

From Spirit Forest to Rubber Plantation: The Accelerating Disaster of “Development” in Cambodia

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Abstract: Despite the rise of Cambodia’s GDP and other development indicators, continuing extreme poverty combined with very rapid conversion of traditional subsistence lands, forests, and waters into land concessions to national and transnational companies is leading to intensified land insecurity issues and other human rights problems that may destabilize the country. An elite sector of Cambodian society comprised of the heads of state, business, and the military is implicated as the central cause of ongoing poverty and land loss. This paper outlines the problematic nature of the concession processes that began in the post-conflict era and continue today, and adapts Roy Rappaport’s concepts of cognized/operational environments within a political and historical framework for analyzing the strategies of these elites, and compares their cognized environments with those of indigenous Kuy peoples whose lands are threatened by elite practice, and suggests that the high-modern discourses of development adhered to by the elites are based on ultimate sacred postulates just as much as the explicitly religious discourses of traditional Kuy peoples.

Keywords Indigenous peoples; human rights; cognized environments

THE PROBLEM

The modification of primary old-growth forest in Cambodia began about 100 years ago with French colonial-modernist ideas about scientific and market-based forestry (e.g., rubber tree plantations), but these ideas never spread too far into the uplands of Northeastern Cambodia. This was the location of the largest and incredibly biodiverse forest areas in the country, where people practiced what could be called “traditional” forestry, oriented mainly around shifting cultivation, hunting, fishing, small-scale mining, and harvesting non-timber forest products. New modernisms of forestry emerged during the Khmer Rouge years, when the Khmer Rouge began logging forests for timber for fast cash in a transnational open market. These efforts resulted in a significant amount of forest destruction and contributed to the epidemic human displacements of the time. Under the post-conflict Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), this view of forests as timber for cash has gained ascendance, bolstered by expanding market demand for timber in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and supported by new legal forms of land transfer called “concessions.” Carried out in the name of development, these concessions are effectively nontransparent business exchanges of wealth and power for natural resources, contracted between the private sector and the state. Concession area sizes usually range from 5,000 to 10,000 hectares, although some are smaller and some are much larger. The official arrangement typically is that of a long-term lease, many for 99 years. The natural resources now targeted for large-scale extraction include not only timber, but

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also the subsequent conversion of clear-cut forest lands into industrial plantations, mines, and dams. In 2006, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization surveyed the forests of Cambodia and estimated that 20 percent of the country's forests had disappeared since 1970. But rather than protect what remains, the RGC has since steadily increased the issuing of land concessions. In early 2012 it became public knowledge that the RGC has conceded over a fifth of the country's total land area to hundreds of corporations, officially including 306 economic land concessions (ELCs), 87 mining concessions (MCs), and 23 special economic zones (SEZs), many of which were issued just within the last two to three years. The recipient corporations are mainly Cambodian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Canadian, and Australian. The market is wide open.¹

Often these concessions are for lands already in use by people with little money or power, including many who self-identify as Indigenous. As companies take possession of their concession lands, the groups of people already living there are displaced, often aided by local government officials. Increasingly this has led to forced evictions, with an alarming rise in the use of state violence and guns against evictees and their supporters. Peaceful protests and organization against the concessions are legally and locally restricted, and when they happen anyway, the protestors may be threatened, photographed, beaten, arrested, imprisoned, or, in the recent case of Chut Vutty, shot dead. The legal system has in the last four years become reshaped as another potent force for silencing opposition to land concessions, with the adoption of new laws that constrain free expression and public dissent, and with a court system widely recognized as biased in favor of the rich and powerful. Poor people who are found guilty of dissent face hefty fines they cannot pay and/or doing time in extremely substandard prison conditions.²

Mu Sochea, one of the few active political leaders to speak out against the land concession problem, estimates that land concessions have displaced upwards of 1 million Cambodians over the last ten years (about 7 percent of the total population). Evidence exists that a small networked group of elites, who have effectively monopolized the state, are orchestrating a significant amount of these concessions and are benefitting greatly as a result, while the displaced people receive little or no compensation. As the concessions increase, so too do evictions, land insecurity, environmental destruction, civil protests, and state violence. It is a perfect recipe for the development of disaster. The questions, then, are why is this happening and what can be done to change the development of disaster into a different outcome?³ Cambodian peoples are the heirs to a world-class cultural and natural heritage, and have all the potential to create a very different future.

DATA

At the invitation of two Indigenous peoples organizations in Cambodia, I visited the country in 2010 and 2011, with the goal of researching indicators of Indigenous peoples' human rights. In general my approach was to adapt with modification the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) indicator framework of structure/process/outcome indicator variables using an ethnographic and historical methodology to ascertain the status of two fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples: the right of self-determination and rights over traditional lands, territories, and resources.⁴ My fieldwork was centered in the province of Preah Vihear, in several Indigenous Kuy villages that are located in the vicinity of the Boeng Peae Wildlife Sanctuary, one of nine such protected areas in Cambodia, and part of the Greater Prey Lang Forest region. The central objective of fieldwork was to elicit and document the perspectives of Kuy people on the status of these rights in their communities. We conducted 45 interviews with community mem-

bers, including adult women and men. We also observed land tenure practices, including village composition, shifting cultivation, wet rice cultivation, tree resin-tapping, artisanal gold mining, burial practices, spirit forest ceremonies, ironworking sites, the remains of an ancient pre-Angkorian temple, and community territorial demarcation. Additional research was carried out in the cities of Phnom Penh and Tbeang Meanchey, consisting of dialogues with nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives and documentary research in the National Archives; in New York City at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues where I have worked with delegations of Indigenous people from Cambodia; and via online media and NGO reports. While I continue to analyze these data with the aim of better understanding of what development means in contemporary Cambodia, the following is a preliminary response to the questions posed above.

