# 4

# The Dance of Life and Death: Social Relationships with Elemental Power

### *Courtney Work*

Water and earth deal in elements, conspiring to make all life possible. This grand conspiracy is understood by many to be a social relationship between humans, other plants and animals, and the elements of water and land. The elements are called by many names across vast geographic regions, and within disparate cultural systems. In Cambodia, from which the data in this chapter comes, people most commonly refer to the elements as Masters of the Water and the Land, Ancient Ones, or Honoured Grandfather/Mother. Long understood as owners or guardians of territories, in some descriptions they are historical figures, in others they are potent invisible actors, and are also physically the water and the land. These agents protect and manage territories and resources with particular guidelines and consequences. Villagers, priests and kings alike negotiate in some way with the Ancient Ones, which shapes village, national, and as the contributions to this volume suggest, regional claims to land, resources and political power.

Paul Mus was one of the earliest scholars to analyse regional similarities in social and political systems across East, South and Southeast Asia through the lens of these distinctive vectors of chthonic energy (Mus 1975 [1933]). Since that time, scholars of Southeast Asia continue to grapple with this cross-regional foundation that at once grounds and permeates social systems classified variously as religious, economic and political (Forest 1991; Holt 2009; Picard 2017; Sprenger

2016; Tannenbaum and Kammerer 2003). In my own explorations of Mus's provocations in the Cambodian context I disrupt the idea that Ancient Ones and 'animism' in general should be analysed as 'religion' (Work 2019), suggesting that their entanglement with religion is itself an effect of imperial resource extraction (Work 2020), and academic knowledge production (Work 2017). A fact that becomes obvious when viewed through the lens of international development (Beban and Work 2014; Work 2018). In this chapter, combining data gathered over 15 years in Cambodia and insights from the extensive literature on traditional social systems in Cambodia and beyond, I want to advance a new argument.

My position thus far is that the Masters of the Water and the Land are human-style representations of the very real and agentive energy that emanates from the life-giving elements of water and land, making all economic and political systems on the planet possible—from the termite mound nourishing the surrounding fields and forest to the urban centre of Taipei feeding the global market with tea. This technique of cosmologically representing and socially engaging with elemental forces has deep roots across the planet (Blaser 2013; Hocart 1953; Munn 1973; Sahlins 2017), and many academics, including myself, are picking up on the political significance of this fact. What I want to do with this chapter is to pull at an ethnographic knot that has troubled me for some time. This is related to the cultivation of social relationships with chthonic energies, but particularly related to what academics persist in calling 'sacrifice'. The archaic and inaccurate term is often used to describe events in which respect is paid to the Master of the Water and the Land to restore good relations with the elements in the face of some blight in human society. These blights occur because of some human transgression, and are most often illnesses, but also include storms, droughts, floods and accidents that emerge from the discomfort or displeasure of the Master.

To tug at some of the strings of this knot of 'sacrifice' which inaccurately represents the Khmer verb *sien*. I do a few things. First, I'll give a brief overview of the problem I am trying to understand. Next, I will unpack the term 'sacrifice' and its deployment as a living artefact of an academic tradition laden with repressed ideas of vengeful gods (which, I argue elsewhere, are none other than extracting kings and priests pretending to be earth beings, providers of resources) (Work 2019). Then I will briefly lay out the political economy of social relationships with elemental entities, and the ways the verb *sien* cannot possibly be defined as 'sacrifice', and then move into a discussion of the 'sacrifice' demanded for offending the Ancient Ones, which I always experienced as a party, and the multiple invisible party participants ignored by Durkheim in his almost accurate assessment that religion emerges out of society. I then provide some details of the parties followed by concluding remarks.

## A Description of the Problem

During my earliest experiences of deep hanging out in Cambodia, with Khmer rice farmers at the edge of the forest, I was struck by the contradictory elements in events staged to ameliorate blights on the human socio-economy. The first time I gave voice to this was on the way home from an event in which a pig had been 'sacrificed' to the Ancient Ones. The local term for this is *sien*, *sien* pig in this case, and it is performed within a *larng neak ta* ceremony (paying tribute to raising/caring for the Ancient Ones). *Lok ta* translates as 'honoured grandfather' and is the familial term used for the local manifestation of the present-everywhere Master of the Water and the Land (*maja tuk maja day*), a.k.a. Ancient Ones (*neak ta*). This *lok ta* is tangled up with founding ancestors and guardian spirits in ways that reveal a layered history in which human-based power and authority over place attempts to supplant the sovereignty of the land itself (see Baumann 2020, this volume; Wessing 2017; Work 2017). The term *sien* illuminates part of this history. It is typically translated as 'sacrifice' or 'offering' and is also used colloquially in the same register as a bribe (Work 2019). This usage suggests a kind of contract, but closer examination reveals more complexity to be pursued below. My first question had nothing to do with the term *sien*:

> If *lok ta* caused the children to become sick, which would be the only reason one would *sien* pig, and if *sien* pig was a sacrifice: a punishment prescribed to ameliorate the offence against an angry *lok ta*, or an offering of the pig life in place of the children's lives, why were the events always so much fun?

As we wandered home after eating roast pig, drinking rice wine, and dancing to drums and gongs, I said to the woman I lived with, 'I'm not happy that sister Phan's children are sick, but that was a great party. People should get sick more often!' She knew I was joking but shot me a look of strong disapproval. She walked in silence for a moment, then said, '*Lok ta* is happy when we share food together, play the drums and dance. If *lok ta* was angry and made the children sick, then we want to change that into happiness so *lok ta* might support us.' This explanation is different from other, more dominant explanations for the logic of sacrifice, as depriving oneself, substituting one life for another, or in which the 'consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it' (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 13). The focus of this rite was to make *lok ta* happy by celebrating together, by referring to it as a sacrifice the analytical focus shifts away from the performance of solidarity to please the elemental overlords to 'the victim to the sacrificial process' (Smith and Doniger 1989: 195), which is the animal and its blood.

In real time, however, the pig, along with the wine, drums and gongs were instrumental toward the end of people having fun: sharing food, drinking wine and dancing. And each of these elements are offered in the register of *sien*, which I suggest may not mean sacrifice or offering, as the translations and taxonomies created by European researchers declare. The ambivalence of the sacred is well remarked, in that it is at once sacred and defiled (Agamben 1998: 75–80; Eliade 1963: 114–5), but the tension I am puzzling with is the idea of separation that grounds the term sacrifice (Douglas 2002; Agamben 1998) used to define an event based in care and expressed through exuberance.

'Sacrifice' is a subset of the notion of the sacred, deeply rooted in the Western traditions and a huge subject in the anthropological literature, which I will not treat in its entirety (Arendt 1958; Bloch 1992; Girard 1972; Hubert and Mauss 1964; Levi-Strauss 1966; Reinert 2015; Robertson-Smith 1995), but will unpack elements below to serve my purposes, beginning with Edmund Leach (1976), who made the provocative claim that the gods do not want the life of the animal. This makes sense in the context of Cambodian cosmologies in which there is a non-human earth being, the Master of the Water and the Land, that manages resource use and activities in the area. This 'master' already owns the animal—both wild and domesticated—and should Ancient Ones want the blood, I am told, it could be simply taken. This is not to suggest that lowland Khmer rice growers do not understand themselves to 'own' their domesticated animals, on the contrary, they consider themselves masters of their pigs, cows, chickens and buffalo *because they supply for them the means of subsistence* (see also Gibson 1986), just as the Master of the Water and the Land supplies the means of subsistence for all living things. So, human 'ownership' of the animal is always understood in its larger context of a world managed by a power whose claim trumps all others.

Leach (1976: 85) suggests that in a 'sacrifice' the gods do not want the life of the animal, what the gods want is 'submission'. While convincing from the perspective of an Abrahamic tradition, I have heard it described a bit differently. The event to *sien lok ta* is held because someone did not submit to the already established rules of resource use, sharing and congeniality. So, in this register submission is important, but the event described as sacrifice does not constitute the submission desired by *neak ta*. I will unpack this knot by animating Durkheim's contested theory of the social origins of religion from a standpoint that assumes agentive capacities beyond the human. This simple move both disrupts and mobilises Durkheim's observation that the functional ambiguity of sacrifice in 'religious' events is not a problem at all, and that in fact the 'sacrifice' as the victim of the animal is not the key ingredient. The important thing is igniting certain 'mental dispositions', which 'depend on the fact that the group is assembled' (1912: 286; see also Karlsson this volume).

