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Chthonic Sovereigns? 'Neak Ta' in a Cambodian Village

Courtney Work  *

Typically conflated with spirit or religion, territorial land entities known by various names across monsoon Asia are engaged in social relationships with human communities. Most often called neak ta in Cambodia (meaning the Ancient ones), but also known as maja tuk maja day, (the master of the water and the land), and arak (guardian or protector), many will tell you this is Brahminism, superstition from the ancient religion. More recently scholars use the term animism, and through this lens, neak ta becomes spirit—metaphysical guardians of territories, spirits of founding ancestors, or the earth-bound deities in Buddhist cosmologies. For locals they are guardians, people we cannot see, punishers, and healers, sometimes ancestors sometimes not. In the following treatment, empirical data complicates the prevailing paradigm and begins to detangle these entities from the constructed category of religion. In the context of an expanding discussion rethinking animism in Southeast Asia and its relationship to universal religions, these sovereigns of the land emerge beyond their confinement, or their assignation as spirits. They are in and of the water and the land and are instrumental social actors in the articulation of economic activity and political strategies as well as Buddhist practice.

Introduction

Neak ta (also written, `anak tā) are non-physical entities, ubiquitously but variously engaged in Cambodia and, by different names, across Monsoon Asia.¹ Understood to be owners, or masters of the water and the land, in Cambodia they are also known as *lok ta*, *arakkh* and/or *maja tuk maja day* (also written, *mcâs djk mcâs tī*) in flexible usage that reflects both the particularity of isolated locations and the heterogeneity and mobility of the contemporary era. These names translate loosely as

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‘Ancient ones’, ‘guardians’ and ‘owner (master) of the water and the land’ respectively.² *Neak ta* are engaged as protectors and guardians of territories, and insist on particular types of behaviours and resource use in their territories. They are managers of the animals, plants, and the rains that ensure abundance. Arbiters of justice as well, they punish inappropriate behaviour through accident, illness or denying access to resources.

This paper focuses on the history and characteristics of *neak ta* from regional and Cambodian sources in light of new data collected during 16 months of field research in a small village newly cleared from the forest.³ This data opens an important window into *maja tuk maja day* as an integral part of both social life and Cambodia’s ongoing economic transformations (Work and Beban 2016). At the edge of the Aural Mountains in western Cambodia, Sambok Dung sits along the dilapidated colonial era railroad at the border between Kampong Chhnang and Pursat provinces (Figures 1 and 2).⁴ Settled by soldiers left over from the war, and internal migrants from many provinces, the people here used all terms, *maja tuk maja day*, *neak ta*, *lok ta* and *arakkh* to describe the energy understood to govern and protect territorial resources.

This piece contributes to emerging studies on the role of animist practice, through the lens of chthonic entities and their potent entanglement with political economy and socio-environmental relationships (Blaser 2013; de la Cadena 2015; Sprenger 2016; Szerszynski 2017). My data adds real-time ethnographic encounters that clarify and



Figure 1. Cambodia Map: Black Circle marks the region where this study took place. Map Source: Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Atlas of the Environment (2nd Edition). Adapted from the GMS Information portal, http://portal.gms-eoc.org/uploads/map/archives/map/CAM-Overview_1_hires_2.jpg/ with permission from GMS Environment Operations Centre, Bangkok, Thailand.

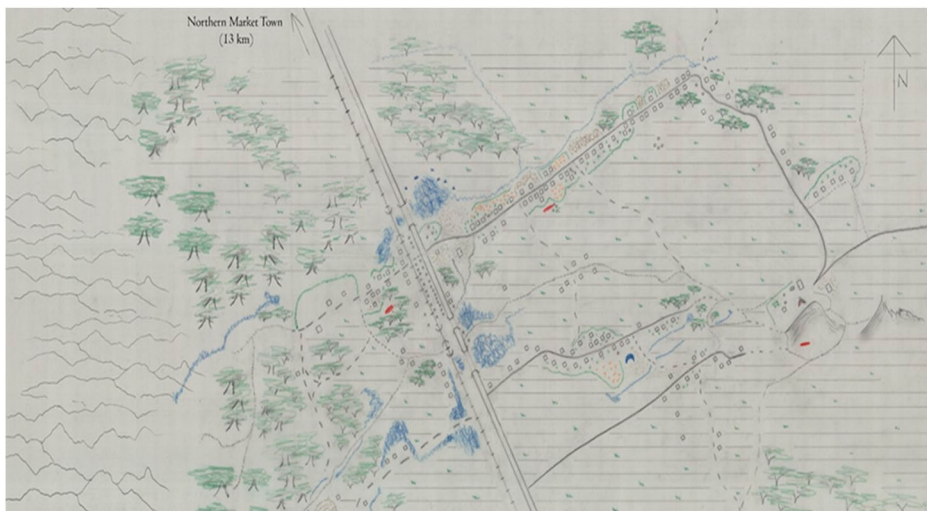


Figure 2. Map Sambok Dung, drawing by author. Red dots represent the three LokTa in the village.

complicate existing configurations of *neak ta* in the literature on Cambodia (Chandler 1976; Ang 1986; Forest 1992; Ang 2000; Guillou 2012; Davis 2012), and joins other treatments of similar entities in the region (High 2006; Holt 2009; Janowski 2017). The *neak ta* in this region introduced themselves to villagers. They were not called or communicated into being (Sprenger 2017a); they were already present in the water and the land. This inspires a critical rethinking of how scholars understand the relationship between *neak ta*, humans, ancestors, Buddhism, rulers, rocks, mountains, water, and the rest of the living world sometimes referred to as ‘nature’.

