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SOJOURN Symposium

***Tides of Empire: Religion, Development and Environment in Cambodia* by Courtney Work. New York: Berghahn, 2020.**

Review essays by Guido Sprenger and Krisna Uk, with a reply from Courtney Work.

Keywords: Cambodia, Neak Ta, religion, Sambuk Dong, Cham, ethnography, empire, environment.

Review Essay I: Guido Sprenger

This book about chthonic powers and translocal political, economic and religious connections in a mixed Khmer and Cham village in western Cambodia offers a wealth of insights and opportunities for reflection. It joins a growing literature about the marginal and rural areas of mainland Southeast Asia that is striving to overcome the dichotomy between 'traditional' community rules and cosmologies on the one hand and government regulations, globalizing economies and transcultural religions on the other. Scholars interested in the relations enacted by 'ritual' used to convey a different image of these communities than those focusing on 'power' or 'economy'. Work—and others of her generation—however, tend to see cosmology, religion and ritual as political and historical, and communities as open to the outside.

This synthesis of different analytical priorities is timely, necessary and eye-opening. It requires, though, as-yet-untested analytical terminologies. At least for anthropologists, these should be suggested by the intersection of local conceptual worlds and the requirements

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of academic communication. In the present book, Courtney Work ties together the various strands of her findings with one central metaphor: “Tides of Empire”.

This is a bit of a mystery. There are no tides anywhere around the field site, which is set in the mountains. And what exactly is ‘empire’? The term has become fairly well-established in recent years, which may be the reason why Work does not bother to define it. However, it covers so much ground here that a definition would have been welcome. Empire here is both the ancient Angkorean realm and the modern nation-state; it also denotes such multi-centred, diffuse phenomena as globalized developmentalism or orthodox Islam. The image of tides, as Work explains, first of all serves to break up the notion of a linear development to prosperity, as promised by developmentalism. In this way, she embeds the dazzling changes of the current age within a longer history of influences that are always coming and going.

The unifying metaphor is not exhausted by the to and fro of diffuse flows, however, but by the contrast between them and by what remains unchanged. Tides imply shores; waves require a ground to break upon. Empire here is the local experience of translocality—both a force and a doorway, an opportunity to sail and a threat of drowning. But what people have to deal with in any case are those entities Work aptly calls “chthonic energies” (p. 5). What unites translocal affordances like non-governmental organizations, state infrastructure or reforms of Buddhism and Islam is the transience of empire. The *neak ta*, the ‘ancients’ who are the masters of the earth, however, have been in place before people arrived, and they abide. Simply in order to live in a place, people need to establish exchange relationships with these invisible sovereigns.

Seen from this angle, the tides of empire encompass various aspects. In some respect they are forms of power—political and economic but also cosmological. They materialize in roads, temples or mosques, but also in inequalities of access and status. At the same time, they come as imaginaries of the future—of progress, development, prosperity, rebirth or salvation. Each tide is always a

value to be realized—something that is yet to happen. But in some ways each tide also provides a language for relating to the masters of the earth, or a reason to neglect them.

The first chapter sketches the setting and its history of immigration. The mountains themselves appear as victims of empire. Originally powerful beings, people reinterpreted them as subjected to the king or the Buddha, and later even as created by them. Villagers themselves came in waves—in the late 1970s, after the Khmer Rouge regime, the abandoned area was resettled by Khmer and Cham fishermen.

Chapter 2 focuses on roads and rail tracks as imperial debris. Work, with Ingoldian flavour, contrasts the large-scale, geopolitically infused infrastructure projects of the state with the local emergence of small paths that are maintained through use. For the latter, use almost equals maintenance, while the roads and train tracks demand systematic attention to keep them from deteriorating—attention they do not always get. They remain, however, promises of future travel, quick connections to market towns and urban labour.

While the first two chapters focus on place and connectivity, the following three address what is conventionally called religion. The third chapter comes to the foundations below the imperial tides—the primordial masters of land and water. Villages do not simply equal a bunch of people that happen to occupy the same spot on earth. They are gatherings around invisible powers that make their living by entertaining and feasting the invisibles from time to time.