Durkheim's claim is close to the ethnographic data I present below but requires disruption by local testimony about communications with nonhuman entities. I argue that the assembled group is indeed the key ingredient, but that the group is larger than the European Scholar was able to accommodate. The social group includes humans, but also the animated life force of the animal, the rice, the wine pot, the drum, and the gong, and the always and everywhere presence of the animating elements of water and land. These things all constitute 'the community'. The lifeblood of the animal is just one part of a dynamic interplay between the geological and biological worlds, mediated and ritualised by a group of humans dancing to the rhythms of life and death. Following Paul Mus (1933: 10–11), I suggest that the 'fecund energy of the soil' constitutes the 'union of the group' in a communicative gestalt, created by neither human nor earth, but through their dynamic interaction. This refracts Durkheim's argument that the primitives mistakenly attach emotions they experience during an event to the images of the totem, making the 'religious force' seem 'external' and 'transcendent' (2001 [1912]: 167). The powerful force was understood to be 'external' and 'transcendent' by the researcher. The people studied understood the power to be imminent and internal to everything.

My argument follows Durkheim, however, and I suggest that he simply did not realise that the totem was a member of the community, imminent in its life-giving force, along with the '*waning* ... *nurtunga* ... bull-roarers and *chruingas*' that were also key elements in the rituals he described (p. 166). The gods do not want submission through the ritual. The kings and priests want ritualised submission and gifts, and Durkheim's understanding of the world had been deeply influenced by the work of kings and priests, which of course influenced his interpretation of the data. I suggest that, on the contrary, the gods want happiness, fecundity and multi-species proliferation through what Levi-Strauss (1962) calls 'rites of increase' (p. 226). When angered by some infraction that impacts collective happiness (not just human happiness) the earth beings want their fecund progeny to throw a party, because '*Lok ta* is happy when we share food together, play the drums and dance.'

In my experience, for every infraction in which the Ancient Ones are offended, the medium or shaman returns from visiting the nonhuman realm with a 'prescription for a party'.[1] In the event introduced above, the medium told the woman that her children fell ill because the family was engaged in illegal logging and her husband had not asked permission to take the trees he was selling. She was advised to *sien* pig, *sien* ten litres of wine, *sien* drums and gongs, and call all the neighbours, in particular the village head and the army captain who facilitate the wood trade. We had the food, drink, entertainment, and the guest list all clearly spelled out by the offended nonhuman ancestor, owner of resources.

And this happens again and again, but whenever I suggest that the party might be the point, my colleagues—from lowland rice farmers to highland swidden cultivators—say, emphatically, no. But then they say some variation of, 'when we feast, drink and dance together, this makes *lok ta* happy'.

My purpose for doing this is not to question local interpretations of these events, but rather to pull them more into the fore. Sacrifice has particular associations in the imaginations of 'civilised' and properly 'educated' individuals that pertain to punishment, to the substitution of one life for another, and to the foregone barbaric practices of our uncivilised ancestors. These remain salient, and my purpose is to intervene into the violence of classificatory systems through which the words and actions of others are twisted so they can fit within the logic of the dominant population, and in this way the significance of the activity is both misunderstood and misrepresented.

## Sacrifice Seen from the East

The events I describe below all have an element of what might be coded 'sacrifice' in the academic study of ritual and religion. An animal is killed, the blood is used in a purposeful way, and the assembled people eat the cooked meat, with a portion presented to the offended or propitiated power. Theories of sacrifice are wide ranging, but also wholly inadequate to analyse events beyond a Judeo-Christian/ Greco-Roman framework. Thinking with decolonising perspectives of culture and society at the ontological turn, where multiple species enter the cognising and agentive field, I will use this section to sketch some of the basic frameworks of sacrifice and expand on how and why I broaden these interpretations.

To begin, sacrifice, in classical Western understanding, is the giving up of something valuable, the act of slaughtering an animal or person to a deity, it can also be a punishment that entails giving something of value to appease an angry god. This thing of value is presumably also valuable to a god, who can be bribed or obligated to grant the request of the human making the sacrifice (see Bloch 1992: 22–7 for a good discussion of this). Robertson-Smith (1995) suggests this process started with primitive people giving gifts to ingratiate themselves to the localised power of the earth represented as a mountain entity, which resonates strongly with my data. This practice through time and amid the proliferation of extractive, hierarchal, state market social formations, transformed into a bloody rite involving a sacralised victim offered to a vengeful god. It is possible that what looked like a gift to the early Europeans, steeped in this civilised sacrificial logic, was something else entirely. Hubert and Mauss (1964: 2) acknowledge that 'usually, and to some extent, sacrifices were gifts….' but then proceed to their point that this is not the interesting part. They focus instead on the communicative elements of the event for which they suggest the vitality of the animal is a vehicle. Animal life, in this line of thinking, can also be a substitute for human life or a receptacle in which to displace social discord (Frazer 1894; Girard 1972).

In my experiences in Cambodia, these ideas are all partially at play, but seem to be of a substantively different quality. I will proceed to arrange the key elements from my experiences into an interpretation that better fits what people say about punishment, bribes, communication, substitution and the role of animals and other interlocutors in events requested by the Ancient Ones.

The notion of punishment is salient, but it is the illness, drought, or accident that is the punishment; depriving oneself of a thing is not significant, especially when that thing already belongs to the Ancient Ones who are neither obliged nor expected to reciprocate. Thomas Gibson's description of the Buid's relationships with 'spirits of the earth' in the Philippines is the most similar to what I have heard from Khmer, Kuy and Jarai descriptions of their relationships with Ancient Ones/ Master of the Water and the Land. These powers give freely and are an 'eternal source of fertility which is not subject to corruption and decay' (Gibson 1986: 173). They do have particular rules to be observed and 'express their anger by withdrawing their protection from growing crops and children, and a sacrifice must be done to regain their benevolence' (ibid.). With 'spirits of the earth' the food is prepared as an invitation to draw them close and repair relations. This is similar to what Levi-Strauss describes when he makes clear that what happens in totemic rituals involving animals that are killed cannot be considered sacrifice (1962: 223).

The 'fundamental principle' of a sacrifice, he says, is substitution, which implies continuity between objects not empirically alike—human and buffalo—in which during the ritual one can be substituted with the other. This is not happening, either in the totemic rites Levi-Strauss refers to or in the *neak ta* events I describe. I do not argue that sacrificial logic is absent in Cambodia, with other entities especially ghosts and evil spirits, the food is explicitly a payment, more like extortion (see also Gibson 1986: 177). Bribing is also a thing people attempt with *lok ta*, but this bribe is made in order to enhance baseline provisions, not to restore protection that has been withdrawn. Gibson uses 'sacrifice' to classify the ritual and his description of the event highlights the treatment of the animal while downplaying and giving few details about the accompanying activities. In the events I describe, I will purposefully reverse this to bring out all the other things going on beyond the blood.

This is not to say that the blood is not important. Indeed, blood is power. It is life force and it has a particular role to play in the event, High suggests in the preceding essay that 'display' is central. I agree and will pull this out further below. What I want to emphasise here is that the blood and the flesh of the animal are not really *for* the offended Master. In their classic intervention, Hubert and Mauss (1964: 13) also claim that the animal is not a gift for the gods, but they still set it up *as a transaction*, in which the 'condition of the moral person' is modified by the sacrificial 'victim'. The point, they say, is to mediate 'communication between the sacred and profane worlds' (p. 97). Through this process the 'victim' represents or becomes the human to cross the barrier between the nonhuman and the human worlds in an exchange of energy or messages.

The life force can also be transplanted into another object, and Hubert and Mauss go so far as to suggest that the god is sustained by and thus created by the sacrifice (p. 91). My Khmer, Kuy and Jarai colleagues would never agree with that. The earth entities provide life-giving rains, animals, plants and soils through which life continues, they do not need the animals prepared to *sien lok ta*. But they do ask for animals, indeed demand them, in these communicative events. The blood and flesh of the animal are prepared, and specific parts are 'offered' to the offended not as gifts, but as proof that they fulfilled their duties. 'See, *lok ta*, here is the head and the blood, all four feet and the tail. We did as you asked' (more on this below). It's a bit like supplying photos of oneself in the field for donors, communicating that the researcher actually did the fieldwork.