Neither spirit nor supernatural, *neak ta* are manifestations of ‘the fecund energy of the soil’ (Mus 1933, 10) that entangle in complex ways with social systems (Sprenger 2017a), thermodynamic energies (Prigogine and Stengers 1984), as well as local resource access, state bureaucracies and Buddhist practice (Tambiah 1970; Spiro 1978; Tannenbaum and Kammerer 2003; Holt 2009). I argue that *neak ta*, as owners of the water and the land, are a critical conduit between humans and natural resources (economy), and that excising this chthonic energy is at the foundation of modern political economy. The entanglement of *neak ta* with religion is an appendage, a state effect, but a big one, and as such is only lightly treated in this piece. A companion work will follow this one, which flushes out the important threads that bind chthonic energies to religion (see also other contemporary scholars excavating this space: Picard 2017; Guillou 2017b; Sprenger 2017b). I focus here on the more neglected political and economic foundations of *neak ta*, making preliminary incisions for a full treatment that will detangle this fully material and energetic force from the obfuscating ideological apparatus of religion.

I begin by situating *neak ta* through history and Cambodian scholarship, followed by a brief discussion of the theoretical field and how I situate my data within it. The

final two sections introduce the *neak ta* of Sambok Dung and their place in village political economy. By way of concluding this article I trace the ethnographic threads I present here through resource access and indigenous cosmologies, through socio-ecological health and the political economy to argue for a material rather than spiritual approach to analyzing this persistent, and palpable force. Sambok Dung is transitioning from forest to fully 'developed' extension of Cambodia's growing market economy. The move toward the market weakens the connectivity of the Ancient ones (Sprenger 2017b), but the transition from forest to village makes their entanglement as economic and political actors more visible.

***Neak Ta*, Religion and the State**

Alain Forest suggests that the *neak ta* deal in a 'system of power relations' that articulate religion and state (Forest 1991, 198). The state claimed the amoral, sovereign, exceptional power of the territorial guardian, while religion harnessed the caretaking and moral precepts, laying claim to the offerings. In the Angkorean complex, 'demons' or giants called *yakkh* are stationed at strategic entryways, often armed with the *naga*. On the southern shores where Cambodia meets the sea, the Naga king was tricked in a game of chance by an Indic prince, who then married the king's daughter and started the Khmer empire (Mabbett and Chandler 1995). The Naga is a snake/water guardian of Indic origin, slain by Indra's lightning bolt to bring forth the waters of heaven, restoring life to the universe (Guthrie 2004, 108–9). The *yakkh* are the captured and conquered *arakkh*, forest guardians, and governors of the land present in every mountain and recognised by indigenous people in Cambodia (Bourdier 2009; Baird 2013), and by other names across the region. The ancient kings claimed the territory of chthonic powers, long understood to violently enforce strict adherence to appropriate resource use and social comportment.

Through time and across Khmer territory *neak ta* were intertwined with Indic gods. Ganesha and Shiva were always *neak ta*. They re-emerged when the Brahmanic kings fell (Forest 1991, 1992), and remain present in the imperial ruins that dot Cambodia's potent landscape (Miura 2005; Guillou 2017a). Ang Chouléan suggests that the *neak ta* is a synthesis of two values, at once the power of the soil itself, and the 'divinised energies of the soil brought into material form' (Ang 1995, 219; 2000). Throughout Southeast Asia we find divinised physical manifestations of this entity, which Khmer kings represented in their *linga* (Ang 1995), and to which Chinese lords pronounced an oath of allegiance (Mus 1933).

Neak Ta Mapping the Territory

In the Chinese record, debris from materialised deities traces a map of the emperor's territories, and shows how his claims to local places depended on sovereignty over local divinities (Mus 1933[1975], 19). The Indic record presents the same hierarchal arrangement of deities, with the god Indra, conqueror of *nagas* at the top (18).

Inscribed in texts and the stone stelae that map the progress of Khmer kings (Chandler 1976), the names of chthonic entities are at the top of lists, with Indic deities below. Sovereignty, it seems, was not imposed upon the land by Brahmanic kingship. It was already present, and in front of witnesses the newcomer-king both pledged allegiance to and contracted territory from the original sovereign (Ang 1995).

