, but also an effective form of territorial control, making it possible for nation states to "extend their authority over the margins" (Baird, 2009: 216). This has led many scholars to suggest that these initiatives were not about conservation at all, but about the forced resettlement of local populations, which often resulted in increased forest degradation (Peluso, 1992; Sivaramakrishnan, 1999; Work et al, 2022).

In the contemporary era, the explicitly political and economic structural positions of priests and kings continue, but they are further fractured, renamed, and bureaucratised. They are now visible in organisations like the United Nations (UN), playing the same role as Brahmin priests who recognise sovereign nations that engage in democracy and human rights. This was explicitly the case in Cambodia, when the UN refused to recognise the Vietnamese-controlled State of Cambodia and invited Khmer Rouge leaders to hold on to Cambodia's UN seat (Short, 2004), and then brokered the

1993 elections that allowed Hun Sen to remain in power (Cock, 2010). The new nation is given life through the ritual of funding, provided by organisations like the World Bank, wielding rights-based discourses to influence policies for national extraction. The environmental violence of these acts must be countered and concealed by conservation zones managed by the likes of Conservation International, playing the role of peaceful Buddhist monks. These conservation zones at first facilitate territorialisation (Baird, 2009; Fairhead et al., 2012; Le Billon, 1999), and then carefully excise industrial uses with glossy reports featuring charismatic flora and fauna (Work et al., 2022; Work & Thuon, 2017; Milne, 2022). The focus is not on 'sustainable use' but on caretaking through nonuse, which also excises all small-holder and indigenous uses of 'state land' which get coded destructive. Concealed within the language of 'slash and burn' agriculture and other destructive local practices like hunting (Fox, 2000; Milne & Adams, 2012), are the twin forces of industrial plantations, factory farms, and the now 'illegal' trade in forest products (timber, medicine, and wild animals) that has only intensified since the rise of the earliest kings.

When we juxtapose contemporary capitalism with the cosmic polity, the role of kings emerges not as something archaic and wholly different from the modern state, but as an intimate foundation out of which the king could truly emerge. David Graeber (2017) notes that "Kings…insist that they stand outside the legal or moral order and that no rules apply to them. Sovereign power is the power to refuse all limits and do whatever one likes… [but kings often] lead lives so circumscribed, so ringed about by custom and ceremony, that they can barely do anything at all" (421). Nonetheless, local respect for the laws of the cosmic polity, like taking only what you need and returning what is taken through offerings, were eroded under the king. Boomgaard (1991) shows how the kings made it possible for peasants and autonomous 'tribal' chiefs to break the cosmo-rules and blame it on the king. Because the king has set himself up as the representative of the enstoried earth energies, he becomes an intermediary and can take responsibility for cosmic transgressions when he demands an excessive amount of timber, for example. In this way, the moral economy of the cosmic polity could remain intact conceptually, and be subverted in practical terms.

There is an important structural symmetry between the consecrating power of Brahmin priests, the morality of Buddhist monks, and the ways that contemporary sovereignty is recognised, funded, and made moral. The United Nations created the ritual structures in which human rights and environmental protection protocols should be enacted. They also create the sovereign through the recognition of political protocols like democratic elections. But, and this is the key element of the modern state, they are not local and have no authority over land-based sovereigns. This is made clear in the case of Cambodia (Work et al., 2022), where the modern sovereign, created through recognition by the United Nations, is free to issue concessions to private investors in protected forests, is free to dispossess autochthonous

communities of their lands and practices, and still continues to receive loans from development banks and recognition of their sovereignty regardless of their transgressions of accepted moral codes. The development banks stand between the "developing" nations, buffering their sovereigns from colonial expenses of extracting directly from the people. Instead, extraction is externally funded and the earth energies are exported directly to markets, both local and global, through a locally generated sovereign fiat and externally funded corporate capture.