In a recent piece, Guido Sprenger echoes Hubert and Mauss to suggest that the ritual itself and its communicative framework is what actually 'makes' the 'spirit', in a one-way communicative gesture that creates the not-previously-existent 'person' by calling it into being (2017: 119). Sprenger also echoes Durkheim here by suggesting that the actions of people create 'spirit' out of nothing. My data complicate all of these treatments. The events I describe below, and in other places (2019), do highlight communication as Sprenger, Hubert and Mauss all suggest, but it goes in multiple directions, and the animal does play a role, but only at the end as part of the resolution of the conversation. The Master of the Water and the Land opens the discussion with illness or accident, the adept or medium reaches out to learn more and is informed of the issue. The event itself, in which people *sien* pig, opens lines of communication across multiple fields, which will be discussed further below. The role of the animal seems to be intimate and life-giving sustenance and can be described as being 'sacred' itself (Robertson-Smith 1995), providing the soil upon which the collectivity gathers.

The Ancient Ones communicate the need for the animal to be presented, killed and eaten: *sien* pig. The animal does not replace or represent the human here, this is not a substitution. The animal is present as itself and a member of the Ancient one's extended social network. Animals and humans, as well as grains, trees, plants and medicines, are all part of this social network. In this context, the domestication of animals is not always domination and subjugation, but is often understood in the register of kinship, care and mutual subsistence (Gibson 1986; Govindrajan 2015). This intimacy echoes and connects to the way people discuss wild prey in many contexts (Ami 2016; Nadasdy 2007; Valeri 2000). Govindrajan relates a story from the Indian highlands in which a small goat placed herself in front of the shrine of the deity during a severe drought, signalling the need for appeasement. In the stories people tell, the intimacy between humans and animals, both domestic and wild, comes from our mutual subservience to the life-giving elements. In the Hindu context, Wendy Doniger cites a salient element of this social order, 'what animals are to us, we are to the gods' (1988: 84), which is to say, food.

Gibson stresses the importance of food, eating, and how the transformation of living things into sources of life is a central feature of social cohesion (1986: 142;

see also Detienne and Vernant 1989: 153). What I will draw out below is that other things are also invited in these acts of social cohesion, and people *sien* wine jar, *sien* drum and gong, and *sien* rice in addition to *sien* pig. Hubert and Mauss make a point to include non-meat items in the 'sacrificial' sphere and draw attention to the sentient quality of the 'victims', but say nothing about technologies (1964: 12). This is certainly part of the substance of the events in Cambodia. There is no indication, however, that either the rice or the meat are considered 'victims' of a 'sacrifice' in the Southeast Asian context, but their vitality, sentience and essential role in the making of communities is well attested (Ang 1990; É.Porée-Maspero 1958). Guido Sprenger (2018) notes the continued importance and power of the 'rice spirit' in Laos communities, even after coffee has taken hold as a cash crop, and how disrespecting the rice opens communities to punishment and the withholding of life-giving elements.

In that same essay, Sprenger gives us an excellent example of how the things people say and what academics say can be of substantively different qualities. He tells us that 'the rice spirit only requires respectful treatment during the agricultural cycle, [but] it demands a bloody sacrifice when it is actively bringing affliction to people' (p. 272). The invocation of the 'bloody sacrifice' is important here. It implies a vengeful god that must be appeased with violence. This is certainly one way to read the data, and it has been the dominant way to read the data. To present one particularly telling example, Michael Wright suggests that Buddhism should have "completely converted the old, dark ways: the bloody sacrifice to the Earth Goddess at the Door of the Underworld, an ancient tree, a termite mount...." (1990: 43), which he suggests are rites for the 'ignorant' who may even be confused about how to approach the Buddha. The communal rite focused on collective action, on strengthening or mending broken relations with the life-giving forces is reduced to a bloody and punitive death. Robertson-Smith (1995) sees this teleology in his classic lecture series on the Semites, in which early rites of communion with a mountain god give way slowly and over time to propitiations and sacrificial rites. This trajectory is inverted regularly by academic productions, like Wright, who was cited above, which look straight through rites of communion and see only the propitiations scholars were educated to see.

There are of course multiple transformations of ritual across time and space and in and out of universalising politico-religio state systems, but we do notice numerous elements that get re-arranged in ways that seem to mock academic taxonomies. In Laos, the relationship between the Khmu elders of a house and the 'house spirit' has very similar markers to Khmer relationships with *neak ta*. The mother or father of the house should be 'good-tempered' and 'diplomatic', especially in relations with other households, and should 'stick to socially acknowledged rules' (Stolz 2021: 52). And when a new house is built, there is a party in the house every night while it is under construction. For the Khmu, however, this party chases away the spirits of the wood, who for the Khmer and Kuy are the very entities that become house spirits as will be discussed below. I am not advocating here for a new taxonomy. In fact, classificatory gymnastics obscure more than they illuminate. High, in this volume describes how this happened with the term Animism, reviving a term with pejorative meaning in Laos. Hubert and Mauss do similar work defining the nature and function of sacrifice, bringing all acts involving killing animals under the single term. Despite their careful attention to communication and energy, the dominant understanding of sacrifice still entangles civilised notions of contract, gift and reciprocity with the barbarous act of killing in the description of rituals with life-providing earth entities.

There is such a thing as sacrifice, but killing an animal does not automatically signal it. In the example from Sprenger (2018) above, what the scholar describes as a demand for a 'bloody sacrifice' takes a completely different form when described by the local specialist (via the author). The specialist tells us that, 'after years of providing "beautiful" (in Lao, *ngam*) rice, the spirit has become hungry' (Sprenger 2018: 272). This is the register in which *sien* events are described to me. There is obvious displeasure because the human community is plagued by drought, or an illness that cannot be expelled. The 'bloody sacrifice' is just one of many things that need to be done in order to restore harmony. What people report is that *lok ta* is hungry, or that *lok ta* likes pig, or that '*lok ta* likes us to share. We work all together and come and eat together, it's happy. *Lok ta* is happy' (22 February 2009). The earth provides 'beautiful' nourishing rice, this is hard work. Feeding the hardworking and hungry seems more like caretaking than sacrifice.[2]

These relationships are also often glossed as some form of reciprocity, as I mistakenly suggested elsewhere (Work 2018), which my Khmer colleagues laughed at. The relationship is not reciprocal. The people need what *lok ta* manages, but *lok ta* does not really *need* the people and everyone understands that. The Ancient Ones allow the people to extract what they need in return for their conscientious care to take part in the work of fecundity and increase. So the relationship is not antagonistic, but this is a hierarchical relationship. The Master of the Water and the Land does not need buffalo and wine, even though Hubert and Mauss suggest that this creates the deity, but if the people want to have fish in the water, game in the forest and rice in the field they need to make the Master happy. The 'spirits of the earth' give freely (Gibson 1986: 173), as long as 'humans continue to live harmoniously and that they respect the integrity of the earth on which their subsistence is based' (p. 181).

No one expects benevolence or reciprocity from the Master of the Water and the Land, and in no way is the animal life given in exchange for, or instead of, the human life. *Lok ta* is hungry, uncomfortable, displeased.... In the case Sprenger describes above, the people are rapidly moving toward the market, which entails a whole new set of social relationships that explicitly devalue social relationships with the earth. Although he does not quote his expert directly, the sentiment rings of care for the hungry rather than a reciprocal service offered in light of service rendered. The *sien* does satisfy desire. But whose desire for what seems to be misrepresented in theories of sacrifice. The analytical focus is often on the powerful nonhuman, understood by the scholar to demand the life of an animal. Researchers raised in civilised environments and educated according to the logics of an extractive, hierarchal, state market system can be blind to both the power of communal activities and the violence of colonising language games.

Consider as well the term 'spirit', which does not in any way reflect the kinds of entities most people are talking about, especially in reference to earth entities (see High this volume; Valeri 2000: 24). Nonetheless, these terms become like a 'literary device' and researchers continue to use them with full knowledge of their inadequacy, often simply to 'avoid awkwardness' (Fabian 1983: 82). In a historical moment, when civilisation and the civilised lifestyle are quite clearly starving the earth to death and disrupting the arrangement of the life-giving elements to such a degree that they will be providing life for different types of entities, perhaps we can embrace awkwardness and rethink some of what Durkheim suggests.