Mus suggests that relationships with powerful localised deities, ‘paved the way for [...] local materializations of king into territory’ (1933, 44). Indeed, the territorial maps inscribed over locally powerful entities in Southeast Asia created the mandala forms recognised by Southeast Asian scholars (Geertz 1980; Wolters 1982).⁵ This pattern of powerful chthonic sovereigns organised into political hierarchal formations with many kings under the sway of a central king, replicated itself through the various rising and falling empires of early Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1970, 1976; Spiro 1978; Holt 2009). Universal religions and extra-territorial cosmic deities were an important part of this replication to carry sovereignty beyond the palace city (Forest 1991, 192).

Fecund Energies of the Earth and Village Founders

Beyond the urban centres of kings in Southeast Asia a strong tradition of founder’s or ancestor cults articulate human hierarchies and subsistence economies among non-state people (Århem and Sprenger 2016; O’Connor 2003). The practices to divinise the soil involving sacrifice, stones and gaining control over resource guardians have echoes in accounts from hierarchal non-state collectives across the region (see for example, Wessing 1999). These articulate a strong moral code that governs social relations between humans, and between communities and their environments (High 2006). Among the egalitarian communities, this moral code is both delivered and enforced at the non-human level (Howell 2017). Cambodia’s most famous *neak ta*, Khleang Muang, was a powerful warrior and ascetic who sacrificed himself to lead a ghost army that defeated the Thai and saved the kingdom (Guillou 2017a). This figure collects elements of morality and the control of non-human power typical of founders’ cults, and also an entanglement with the human sovereign.

But *neak ta* are beyond the human sovereign, and in one story from Cambodia, a bodi tree was found growing in the middle of the forest and people honoured it as *neak ta*. When asked to identify itself it said, *we were not established in the shade of this tree, we know nothing of that ... [we came] to get the attention of the people of this village and to show them how to comport themselves ...* (Paṇḍity 1989, 35–40; Forest 1992, 135–38). Marshall Sahlins (2017) shows how rules of compartment in non-state societies were often delivered through non-human rather than human hierarchies, and posits this as an ‘original political society’ in which hierarchy is always present, but the sovereign is not always human (23). The emperors of China manipulated this cosmo-politics, as did the priests and kings of the Indic state system. There is a long history of ensconcing ‘deities’ atop already potent places in settled localities and taking control of territories and resources. Hayashi records how Buddhist monks appropriated the potent places of soon-to-be conquered forest communities

(Hayashi 2003b). This process of buddhicisation also absorbs the Indic gods and *nagas* into Buddhist cosmic schemes, bringing the already appropriated *neak ta* along with them (Forest 1991).

The colonial empire encountered Buddhism as ‘religion’, which is a made-up category for the state-legitimising wing of the Western traditions. Constantine created a Christian Rome on the power of Zeus who defeated the chthonic titans with his lightning bolt. When that wing of politics was jettisoned in the ‘modern’ era, those hierarchal structures needed a new category and thus religion was born (Masuzawa 2005). Cosmic forces had no place in the modern state, but colonial territorial activities in Cambodia had to engage *neak ta* through ritual offerings (Edwards 2007; Hansen 2007), and a Ministry of Interior and Cults (Guillou 2017b, 74, fn12). Secularisation advanced, and through its cleansing, Buddhism was detached from state activities, and chthonic power segregated to the Brahminist religion, which was never ‘religion’ but simply an apparatus of the state. It remains attached to religion, even at the heart of sacred Buddhist space (Davis 2016), but for the people, *neak ta* is in the land. This historical investigation situates religion as a state effect that facilitates the capture of energetic interactions between people and their environments. Hocart suggests these energetic interactions are ‘the science of life’ (Hocart 1953, 52), which consists of techniques through which the life-giving properties of elemental substances can be transferred to human collectives. These techniques are now entangled with extractive and hierarchal projects of human-based power and are referred to as ritual in the context of religion.

Communication, Connectivity and Energy

Neak ta are neither superstition nor supernatural, but foundational. By flipping the analytical lens to examine states (and their discarded appendage now called religion) from the ground up, *neak ta* emerge as an ontological reality that shapes claims to kingship and territorial sovereignty. I argue that they are—as water and land—the life-giving resources that human sociality (and all of the biosphere) depend on. Acknowledging the possibility of this claim disrupts the dominant paradigm, recently labelled a ‘naturalist’ ontology. The most important contribution to the so-called ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology is Philip Descola’s delineation of the naturalist ontology (Descola and Pálsson 1996), as one among many empirical realities. In a naturalist ontology, the human animal alone holds sentience, consciousness and agency and is explicitly separate from all other entities in the bio and geosphere, referred to as nature, which are believed to be without sentience, consciousness, or agency.

Denaturalising and labelling this dominant ontology as ‘naturalist’ is a profound contribution to social analysis. Social systems create bodies that are ‘enabled to appropriate the world’ using particular techniques and based on particular understandings of reality (Bourdieu 1999, 55). A naturalist reality, in which humans are entitled to all the earth’s resources, is just one among many possible ontologies. Suggesting multiple worlds with multiple realities disrupts human entitlement and forces a renegotiation of

the ‘reality that can be thought’ (ibid). In this way, the ontological turn makes a space for the excluded members of society to be included. I decline the impulse to situate my data within the emerging (and inherently fictional) classificatory schema for the multiple ontologies (for these discussions, see Latour 2014; Viveiros de Castro 2015; Alberti 2016), but rather use it to provincialise the naturalist ontology. Toward that end of de-naturalizing a reality that separates the human from all other species and elements, I focus on three things that speak directly to the empirical elements I present below: communication, intention and energy.