DEVELOPMENT AS RELIGION

To address the question of why the land conflict is occurring, I focus on the cultural frames within which the leading instigators of this development may be operating. The aims are to better understand what causes elite behaviors and move analysis beyond the more usual human nature-based explanations of individual greed and corruption to a consideration of the cultural situations in which such behavior occurs. In this way, my study examines how the international system is as much a factor in the development of disaster as is the elite group that monopolizes the political economy of Cambodia. This requires taking a Durkheimian approach to the international system as a religion, with the market as its sacred, massive social fact, around which human organization has become reoriented.⁵ If the scientific discipline of anthropology has contributed anything, it is the knowledge that human behavior and what we think of as human nature and “reality” are in fact thoroughly mediated by culture: the symbols and grammars we learn, share, mobilize in our behavior, and re-enact in our structures of society and power. These mediating frames, like maps, should not be conflated with the territory itself. When we examine the cultural core of social formation, we find ritual, generating beliefs, and social structure. Cultural frames are not entirely stable or consistent and shift over time in response to changing social and physical environments, but they nonetheless demonstrate resiliency and develop structure and recursion. The case of gender, race, class, and ethnic discrimination is perhaps the most obvious example of recursive cultural construction. The individual behaviors of the Cambodian elites currently instigating the land concessions would certainly be disrupted if they were all rounded up and put in jail, but it is likely that the problem would continue with whatever group replaces them. The problem with land concessions in Cambodia is not unique, but is variably replicated in many other countries, constituting a global pattern—if not pathology—of economic development that many refer to as “land-grabbing.”⁶

Again, the position here is that this pattern is not the result of any law of nature; “market forces” are the product of human power, history, and cognition. It bears repetition because it strikes me that the mainstream theories of neoliberal economics that undergird economic practice seem to claim to have discovered the natural law of humanity: that we have always been self-interested capitalists underneath it all, and that capitalism is a spirit after all. As with most other universalizing and determinate laws of human nature, this one indicates the presence of an unverifiable verisimilitude to which science can only reply: although humans are limited by their biology, their behaviors are not entirely determined by it.⁷

It is not a change in personnel that will alter the path of the development of destruction. To turn Rostow on his head, it is a change in the cultural and global frames of development, along with the social structures that engender them, that is necessary to solve the problem

of land-grabbing. The focus of analysis in this paper will be to examine two conflicting frames within Cambodia concerning the basic relationship of people and land, one represented by the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) elites who have captured the state, whom I will refer to as the Khmer Riche; and the other by Kuy Indigenous peoples whose lands are being grabbed up as corporate concessions. By examining variation in the people/land relationship, I hope to develop insights of potential benefit to solving the land-grabbing problem. To reiterate, the problem is not in this policy or that; it is in the dynamic frames that make policy making appear to be the appropriate solution in the first place, and that do not account for the evasive discrepancies between stated policy and actual practice, which are in fact fairly ubiquitous in the case of land-grabbing.⁸

To do so, I reframe the idea of cultural frame as humanly dynamic and multiple. Frames are not simply handed to people to look through; they are cognized and constructed through dynamic concatenations of social symbols and rituals in recombination with ecological, political, and historical conditions. Cognition in this holistic sense is not only empirical rationality; it also importantly involves imagination and emotion that aims to integrate different aspects of experience, however imperfectly. Nor is it purely intellectual; the ideas gain purchase from intentional stereotyped and repetitive behavior, that is, ritual. Land-grabbing has become a global ritual.

COGNIZING COGNIZED ENVIRONMENTS

The term “cognized environment” originates in the writings of Roy Rappaport as an analytical concept for modeling the human-social symbolic cognitive framing of the experienced world. It is premised on a basic insight that the discipline of anthropology has provided through many years of empirical cross-cultural research: that humans experience the world through a sensorial filter of symbolic, physiological, and social processes that we gloss as “culture.” These processes already mediate between us and the physical environment, and are what allow us to form societies and transform the physical world (or what Rappaport called the “operational environment”) in which living organisms actually operate, reproduce, live and die. The cognized environment is a diagnostic way of approaching what is commonly glossed as “worldview” or what Freire called generative themes, that is, explanatory frameworks people develop in response to the concrete historical conditions in which they live. The cognized/operational environment model suggests a paradox of the human condition—that we are conscious of our existence, but only to a limited degree. As the Mayan *Popul Vuh* puts it more poetically, when Heart of Sky and Heart of Earth finally succeeded in making beings that would be conscious of their existence, at first it was too good a creation; the beings could see everything and all of time, just as well as the gods—so they clouded the vision of the beings they made, so they could only see so much. That would be us, the humans, the beings with clouded vision. Cognized models of the world provide the underlying rationale and motivation for specific human behavior guided by the limited comprehension that humans do possess.⁹