There is a need for smooth and harmonious relations with the Master of the Water and the Land because, they are 'the very source of life' (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 98; see also Hocart 1953). Smooth relations with the Ancient Ones are only possible in the context of social harmony and fecundity, which makes the earth happy. The death of the animal in the cases I describe does not fit inside the academically-constructed classification of sacrifice. Following Herbert and Mauss, the animal is not the object of the performance, but its vehicle. They analyse this as a sacrifice, from human to god via animal. It could also be understood as the mutual constitution of animals and people via the nonhuman elemental master. This interpretation foregrounds the eating, dancing, and drinking and the conviviality and fecundity those acts imply—resembling a sacrifice like a whale does a fish (Levi-Strauss 1962: 226).[3] Below I present ethnographic data to demonstrate elements of mutual constitution that emerge as parts of all events designed to satisfy the desires of the Master of the Water and the Land.

## Chthonic Energy and the Animated Society

Mountains, rivers and stones are well-recognised as elements of the geohistorical structuring of human society. Energy and effective power pass through these elements into the products of their life-giving potential, like plants and animals. All mountains and all rivers are sources of life-giving power, and all living things are recipients. In Southeast Asia, this power is open for engagement by those recipients with sufficient prowess (see Lutz this volume; see also Anderson 1990; Wolters 1982). Mountains, rivers, termite mounds, stones, trees and snakes are all vectors for encounter. Music, plants, chants, blood, smoke, food, dance and handicrafts are all mediums through which communication and energy can be channelled by individuals. Certain trees and plants, particular predators, and specially endowed humans are known to engage this power. Among humans, these include shamans and kings, but also dancers and musicians (and their instruments, which are often crafted from certain trees) (Shapiro 1994; Khoury 2017), craftsmen, their tools and their products (Narayan and George 2017), and also include domesticated animals and grains (Wollford et al. 2021). All of these are acknowledged at various times in multiple ways as being vectors that translate power between chthonic energies and human social life.

In this section, I will describe the cosmological framework in which these social entities are embedded and their relationships to one another, using data gathered in Cambodia over the course of 15 years of field research. Because my collaborators have long histories of interaction with each other and with various cultural systems that ebb and flow with tides of imperial strength through history, I have not encountered anyone who speaks the whole story. The pieces of story I present here from across Cambodia come together in a mosaic of ideas and practices that interact and reflect, refract and illuminate each other, and pieces of stories from across the region. I pull them together here to loosely frame the world in which people *sien* drum, *sien lok ta* and *sien* rice as significant social actors in the dance of life and death. In this chapter, I do not engage much with the ways that global development and social relationships with the market economy and the strengthening nation state are changing local interactions with both chthonic entities and with each other (for more on this, see Beban and Work 2014; Work 2014, 2018). Even with these changes, cultivating productive relationships with chthonic power remains a salient, if no longer pervasive element of social life.

There is a consistent notion of an animating power that exists in all things. Terminology shifts across space and in Cambodia I have heard people refer to that power as *maja tuk maja day* (also written, *mcâs dẏk mcâs ṭī*), the Master of the Water and the Land, also as *pāramī,* as *pralung*, *arak*, and as *itthipal*. These terms articulate boundaries across Khmer and Pali language-scapes, but are importantly informed by ideas from the Kuy, Phnong, and Jarai practices, and by influences from Hindu, Buddhist and Christian cosmologies over time. The way I understand this, and my collaborators do not object to my formulation, is that the mountain and the river are concentrated nodes of the elemental power that flows through all things. Water and stone are particularly important. The nutrients from land and water feed all the living things, infusing them with *chthonic energy*. The longer they live, like trees and elephants, the more chthonic energy they accumulate, the stronger and more clever they are, like hunters, shamans and tigers. *Pralung* is sometimes translated as 'soul', but this is not really accurate as *pralung* refers to the energy that adheres within all living things. A stone does not have *pralung*, a stone is elemental and a vector for *lok ta*, but a stone might be described as having *pāramī*. Janowski, working in Indonesia, suggests that stone is 'petrified power' (2017: 185).

The most common vector of elemental power in Cambodia are stones. Stones represent earth energy in naturally occurring rock formations, and also as *lok ta* in huts from which people can *sien lok ta*. Stones are also instigators themselves of hut building. My most recent encounter with a hut-building stone was in Kratie Province, where a new road was being excavated. Halfway through the project, the driver of the machine, himself from another province, received a dream in which the stone informed him of having suffered an unceremonious unearthing and called for a hut, offerings and dancing. The driver informed the locals of this event, who proceeded to find the stone, build the hut, make offerings, and continue to have parties with the distinctively-shaped stone (Figure 4.1).

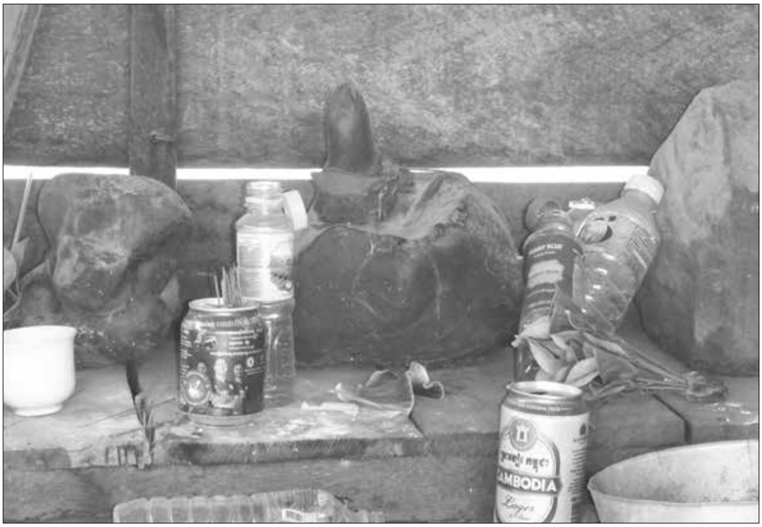

**Figure 4.1** Hut-building stone, Kratie Province, 2018. Photo credit: Courtney Work.

This animated bio-geosphere is a social and economic system where the primary currency is life and death. The Ancient Ones enforce some general rules, loosely these are respect and care, giving and receiving. Respect the Master of the Water and the Land by announcing your presence and asking permission, for example: I want to cut the forest here for a field or a road, or I want to catch a pig to eat. Respect the trees by asking permission to kill and use them, respect the rice through careful cultivation, and the animal through careful hunting. Give back, and share, get along with each other. When you respect and care for members of the Master's community, the Master of the Water and the Land cares for you. If you do not, provision is withheld or curtailed—provision of meat, grain, rain, healthy children—which all carry within them the elemental forces of water and land. In the next section, I will expand the idea of *pralung*, a thing that adheres in all living things, and how this life force is related to *sien*.

## Entangled *Pralung*

I forego the Western notion of a 'soul' to describe *pralung* and use instead the idea of life force, which cannot be mistaken for a single thing attached to a single person as 'soul' can. The idea of life force can bring out the entangledness of an animating chthonic energy that adheres in individual entities (rice, trees, humans), and is also an animating force of human technologies. I will start with the example of the 'house spirit'. Known in many cultures from Europe to Japan, in Khmer this entity is called the *jaṃnāng phdaḥ*. The term *jaṃnāng* is a noun meaning skill or achievement, and *phdaḥ* means house. The English translation of this into 'house spirit' is, in my opinion, a violence that continues to obscure what people say is actually going on. The way it was explained to me is that something happens when human creativity crafts and changes the elements (see also Handley 2015: 338). The *jaṃnāng phdaḥ* happens, and also the house happens. So, the invocation of 'house spirit' perpetuates the idea of its separateness, as supernatural, when it seems to be integral.

This is a kind of violence and it took me many questions, and many house-building and house-warming ceremonies over many years to understand that the *jaṃnāng phdaḥ* is a manifestation of interaction between the skill of the craftsman that made the house, the life force of the tree used to make house, and the enabling elemental energies that made both the tree and the craftsman. Today, this life force can adhere in the milled planks and also in the concrete used to build houses. Sometimes the craftsman of a modern house will inform the home dweller where the *jaṃnāng phdaḥ* energy is. If they choose, the home dweller, before moving in, stages an event in which s/he asks permission to come and dwell in this house, promises to care for the *pralung* and asks to be cared for and protected. In addition, the home dweller fills a plate (banana trunk plate construction is traditional) with various items to present to the *pralung* and engage in a negotiation with the house presence. The conversation and the gifts are all part of *sien jaṃnāng phdaḥ*. The elements on the tray include a variety of things, pictured are betel leaves rolled with tobacco, soda, cloth, bananas, candles, incense and rice (Figure 4.2). These are offerings, and I follow Hubert and Mauss's analysis to suggest that they make a space for communication. But the rice, betel and incense do not seem to be the vehicle for the communication; words are exchanged and promises made. In this case, the home dweller is asking permission to live in the house and carries the gifts as one part of the ritual that is *sien jaṃnāng phdaḥ*.