This chapter demonstrates the various guises that these beings take—earth 'spirits' in new villages, founding ancestors in older ones. The protean character of the *neak ta* seems to carry them through the ages, changing with the languages used to address them.

Work quotes a woman in her twenties saying, and I give the full quote: "*Neak Ta* connect to Buddhism because we use the tools and the language of Buddhism, but they are different—they are older. They come from the time before and we need relationships with them, but the only language we know now comes from Buddhism" (p. 78). This comments brilliantly on scholarly models of animist and Buddhist 'layers' or 'systems' in Southeast Asia and simultaneously

reveals how these models are stuck in all-too-essentialist images of substances piled upon or separated from each other. 'Tools' and 'language' imply a non-exclusive ontology that is closer to what Viveiros de Castro has called equivocation—speaking about different things with the same words and thus structurally coupling different 'worlds' (Viveiros de Castro 2004, p. 2). And yet, the quote even suggests something more straightforward and more intricate than Viveiros de Castro's grandiose bridging of universes. While Work insists on the primordial character of these beings, the shape they take and the relations they have with human beings seem to be informed by the communicative means chosen to address them. Buddhism is at once an imperial force and one of several possible options for relating to a person-shaped place.

The Cham, featured in chapter 4, represent the opposite end of a spectrum of firm and loose ties to this person-shaped place, as the tide of Islamic reform has kept them away from the masters of the soil. International connectivity has provided them with religious schooling and an Arab-style mosque, suggesting the double aspiration to a 'proper' religion and salvation after death. At the same time, reformist Islam also represents a language that cuts the relations with *neak ta*. What unites the Muslim Cham was always a relationship with the outside, to Malays and the Arab peninsula. Here, for once, the imagery of tides fits the sea trade that carried Islam to Southeast Asia. This way of life abstracts itself from the powers of the earth, and in this respect, the abstractionism of transcultural religion, the movement of trade and capitalist globalization promising a secular salvation appear as related. This matches the self-image of the Cham as migrants who lost their proper locality a long time ago.

In possibly the most complex chapter, chapter 5, Work shows how Buddhist merit energizes imperial flows by tying rural places in need of support to urban monks and middle-class donors. Merit thus creates ties of patronage and dependence. In so far as the specifics of these hierarchies depend on the respective form of empire, each imperial tide—be it monarchical, developmentalist or otherwise—produces its own types of merit-making.

But there is a blurring of terms here that the author does not clarify entirely. Earlier in the book she has claimed that *attibol* (the miracle-working power) and *parami* (the cosmic power of *neak ta* and kings) work in the same "register" (p. 65). Is this an association by the author or is it what people say? Why are there two different terms then? A similar question arises in this chapter. The author argues that merit (*bun*) is also a form of ethics—ethics, however, that are determined by those who can afford to gain merit. Then she states that people identify the meritorious power of kings and monks with the power of witches, even though they separate them terminologically along the good or bad intentions of those who employ them. What terms do they in fact then use for witchcraft? And if *bun* is morally neutral—which seems hard to believe—how do people differentiate it from *bab* (demerit, sin)?

Buddhism is perhaps the best example for the way the localization and translocality of this village operates. A temple and worship places for *neak ta*, Buddhists state, make a village complete. Here, again, the village appears as an assembly of human and non-human forces tied together by human effort. Buddhism provides power from the outside, a common theme in Southeast Asian cosmologies, but also a language that enables people to address the masters of the earth. At the same time, Buddhism—together with Islam, globalization and developmentalism—belongs to those external forces that push relations with *neak ta* into a subordinated niche labelled 'Brahmanism' or superstition.

This is not unimportant for the thrust of the entire volume. In its first pages, Work boldly claims that "chthonic energies [are] the first and final force of the so-called anthropocene" (p. 5). What Cambodian villagers call *neak ta* are thus not just cultural peculiarities, remnants of a tradition that will soon make way for a new world. Rather, they represent a relationship so fundamental that it comes close to a universal. To my mind, in current theoretical terms, the lords of the earth represent what Latour (2018, p. 51) calls the "terrestrial"—a relationship of attention, responsibility and immediacy to the non-humans at hand that still does not isolate places from the outside.