Guido Sprenger avoids the subject of energy, which is important for my data, but through a subtle treatment of systems theory he naturalises the idea of communication between human and non-human entities. By distinguishing communication from thought, Sprenger suggests that self-reference, ‘and therefore subject status’ emerges through communication (Sprenger 2017a, 121). Communication is action and not thought, and so the unknowable interiority (and intentionality) of ‘the other’ becomes beside the point. His intervention is at the level of social systems, which he argues, ‘consist of communications, not persons’ (116). These communications and the uses to which they are put in social systems establish the relative connectedness or disconnectedness of individuals within a given system (Sprenger 2017b).

Sprenger sidesteps the question of non-human agency or intentionality that emerges from Amerindian data (Viveiros de Castro 2004), the circumpolar north (Ingold 1987; Nadasdy 2007), and science and technology studies (Latour 2014), to focus on society and its constitution. My analysis engages with non-human agency and keeps communication and connectivity at the forefront, not in an effort to ‘grasp the [...] contested nature of the Earth’s spiritual body’, as Bronislaw Szerszynski suggests (2017, 255; see also, Latour 2017), but I do argue that the earth’s elements have their own mode of existence (258). They exist and they are connected to human sociality (among other things). In Cambodia, mass graves mingle with the earth’s energies to create, over time, social effects recognised as *neak ta* (Guillou 2013). What Guillou describes are, I suggest, part of the self-organising system through which thermodynamic energies become the bio and geosphere of life. The energy of the earth is important, dangerous, and should be respected. Szerszynski wants to make the earth’s energies sacred once again, but I argue that the sacred has obscured the practical, relational, rational, free for everyone, care-taking elements of relationships with earth entities.

In investigations of entropy and complexity in natural systems, Prigogine and Stengers analyze the thermodynamics of naturally occurring earth systems. Their work reconciles stable systems with emergent possibilities by finding the turbulence at the edges of stability that create both the large flows of fluid stability, and the dynamic emergence of self-organising systems (Prigogine and Stengers 1984, 141). Szerszynski (2017, 262) usefully compares this to the relationships between global flows of capital, and the contingent self-organising systems at the local level. The space where global flows connect to local processes he notes, following Tsing (2005), is a space filled with enchantment. True indeed, but I suggest this is a state

effect through which the divinised soil of the earliest kings has come to look like the large, orderly laminar flows of fluid dynamics. When this fictional flow meets the ground, it does require enchantment.

What the study of thermodynamics brings to my argument is the idea that organisms emerge and self-organise, which inserts intention and removes the deity. This makes space to focus on the constantly emergent possibilities of social life that extend easily and without contradiction beyond the human (Smith and Jenks 2018, 50–53), and to discuss what people living in communicative and energetic exchanges with the productive forces of the planet tell us about their worlds. There is energy flowing through the water and the land and we are a part of it in a rule-bound, but always emergent, system of social relations between humans, mountains, tigers, water, rice and multiple others. Bringing the planet's energy into this conversation also gives us the perspective of time. As humans, we are latecomers to this game of energetic exchange and it is obvious that our ignorance is causing system-altering turbulence.

In Cambodia, the energetic forces of the earth are entangled with Buddhist vocabulary and the divinised energies of the soil still cooking at ancient sites across the country. Guillou maps a series of 'potent places' in the long-settled region nearby the new village from which I gathered my data. She finds that *pāramī* adheres to the ancient stones of kings and their human heroes in an energetic geography that is inextricable from the chthonic forces that continue to infuse it (Guillou 2017a). Adding complexity to this long-acknowledged human interaction with soils, rocks and the entities therein is an unattached curiosity, tossed into Prigogine and Stengers' analysis. In the geological record, the emergence of biological life on the planet was simultaneous with the emergence of rock formations (1984, 176). The importance of rocks in cosmic systems is well-known, and in Cambodia the *neak ta* are represented most often by rocks. This is an area for further excavation, toward which the stories below point.

Owners of the Land

The historical moment when *neak ta* reached out to people in Sambok Dung was marked by weak relationships with both state and religious hierarchies and laws, and a mixture of aggressive extraction and local subsistence. I introduce three *neak ta* in this section, each of whom entered the material and social lives of villagers through unsolicited dream visitations. People did not offer these dream stories. In an academic search for origins, I wanted to know how the first generation inhabitants of Sambok Dung knew that *lok ta* was where the *ctum* now stands. In answer to this question, people invoked the palpable power, at the sites, called *pāramī*, and they told stories of miraculous healings, teachings, and fortuitous findings of missing buffalo. *pāramī* is a slippery term in Cambodia; it has Buddhist origins, but in this context refers to the animating, circulating energy that is in all things and congeals with potent power at particular locations, in certain animals, trees, persons or natural phenomenon (Guillou 2017a; see also, Work 2017). These stories of power and presence validated the place, but did not satisfy my question of origin. The question, I

finally realised, was completely inappropriate in local terms. *Maja tuk maja day* is always present, everywhere. There is no origin—only encounter. In this section I present encounters and places as they were presented to me.