These little elements of *sien* are visible everywhere, if you know how to look for them. What I will draw out here is how they are connected to food, like rice and meat, but also to technological activities, or the fruits of craftsmanship, like cloth (see also Bautista 2012). Drums and other instruments, rice hulling machines, houses, water pumps all receive *sien* (Figure 4.3), and this relationship is grounded in the fecund energies of the soil from which the rice, the tree and the electronic components come.

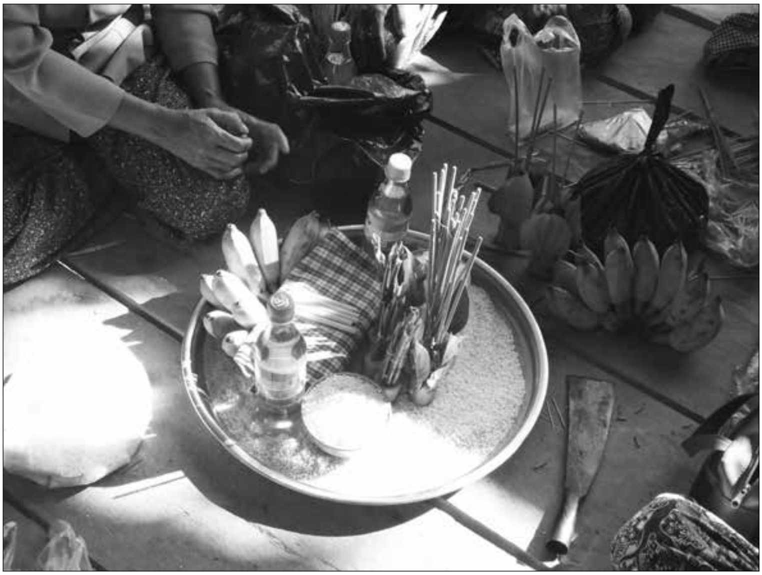

**Figure 4.2** *Sien jaṃnāng phdaḥ*, 2017. Photo credit: Courtney Work.

In a provocative essay called *The Ghost in the Machine* (2009), John Pemberton talks about the work of offerings and machines, suggesting that ritual is a form of energy creation, with the rhythms of drums, dance and chant pulling energy into social projects. When attached to machines, the ritual attempts to bind the force created by the rhythmic movements of machines, the energy from which often creates death. The idea of drawing energy into social projects fits with what people tell me. In addition, what they say about machines relates to the source of the materials and the prowess to create it. 'We *sien* the CD player, because it has a *kru* [teacher]. It's hard to explain, maybe I don't understand, but the metal and electronic parts, and the person that built it, the musicians whose music I play. We respect them all, and we want the machine to work for the party, so I *sien* machine' (Figure 4.4).[4] The act of *sien* does not always go smoothly, and recently one powerful mountain sent an incurable illness to the Buddhist monk who tried to clear a road to its summit, where a temple would be built. The money was raised, and permissions from local authorities secured, they *sien* chicken before beginning to clear, but it was obviously not accepted because the monk fell suddenly and violently ill. At that point, all clearing stopped, and the mountain remains an island of forest amid spreading homesteads and cashew fields.