The fact that Cambodian villagers treat these beings with "person-techniques" rather than "thing-techniques" (Benedict 1931, p. 67) is not an epistemological error but just one among several options of relating to them from a human standpoint. It is the cosmologies where any such option is missing that are odd.

Thus, Work's book approaches a subversion of the distinction between a cosmology of localization and one of abstracting globalized (and imperial) forces. Locality turns into a globalized concept. Much of the book shows how villagers aspire for external relations, coded in languages of development, trade or religion—the outside is coming in. On a different level, however, this is never enough. There is a principle of locality, as protean as the ancient ones, that necessarily takes up heterogeneous, ambiguous, unpredictable and possibly even unrecognizable shapes in any specific place we encounter it.

In the final pages, Work gives us a glimpse of the village years after her fieldwork. As to be expected in one of those explosively developing economies of Southeast Asia, much has changed. Roads have solidified further, buildings have risen from the ground, and the shrines of the ancient ones have deteriorated, abraded by the incoming flood of empire. Are they lying in wait for the time when the tide falls?

Review Essay II: Krisna Uk

At the Edge of the Forest

Courtney Work's ethnography of Sambok Dung village takes the reader under the skin of a Cambodian community in Kampong Chhnang Province, northwest of the capital, Phnom Penh. As in many other parts of the country where people have sought to make a living, own land, build a home and be part of the social fabric of a village, Sambok Dung is a composite of the economic, environmental and social influences that have swept across Cambodia over the past twenty years. In this sense, the villagers, and the circumstances that have brought them to this particular place, give the reader a useful insight into some of the dynamics at play in rural areas across the country.

Work's choice of Sambuk Dong is driven by its state of continual transformation or 'becoming'. Ongoing changes are the direct consequences of the national economic development strategy that translates locally into the exploitation of natural resources (logging for timber), infrastructure building (roads) and new places of worship largely funded by sources outside village boundaries and across international borders. These changes were originally made possible by internal migrants who settled in Sambok Dung, claiming land from the forest. This claim from nature is sanctioned by the local deities and chthonic powers that bind new settlers—mostly farmers—into an ethical and social contract. To them, more than for any other types of new settlers in Sambok Dung, the significance of the land, and their relationship with it, is particularly pronounced. The presence of the 'Owner of the Water' and the 'Owner of the Land', both chthonian deities and embodiments of fecund elements, is indissociable from farming life. The 'Owner of the Water' and the 'Owner of the Land' play a crucial role in the subsistence livelihood of local farmers. The fusion of land and water generates, literally and metaphorically, new roots for the seasonal crops that feed the entire household; they also create rhizomes for the family's physical and spiritual settlement.

The Sacred in Sambok Dung

At the intersection of major provinces connecting key political, trading and touristic hubs, people's livelihoods in Sambok Dung are very much dependent on the fertility of the land, which is governed by tutelar deities and other guardians with whom one has to forge a lasting relationship (Ang 1986). More than seeking direct intervention of elemental or supernatural forces in the farmers' affairs, ritual actions illustrate the hope to preserve nature's virtuous cycle, or what Peter Gyallay-Pap calls "the cosmo-magical dimension of the Khmer understanding of the structure of reality" (Harris 2007, p. 93).

Works's informants share that instead of human ancestors or village founders in Sambok Dung (p. 57), there are Owner of the Water and Owner of the Land, *Neak Ta Chas Srok* (who transcend the spheres of the ancestors and spirits of the land), and *Lok Ta*

(who are subjects of villagers' ritual activities). Their existence add meaning to local religious practices and landscape transformations. *Neak Ta* manifest and communicate with the villager elders by means of dreams; while *Lok Ta* have favourite food and drinks. Some have moderate tastes (and therefore reasonable demands), like *Lok Ta* who drink tea and eat vegetables. Others have more sophisticated (and therefore expensive) preferences, such as *Lok Ta* Beung Komnap, who indulges in whiskey and chicken. Though not human ancestors, they are endowed with human traits. These attributes create connections and intimacy, allowing for their domestication by the villagers. Work explains: "As social actors, *neak ta* participate in village activities, like drinking, dancing, sharing offerings with monks, and thinking about holding Buddhist precepts (*kan sel*)" (pp. 74–75). In other words, these spirits, ancestor-spirits and deities are accessible, and their imperfections are similar to human foibles.