The small household huts in everyone's yards (Figure 3) originated as part of the settlement process. Any newcomer clearing the land makes h/erself known to its yet unknown sovereign, renowned for malevolence and caprice. This is consistent beyond stories from Buddhist (Arensen 2012) and indigenous Cambodia (Work 2018). In Isan among the Thai-Lao, 'the establishment of the village by *chap chong* and the establishment of the shrine-like building for the guardian spirit are inseparable' (Hayashi 2003a, 184), and in Laos the violent appropriation of forest clearing is countered by shrine building and offerings to respect the 'divine agency and design' (Holt 2009, 36) that can call an exception to existence.

Neak ta are only dangerous when we are careless with words and greedy in deeds. We built the *ctum* first; we made offerings and asked permission. Please let us stay here, we said. We are only poor. We don't come to eat you to bits, only to raise our children. (Ming Tri, female villager, age 38)

These propitiations to the owner of the water and the land are specific to the work of carving a human space out of the forest. They come from an original position of respect, fear and care. The relationship between resource use and caretaking that founds deals with the chthonic sovereign is obscured when *neak ta* are entangled with village founders, Buddhist religion or understood to be protective ancestor spirits that articulate the space between forest and village (Aymonier 1900; Mus 1933; Ang 1986; Paṅḍity 1989; Forest 1992). What I draw out here is how Ming Tri's invocation pushes the Khmer *neak ta* closer to the conceptions of the highland shifting agriculturalists, who do not 'eat to excess' or 'kill for no reason' (Condominas 1977, 107), and also resonates with Valerio Valeri's description of Huaulu hunters, who 'must always strike a deal, pay a price for using the land' (2000, 308).



Figure 3. Front yard *ctum* for the *maja tuk maja day* (fancy, plank on post, and nook of tree).

The Huaulu are not agriculturalists, they are hunters, and the owner of the land preys on the humans just as the humans prey on forest game in a relationship that entails life and death and the tacit agreement for mutual restraint and respect. For Ming Tri, the deal struck with the owner of the land contains that promise. The owners of the land provide or withhold the rains, sustain or subvert physical health, and demand communal solidarity, all of which are essential to wet-rice agriculture.

The particular manner in which Sambok Dung was established, by degrees, over time, and by heterogenous families, intimately connected *neak ta* to each family's prosperity, health and safety (Sprengrer 2017b). But huts for communal offerings did not emerge out of human agency to improve connectivity as is reported in Isan and Laos, rather it was the other way around. Specific *neak ta* emerged in an already cleared and populated landscape to establish connectivity with humans who opened communicative channels when they cleared the land. These *neak ta* are not 'divinised' village ancestors, but are entities existing in the natural world (Ang 1986; Forest 1992).

The oldest *neak ta*, Lok Ta Oh (also written, Lok Tā `Aū) Grandfather Stream, is the mountain known as Phnom Ta Oh, under which sits the Buddhist temple vat Phnom Ta Oh, and from which spread rice fields in the four directions. Grandfather of the Lake of Hidden Treasure, Lok Ta Bung Komnap (also written, Lok Tā B̄ng Kamṅáp) is the fresh, underground spring that flows from the roots of a large tree out into the rice fields. Grandfather Revenge and Grandmother Duck, Lok Ta Gum Lok Yeay Tia (also written, Tā Gum Yāy Dā), are the most recent *neak ta* in the village, but may also be the oldest. Their *ctum* is in the middle of a yet uncultivated field at the base of the tallest tree in the most continuously populated area of Sambok Dung (Figure 4).

If Lok Ta Oh has a story, it is now forgotten, but the mountain that is Grandfather Stream has more power than any of the other *neak ta* in the region. After resettlement began, Lok Ta Oh intervened into a woman's private prayers for a child. Following a dream, her husband built a *ctum* and made an offering at the base of the mountain. The child was born and offerings continue at this spot. About the characteristics of



Figure 4. Close up of three locations for *lok ta*. Red dot in east is Lok Ta Oh, central is Lok Ta Bung Komnap, and west is Lok Ta Gum and Lok Yeah Tia.

this spirit I was simply told, Lok Ta is *the mountain and the water that flows into the rice fields*. His *ctum* (Figure 5), with simple offering dishes and stone representations, sits at the base of the mountain, but the celebrations are held at the temple.

Lok Ta Bung Komnap, is the body of water from which ...

... gold and silver rose and all who came to collect the riches received an equal share. People settled in this area; they began to grow rice and to raise families and they honoured the water-person they could not see that provided their wealth. Then, one powerful man desired the treasure of his neighbour and stole his gold. The success of this greedy man inspired other powerful people to overrun their neighbours, stealing their treasure. This angered the water-person and all the gold and silver once provided freely, sank to the bottom of the lake ...