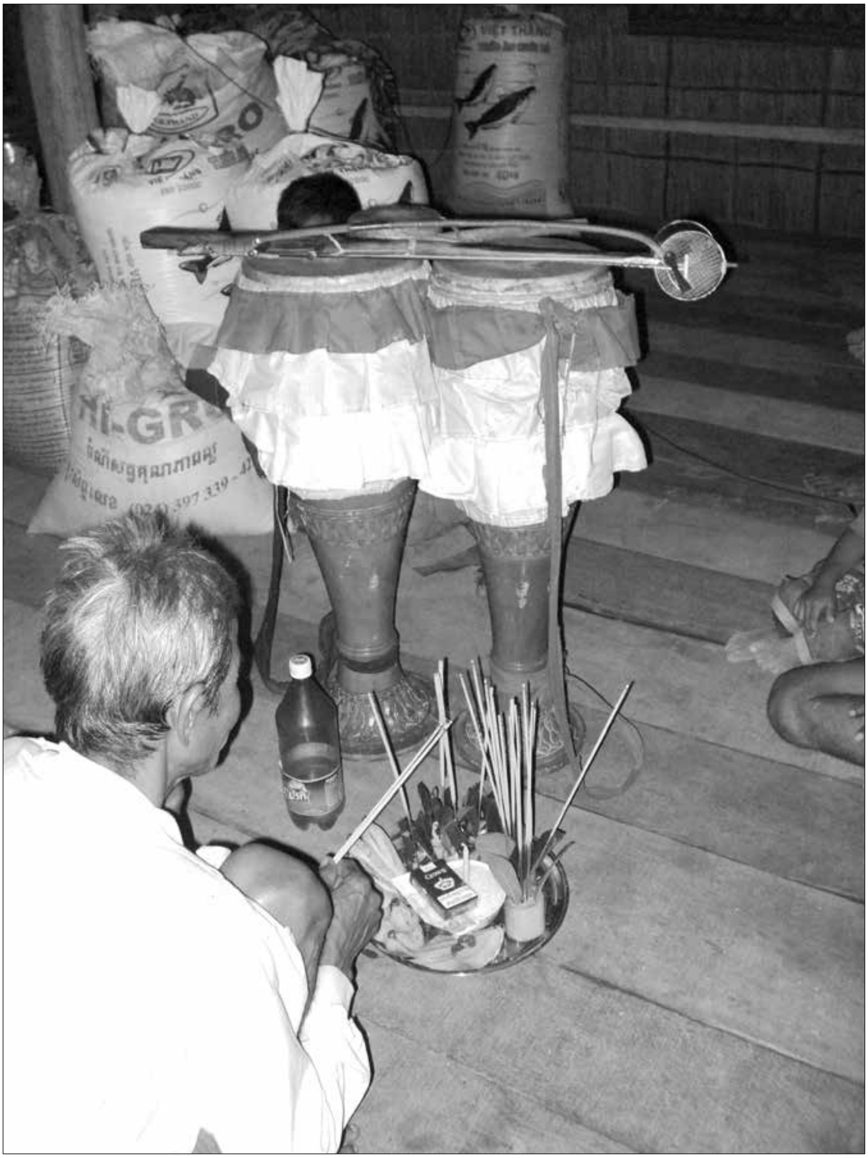

**Figure 4.3** *Sien* musical instruments, 2011. Photo credit: Courtney Work.

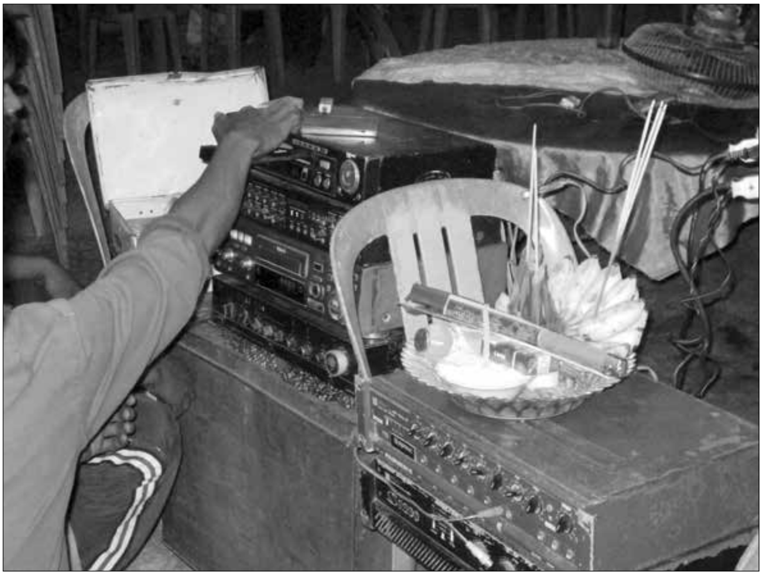

**Figure 4.4** *Sien* machine, Kampong Chhnang, 2010. Photo credit: Courtney Work.

There is one more story to share here, which recently helped me rethink the social work being done with the term *sien*. We might think that it is an offering, like in the configuration that Hurbert and Mauss give that could be akin to sacrifice. This works, but what is significant is that the offering is not directed toward a god or toward the Master of the Water and the Land, but is rather directed toward the rice, the house, the drum, or the electronic equipment—all these hold pieces of chthonic energies, but they also hold the energies of farmers, human artists and their nonhuman teachers. I will not, for lack of space, discuss the invisible teachers, *kru*, that are known to teach many craftsmen, artists and musicians, but will talk about the jars that many indigenous minorities in Cambodia use to ferment rice wine. Wine is a regular part of any *sien* and when the Jarai elder told me that they *sien* ten wine jars, I assumed that meant they used the wine that was in the jar as part of the *sien*. After much discussion, I realised my mistake. The jar itself is the receiving agent in the *sien*, created from earth and fire, the wine jar articulates an intimate relationship that informs technological prowess at all levels. The jar is crafted from the earth, which requires earth as well as knowledge about what kind of earth, and skill in its preparation and curing so it can hold liquid and last for years. The wine requires the energy of the roots and plants that make the yeast, as well as the knowledge of these plants and the skill of chopping, curing, and mixing them to make wine. This complex of skills are also part of weaving cloth and baskets, building traps, or various cooking techniques (see Conway 2018; Narayan and George 2017), and in industrial machines as well (Pemberton 2009).

One could suggest that to *sien* the wine jar is a sacrifice, in that the *sien* makes the wine jar sacred. This, I suggest, privileges a modern understanding of the sacred and ignores the important interventions by first Mary Douglas (2002) and later Giorgio Agamben (1998), who both attend to the original meaning of the term and how the sacred must be disposed of and/or kept apart precisely because it is powerful and/or dangerous. As members of the party, bringers of wine, the wine jar is not at all separated, but is rather brought close and made intimate through the *sien*. The sacred is at once holy and defiled, the wine jar is neither. *Sien* for the rice jar is not done in the same register as the *sien* at a house warming or a *sien* drum. They do not prepare a plate with goodies, but rather scratch on the lid of the jar before opening it, to 'wake up' the jar itself and the wine inside and to state their intention: 'Oh wine jar, help keep us healthy and strong. Today, uncle is ill, and we will *sien* cow, *sien* gong and *sien* ten wine jars. Please help him continue to have a happy life....' In this communication, the jar is a vector of chthonic energy—the clay, the craft, as well as the wine and the craft of the wine. Maybe *sien* means respect, and not offering as I thought. When I asked the Jarai elder (in Khmer), she thought for a moment then laughed a little, saying, 'We can't give anything to *lok ta*, who is already the owner. *Sien* is how we take care, we come together and use everything *lok ta* gives us and we *sien* to say why, why we come together.'

This helped explain the importance of wine to *sien* events, it also really brought forward the entangled nature of these relationships. It is not a sacrifice, but closer to a vehicle for communication, in a multilevel acknowledgement of elements, craft, *pralung* and teachers that come together to *make social life possible*. Rice is one of the oldest entanglements of chthonic power and least represented in my work, enduring in the myths but very few of the practices I encounter. The rice has elemental energy, whose presence in the lives of Buddhist farmers has dwindled since the descriptions offered by Poree-Maspero (1962). Nonetheless, I still find small sacks of useful seed varieties tied to *neak ta* huts among indigenous communities. These I am told are representatives. Not *sien*, but hopeful enticements and possible vectors in the like-makes-like logic of sympathetic rites. Mauss suggests that sympathy is a route along which magical powers pass (1972: 125), from the elements through individual human actors and into gods. Marshal Sahlins also makes this point, suggesting that divinity is a 'high-order form' of animism (2017: 30), which is also Mus's point, who situates chthonic cults as 'a stage between' animism and 'scholarly religions' (1975 [1933]). I leave behind the spatial metaphors of 'higher' and 'between', which suggest this is a line and not a circle dance, and in the following section will grapple with what I suggest could be the most important element of social relationships with chthonic energy. 'The party.'

## The Prescription for a Party

One of the things that has always struck me about other-than-human demands when asked to intervene into afflictions, be they droughts or diseases, is that they always involve some type of communal offering, a 'bloody sacrifice'. When confronted with the problem, 'my husband is sick and the doctors can't treat him', the shaman, medium or fortune teller, through their individual capacity to engage with the other-than-human social world, will determine the offence, the offended and the 'prescription for a party'. In this section, I gather together elements from a number of different events I have attended or had described to me. Each example is useful for pulling out different aspects of this prescription for a party, from the powerful elements requested to the detailed guest lists, and the collective effervescence and communitas engendered as a result of committing some offence against the ancestors/Ancient Ones.[5]

When describing how the monk was cured in the story above, my friend told me that 'they *sien* buffalo [*kraboe*], and by the next day the monk was cured' (Steung Treng, January 2018). Behind this statement of fact that attests to the effective power of the mountain is everything that is in excess of what is often coded 'sacrifice'. There were collective activities required to prepare and kill the buffalo, capture the blood, dress, and share the meat. Another group of people prepared the broth and arranged the blood, head, and broth to present to the Ancient Ones. There was also the shared labour of making the leaf platters and ladles, of cleaning and preparing the offering place, and the work of clearing the place for the feast and the dancing. The wine had to be gathered, and the music equipment procured, transported, and set up. The whole village was involved in the preparation for this punishment. Then there was the moment when everyone gathered to hear the monk's apology, and the people's plea that the monk be healed.[6] There were collective promises to be good children and grandchildren and to protect the area. And finally, the feast, the drinking and the dancing into the small hours of the morning. All these last elements had to be pulled from the memory of my friend, who told me this story. For him, they were implicit and obvious in the 'social fact' that is *sien kraboe*.

In a recent discussion with a Jarai elder (Ratanakiri, February 2019), I was told that *neak ta* will be very clear about what they want. 'It depends on the problem. They demand a buffalo, a pig, a dog, or a chicken. There will be 3 jars, 6 jars, or 15 jars of wine. However many are needed, we bring out that many. We line them up together. We *sien* the wine jar first, then we *sien* the buffalo. There will be gongs, we *sien* the gong.... The preparations, the feasting, the music and dancing can last for many hours [general laughter] sometimes all night! All this we do to *sien lok ta*.'

I offer this description because it shows quite clearly the extent to which the word 'sacrifice' is inadequate to capture what adheres to the word *sien*. In the above story about how *sien kraboe* cured the monk, the description my friend first gave me could be a 'sacrificial offering'. But, as I demonstrated, *sien kraboe* is about much more than the buffalo. The Jarai elder tells us that each key element in the event receives *sien*, the wine jar, the gong. I was not in attendance at the *sien kraboe* for the monk, but at other events I have attended there is always a *sien* for the music equipment: a small plate with fruit, tobacco, betel and lime, wine and a few sticks of incense. The *sien* simply cannot be understood as a sacrifice, or even as an offering, as the *sien* for the wine jars and the *sien* for the musical 'instruments' makes clear.

In another ceremony (Steung Treng, January 2018), the *neak ta* of the village and my friend's ancestors had some very specific demands. My friend was sick because villagers were gossiping about her family. To address this issue, she had to *sien* pig, *sien* three litres of wine, and invite her immediate family from this village and the next, the families of two other neighbours in this village, one family from the next village, and me. I was implicated in the gossip, which involved the woman's husband who was suspected of sexual dalliance. While I was not implicated in the dalliance, I was enlisted into the solution because her husband acted as a research assistant for me and we often travelled together for weeks at a time. To satisfy demands of the Ancient Ones, I was publicly asked to perform a hand-tying ceremony with my research assistant in which I agreed to be his 'mother'. Not quite old enough to be his mother, I am his elder in both age and occupation, and during the feasting and drinking we all joked about how he now had to do as he was told and respect his elders. The guests stayed for hours, more wine was enlisted, and the gossip has since ceased. This is an example of a specific guest list being requested and a particular activity prescribed, and also eating meat and drinking wine.