In Rappaport's conceptualization of cognized environment, five different orders of cognition are described: ultimate sacred postulates (USPs), cosmological axioms, ritual rules of conduct, imported indications of current prevailing conditions, and mundane understandings of the everyday world. USPs are the general, nonreferential, and relatively unchanging understandings of the cosmos, for example, the existence of spirits or progress. As Rappaport put it, USPs are “the unfalsifiable... [that] yields the unquestionable, which transforms the dubious, the arbitrary, and the conventional into the correct, the necessary, and the natural.”¹⁰ Cosmological axioms are the malleable understandings of the structure

of the world that follow from USPs, connect them with the physical and social world, and suggest general modes of human behavior. While USPs may be relatively fixed, the other orders are not. What makes a given cognized model appear not as a model, but as the truth about the world, is its performance in ritual, which again may or may not be explicitly religious. By themselves, USPs and cosmological axioms are abstractions. Through their performance or enactment via human ritual action, they become palpable and emotive. Rappaport argued that ritual involves two different streams of messages, self-referential and canonical. While postulates and axioms constitute the canonical messages, the knowledge of prevailing conditions and everyday life constitute the self-referential messages. But it is ritual that combines them and gives them the feel of concrete reality. Cognized models are dynamic, because their associated rituals do not simply reflect cognitive understandings; they engender them. They are also dynamic because power and history change the prevailing conditions of everyday social life, while the postulates remain relatively stable within a shared, cognized environment, and the axioms more prone to change.

What is proposed here is that all human societies use ritual to generate cognized environments in social life. These environments are cognitive structures of the world that are enacted through stereotyped and repetitive behaviors that aim at connecting canonical and self-referential information for group members. This is what happens in religious ceremonies, but it is also what happens in the practice of global neoliberal capitalism. Cognized environments are the frames through which we map onto the world. Effectively enacted cognized environments do not appear as maps to actors, but rather as the world itself.

Rather than Manichean dualism, the relationship between the operational environment and the cognized environment is interactive, insofar as the ritual enactments of cognized environments result in specific human interactions and transformations of the operational environment that can be more or less adaptive, that is, enhancing or destroying the living systems in the operational environment. Those confident of current hegemonic development discourse use the phrase “creative destruction” to describe the interactions between dominant global-scale cognized and operational environments. Cognized environments do not exist separately from the operational environment, given that humans are part of the living systems of the planet. The operational environment is importantly changed by the power relations that are ritually enacted within cognized environments. From this perspective, there is a survival question about what is being created by capital-intensive creative destruction.

The land conflict in Cambodia pits powerful elites against peoples historically constructed as powerless. In between these two heuristic poles are many other social relationships that contradict and complicate the dichotomy, but do not eliminate it. There are stark differences between these groups not only in terms of socioeconomic status but also in terms of their cognized environments. To better understand the elite cognized model, I will first provide a brief contrastive sketch of the cognized environment of one of the relatively powerless groups, based mainly on my fieldwork. Then I will sketch the cognized environment of the elites, whom I will refer to as the Khmer Riche, using available public information. Although both sketches are admittedly reductive, they are not fictitious and are grounded in empirical data. Based on the disparity between the two, the concluding analysis offers recommendations for resolving the conflict.

SKETCH #1: KUY COGNIZED ENVIRONMENT

Kuy peoples in Cambodia constitute one of the most powerless groups in Cambodia, for not only are they poor, they are also culturally different from the majority ethnic group in

Cambodia, the Khmer. They are distinct from Khmer peoples in variable terms of religion, economics, language, kinship, politics, and various expressive arts. The Kuy peoples are one of some twenty-four different groups of people that have historically been referred to by colonial and postcolonial hegemony as ethnic minorities or worse and discriminated against on the grounds that their traditional cultures were and are inferior and primitive. Since 2001 these groups have increasingly embraced Indigeneity as a means of expressing and asserting their distinct cultures as well as collective rights, although Cambodian hegemony still has yet to fully recognize them as such. While the demographics are not definitively known, their combined population is estimated at 300,000 to 400,000, distributed across fifteen Cambodian provinces, in approximately 400 to 500 communities, many of which are located in the upland forests and mountains of the north and northeastern provinces of the country, areas rich and diverse in natural resources. Although their combined population makes up only about 2 percent of the national population of Cambodia, probably 25-50 percent of the land concessions foreclose on Indigenous traditional territories. In addition to the land concessions, Indigenous peoples are faced with significant in-migration of Khmer peoples into their territories, which further contributes to culture and land loss. These two factors constitute some of the main prevailing conditions changing contemporary Indigenous cognized environments. The Kuy peoples are one of the larger Indigenous groups in Cambodia. Kuy-speaking peoples are also present in Thailand and Laos.

Much of the data I collected in my fieldwork confirm what several NGOs have previously reported, especially within the last five years: that the land-grabbing in rural Cambodia is producing dramatic land insecurity and is destabilizing society. Approximately 95 percent of the people I interviewed made statements of concern about the loss of their lands to unknown powerful business people and corporations; many people provided accounts of violence related to the land-grabbing, including coercion, beatings, and murder by the security forces hired by the businessmen and corporations. When discussing compensation or consultative mechanisms, they reported that there were none. I collected evidence strongly suggesting government is complicit in the land-grabbing throughout the four different scales of governmental administration, from the larger national scale to provincial, district, and local commune levels.