Industrial agriculture enacts a similar slippage, and has been posited as the opposite of a "moral economy" in that it guarantees neither environmental nor social sustainability (Dove & Kammen, 1997: 92). Inadequate studies of green revolution industrial rice proclaim its effectiveness in terms of crop yield, while concealing the required inputs of both human labour and planet labour in the form of fossil fertilisers (Ibid: 96). But the shaman's trick of skillfully revealing a skilled concealment continues as poor industrial yields are attributed to 'natural' processes. The nature of monocrop landscapes makes them more vulnerable than forest swiddens to pests, floods, and droughts. And it is these that are consistently cited as the 'reason' for poor yields (Dove & Kammen, 1997: 94; Ollinaho & Kröger, 2021), thereby blaming 'nature' for the crop failures endemic to monocrop industrial landscapes, which in an indigenous economy signal displeasure or disagreement from earth energies. The earth energies are not out of the picture, however—especially in Cambodia, where local big men and industrial capitalists alike make offerings to them to facilitate extreme extraction (Work et al., 2022).

The modern secular state conceals the enstoried energies of the earth that made the king possible—both through tales of sovereign entitlement and through the material processes that make the food—by revealing the religion of kings and their priests. The 'success' of modern industrial agriculture is another shaman's trick that reveals high yields while concealing both their costs and their impossible sustainability. It creates expectations of "success versus failure" that are in direct contradiction to the cycles of abundance and scarcity recorded in swidden landscapes and to the cycles of cash cropping in which abundance lowers profit (Dove & Kammen, 1997: 93; Mahanty, 2022). Modern conservation enacts the same trick, revealing the protection of vital 'natural' spaces while concealing the dispossession required to 'protect' these areas and also the extreme extraction that they at once excise and contain (Milne, 2022; Work & Thuon, 2017). This creates a politics in which success is proclaimed by the boundary itself, having little to do with what goes on inside of it. In Cambodia, conservation boundaries not only intimately trace industrial boundaries, but they also accommodate industry within them (Harbinson, 2016; Narim, 2015), provocatively mirroring the rites establishing the sacred boundary of a Buddhist temple that holds the violent sacrifice of the king at their centre (Davis, 2016: 127–29).

A Humble Provocation

During a recent (January 2023) fieldtrip investigating "intangible heritage" in the Prey Lang forest of north-central Cambodia,[2] I was told a story that so beautifully contextualises the ideal–typical form of political norms I analyse above that I will unconventionally end this chapter with an ethnographic nugget and some exploratory closing thoughts.

The earth energy is here the Blue Dragon King, *sdec nāg khiev*, that communicates with the local Kuy population through/as a limestone karst located adjacent to the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary. Another karst landscape is located close by, within the protected area, as is a marble formation (metamorphosed limestone) referred to as Ancestor Snouk. The local Kuy people report social relations with these rock formations for many generations. Communication happens through dreams and through each location choosing the body of a selected human (*rup*).

The rugged karst is well known as a place where land animals find sanctuary in the caves and gullies of its spinney crags. Water pools in these crags as well, hosting turtles and supporting birds. Hunters, both human and non, find food, water, and often shelter with the Blue Dragon King. The human hunters report being punished with illness if they are careless at this vital spot. Tigers take care here as well, and local reports claim that one tiger works for the Blue Dragon King. I cannot speak tiger and they are notoriously difficult to interview, but territorial monitoring is a tiger-consistent activity and the tiger is often seen by locals making the rounds to the other recognised ancient ones (*neak ta*) in the area. These include the marble slab, the other limestone karst, a lake, two swamps, and a large rock formation at the Mekong river that traps flood water behind it in the dry season. All of these locations are sites for veneration and offerings by local humans that require particular types of respectful comportment while nearby.

Please, dear reader, pause here for a moment to consider what these ancient ones are. They are often translated as 'ancestors' or as 'spirits', but they are also (perhaps first and foremost) key nodes in the landscape providing food and water. This 'religious' system, as Hocart (1936: 3) provocatively suggests, is "not a system of government, but of an organisation to promote life… by transferring life from objects abounding in it to objects deficient in it". The title carried by this limestone karst, the Blue Dragon King, refers to none other than *Kruṅ Bālī*, the Naga king, featured in the 'origin' stories of the early kings, who sucked up the water to give his new 'son-in-law' the land of Cambodia, and who must still give permission for all building projects.