Readers of Work's ethnography of Sambok Dung may at times find it difficult to delineate the contours of what is understood as supernatural, sacred or manifestations of power. Work observes this as a "fraught relationship … at the foundation of human claims to territorial access. Stories and rites bring it into the human social world where it becomes embroiled in everyday acts of subsistence and extraordinary acts of appropriation that have nothing to do with the 'supernatural', but everything to do with power" (pp. 71–72). Despite the power manifested by the commune or local governing structure, villagers seek to emulate and even court the 'supernatural'—if simply understood as "the world of the mysterious, the unknown and the incomprehensible" (Durkheim 1960, p. 33)—along with the sacred, the religious and symbolic markers of magic or power in their quest for that sense of security seldom attained by subsistence farmers living precariously at the forest's edge. As Ebihara noted of the village of Svay, "for the ordinary Khmer, Buddha and ghosts, prayers at the temple and invocations to spirits, monks and mediums are all part of what is essentially a single religious system, different aspects of which are called into play at different, appropriate times" (2018, p. 153). In Sambok Dung, the celebrations for *Lok Ta* Gum

Lok Yay Tia were not held at their dedicated huts but took place in the lumber yard of a powerful soldier instead. The relocation of communal rituals shows the extent to which the proximity of the supernatural plays a strategic role in enabling the individual to maintain—or yield—more power. Agents of the sacred or the supernatural in Sambok Dung inhabit the villagers' daily lives and retain a certain 'efficacy' in ensuring more prosperity for the village, create a sense of belonging and community, and become 'real'.

Heads of State and Boramei

Southeast Asian heads of state have attempted to harness these otherworldly influences through the mediation of a *dukun*, or shaman, (Sukarno and Suharto in Indonesia) or by means of blessings from Buddhist monks, patronage and merit-making (Hun Sen in Cambodia). Access to these unfathomable powers is believed to bestow formidable forces, consolidate political control and gain moral legitimacy. Work mentions that Hun Sen actively seeks *boramei* (*pāramī* in Pali), a Buddhist term that refers to 'perfection' or 'supremacy'. The prime minister and his family have contributed financially to the refurbishment of Wat Weang Chas in the ancient capital of Oudong. Formerly part of the old royal palace, the *wat* is known to be imbued with magical powers. "By taking over the old royal palace at Oudong, Hun Sen is defining himself as the legitimate successor of the old Khmer kings of Oudong", Guthrie argues (2002, p. 68). The Hun family's investment in the *wat* betrays a farther-reaching motive—a desire for the entire lineage to take over King Ang Duong's famous empire at all costs.

Astrid Norén-Nilsson comments on Hun Sen's attempt to invoke *Sdech Kân*, "a controversial historical figure who rose to occupy the throne after killing a supposedly unjust king. Through this story, Hun Sen uproots the idea of kingship itself—accommodating his claim to personally embody the nation" (Norén-Nilsson 2016, p. 39). Hun Sen's obsession with kingship and accessing *boramei* became even more explicit when in 2016 he made it known that Cambodian media would face legal action if they did not refer to him as '*Samdech*

Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen' (Lord Prime Minister and Supreme Military Commander Hun Sen), a royal title bestowed by King Norodom Sihamoni in 2007 (ABC News 2016). Here, naming enables appropriation of the potent power of *boramei*. Saying his name and title makes him indissociable from *boramei*. He aspires to become its embodiment.

Merit-making and Merit-naming

Theravada Buddhism highlights that altruism, selflessness and the desire to continually improve one's consciousness lie at the heart of merit-making. Whether in Sambok Dung or amongst Cambodia's political elite, the journey to self-betterment often takes second place to how the 'merit-performer' wishes their *wat* patronage or other charitable acts to be viewed, acknowledged and praised by others. Work observes that "People in Sambok Dung spoke of merit both as something one *has* and as something one *makes*" (p. 109). If the villagers of Sambok Dung may not have access to formal royal titles, they nonetheless avail themselves of the potent use of names and naming (Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn 2006) in the local merit-making process. All this is done within their financial ability and social status. Inscribing one's name and the amount donated on the pillar of a Buddhist temple is thus akin to displaying one's access to spiritual power. The donation becomes a ritual act devoid of pure intention and spiritual significance (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994); 'merit-making' collapses into 'merit-naming' as a means towards social and political point-scoring.