The cognized environment of Kuy peoples in Preah Vihear is by no means monolithic or unchanging, which is at least partially understandable given the history of multiple colonizations of their operational environments over the course of the last nine centuries. Nonetheless, in the twenty-first century there are observably recurring cognized patterns that at least some Kuy share widely with other Indigenous peoples in Cambodia, including USPs involving the existence of powerful local spirits, which during fieldwork were most frequently referred to as *Ahret*. Other reported names for this class of spirits include *Neak Ta*, or *Phi*. They are typically considered as spirits of past ancestors who linger in the forests, retain a kind of personhood, and hold acquired mystical power over health and illness. Cosmological axioms that follow are that like other persons, Ahrets experience emotion and respond reciprocally to the behavior of others around them, including living people; yet they are more powerful than living people, and thus also dangerous. They are generally considered to take up residence in particular places, usually in the forest and in specific trees. Ahrets have a moral aspect; they judge and act upon the behavior of people. When the people behave well, the Ahrets contribute to their well-being. This judgement extends not only to interpersonal relations, but also to what we might call internature relations—the relations between people and the natural environment around them. The idea is that so long as the Ahrets are content, people's health and well-being will continue. Illness and death, on the

other hand, are the predictable outcomes of behaviors that upset the Ahrets. There is some evidence that these USPs formerly provided the basis of Kuy social organization, as community settlements formed and reformed around collective recognition of places where Ahrets resided. Besides cyclical ceremonies of supplication and thanksgiving, Ahrets are consulted and prayed to in the event of sickness or in the need to divine the future. People also seek out the agreement of local Ahrets prior to undertaking any sort of “development” in the operational environment, such as clearing a new field, digging for gold, or seeking out new trees from which to collect valuable resins or other non-timber forest products. As dwellers in the forests and mountains, the Ahrets are perhaps understandably sensitive about their habitat. The current prevailing conditions of land concessions are extremely stressful to both the canonical and self-referential message-streams in the Kuy cognized environment, and produce changes in their operational environment that living people experience as life-threatening. During my fieldwork my Kuy interlocutors repeatedly informed me that land equals life, that the forests and the mountains are places where Ahrets reside, and that the destruction of the forests is making the Ahrets very angry, in addition to taking away people’s source of livelihood.

The Kuy cognized environment entails a kind of embedded ecology that has until recently yielded a relatively robust maintenance of biodiversity and viable habitat. It is also a model that is locale-centric and small-scale, and that is variably replicated among many other Indigenous peoples in Cambodia, if not throughout much of upland Southeast Asia (which some have argued should be seen as a cohesive region with its own long and distinctive history), as a relatively successful alternative response and resistance to the multiple lowland state formations that have developed in Southeast Asia over the last thousand years or more. The Kuy cognized environment is not static, but has incorporated new rituals brought about by historical and political changes in the prevailing conditions, without significantly altering the USPs that provide the cosmic rationale. As contemporary evidence of this, I found that most of the Kuy traditionalists also practice Buddhist traditions, and see these as complementary to Ahret-centered ritual. One of the villages I lived in was not originally formed around an Ahret, but was formed by the Pol Pot regime as part of its arguably hyper-modern and atheist agenda of social relocation. Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century Ahrets reside near the village and are important sources of local solidarity. But the current prevailing conditions of land concessions and in-migration are more difficult to incorporate into the Kuy cognized environment because—unlike Buddhism, distant state formations, or even Khmer Rouge atrocities—the current conditions threaten the entire existence of Kuy peoples and Ahret spirits because they take away the source of their future, both cognitively and operationally. The Kuy benefit little from their integration into the market because like many other poor Cambodians who are being dispossessed by land concessions, they do not receive compensation for the loss of their territories. And because of their Indigeneity, the Kuy face the additional cost of cultural negation.¹¹

SKETCH #2: KHMER RICHE COGNIZED ENVIRONMENT

The second group is constituted very differently than the Kuy, although both are Cambodian and their languages are related. But unlike the Kuy, I was not able to live with this group and get to know them personally. Instead this sketch is based largely on media reports, NGO reports, and conversations with NGO representatives; it is also corroborated in part by my field observations in Preah Vihear. This group consists of Prime Minister Hun Sen and his wife Bun Rany, and their close relatives, friends, and business partners in the ruling CPP, which appears to constitute a patronage network that is justifiably described as

a “kleptocratic state.” Hun Sen has now been Prime Minister of Cambodia for more than 10,000 days (27+ years), and in that time he and his group—here referred to as the Khmer Riche—have accumulated a massive amount of wealth, while the vast majority of Cambodians have remained entrenched in dire poverty and fear. The Khmer Riche USPs are formed not around ancestor or forest spirits, but around a different sacred entity: the market, with the acquisition of wealth and power as one of the central axioms. These axioms are politically manifested through ritual “strongman” practices of control of government, military, and justice systems; limiting opposition parties; and suppressing public dissent and free speech. Their wealth comes from the many opaque business deals for natural resource extraction they conduct between themselves and with transnational corporations. Another important stream of their revenue comes in the form of international aid and investment, including, ironically, billions of dollars intended to develop civil society, improve healthcare and educational systems, and promote human rights. The kleptocratic and menacing nature of the Cambodian state is public knowledge, yet the international aid continues to flow in, and public criticism remains largely muted within Cambodia as well as in the international arena, which likely enhances the sense of impunity the Khmer Riche feel. The immediate issue within the country is not wealth flows per se; it is that the wealth flows do not extend outward to the rest of Cambodian society. However, wealth flows per se do constitute a structural issue no less immediate, given their increasing recursion in other parts of the world economic system.¹²

I propose the Khmer Riche cognized environment as it is today is produced through state rituals of resource appropriation and dominance expression (physical and verbal), and that these rituals generate two imbricated canonical message streams that come from different sources. The first is about the existence of the market as a powerful spirit entity (or what Durkheim would call a “social fact”), the main axiom of which is capital accumulation. Durkheim argued that religions are mirrors of society, which are produced by the social imaginaire. Their gods are reflections of what the society is. They become a source of futures in the collective imagination. The market as sacred being offers a future of progress, wealth, and security.¹³

