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[Spirits of the Forest: Cambodia's Kuy People Practice Spirit-based Conservation](#)

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The Kuy believe that Ah'ret (spirits) live in the trees. Making offerings in places where they dwell is required to maintain positive relations.

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It was late in the Cambodian afternoon as my Kuy colleagues, Mr. Pak and Mr. Vansakd, and I followed Mr. Phon (a Kuy community leader and elder) down the narrow dirt road leading out of the Kuy village of Svay Damnak to go into the forest. Svay Damnak is located in southern Preah Vihear, on the outskirts of the Boeng Per Wildlife Reserve, a forested area that is part of the greater Prey Lang forest area. Along the way, Mr. Phon pointed out to us the ancient mango tree that symbolizes the ancient founding of the village in the days before Angkor Wat. At the foot of the tree we saw a small open hut that provided a shrine for one of the local *Ah'ret* (spirits). Nearby were srai fields where people were working to prepare the ground for transplanting the young rice shoots they had grown.

As we stepped into the forest we felt instant relief from the hot sun. The large and diverse forest cover provided a lush umbrella under which the fragrant air of the many different plants around us circulated freely. As we proceeded deeper into the forest we eventually came to a cemetery (phno kmaucht), where the grave mounds of the dead were interspersed in the small distances between the trees. Mr. Phon explained that it was important to keep the dead far away from the village, and that they were happier to be in the forest. The forest also provides people with numerous medicine roots, bark, and other materials for living. We continued our walk from the forest through interspersed fields of mixed cultivation (voh srei dad dal), that included many tall dipterocarp trees from which people obtain useful resins (ut charl dtut). We visited the overgrown site of a looted Chenla temple, and crossed the old raised road that runs in a straight line from Svay Damnak west to the old city of Angkor Wat, once the largest urban center in the world.

We finally came to rest under a large dipterocarp tree growing on top of a small hill made out of tons of iron slag left behind by ancient Kuy shamans (chây) who long ago danced the solid ore into molten liquid for blacksmiths (val dtat) to render into tools for use and trade with the elites of Angkor Wat. As we walked back to the village through the forests and fields, Mr. Phon explained that all of this would be gone soon. Why? The government had just remapped most of their territory as an economic land concession, and leased it to a transnational corporation that aims to convert it into an industrial plantation of rubber, cashew and acacia trees. Most of the Boeng Per Reserve has recently met the same outcome: it is gone.

Mr. Phon told us he recently had an opportunity to speak directly to the director of the company that plans to develop the new plantation on Kuy territory. He told us that he said “no” to the director, and that the Kuy people did not consent to this concession. The director’s reply was that the land currently being farmed by community members would not be taken, but that the rest would. The “rest” includes the large areas of diverse forests we had walked through. To help me understand this, Mr. Phon drew a picture for me. First, he drew a large rectangle and said, “This is our land.”

Then he drew a very small circle in the middle of the rectangle and said, “This is what the company said we will be able to keep, to farm.” When I asked how one would get to the farming area, Mr. Phon explained the company’s plan by drawing a line from the edge of the rectangle to the circle and explained that the company proposed to provide a small road to the remaining farmland, but that he and the other Kuy people would have to pay an access toll. When the company director explained this to Mr. Phon, Mr. Phon again disagreed, and that is where the “consultation” ended.

Such encounters, devoid of anything resembling free, prior and informed consent, are commonplace throughout Cambodia. They are not just cultural norms; they are enabled by a political climate of force that generates transnational wealth.

In talking with Mr. Ra, a young Kuy farmer, he clearly explained how this works. He said a company came and took his land, and he cannot complain about it because he fears he will get punished by the police or soldiers. In talking about this fear with Mr. Sochea, the leader of an important Indigenous organization, he said that yes, there is a general fear in the country that if you publicly complain about one thing (like having your land taken away), you risk causing even bigger problems for yourself (like getting arrested or worse).

Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia Today

There are more than 20 different ethnic groups in Cambodia who self-identify not as Khmer, but as distinct Indigenous Peoples of the uplands and mountains, with different cultures, languages and histories than those of the lowland Khmer peoples. Historically, these peoples have been referred to by Khmers and others (e.g., French colonials, Chinese traders, etc.) as ethnic minorities, hill tribes, Khmer Loue, and more dehumanizing terms associated with wildness, primitivity, savagery, and so forth. Most of their traditional territories are today reconstituted as the provinces of Mondulkiri, Rattanakiri, Kratie, Steung Treng, Kampong Thom, and Preah Vihear. Because these people chose to live different lifestyles, they have been targets of discrimination through centuries of multiple colonialisms. But in 2012, the problems facing Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia are shared with millions of poor rural and urban Khmer people throughout the country, lowlands and uplands alike. They are basic economic, political and biological problems of survival within an increasingly predatory and menacing state environment that is largely supported by the international system. What is going on now is perhaps the most devastating colonialism of them all: that of the market economy and “development.” In the name of free market development, the Cambodian government is rapidly and increasingly selling off the country’s lands and natural resources to the highest bidder, with little or no benefit to the people who already live there. This is what “land-grabbing” means in Cambodia.