Of Empires

Work introduces Sambok Dung as sitting "at the edge of the forest and the frontier of empire" (p. 1). She later adds,

> The empire I invoke is not a discrete object. This term is a container for the various formations of state that have ebbed and flowed over the social and physical landscape of the people in this study. It includes the incoming and outgoing tides of multiple Khmer kings toting Indic cosmologies, Brahmanic priests, and Buddhist monks. It also includes the Muslim influence passed

> along through traders, diaspora, wise men, and proselytizers whose sixteenth-century excursions transformed the kingly ideologies throughout maritime Southeast Asia, leaving kingship intact. The European colonial tide dismantled kingship and left behind its own particular forms of debris, as did the Khmer Rouge, and Vietnamese socialism. Each of these imperial tides flowed in and covered the landscape with particular ideological and material practices. When each tide ebbs, debris remains. It sticks to trees, rocks, rivers, and modes of production; it also sticks to ideas, chants, and systems of value. (p. 4)

In a place like Sambok Dung, which is continually subject to the eroding effect of potent historical and economic waves, the empire-agent is multifaceted.

In Kampong Chhang Province, the receding of the tides has, over the past four years, enabled archaeologists to rediscover Longvek. Described in the Royal Cambodian Chronicles as the capital of Cambodia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its political, administrative and economic significance is attested by the discovery of ceramics at the heart of international maritime trade. The empire at the edge of Sambok Dung is strewn with sherds of Chinese, Japanese and Southeast Asian porcelains as well as modern clay pottery that may also affect the village life or the people who traverse the village (Sato and Polkinghorne 2017).

Another empire that may loom large is that created by politically connected logging and agribusiness companies such as Pheapimex, mentioned in passing in the book's introduction. This firm, run by close associates of Hun Sen, acquired a so-called economic land concession covering over 300,000 hectares of Kompong Chhnang and neighbouring Pursat, which it set about clearing in partnership with a Chinese company. When King Sihamoni wrote to Hun Sen in 2004 to raise concerns about a grenade attack on villagers protesting Pheapimex's activities in the Pursat Province section of the concession, the prime minister accused the protesters of staging the attack to discredit the government (Global Witness 2007).

The author refers, at a few points, to the land concession and mentions some villagers who have benefitted economically and

socially from lucrative logging activities. It is unknown to the reader whether they are connected with this spectacular land grab by politically connected business elites and Chinese capital, and are contributing to deforestation's devastating impact across the country. Are Sambok Dung residents affected by or complicit in the violence that illegal logging and land grabbing often brings with it? This leaves the reader wondering whether the villagers of Sambok Dung, whose lives are influenced by the strong waves of development opportunities, have become—at the expense of those more vulnerable—the engineers of their own empire-building that is constantly in the making. It would be good to hear more about the author's reflections on the impact of this very contemporary and predatory empire and to understand how it compares with—and overlays—the previous empires that she describes in the ethnography.

Author's Response: Courtney Work

I am grateful to Guido Sprenger and Krisna Uk for their insightful essays, and also for the opportunity to discuss the points they raise, to clarify my intended meanings, and to express my ideas more explicitly than I did in my book.