One of the first prescriptions for a party that I witnessed from beginning to end came about because of an incurable illness (Kampong Chhnang, January 2010). This woman had been ill for months and after numerous trips to different doctors, she went to see a spirit medium. Her illness was because a spirit wanted her to provide her body for possession. She was told to *sien* pig, provide five litres of wine, to bring the *pinpiet* musicians,[7] and to gather all her neighbours and the local drum troupe. This is a long and drawn-out story, because this woman was not interested in becoming a vessel for a powerful nonhuman. I will just cut to the day of the event. Things started early with a trip to the market, where the woman's daughter bought a pig's head and two legs, along with other fixings for a feast. The pig head was already prepared, boiled, wrapped in its entrails, with the tail in its mouth and its four feet in the package. It was arranged on a tray, with betel, tobacco, wine and incense. The two legs were cut up and used to prepare four big pots of *kha jeung jruk'*, a special stew with ginger and palm sugar. It took ten people to prepare the stew, and three cooking stations were set up in the house yard. The musicians arrived and carried their instruments into the house. Once the instruments were arranged, a tray with fruit, wine, betel, tobacco, uncooked rice and incense was placed on the floor next to the instruments. During this time, two ritual specialists prepared ritual tools from banana trunk and leaves to hold the possessing entity should it be necessary.

It was not necessary. The music played and after the second song, the woman was possessed. Using her voice, a message emerged, 'Oh children and grandchildren, I am worried about Cambodia. I come from far away and see it is broken. Take care of each other and follow the five precepts.[8] I will leave now, back to the borderlands to protect the land.' The people asked for a name, they asked for more, but none came. Refusing to speak further, the possessing entity left and the woman crumpled to the floor. The musicians continued to play, but there was no more communication. The guests ate the stew and drank the two litres of wine provided, but this event engendered neither effervescence nor communitas. Guests left early, the woman remained collapsed and exhausted. The pig's head remained on display through the afternoon, stew was sent home with guests, and the family ate the pig's head the next day.

There are significant elements of this last event beyond the prescription for what should have been a party. People were concerned about what was clearly an unsuccessful possession, by not staying to answer questions and not providing a name, it was clear to the assembled that this woman would not provide a body for the Ancient one. There was speculation about why this happened; first, it was noticed by all that she did not follow the prescription and did not prepare a full pig or supply enough wine. She did not invite the whole village, but only certain people, and she looked down on the others. People thought the message about taking care of each other was for her, but also for the whole village and the whole country. They also thought that the border conflict at the Preah Vihear temple, which had recently heated up again, was why the possession failed. Things were just too busy to be involved in this little village.

Two related things stand out from my most recent visits with Kuy friends at the edge of the rapidly vanishing forest in Cambodia. The first is a comment from a young man, repeated a dozen times by others in other places, that the parties are not as fun as they used to be:

> The elders would go door to door, banging on houses and shouting for people to bring out their share. Through the day, people would join in the procession and that was the beginning of the banter and laughter that only increased into the night. Now, the elders are all in their fields planting and harvesting cassava. No one has time to make demands, and there is not much to offer (Preah Vihear, February 2018).

The other important theme, spoken perfectly by one, but repeated by many, was this: 'We had strong relationships out here (*tomneak tomnong ban khlang*). We took care of each other, and there was always enough. Now we don't really have relationships with each other, there is no solidarity' he said, pulling some small bills from his shirt pocket. 'Now we have social relationships here (*mian tomneak tomnong di ni*' (Kratie, February 2018). The insights of Karl Marx haunt this statement when he says '[a] particular commodity cannot become the universal equivalent except by a social act' (1906: 61).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I recount one of the first short stories I heard about the power of *lok ta* (2019) and the associated parties. This was offered by a woman who came of age during the Khmer Rouge. At her first *larng neak ta* celebration (a post-harvest event) in a village recently cut from the forest by herself and other internal migrants, she told me that she danced for the first time in her life. 'I didn't know how. I'd never danced before. But, I just knew the steps. It was like *lok ta* wanted us to dance.' That is how it seems to me as well. Edmund Leach suggests that the gods don't need gifts from the people. I agree; this is the owner of the water and the land, what could a human possibly give that is not already owned? Leach says what the gods want are 'signs of submission' (Leach 1976: 82–93). This is the register in which 'sacrifice' is still understood, as discussed above. I suggest, and have drawn out here, that it is neither the animals that the gods are after, nor the act of submission in which the animals are killed at the request of power. It is care. Care for the elemental Masters of the Water and the Land all the time, and care for each other, solidarity, which is enacted or re-ignited through the party. It is through the fun, the sociality, and all the feats of technological prowess that go into creating such an event that a vibrant social life is sustained. It is the feast and its attendant possibilities for fecundity that the sovereign elements are after.

Some of what I advance here does not stray too far from Durkheim's thesis, but I make two explicit moves that significantly reframe the discussion to open the foreclosed relationships with nonhuman others as part of transforming and expanding the community. The first move is already worked out (Work 2019, 2020) and disrupts Durkheim's assumption that the 'religion' of which he speaks is part of a natural progression from 'primitive' to 'civilised'. We already know this, but cannot quite embrace it and the 'supernatural' is still a thing that is opposed to the 'natural' and is still coded primitive in contemporary scholarship. Across Southeast Asia, the tools, skills and products of human technological activity are entangled with elemental energy and are also implicated in maintaining social relationships. The life force that is part of all things is in no way 'supernatural', but a key element in the constant transfer of energy that creates life from water and rock.

It is possible, in fact quite likely, that there is no such thing as an entity devoid of awareness. In this social configuration, proper relationships require caretaking, restraint and respect, which are the general 'rules' of the Master of the Water and the Land to which we must all submit. When we fail at any of these activities, our punishment is to throw a party. Durkheim draws out quite convincingly that the crucial element is 'these effervescent social settings' (1975 [1933]: 164) and the simple fact that 'the god of the clan ... must therefore be the clan itself' (p. 154). I agree with Durkheim, but object to the way his configuration displaces 'the god of the clan' in favour of the clan. As if the 'god' is separate and outside the clan, which accurately reflects the world Durkheim lived in, but not the world of the colonised other. On the contrary, their 'god' is constituent of and inseparable from the clan. The intimacy with which people are socially bound to *lok ta* as the honoured grandfather and also the life-giving elements that make up the mountain and the water suggests that they form a single unit. People living in a territory are the 'children and grandchildren' of *lok ta*. Like Durkheim, I suggest that collective parties prescribed by the Ancient Ones to cure various ills or to mark special events like marriage are, in fact, social phenomena. But, they are also physical and biological. This claim picks up the absurdity of an external, non-worldly entity at the heart of 'religion'. Durkheim says that power exists and it is society, which is to say 'a system of notions by which individuals imagine the society to which they belong' (p. 171). This seems to be spot on, but when he suggested that human 'categories of understanding' have social origins, he did not understand the full extent of the social lives in which people were involved. As human arrogance ebbs in the face of surprising scientific discoveries and the dastardly effects of ignoring the care, respect and restraint due to our extended families, this chapter re-evaluates the power of collective effervescence in light of a much larger collective.

## Notes

1. Thanks to Paul-David Lutz for this most appropriate description.
2. The Lao term *liang* used to describe these events literally means 'caretaking' (thanks to Holly High for this insight; see also Lutz this volume), and in Cambodia there is also an important element of care and caretaking in this context. See, for example, Davis 2012.
3. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me about Levi-Strauss's interventions on sacrificial logic.
4. Chat with the DJ at the harvest celebration, 21 January 2010.
5. The commingling of ancestors and Ancient Ones is important, but beyond my scope here. My own data has human ancestors, whose bodies are buried in the earth, acting as intermediaries between the elemental forces of the Ancient Ones and the human community. They can also be offended in their own right. For some further discussions of this, please see: Davis (2016) on the king's jedi; Wessing (2017) on the translation between nonhumans, founders, kings, and states; Guillou (2014) on the ways that human remains in the earth change character over time; and Schweyer (2017).
6. The hierarchal inversion here, of a monk apologising to an earth entity, is exactly in keeping with the larger discussion emerging from many chapters of this volume (Baumann, Karlsson, Lutz), that opens a lens through which we cannot see the discursive creation of hierarchal taxonomies in which monks are 'higher' than

spirits, but rather the empirical manifestation of hierarchy. The monk was rendered gravely ill by clearing a road on the animated mountain and was brought into the non-contradictory position of apologising for the transgression. Some in that village declared, 'lok ta won' (22 January 2018).

7. This is the formal traditional music, consisting of drums, xylophone and brass gongs.
8. This is in reference to the five Buddhist precepts: do not kill, do not lie, do not talk badly about others, do not engage in sexual misconduct, do not become intoxicated.