It is not uncommon for Westerners and some Cambodians to describe Cambodia as a place cursed by a recurring fate of human tragedy enabled by a Southeast Asian tradition of patron-client relations based on inequality, and structural proclivities for enacting disproportionate revenge on perceived enemies. While there is certainly truth in these explanations, they overlook the modern role played by the international system in promulgating relations of inequality within Cambodia, a role in dire need of critical self-reflection. Other sorts of relationships have an equally long tradition in the uplands, such as mutual aid and collective autonomy, but these are not favored by the international system.

Kuy Theories of Environment

Although there is variation in Kuy perceptions of their environment, there are some strong recurring patterns of spiritual geography. Primary among these are beliefs in a variety of local spirits that reside in the forests, mountains and near the villages. These spirits have different names, such as Ah’ret, Neak Ta, or Phi. In most of the conversations I had with Kuy people, the most commonly given name was Ah’ret. For most Kuy peoples, the existence of these spirits is fully compatible with the practice of Buddhist or

Brahmanic religion. Mrs. Meas, an elder Kuy woman, explained Ah'ret to me as ancestor ghost spirits that will help the people, but they require people to regularly maintain positive communications with them and carry out ceremonies at particular places where they dwell. She said there are four such places at Svay Damnak.

As I learned, the flip-side of this understanding is that if the Ah'ret become angry, they cause illness and death. The Ah'ret are also dangerous; they get upset when people behave badly. Mrs. Meas said that the land-grabbing is angering the Ah'ret. The Ah'ret are key to understanding Kuy culture and the relationships between people and land. Mr. Lot, another Kuy elder, recounted the origin story of Svay Damnak as a royal Cambodian village founded by a king from Bau Khan temple (midway on the road between the village and Angkor Wat), who visited the area and camped under a big mango tree before going to build Angkor Wat. Mr. Lot took us to the same tree that Mr. Phon had shown us, and explained that an Ah'ret lives in that tree; and that the shrine next to the tree houses is the ceremonial stone that is the means by which the people communicate with the Ah'ret. His explanation suggested to me that the shrine is analogous to a cosmic phone booth: when it is time for communication the spirit comes to indwell in the stone as the people draw near the shrine in ceremony, bathe the stone, and offer it tobacco, food, juice, and incense. Traditional musicians may provide music to please the Ah'ret (playing ahrahtnay), using flutes, drums, and other instruments. Mr. Nom, one of the local musicians said that the traditional music can only be played for the Ah'ret and is not meant to be performed otherwise.

Through ceremony, the stone becomes a kind of send-and receive device for messages and expressions between people and Ah'ret. Many women and men in the Kuy villages I visited affirmed the importance of maintaining good relations with the Ah'ret in order to ensure good health and well-being. For example, when illness strikes, Kuy people ask these spirits for their assistance in curing, and go into the forest to procure the necessary materials that are then variously combined to make medicines, that with the help of the Ah'ret remove the malady. The Ah'ret are consulted on many other occasions such as when people prepare fields for planting, need resources from the forest, or want to get married. The need for timber for building houses is particularly sensitive, given that trees are thought to be where Ah'ret normally dwell. Many people told me of the need to carry out ceremonies and appease the Ah'ret before cutting down any trees. Failure to do so can result in serious illness (banja arall).

Kuy Theories of Development

In many different ways almost all of the Kuy people I spoke with told me that land equals life, and the land includes slowly shifting zones of spirit forests and cultivation fields. If development is change, the change most of the Kuy people I spoke with wanted was to be able to eventually give their children ownership of their lands. An elder and traditional healer, Mr. Ki said that access to traditional lands, territories and resources is important to him because they are for his children's future living, and that he is unhappy when foreigners come in and take over their lands.

What the Kuy and other Indigenous Peoples would like to change in the present day is the power and impunity of the neoliberal Khmer Riche elites so that they cannot simply sell Kuy lands to a corporation who will then foreclose on traditional Kuy practices of land tenure. This runs almost entirely in opposition to the program of change envisioned by the dominant international model of development to which the Khmer Riche is a party. In effect, Kuy development means stopping this other development. Kuy peoples do not seem interested in developing their economy into something else, but rather stabilizing and ensuring the economy they already have, which follows a complex annual cycle of planting, transplanting, harvesting, and regeneration, and in which local spirits play a critical role. It is not that Kuy people do not want change; they do—they want the political structure to change, so that they have a better chance of surviving, and are able to freely move about their ancestral homeland fields and forests. More than anything else, the Kuy fathers and mothers I spoke to said they wanted to be able to leave their land to their children, to work it much the same way they have. And many of their children expressed assent to the same. The development they seek is that of human dignity.

Kuy theories of environment and development suggest a religiously embedded ecology that has sustained a robust biodiversity and viable habitat over long periods of time. In varying extents, their theories are engaged by other Indigenous Peoples throughout the uplands of Southeast Asia, who have been noted for

their state-evasive, anarchic proclivities. It is a human adaptation that has until recently proven to be relatively successful as an alternative response to the multiple lowland state formations that have developed over the last 1,000 years.

There is much the Kuy can teach the rest of the world. Kuy peoples have survived centuries of regional depredations of slave-raids, followed by French colonialism, postcolonial civil war, US carpet-bombing, Khmer Rouge genocide, Vietnamese occupation, and now global neoliberal development. Given their relatively small numbers, they will not survive this latest threat without joining forces with other Indigenous Peoples, alongside and with impoverished Khmer peoples living alongside them in the lowlands and the cities, to generate a peoples' movement for Springtime in Cambodia. It remains to see who will join them.

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