Uk raises two important questions, one about large-scale land grabs, and one about local complicity in illegal logging and environmental destruction. This is a key element that I try to draw out by describing the different social groups in the village of Sambok Dung. At a certain level, everyone is complicit. Farming families who came looking for rice fields are converting as much forest to rice fields as their family labour or capital will manage. Cham families from the region have been part of the wood trade in the region since French Colonial times and continue to do this in addition to rice farming. Many Khmer migrated to the region for work in the informal timber industry or to profit from running shops along the extraction zone. Many soldiers who remained after the wars were both land speculators and loggers. In a different piece, I wrote about the roll out of the Order 01 land titling initiative that began in 2012 (Work and Beban 2016). In this context, the corruption was obvious,

as elites, both local and foreign, collaborated to hire local labour to clear vast tracts of forest so it could be measured and owned. But what I find working at the frontier of development is that capital accumulation happens with varying degrees of complicity, knowledge, vulnerability and profit, and none are untainted by its effects. I also wrote about the Pheapimex concession and some of the impacts of that operation on local inhabitants in the context of research into land grabbing and biofuels (Beban and Work 2014; Hunsberger, Work and Herr 2018).

It was my original intention to fill in the ethnography in Sambok Dung with the data gathered on Cambodia's version of development in the context of climate change politics (see Franco and Borras 2019). The two sets of data, however, were gathered with different intentions. The latter was concerned with understanding the structures of discourse and practice within which development projects make sense and documenting their effects on people living in development landscapes. The former, the data which informs this book, was gathered with a concern for the processes that brought particular kinds of structures into being at the village level. Gathering each data set required different theoretical tools and created wholly different frames of 'researcher mind'. After a few years of cultivating my political economy, political ecology frame, the phenomenological, ontological, materialist approach that helped describe the processes I experienced in Sambok Dung was inadequate to capture the larger story that I now want to tell.

The phenomenal experience of that village in transition and the ways that the incoming tide of empire solidified both the roads and the fluid boundaries between social groups is, however, an integral part of that larger story. As I say in the introduction, the ethnographic work from Sambok Dung represents a snapshot in time, for both myself and the village. I chose to deal with it separately and tell an intimate and contained story of place-making. The larger connections made by Uk, especially about Hun Sen's claims to kingship and his activities in the middle-period capital of Longvek, which are not explored in *Tides of Empire*, are slated for treatment in an emerging

piece investigating sovereignty and its multiple guises more deeply. I am grateful to Uk for the signposts and her insights, which will inform the forthcoming manuscript.

On a different track, there are some important elements to Uk's essay that give me the opportunity to really clarify the interventions I am trying to make into the deep literature on rural Cambodia in particular, and into notions of religion and the sacred in general. These are connected to Sprenger's comment about challenges at the intersection of "untested analytical terminologies … and the requirements of academic communication". As I understand more clearly what people in the rural areas of Cambodia have been saying to me over the years, I find myself struggling to explain it within the established academic lexicon and the particular view of the world that it represents. The language of Uk's essay evokes concepts that are in line with the conventions of academic communication, but seem to misrepresent what people say about the nature of the world they live in. I will pull out just two brief examples to explain what this looks like. The first involves the well-trodden suggestion that villagers 'domesticate' spirits, which seems to be an inversion of what happens.

The logic that underpins the idea of humans domesticating entities of the earth comes from the ways that anthropomorphized earth energies take on human characteristics, which they certainly do. What I try to draw out through stories of encounters with chthonic energies is how the possibility of communicative entities embedded in the landscape forces particular types of sociality and practice. This, I suggest, domesticates the human community for cohabitation with the earth. Before clearing land in a new area, people must ask permission, and then watch for signs of chthonic displeasure. If there are no signs, accidents or illnesses, and if they find enough resources for a healthy life, then new settlers assume synchrony with the life-giving elements. People are careful about what they extract or claim for use, they promise to take only what they need, they worry about bickering and disrespecting each other, and they make regular offerings of music, dance, and food. These are all ways that humans are domesticated into the planetary

system. As the tides of capital accumulation roll over the landscape and the language of Western science turns entities of the earth into supernatural superstitions, people are given both a reason to ignore the Ancient ones, and a language to justify it.

Perhaps chthonic energies are lying in wait for the next ebbing of the imperial tide, as Sprenger wonders, or perhaps their agentive capacity is currently manifest all around us. The latter suggestion is emerging among university-educated Cambodian peasants. It is also the language emerging in scholarship. Sprenger's essay attempts to grapple with some of those issues and I am very grateful for his insights into my book.