## References

Agamben, G. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ami, C.M.W. 2016. *Díįjí nida'iil'ah (Today, We Butcher): A Study of Navajo Traditional Sheep Butchering*. Davis: University of California.

Anderson, B.R.O. 1990. "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture", in *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 17–77.

Ang, C. 1990. "La Communauté Rurale Khmère du Point de Vue du Sacré [The Rural Cambodian Community from a Sacred Point of View]", *Journal Asiatiqùe* 278, 1–2: 135–54.

Arendt, H. 1958. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Cleveland: World Publishing Co.

Bautista, J. 2012. *The Spirit of Things: Materiality and Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program.

Beban, A. and C. Work. 2014. "The Spirits are Crying: Dispossessing Land and Possessing Bodies in Rural Cambodia", *Antipode* 46, 3: 593–610.

Blaser, M. 2013. "Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe", *Current Anthropology* 54, 5: 547–68. https://doi.org/10.1086/672270

Bloch, M. 1992. *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Conway, S. 2018. "Textiles and Supernatural Power: A Tai Belief System", *Journal of Burma Studies* 21, 2: 365–94. https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2017.0011

Davis, E. 2016. *Deathpower: Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Davis, E.W. 2012. "Khmer Spirits, Chinese Bodies: Chinese spirit mediums and spirit possession rituals in contemporary Cambodia", in *Faith in the Future: Understanding the revitalization of religions and cultural traditions in Asia*, ed. T. Reuter and A. Horstmann. Leiden: BRILL, pp. 177–98. http://www.ucm.eblib.com/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=1051838

Detienne, M. and J-P. Vernant. 1989. *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Doniger O'Flaherty, W. 1988. *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Douglas, M. 2002 [1966]. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Polution and Taboo*. New York and London: Routledge.

Durkheim, É. 2008 [1912]. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eliade, M. 1963. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. World Publishing.

Fabian, J. 1983. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Forest, A. 1991. "Cambodge: Pouvoir de Roi et Puissance de Génie [Cambodia: Power [Management] of the King and Power [Political] of the Genie ]", in *Cultes Populaires et Sociétés Asiatiques: Appareils cultuels et appareils de pouvoir* [Popular Cults in Asian Societies: Devices of Culture and Tools of Power ], ed. A. Forest, Y. Ishizawa and L. Vandermeersch. Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, pp. 185–222.

Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*. London: Macmillan and Co.

Gibson, T. 2006 [1986]. *Sacrifice and Sharing in the Philippine Highlands: Religion and Society among the Buid of Mindoro*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Girard, R. 1972. *Violence and the Sacred*. New York: John Hopkins University Press.

Govindrajan, R. 2015. "'The Goat That Died for Family': Animal Sacrifice and Interspecies Kinship in India's Central Himalayas", *American Ethnologist* 42, 3: 504–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12144

Guillou, Anne Y. 2014. "From bones-as-evidence to tutelary spirits: Status of bodies in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge genocide", in *Destruction and human remains: disposal and concealment in genocide and mass violence*, ed. Élisabeth Gessat-Anstett and Jean-Marc Dreyfus. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 146–60.

Handley, G.B. 2015. "Climate Change, Cosmology, and Poetry: The Case of Derek Walcott's Omeros", in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, ed. E. DeLoughrey, J. Didur, and A. Carrigan. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 333–51.

Hocart, A.M. 1953. *The Life-giving Myth*. New York: Grove Press.

Holt, J.C. 2009. *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-1-4160-4389-8.50161-8

Hubert, H. and M. Mauss. 1964. *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Janowski, M. 2017. "The Dynamics of the Cosmic Conversation: Beliefs about Spirits Among the Kelabit and Penan of the Upper Baram River, Sarawak", in *Animism in Southeast Asia*, ed. K. Århem and G. Sprenger. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 181–204.

Khoury, S. 2017. “On Periodically Potent Places: The Theatre Stage as a Temporarily Empowered Space for Ritual Performances in Cambodia”, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 18, 5: 444–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2017.1366545

Leach, E. 1976. *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lévi-Strauss, C. 1962. *The Savage Mind*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Mauss, M. and H. Hubert. 1972. *A General Theory of Magic*. New York and London.

Munn, N. 1973. *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Mus, P. 1975 [1933]. *India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*. Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University.

Nadasdy, P. 2007. “The Gift in the Animal: The Ontology of Hunting and Human-Animal Sociality”, *Arctic* 34, 1: 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2007.34.1.25

Narayan, K. and K.M. George. 2017. “Tools and World-making in the Worship of Vishwakarma”, *South Asian History and Culture* 8, 4: 478–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2017.1371506

Pemberton, J. 2009. “The Ghost in the Machine”, in *Photographs East*, ed. R. Morris. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Picard, M. 2017. *The Appropriation of Religion in Southeast Asia and Beyond*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Porée-Maspero, É. 1958. *Cérémonies privées des Cambodgiens, Bidhi knun gruasar Khmaer* [Private Ceremonies of the Cambodians], ed. K. J.T.D. Khmaer. Phnom Penh: Éditions de l’Institut Bouddhique.

_________. 1962. *Étude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens* [A Study on Cambodian Agrarian Rites]. Mouton.

Reinert, H. 2015. “Sacrifice”, *Environmental Humanities* 7: 255–8.

Robertson-Smith, W. 1995. “Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. Second and Third Series”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, ed. J. Day. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press.

Sahlins, M. 2017. “The Original Political Society”, in *On Kings*, ed. D. Graeber and M. Sahlins. Chicago: Hau Books, pp. 23–65.

Schweyer, A.V. 2017. “Potent Places in Central Vietnam: ‘Everything that Comes Out of the Earth is Cham’”, *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 18, 5: 400–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2017.1370478

Shapiro, T. 1994. “Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia”. PhD Thesis, Cornell University.

Smith, B.K. and W. Doniger. 1989. “Sacrifice and Substitution: Ritual Mystification and Mythical Demystification”, *Numen* 36, 2: 189–224.

Sprenger, G. 2016. “Dimensions of Animism in Southeast Asia”, in *Animism in Southeast Asia*, ed. K. Århem and G. Sprenger. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 31–51.

________. 2017. "Communicated into Being: Systems Theory and the Shifting of Ontological Status", *Anthropological Theory* 17, 1: 108–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499617699330

________. 2018. "Buddhism and Coffee: The Transformation of Locality and Non-Human Personhood in Southern Laos", *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33, 2: 265–90. https://doi.org/10.1355/sj33-2b

Stolz, R. 2021. *Living Kinship, Fearing Spirits: Sociality among the Khmu of Northern Laos*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Tannenbaum, N.B. and C.A. Kammerer (eds). 2003. *Founders' Cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, Polity, and Identity.* New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press.

Valeri, V. 2000. *The Forest of Taboos: Morality, hunting, and Identity among the Huaulu of the Moluccas*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Wessing, R. 2017. "The lord of the land relationship in southeast Asia", in *Spirits and Ships: Cultural Transfers in Early Monsoon Asia*, ed. A. Acri, R. Blench, and A. Landmann. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, pp. 515–56.

Wolters, O.W. 1982. *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Woolford, A., June, W., and Um, S. 2021. "'We Planted Rice and Killed People': Symbiogenetic Destruction in the Cambodian Genocide", *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 15, 1: 44–67. https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.15.1.1805

Work, C. 2014. "Sacred Bribes and Violence Deferred: Buddhist Ritual in Rural Cambodia", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 45, 1: 4–24.

________. 2017. "The Persistent Presence of Cambodian Spirits: Contemporary Knowledge Production in Cambodia", in *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia*, ed. K. Brickell and S. Springer. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 389–98.

________. 2018. "'There Was So Much': Violence, Sovereignty, and States of Extraction in Cambodia", *Journal of Religion and Violence* 6, 1: 52–72. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv201851451

________. 2019. "Chthonic Sovereigns? 'Neak Ta' in a Cambodian Village", *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 20, 1: 74–95.

________. 2020. *Tides of Empire: Religion, Development, and Environment in Cambodia*. New York and Oxford: Berghahan Books.

________. 2022. "Stones of Spirits and Kings: Negotiating Land Grabs in Contemporary Cambodia", in *Sīmās: Foundations of Buddhist Religion*, ed. Jason A. Carbine and Erik W. Davis. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Wright, M. 1990. "Sacrifice and the Underworld: Death and Fertility in Siamese Myth and Ritual", *Journal of the Siam Society* 78, 1: 43–53.