The second canonical stream is of local Hindu and Buddhist origin, about the existence of reincarnation, and a central axiom of which is merit, which in Cambodia seems to recur along cultural lines such as the rule of disproportionate revenge. The USPs here are that souls reincarnate multiple times, acquiring and losing merit as they go through the cycles of rebirth. In a vague but axiomatic way, one’s status in this life is socially understood as a result of merit achieved in past lives. It is an axiom of predestination and a key cognitive factor in the long history of patron-client relations in Cambodia (which predates market integration). The exercise of disproportionate revenge against perceived enemies carries with it supernatural undertones.¹⁴

What Hun Sen and his group have achieved is a neoliberal fusion of these two message streams. They have fully embraced the market economy as national policy and practice, and dealt harshly with those who impolitely harm this practice by speaking out against it. In so doing the Khmer Riche generate a supernatural aura of seemingly irresistible power about themselves, a feeling of cosmic merit in action. As an Indigenous Bunong person explained it, there is a feeling in Cambodia that if you make a complaint about a small problem, the government response will be to make a bigger problem for you. Or, as Hinton explains the rule of disproportionate revenge, if in the Abramic traditions the cosmological axiom is “an eye for an eye,” in Cambodian Buddhist traditions the axiom is “a head for an eye.” This illuminates the specific Cambodian style of land-grabbing and the subsequent harsh

treatment of civilian evictees and protestors as subhuman criminals. It also provides context for understanding the tone of Hun Sen's "strongman" public rhetoric, for example when he refers to his political opponents and dissenting civil society groups as bad dogs that he will physically discipline, or responds to female dissenters by insulting their womanhood.¹⁵

Arguably, in certain respects such as bravado, cunning, and wiliness, Hun Sen bears a loose resemblance to some of the Cambodian rulers during the precolonial Angkor and post-Angkor periods, who also sought to rhetorically emphasize their greatness over that of their perceived enemies, and build their power base around strategic allies, often through extensions of kinship. And like the old rulers of Angkor Wat, Hun Sen's official title sends the message that he is not simply the Prime Minister, but suggests he is equipped with supernatural power as well. His official title today is "Samdech Akka Moha Senai Padi Techo" Hun Sen. The spellings and translations vary, but a rough translation is "his royal highness, great of the great supreme ruler, protector." In 2007, Hun Sen himself reportedly compared his title to that of Jayavarman VII (AD 1125-1200), one of the more lauded Angkor kings. The connection to Angkor Wat was also an important axiom of the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot. This connection to past kings and glories continues to be salient in twenty-first century Cambodian nationalism. How can it not be? As a UNESCO world heritage site, the sites of Angkor Wat and other temples in the surrounding region constitute one of the main revenue streams driving the Cambodia GDP, that of tourism services. Its three facing towers are the central symbol on the Cambodian flag.¹⁶

However, the cognized environment of Hun Sen and the Khmer Riche is not simply constituted by Angkorean and Buddhist postulates and axioms. Since at least the 1990s, new postulates have been imported alongside new conditions, including those of neoliberal market integration, and new access to billions of dollars in international assistance to get there. Like explicitly religious beliefs, market-based beliefs provide people with a seemingly reliable future to believe in, one of economic and social progress resulting from global market integration. While these beliefs are commonly couched as secular material beliefs, they nonetheless engender the same qualities as explicitly sacred postulates implied in ritual: general, vague, and unverifiable presumptions. These have not entirely displaced the local postulates, but they have shifted the axioms and ritual rules toward conformity with global standards of market-based capitalism. The Cambodian-style supernatural quest for elite power continues in a new operational environment in which almost everything becomes recast as a market commodity, especially natural resources. The people/land relation in this cognized environment is that land and water are sources of capital, especially Cambodian upland forests and the Mekong river system. In order for the capital to be released from these resources they have to be transformed to fit the market model of export orientation, both symbolically and physically. Symbolically this is achieved through national assurances of a progressive future based on market integration and legal mechanisms like land concessions. Physically this is achieved by transforming biodiverse forests and rivers into monocrop plantations, large-scale industrial mining sites, hydropower sites, or deforested areas.

In the neoliberal Buddhism of the Khmer Riche, the postulates of reincarnation and merit are ritually recombined with that of the market to legitimate new inequalities and practices of domination. The acquisition of merit becomes imbricated with the acquisition of capital. As a colloquial example of the way cognized environments change, the Buddhist orthodox logic of practicing compassion towards all living things as a strategy towards greater enlightenment in the next life gets inverted under the prevailing neoliberal conditions into something like this: if you are kind in this life, your next life will be better; but if you are bad in this life, in the next life you will be rich.¹⁷ This apparent mockery does not

fully dislodge the USPs of karma and reincarnation, but it speaks to the changes in the ritual rules and axioms that have modified in response to shifting conditions in the operational environment.