Three generations of spirit houses stand next to the tree that protects the spring, but only one is currently used. The material objects inside the *ctum* (Figures 6 and 7), a statue of the Chinese land spirit, plastic flowers, a gold paper *baisay* (also written, *pāyasī*),⁶ army medals, an army cap, and a cane, signal connections with the affluent Chinese and the powerful army, while the story of the lake of hidden riches is significant for local history.

Wealth rose from the land here with Cambodia's opening to the global market. Timber was freely available for harvest and the land was free for those strong enough to clear and settle it.⁷ This work in which the powerful take from the less powerful and cause everything to disappear, was often in violation of *neak ta* relations (see Sprenger and Großmann 2018; and Work 2018, for discussions of this dynamic). Some carved out very nice land claims for their families, but many villagers flounder at the edge of subsistence, and the resources are dwindling. In an earlier era of colonial extraction, settler habitation also spread along the railroad tracks in this region (Work 2014), and this is where Ta Gum Yay Tia emerged shortly after Ta Reut and other timber labourers cleared land, and expanded their holdings into this area. They



Figure 5. *Ctum* of Lok Ta Oh at the base of the mountain.



Figure 6. *Ctum* of Lok Ta Bung Komnap.

visited Reut in a dream and said they were lonely, that they *missed the music and the parties they used to have*. After his dream, Reut built the couple a house as they requested, put out plates for offerings, and represented Ta Gum Yay Tia with two stones at the back of their *ctum* (Figure 8). Communication continues and they requested and received stairs and a window for their abode. After installation of the window in 2006, a termite mound began to grow next to the tree (Figure 9), a potent sign of earth energies, and Reut sees this as a testament to both his caretaking and the power of this *neak ta*.

The *neak ta* I encountered in Sambok Dung complicate the division between the forest and the village, the *srok* and the *prei* so commonly found in the literature on Cambodia. I suspect that like religion, and the idea that chthonic energies are



Figure 7. Lok Ta Bung Komnap as a Chinese land deity.



Figure 8. Stone representations of Ta Gum and Yay Tia.

human ancestors, this is a state effect. The forest gives rise to the village (Forest 1992, 15), and everything of value comes from it. In Sambok Dung, most families went regularly into the forest to collect food and useful products, as well as timber. Only the wealthy who bought their food from the market were able to draw a line at the edge of the village and feared the wild space beyond.



Figure 9. The house of Ta Gum Yay Tia and its attendant termite mound (the mound is visible in the background between the hut and the tree).

Political Economy of the Spirit

Transformations into a Modern State

Despite the expanding market economy, every province in Cambodia has a *lok ta* and oaths of office, and oaths in courts of law are declared to the chthonic sovereign (Edwards 2008, 219; Khmernews 2008). While statues attest to their presence at politically significant places, the continuing salience of the political hierarchy of *neak ta* has not been systematically investigated. They remain alive in the popular political imagination, however; an anti-logging activist killed by military police was immortalised as *neak ta* (Sacrava 2012), and in the many protests against development land-grabs, people call on *neak ta* to protect them from the encroaching companies (Rith and Strangio 2009). In the run-up to the 2013 election, even the current prime minister cultivated connectivity, claiming that his son may be the child of *neak ta* (Wallace 2013).

The above examples highlight the continued power of *neak ta* in contemporary Cambodian politics, who are invoked by the powerful as allies, by the disempowered as protectors, and who continue as arbiters of justice. They are dangerous interlocutors for all concerned and while they support the king and uphold justice, they are beholden to neither the law nor the institution of kingship. Their connectivity waxes and wanes, but every political administration has invoked them in one way or another from the earliest kings to today. Even the Khmer Rouge recognised the power of the *neak ta* by stating that Angkar (the Khmer Rouge) was the master of the water and the land (Locard 1996; cited in Harris 2013, 96).

Power and Resources in the Village

The year I arrived for fieldwork, people were losing their early plantings to drought. In response to a dream from Lok Ta Gum Lok Yeah Tia, people arranged a second ceremony at the spring of Lok Ta Bung Kamnap on a Buddhist holy day. The drum troupe came to play and sing, and the monks chanted the *dhamma*. Later that afternoon, a hard and long rain came down, and the fields were soon ready for planting. The efficacy of cultivating social relationships with *neak ta* is experiential and empirical.

Neak ta provide or withhold the rains, but it is in their administrative capacity that families propitiate *neak ta* before they build a home, cut a tree or clear the land—they are the local authority. It is also in this capacity that offerings accompany practical requests for things like plentiful rains, relief from illness, success in business ventures, protection for visiting anthropologists, or the location of lost cows and buffalo. These are hopeful requests and aside from asking for rain, they were also common requests to local authorities: for powerful interventions into daily life. Such offerings are not meritorious; these are elements of becoming ‘enabled to appropriate the world’.