When a mining company arrived inside the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary in early 2022 to extract the marble that is Ancestor Snouk (yes, *inside* the *protected area*), according to local accounts the company offered pigs, wine, and festivities to the ancestor for several nights before they began digging

[2] Funded by Taiwan National Science and Technology Council, 111-2410-H-004-119.

out the stone. Shortly after the marble mine opened, representatives from the provincial office of the Ministry of Environment came to pay a visit to Ancestor Blue Dragon King and also to survey the other, much larger karst that is Ancestor Pointy Limestone, *neak ta kaṃbao crung*. They brought their own spirit medium, who works with Ancestor Blue Dragon King at the provincial centre (the trans-local elements of powerful *neak ta* in Cambodia are noted, but under-theorised as part of the state-making argument I make here. Further research will provoke another essay).

Local people were angry that they had not been consulted about these mining plans or about the visit from the spirit medium. The provincial officials conducted a ceremony asking permission to create an eco-tourism site at the karst. Ancestor Blue Dragon King is reported to have said, *you can have your eco-tourism, you can even have your road, but do not touch the stone*. The woman who typically provides her body for the ancestor was excluded from the ceremony. There are surveyors at the site at the time of this writing, and large areas of the surrounding forest have been cleared for mine development. The area around Ancestor Blue Dragon King has also been cleared and 'developed' for eco-tourism. The large road runs right by the site, which was recently forested and remote. Now, the site has benches for tourists, tree stumps, and signs on the remaining trees stating their names.

This short story depicts a part of much larger engagements in the Prey Lang landscape, where the "institutionalised raiding" of corporate actors is countered by "utopian projects" of both conservation and development donors (Graeber, 2006: 65; Work et al., 2022). This story brings out the importantly neglected 'superstitions' of local people to reveal them as potent sources of life. This goes beyond my previous argument that this animist 'religion' is better understood as political economy (Work, 2019), and puts some real flesh onto Hocart's suggestion about an 'organisation to promote life'. Setting this alongside the shaman's trick of global development, which reveals skyscrapers while concealing the death of the life-giving ancestors they require, I hope to change our conversation a bit. This is not about multiple worlds or about the agency of things, this is about ongoing possibilities of life.

This brief chapter has outlined three distinct sets of political norms present across (but not limited to) Southeast Asia, critically engaging in their overlapping logics which is narratively illustrated through an ethnographic encounter. In contemporary political economy, the ruthless corporations are supposed to be managed by a bureaucratic government, which is supposed to be controlled by international bodies of social and ecological conservation. Industrial corporate production puts forward the promise of wealth and progress, yet industrial plantations and the cash crop economies they engender are inherently unstable. Conservation is the utopian counterpart to the violence of industrial extraction, and the state of global forests today, coupled with the changes to the life support system that their demise causes, will give rise to another shaman's trick. Taussig (2003) shows how researchers into shamanic

healing watched the shamans and declared them frauds and tricksters, not realising that everyone, including the shamans, already knew that they were. The skill and the trick are necessary to guide the non-human healer into the sick body (138–139). As researchers of political norms, we may be falling prey to the same trick. The kings, councilors, prime ministers, and captains of industry know they are lying, cheating, and stealing—in a dramatic spectacle that we watch with horrific anticipation.

The original potency of water and of land, from which grew the stories of gods, their kings, and corporations, has been consistently concealed by utopian projects revealing exemplary prowess and exclusionary access to potent resources. As the system continues to crack, we might question the content of development and progress that is transforming our ancestors. If we are too busy, that might be OK. The ancestors look like they will go on making life with or without us, a truth to which unmonitored urban landscapes and trash islands in the ocean can readily attest.

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