That Hun Sen has successfully integrated the market postulate into Cambodia is evidenced by the robust growth in the GDP indicator. The Asia Development Bank projects that Cambodia's GDP will grow 6.5 percent in 2012 and 7 percent in 2013.¹⁸ It has grown from \$3.6 billion in 2000 to almost \$13 billion in 2011, officially driven by tourism, garment manufactures, and agriculture. A visit to Phnom Penh confirms a construction boom is underway, with high-rise buildings going up in many parts of the city. Foreign direct investment in Cambodia has been steadily increasing since 1992, from \$33 million in 1992, to \$783 million in 2010.¹⁹ The population has more than doubled since the end of the 1970s. Infrastructure projects like paved roads are underway throughout the country. This year the government of Cambodia is chairing the ASEAN and has pledged to "continue to intensify efforts aimed at building a rule-based, people-oriented and fully integrated ASEAN Community by 2015."²⁰ In 2004, while laying out the national rectangular strategy of development ("growth, employment, equity and efficiency"), Hun Sen described Cambodia as having undergone a "profound transformation... from a region of uncertainty, war, internal strife, instability and backwardness into an epicenter of sustained peace, security and social order, respect for democracy, human rights and dignity, cooperation and shared development."²¹ In an advertisement for an "Investment Focus Conference" that took place in April 2012 at the new tony Sofitel Hotel in Phnom Penh, the opening address was titled "Cambodia Begins to Blossom."²² Considered from the perspective of its investment environment, Cambodia is more robust than ever. A recently released opinion poll by the International Republican Institute reports that 81 percent of Cambodians think Cambodia is going in the right direction.²³

Several observers have suggested that the international assistance regime in general has favored positive economic growth and development over concerns with human rights, democracy, and open societies, and this is why the international system remains largely blithe about the increasingly deteriorating human rights situation in Cambodia. In terms of economic development and GDP, Hun Sen has delivered the goods, and until 2011 the World Bank seemed largely pleased with his performance.²⁴ While he may be motivated in part by the postulates of ancient Cambodian history and mythology, he seems equally motivated to meet the bottom line of the international capitalist system and committed to reorienting the economy toward commercial markets. In so doing he increases his power and extends his patronage network. These two canonical message streams share a common theme of domination and foreboding for the poor and relatively powerless people, whose rural subsistence systems are inevitably doomed to be converted into new flows of capital carrying benefits elsewhere, and who are bullied into submission on another forced march of progress.²⁵

CONCLUSIONS

One does not need to use a cognized model of the environment to understand that there is a conflict in Cambodia over the appropriate use of natural resources. What cognized models do illuminate are the cultural frameworks within which this conflict has emerged in the twenty-first century. The conflict sketched out in this paper is variably reproduced in many other parts of the world today. It seems that solving this problem will be difficult if we do not understand its emergence. From a cognized environment model, transnational capitalism mobilizes ultimate sacred postulates around which human social organization

forms, like any other religion. Thus, Durkheim proclaimed a century ago that religion is the soul of society. However, it seems increasingly evident that the social forms produced by neoliberal cognized environments are no longer societies in any traditional sense, but are in fact markets. Instead of Ahrets we increasingly are organized around and by corporations. The resulting massive loss of human livelihoods and dignity, in combination with the loss of ecological biodiversity and habitat, suggests that this is a world religion that has turned pathological. In the case of Cambodia, this pathology presents itself in the current structures of kleptocracy. That modernist frames of development and progress are inherently religious is a point that many Indigenous peoples have long observed. Perhaps it is time for the rest of the world to begin to listen, especially in the elite sectors that control structural power within nation-states, and even more so at the international level.²⁶

Cambodia could begin to address this problem by reorienting the rectangular strategy of development around the growth of human cultural capacity and biodiverse habitat. This would require the RGC to reframe the national population as individual and collective stakeholders in development decisions and require their free, prior, and informed consent in decisions such as how to develop the land. If the RGC reoriented the wealth flowing into the country toward promoting the health, education, free expression, and self-determination of the rural and urban poor, an entirely different approach to development could possibly emerge from civil society that would be more sustainable than the strategy as currently practiced. Cambodia's heritage includes more than an unending string of brutal dominations. It is also rich in art, beauty, wisdom, and compassion, which offer alternative canonical message streams. It is important that Indigenous peoples in particular be given a seat at the table, as their distinctive traditions, histories, and knowledge—if nationally supported instead of nationally rejected—may offer strong, sustainable alternatives to the current models of economic development.

However, an ecological human rights-based cognized environment in Cambodia is unlikely to take hold so long as the larger global power structure of market-based capitalist development maintains its cognitive grip on the imaginations of international donors and investors as the only feasible way forward. The current structure provides the axioms for Hun Sen to continue business as usual, especially now that China has entered the picture as Cambodia's largest bilateral donor.²⁷ By analyzing this global cognized environment as based not simply on rational economic principles, but fundamentally grounded in religious imagination about the future, it may be possible to loosen this grip and open the collective imagination of otherwise reasonable donors to different ultimate postulates for human action. But USPs do not simply appear; they are brought into social existence through ritual practice. Perhaps we would do better to alter the rituals of the market and its elites in the hopes of developing new axioms that enhance human and ecological survival in the operational environment.