In Sambok Dung, each of the three *lok ta* served constituents in their areas. These were not strictly demarcated areas, and human friendships and power relations

brought people from the railroad tracks to ceremonies with Lok Ta Bung Kamnap or Lok Ta Oh and vice versa. *Lok ta* also travelled to ceremonies at each other's places and *neak ta* from the surrounding area, the province, and far-away places were always called to join celebrations. These can be small, individual affairs like introducing the newcomer or asking for help with a business transaction; they can be larger affairs with close friends and kin to heal the sick or for large business deals (like buying plantation land); and they can also be large community celebrations in conjunction with the agricultural season.

It is in these community celebrations that the subtle delineations of class and authority are visible. The celebrants at each spirit location came predominantly from their respective neighbourhoods, which map both spatially and along class lines. Soldiers, timber labourers, and latecomers to the land grab occupy state land along the railroad tracks and loose settlements in the 'forest'. Khmer rice farmers from the first wave of resettlement live around Phnom Ta Oh and the more affluent migrants live closer to Lok Ta Bung Kamnap (Figure 4). I want to stress that these distinctions were not cultivated, discussed or paraded by participants. In fact, when I asked about them or suggested their presence, people shrugged off my questions and comments. I will proceed, nonetheless, to describe the ways that class, authority, religion and state seem to adhere to the communal celebrations performed in honour of the spirit of the water and the land.

Phnom Srou and Larng Neak Ta

While most in the village attend to both *lok ta* and Buddhist monks, in Sambok Dung the soldiers never, and the village head rarely attended Buddhist celebrations at the temple. The monks were expected at *neak ta* celebrations, where the soldiers and village heads were also in regular attendance. One of the powerful soldiers even hosted the Rice Mountain ceremony, *phnom srou* (also written, *phnam srūv*), made in gratitude to *lok ta* after a bountiful harvest. The *larng neak ta* (also written, *loeng `anak tā*) celebration is the counterpoint to *phnom srou* and is performed at the beginning of the ploughing season to request adequate rains and a good harvest. In the softly demarcated zones of social class in the village, *neak ta* connection with political power was not prominent, but the *phnom srou* celebration of 2011 draws this out in suggestive ways.

The temple association organised the *phnom srou* celebrations that year, and they planned one ceremony at the temple and two others at private homes to the east of the temple. None were at the sites of the village *neak ta*. After these, one additional celebration was organised by the soldier ta Rein, the well-connected timber dealer mentioned above. The decision to have the ceremony was sudden and when I asked why, I was told quite simply that the temple was too far away for the people by the railroad. The work groups that prepared this celebration were exclusively from the neighbourhood at the railroad tracks.

The officiating *achar* (also written, *ācāry*) accepted the offerings: unhusked rice for the rice mountain (donated to the temple to feed the monks for the year), milled rice,

small denominations of money, and little monastic necessities. The village head was present as were all of the soldiers who live along the railroad, but members of the temple association were conspicuously absent. They showed up late, made an offering, ate some food and left. They did not stay to dance and they did not return to make offerings in the morning. All the other attendees, however, were active participants who enjoyed the rice porridge prepared by ta Reut and paid for by ta Rein. They prepared to *sine* (also written, *saen*) *neak ta*, and the *achar* led the invocation to offer the mountain of rice and the food to *lok ta*. Offering to *lok ta* are separate, both physically and linguistically from the *brocane* (also written, *pragen*) presented to the monks, who then chanted the *dhamma*. Once the blessings and offerings were complete, the village head took the microphone. This was unprecedented, as he rarely took a leading role, even at village meetings.

He read rather stiffly, from a prepared document that began by explicitly comparing the government with Buddhism. 'The government', he said, 'has five precepts, just like Buddhism'. The Buddhist precepts are the moral codes. Regular laypersons are expected to adhere to five. These are: Do not kill, do not steal, do not engage in sexual misconduct, do not lie, and do not consume intoxicating substances. More serious practitioners, like *achar* and elders, hold ten precepts, and monks hold 277. Few lay people actually adhere to these, and only elders are expected to observe the precepts.

The village head went on to enumerate the government's precepts: no stealing, no trafficking in addictive drugs, no domestic violence, no trafficking in women or children, and no lawless behaviour. He continued, explaining how the government provides safety and services to the people, but that with the development of new roads villagers will be more at risk from strangers. The village police, he said, do not patrol in the evenings and so the people have to join together to protect each other and to warn the police if strangers are in the village.

This speaks to the instability of the ongoing transformation of Cambodia's countryside. The government has no capacity to ensure villager safety in the face of development, Buddhist precepts have weak connectivity in practice, and both are invoked at the site of *neak ta*, the arbiter of justice, resource use and appropriate social conduct. I am certain that the government did not want to draw attention to how weak the Buddhist precepts are in the current era by comparing them to their own halfheartedly enforced 'precepts', but the comparison is striking. Sprenger suggests that the value of a thing can be traced through the value of the connections it makes (2017b, 97).

If there were no monks in this village, the rice mountain would have connected villagers through communal consumption in the lean months between harvests, a gap now filled by micro-finance and market crops. In a neighbouring and much older village they told me that 'in the old days, before Pol Pot', they could go to the *ctum* before the *larng neak ta* celebration and find plates, straw mats, and cooking pots for the gathering, communal goods held by *lok ta* until needed.