Sprenger asks a number of questions, but I will answer only two. Regarding the relationship between *attibol* (miracle-working power) and *parami* (the cosmic power of *neak ta* and kings) that I say "work in the same register" (p. 65), Sprenger asks if this is my own association and also questions why there are two different terms. This is a key, and complicated, element inadequately explained in the book. Let me try again here. *Atti* comes from the Pali (*ṛiddhi* in Sanskrit) meaning action or effect, but also potency. *Attipol* in this sense refers to 'the effect of power'. This commonly used Pali term, *attipol*, refers to the effects of chthonic energies and can also refer to the effect of lightning, and other things. The Sanskrit is a related but rarely used term that refers more explicitly to authority and magical effects. Now, *Parami* is a Pali term meaning perfection that is associated with the perfections obtained by the Buddha through which enlightenment was achieved. In Cambodia, the term is most often used to refer to miracle-working cosmic power (interchanged by some speakers with *attipol*). I suggest that this conflation reflects the power of *neak ta* absorbed into the power of the Buddha. Throughout Cambodia's imperial history, temples and statues have been placed directly on top of known sources of chthonic energies, like mountain tops or the huts of *neak ta* in villages (see Work 2022). The physical displacement of *neak ta* by Buddhist temples and statues (and their accompanying stories and bureaucracies), followed by dramatic ebbs in the imperial tide, made a space in which the perfections of the Buddha became part of the

language of chthonic power. This shows layers of semantic shifts that are connected to the young woman's insight, which Sprenger also draws attention to, about how the language of the Buddha is all they have now to engage with this amoral force.

Sprenger also asks about the problem I point to between merit and morality, which is a thorny and complex issue. I do not suggest that merit (*bun*) is morally neutral, but rather want to draw out the fine line that separates the (immoral) power of the witch (*kru mant'agam*—an expert [*kru*], who chants [*mant*] and infixes, or causes to arrive, science/doctrine [*agam*]) and magic (*amboe*, the Khmer term meaning action or effect) from the morality of merit. What strikes me is how the practices that the witch uses to create *amboe* (immoral) effects, like ascetic observances, meditation and chanting, are exactly the same as those used to create *bun* (moral) effects in powerful people (*neak mian bun*). Uk pulls out the other side of this shift in the ways that contemporary merit-making (*twer bun*) is consumed by worldly status and becomes 'merit-naming'. Importantly, the power to make merit and do magic comes from the same source—the chthonic energies of the water and the land (see Tannenbaum 1987), while the capacity to perform 'merit-naming' comes from capital accumulation. Thanks to both Uk and Sprenger for helping me get at this key issue of shifting power amid the ebbs and flows of imperial tides and the games of language and practice that follow its ebbs and flows.

This brings me back to the second notion of academic convention from Uk's essay with which I will conclude my comments. I am trying to move away from the conventional use of the terms 'sacred' and 'supernatural' to describe things that are very much in the world with people and with which they are attempting communion and communication.

I follow Mary Douglas here (1966) to understand the notion of the sacred as imbedded in the impulse to separate—protecting powerful forces from human defilement and protecting humans from powerful forces. In Cambodia, this term is accurate when referring to a 'sacred forest', from which resources cannot be extracted for fear

of retaliation by the entity within it. But when referring to Ancient ones, understood as a dynamic and powerful manifestation of the interaction between human settlers and earth energies (Wessing 2017), this is neither sacred nor holy, but present—and, in that presence, not at all 'supernatural'. The idea of a thing being outside of the 'natural world' emerged out of enlightenment Europe and a science that claims to provide explanations for everything. As natural scientists get out of their labs and armchairs and into the 'nature' they claim to represent, many accepted truths about the world are coming into question, especially regarding consciousness, animal sociality and non-human intelligence.

I suggest that the requirements of academic communication need to change to meet the challenges of our altering reality. The stable ecological conditions of the Holocene have ceased, and much of academic communication was forged in the kiln of industrial expansion and human exceptionalism that such stability made possible. It may be time to shift away from delusions of human mastery over the planet and the semiotic system that supports it, to focus instead on finding mastery within the prevailing political economy. A political economy that I argue, following the reality of forest-dwellers and peasant farmers around the globe, is governed by the planet.

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