NOTES

1. A rather condescending discussion of Kuy forestry practice from the French Colonial period is provided in C. Cozette, "Propositions d'essais de culture chez les Kouys en vue de restreindre le ray," *Rapport de Monsieur Cozette, Charles, Garde Général des Forêts de lère classe* (Protectorat du Cambodge: Service Forestier. National Archives of Cambodia: 26431, 1915). The first Cambodian land concession laws were passed in 2001. See Open Development, <http://www.opendevdevelopmentcambodia.net/laws-regulations/> (accessed 2 June 2012). Information on the size and scale of concessions is from a LICADHO/*Cambodia Daily* analysis, by Paul Vrieze and Kuch Naren, "Carving Up Cambodia: One Concession at a Time," *The Cambodia Daily*, March 10-11, 2012, <http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/land2012/> (accessed 30 May 2012); and also from Open Development, <http://www.opendevdevelopmentcambodia.net> (accessed 30 May 2012).
2. The growing number of forced evictions and land disputes is well documented by Amnesty International and the Cambodia Human Rights Action Committee in *Rights Razed: Forced Evictions in Cambodia* (London:

- Amnesty International, February 11, 2008), <http://hrrca.org/content/kingdom-cambodia-assumes-asean-chairmanship-2012>; *Losing Ground: Forced Evictions and Intimidation in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Human Rights Action Committee, 2009); and *Still Losing Ground: Forced Evictions and Intimidation in Cambodia, 2010* (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Human Rights Action Committee, 2011). See also NGO Forum *Statistical Analysis of Land Disputes in Cambodia, 2010* (Phnom Penh: NGO Forum, 2011). Chut Wutty was a well-known and outspoken Cambodian environmental activist and a member of the Prey Lang Forest Network who was shot dead on 26 April 2012 by military police while photo-documenting illegal logging activities. This was followed a week later by military police killing a 14 year-old girl in another rural area where a village was being evicted to make way for a rubber plantation. The escalating violence has begun to draw international media attention, including the *New York Times*, BBC, and Huffington Post. I worked with members of the Prey Lang Forest Network to prepare and submit a substantial human rights complaint with regard to land concessions, state violence, and restrictions on free expression to the OHCHR Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights on 16 May. A good analysis of the recent laws restricting free expression was produced by LICADHO, "The Delusion of Progress: Cambodia's Legislative Assault on Freedom of Expression," <http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/delusion2011/> (accessed 2 June 2012).
3. Mu Sochea is a leader in the opposition Sam Rainsy Party. She made this statement in April 2012 while visiting Australia to stop Australian companies from accepting any further land concessions in Cambodia. See Georgia Wilkins, "Call to stop firms accepting Cambodian Land," Khmerization Blog, April 16, 2012, <http://khmerization.blogspot.com/2012/04/call-to-stop-firms-accepting-cambodian.html> (accessed 2 June 2012). The Cambodian elite patronage network is most thoroughly mapped out in two extensive reports by Global Witness, *Cambodia's Family Trees: Illegal Logging and the Stripping of Public Assets by Cambodia's Elite* (2007), <http://www.globalwitness.org/library/cambodias-family-trees> and *Country For Sale: How Cambodia's Elite Have Captured the Country's Extractive Industries* (2009), <http://www.globalwitness.org/library/country-sale> (accessed 2 June 2012).
 4. I capitalize the "I" in Indigenous to indicate its emergent usage as a proper noun with regard to peoples, as a name of an emerging global identity that is broad in scale, like "Asian" or "European." Indigenous peoples may also constitute minority ethnic groups within a nation-state, but the interpellation of "Indigenous" asserts more than ethnic or minority status; it also asserts collective rights of self-determination and collective rights to lands, territories, and resources. Indigeneity as such is new in Cambodia and very much a twenty-first century process. For more on Indigenous identity in Asia, see Christian Erni, ed., *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia: A Resource Book* (Copenhagen/Chiang Mai: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2008). See also ASEAN's *Indigenous Peoples* (Chiang Mai: Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact, 2011).
 5. This idea is partially indebted to Arjun Appadurai, who recently suggested as much in an opening keynote address (and forthcoming book), "The Future is a Cultural Fact" (American Ethnological Society Spring Conference, New York, April 19, 2012; and forthcoming from Verso, 2013).
 6. The literature on land-grabbing is rapidly growing. For example, see *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39 nos. 3/4 (2012).
 7. Emile Durkheim is a key source for ideas about the social basis of religion and the religious basis of society; see Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Collier Books, 1912). On the centrality of ritual for giving substance to the canonical streams of messages, see Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Mankind*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
 8. I first came across the name "Khmer Riche" as a name for the Cambodia elite in Andrew Marshall, "Making a Killing in Cambodia," Andrew Marshall reporting from Asia on conflict, human rights and climate change website, February 15, 2010, <http://andrewmarshall.com/articles/making-a-killing-in-cambodia-2/> (accessed 26 May 2012). I have since confirmed its common usage in Phnom Penh.
 9. Roy A. Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (Richmond, Calif: North Atlantic Books, 1979); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000). The paraphrase of the Popul Vuh is based on Dennis Tedlock, *The Popul Vuh* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). Eric Wolf offered an important critique of cognized environments in which he stressed the inclusion of political and historical factors; see Eric R. Wolf, "Cognizing 'Cognized Models,'" *American Anthropologist* 101 no. 1 (March 1999): 19-23.
 10. Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*, p. 217.
 11. The spirit name I most frequently heard in my fieldwork was *Ahret*. The names *Neak Ta* or *Phi* are discussed in Wilart Pothisan et al, "The Social Adjustment of Kuy People to a Multicultural Context in Southern Isan, Thailand," *Journal of Social Sciences* 4 no. 4:343-346; and P. Swift *Preliminary Notes on Kui Land Use and Tenure: Results of Focus Group Discussions and Interviews* (Phnom Penh: Southeast Asia Development Program, 2004). Swift also discusses Kuy settlement patterns. Regarding upland Southeast Asia adaptive strategies, see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).
 12. Regarding the characterization of the Hun Sen regime as a kleptocracy, see Global Witness, *Cambodia's Family Trees: Illegal Logging and the Stripping of Public Assets by Cambodia's Elite*, p. 6; and *Country For Sale: How Cambodia's Elite Have Captured the Country's Extractive Industries*, p. 5. In a 2012 letter to USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah on 18 May, Global Witness again made reference to the Hun Sen regime as "kleptocratic elites" who are complicit in the murder of environmental activist Chut Wutty. For a brief summary of Hun Sen's first 10,000 days of rule, see Brad Adams, "10,000 Days of Hun Sen," *New York Times/International Herald Tribune*, May 31, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/opinion/10000-days-of-hun-sen.html> (accessed 31 May 2012).

13. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.
14. Regarding the cultural rule of disproportionate revenge, see Alexander Laban Hinton "A Head for an Eye: Revenge in the Cambodian Genocide," *American Ethnologist* 25 no. 3:352-77.
15. Hun Sen's rhetorical style is well known; see Adams, "10,000 Days of Hun Sen" as well as Sebastian Strangio, "The Strings in Hun Sen's Rhetorical Bow," *Asia Times Online*, 25 April 2012, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/ND25Ae03.html (accessed 31 May 2012).
16. For descriptions of the Angkorean kings, see David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008). Regarding Hun Sen's title, see "Cambodia New Vision," the official newsletter of Prime Minister Hun Sen's cabinet, at <http://www.cnv.org.kh/> (accessed 1 June 2012); "Hun Sen's title 'Great Supreme Statesman' proposed by students is not bad," Cambodia Bright Future blog, December 12, 2007, <http://cambodiabrightfuture.blogspot.com/2007/12/hun-sens-title-great-supreme-statesman.html> (accessed 1 June 2012); and Socheata (2007); "How Does 'Great Supremo Statesman' Hun Sen Sound?" KI-Media blog, December 13, 2007, <http://ki-media.blogspot.com/search/label/Great%20Supreme%20Statesman> (accessed 25 May 2012).
17. In Khmer the saying is *twer laor ban laor, twer akrok ban louy*: "if you do good, you will receive good; but if you do bad, you will get rich." I am indebted to Lim Sereyath for this insight.
18. Asian Development Bank, *Asian Development Outlook 2012: Confronting Rising Inequality in Asia* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2012), 191 (accessed 23 May 2012). GDP figures from the International Monetary Fund database (accessed 15 June 2012).
19. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, "UNCTADStat," <http://unctadstat.unctad.org> (accessed 15 June 2012).
20. Human Rights Resource Center, "Kingdom of Cambodia assumes ASEAN Chairmanship for 2012," January 1, 2012, <http://hrrca.org/content/kingdom-cambodia-assumes-asean-chairmanship-2012> (accessed 15 June 2012).
21. Hun Sen, "The Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency in Cambodia," address to the First Cabinet Meeting of the Third Legislature of the National Assembly at the Office of the Council of Ministers, Phnom Penh, July 16, 2004.
22. *Phnom Penh Post*, "Investment Finance Convention," 28 February 2012, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/ifc-conference-agenda.html> (accessed 3 March 2012) {{Citation broken|date=July 2012}}.
23. International Republican Institute, *Survey of Cambodian Public Opinion: November 30-December 25, 2011*, <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/iri-releases-survey-cambodian-public-opinion-0> (accessed 26 May 2012).
24. But the urban land-grabbing episode of Boeung Kak that began in 2009 proved too much even for the World Bank to stomach. They suspended all new lending in 2011 as a result. See World Bank, "World Bank Board of Executive Directors Considers Inspection Panel Report on Cambodia Land Management and Administration Project," news release, March 8, 2011, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/CAMBODIAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:22851984~menuPK:293861~pagePK:2865066~piPK:2865079~theSitePK:293856,00.html>; see also Mark Tran, "World Bank suspends new lending to Cambodia over eviction of landowners," *The Guardian*, August 10, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2011/aug/10/world-bank-suspends-cambodia-lending> (accessed 15 June 2012).
25. One of the strongest critiques of NGOs and the international system in Cambodia is made in the work of Caroline Hughes; see Caroline Hughes and Vanessa Pupavac, "Psychologising Post Conflict Societies, Cambodia and Bosnia Compared," *Third World Quarterly*, 26 no. 6 (2005): 873-89; and also Caroline Hughes, "Transnational Networks, International Organizations and Political Participation in Cambodia: Human Rights, Labour Rights and Common Rights," *Democratization* 14 no. 5 (December 2007): 834-52. Global Witness also criticizes the international community for turning a blind eye toward corruption and impunity.
26. See "Spiritualism: The Highest Form of Political Consciousness," in *Basic Call to Consciousness*, ed. Akwesasne Notes (Summertown, Tenn.: Book Publishing Company, 1978). More recently, Indigenous groups have advocated on behalf of the rights of Mother Nature, and in 2010 drafted a document to that effect, titled "The Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Nature." Available on multiple websites including <http://motherearthrights.org/> and <http://www.celdf.org/rights-of-nature-universal-declaration-on-the-rights-of-mother-earth> (accessed 2 June 2012).
27. See AusAID Office of Development Effectiveness, "Transcript of emerging Asian donors interview," March 2012, <http://www.ode.usaid.gov.au/publications/transcripts/emerging-donors.html> (accessed 15 June 2012). However flawed the Western-based aid models may be, they are accompanied by discourses and stated expectations of human rights promotion and environmental conservation. There is no indication that Chinese aid comes with any such strings attached.