Villager prosperity has changed markedly since those days and *neak ta* no longer provide in the same way. Today, there is a shift in power, and the state and the

market are supposed to provide for the people, who joke about the incongruity of this proposition. They use the word *sine* in some of these jokes to refer to other offerings made in the interest of economic windfalls and powerful protection. Young men who make their living in the informal wood trade laughed at my question about making offerings to *neak ta* and told me, ‘I don’t seine *neak ta*, I seine the police [...] I give them my money and they let me pass with my load. If someone comes to make arrests, they warn me and I go the other way’. To *sine* is to bribe. Offerings to the capricious and powerful owner of the water and the land are enacted in the same register as the bribe paid to police. In days past, the word ‘*larng*’ was also used to refer to the taxes paid to the king (Forest 1992, 36).

In Sambok Dung, the owner of the water and the land continues to grant access to land, bring the rain, heal the sick, grant prosperity, and receive rice offerings—even if the rice goes to the monks, and the government awards land titles, international development projects and microcredit opportunities.

Conclusion

Paul Mus suggests that the ancestor gains ‘access to the soil as soil: [in] a magical act of occupation’ (Mus 1933, 24). I agree with this, but suggest that the relationship between human and soil was already present, and that what was engendered through such ‘magical access’ was social hierarchy and the entitlement of certain individuals over others to resources. This is a state effect. In the above pages, I have discussed the political and economic elements of *neak ta* as I encountered them in the village and the literature—entanglement with kings and religion, with resources and territory, and the local organisation of resource use, social groups, and ritual venues for claims to power. The strings that bind chthonic entities to Buddhism are so deep and tangled that even though space constraints demand a separate treatment, it is inextricable. The data I present shows the Buddhist temple built at the base of the most potent place in the surrounding area and *larng neak ta* celebrations with monks, sometimes held at the temple.

Analyzing these political-economic entities through the lens of religion colours the investigation into *neak ta* and two things underrepresented in the literature which emerged from my field site. The first is the strong connections between Khmer traditional practices and those of indigenous highlanders. Although muted and covered over by generations of kings, monks and modern colonisers, the interactions of Khmer rice farmers with the land as they cleared new settlements were clearly visible as ‘techniques for life-saving’ associated with ancient cosmologies. And second, but most provocatively, the Ancient ones were here in the landscape long before people arrived, as an emergent source of palpable and circulating energy. This is the key point of creatively engaging actual matter and thermal energy in this discussion. Human time and planet time work at incommensurable scales, and for the human to declare that he knows planet time is hubris of the most dangerous kind.

It is communication that creates social persons, and in the stories I recount, those communications were instigated by non-human actors. That this flies in the face of

accepted scientific explanations of the world is not surprising; these actors have been demonised and excluded from the social community for generations. *Lok ta* is losing connectivity, but there is evidence to suggest that whatever energy is there, present in the water and the land, it will engage us once we turn our attention back to it. I suspect we will soon be forced to do just that as the ontology of scientific rationalism is bringing us to the brink of ecological collapse.

Notes

- [1] I transliterate Khmer words as they were phonetically rendered by my interlocutors and accompany my sound rendering with Khmer script at the first usage to facilitate further research.
- [2] The term *ta* means grandfather. *Neak* is variously used: it means ‘person’, it is also used as the pronoun ‘you’, as a female gendered, formal term of address on par with *lok*, which means ‘honorable’ or ‘sir’. I follow Alain Forest and Lisa Arensen and translate this as ‘Ancient ones’. *Arak* comes from the Pali language to mean protect, guard, administrate or govern. *Arak* was used least often in this region, but was used like *neak ta* when the spirit was referred to in the abstract and especially in the forest. When speaking of a particular entity at a particular place, people used *lok ta* or *lok yay* (*yay* is grandmother). When referring to the present-everywhere possibility of emergent presence, *maja tuk maja dey* was most common. For this paper, I use the terms in the same way.
- [3] Primary data were collected from June 2009 to July 2012, with regular subsequent site visits.
- [4] Not the real name of the village.
- [5] The mandala kingdom was a loosely bounded territory in which power emanated from the political centre, which was physically and ritually modeled after mount Meru, the home of the gods (but remember that all mountains are *neak ta*). The king is at the top of the hierarchy, but is understood to be the top king among many, and the offerings of tribute and slaves were contingent on both the power of the king and the contentment of the smaller kings.
- [6] The *baisay* is a ritual object made from a variety of materials: coconuts or banana tree limbs with wrapped betel leaves, or shiny tinsel wrapped around paper cylinders (Figure 2).
- [7] Soldiers were awarded land concessions for their service, and proceeded to grab more land becoming powerful brokers in the region. In addition, local village leaders attempted to secure a government-issued social land concession and awarded land to settlers. The standard giveaway was a village plot of 30×100m² and a one hectare plot of rice land outside the village. For many, the promised land title has yet to appear. The government’s land titling scheme awarded some but not all in this region (Work and Beban 2016).

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