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The Spirits are Crying: Dispossessing Land and Possessing Bodies in Rural Cambodia

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Abstract

In 2009, a land spirit disrupted plantation development within a contested Economic Land Concession in Cambodia. The spirit, along with efforts of a monk and NGO, ultimately persuaded state officials to return 5 ha of land to the local temple. In this paper, we bring together literature on the anthropology of religion, political economy of land possession, and critical development studies; we demonstrate that land spirits continue as members of political patronage chains at both the state and the local level, and show how the non-capitalist logics of spirit negotiations both challenged and legitimized large-scale land acquisition projects. The spirit was not subsumed by, but rather shaped, contemporary capitalist expansion in ways that call for a critical examination of the ontological certainty that all land is designed for human production and consumption.

Introduction

In July 2012 provincial government officials in Cambodia's Pursat province presided over a tree-planting ceremony at a Buddhist temple on the base of a mountain known for its powerful spirits. Depending on who does the telling, this story has two distinct narratives: State officials say the provincial government gave 5 ha of land to the temple and planted 5000 trees on it to show the state's generosity, good governance, and forest stewardship. Local monks and rice farmers say the Pheapimex Corporation illegitimately appropriated the land, which was returned to temple ownership after the spirit of the mountain caused the company distress. Locals describe how the spirit, *Yeah Tape*, first appeared in 2009 when Pheapimex' bulldozers came to clear plantation land in front of the Buddhist temple.¹ After the holy-day service, temple-goers walked past the bulldozers and one woman suddenly convulsed and staggered on the road, overtaken by spirit possession. The convulsions stopped as temple-goers and company workers looked on. The woman stood tall and walked toward the machines; people followed her. "Stop!" the spirit shouted, holding up the woman's hand. "Stop now!!" She continued walking toward the machines. The men working the machines stopped. "You must stop taking down the trees", the spirit said. "This is our home. This mountain has been our home since ancient times; if you cut the trees we cannot stay." The woman then slumped to the ground and slowly, the workers climbed down from their machines, unwilling to continue their assigned task. "The spirits are crying", the woman later said. "The forest is dying and they can no longer live." The workers at the plantation were from the villages surrounding the mountain and everyone was familiar with the Angkorian era stone circle and the powerful spirits that protected the ancient kings at this place. It took two weeks for the company to find workers willing to continue clearing. "People were afraid of the spirit after that", the woman's husband said, "no one would come clear for the company".

The spirit possession marked the beginning of a campaign to reclaim the temple's land. A Buddhist monk was the human face of this campaign, in conjunction with the local spirit of the mountain, to whom people attributed a series of calamities in the plantation: illness and broken machines. In discussions, people described the spirit's claim to the land: "*Yeah* was here first and protects this mountain ... protected the kings before ... protects us and brings the rain so we can eat." The spirit was seen as a legitimate entity in the cosmological framework of plantation workers, local villagers, and Buddhist monks, as well

as provincial officials, Pheapimex company representatives, and the head of the local NGO, Green Vision. Whether through respect and fear of the spirit as the rightful owner of the land or through an understanding of the importance of winning support for otherwise undesirable Economic Land Concessions (ELCs), all recognized the spirit's legitimacy. Eventually, interventions by the spirit, the monk, and the NGO succeeded in persuading provincial authorities to return 5 ha of land to the temple and plant 5000 saplings.

In this paper we draw on ethnographic research conducted within the Pheapimex ELC to explore the ways spirits negotiate and legitimate multiple claims to land under neoliberal state/society dynamics. Five hectares within a 315,000 ha ELC is not an unqualified "successful" resistance against land grabbing, and the overall effect of the tree-planting ceremony was to return some land to the community while legitimizing the large-scale concession. We analyze this story not as a coherent narrative of resistance, but to recognize the central role that spirits play in everyday life in Cambodia, mediating land/labor relations between corporations, villagers, and the state. Drawing on our diverse backgrounds in the anthropology of religion and agrarian political economy, we bring together literature on land's material, sociopolitical, and spiritual dynamics, to illuminate the complexities of power and legitimation in Cambodian state/society relations. We argue that recognizing the power of land spirits embedded in Cambodia's patronage chains helps to decenter capitalist understandings of land as resource and the attendant discourses that posit the human as the only agentive actor in the landscape. This opens "interstitial cracks" within an ontology that divides humans from nature and obscures the entangled, productive relations that "precondition the appearance of power" (Sharp et al [2000](#):24). Contrary to a Weberian narrative that traditional beliefs and connections to the land will disappear under the influence of capitalism and rational science (Weber [2003](#) [1905]:17), the spirits in this account are not dying, the spirits are crying. And if spirits can cry, we would ask: can the spirit speak? (Spivak [1998](#)). Analyzing spirits as non-human actors gives geographers and critical development scholars new ways to think about human/non-human relations and the ways they fold into religious, environmental, and political projects.

Analytically, we focus on the historical processes of state formation and cultural dimensions of moral power that shape how different actors make claims to land, which claims gain legitimacy and why, in order to complicate the popular assumption that land grabbing is done *by* corporations and state elites *to* a diverse group of powerless locals (Hall [2012](#)). We demonstrate that religious and spirit centered discourses make powerful and legitimate claims to contested land, but in Cambodia and Southeast Asia more broadly, they also legitimize state land-grabbing objectives. In the Cambodian context, state power works through patrimonial relations between powerful patrons and networks of clients: networks whose legitimacy was originally conferred through relationships with the spirit of the land. Peasant farmers also legitimate their claims to land through reciprocal relationships with the spirit; thus, farmer, spirit, and government official are linked in a patronage structure (Scott [1972](#)) that today also includes corporate, NGO and development agency interests (though we do not address the latter in this paper). The Cambodian case shows how land grabs in contemporary capitalism are marked not by a strict separation between state and capital, but are enabled by state law and muscle, and are made legitimate through promises of economic growth, jobs, infrastructure, or as in this case, demonstrating that the state protects the forest.

This argument is based on field research undertaken by Work in Kompong Chhnang and Pursat Provinces from 2010 to 2012 and Beban in Pursat Province in 2012. Work, an anthropologist, studied religion and community building in a newly settled Social Land Concession (SLC) in the region, and Beban, a development sociologist, researched land disputes within the Pheapimex concession. Both authors have worked and conducted research in Cambodia since 2005. The authors speak Khmer and interviews were conducted without interpreters. The temple was not the primary site of research, nor was research enacted jointly. Rather, the plantation was a place of employment for Work's interlocutors in the SLC and this story emerged by following their lives and livelihoods. Beban's work on land reform and agrarian issues led her to the plantation in 2012 to investigate ongoing resistance activities in Kompong Chhnang and Pursat Provinces. Interviews were conducted with more than 100 farmers, plantation workers, monks, NGO representatives, and provincial officials. Both researchers are Caucasian western-educated women, one from New Zealand and one from the United States; as such both are outsiders and were raised with monotheistic notions of spirituality. We began this collaboration after returning to the US, as we realized how our combined fieldwork brought together land/labor relations, patronage, and spirits in ways that illuminate how the material and symbolic are mutually constituted, and the multiple understandings of what land is and who owns it.

During our collaborative writing process, we had long discussions about how to present our account in a way that took the spirit's agency seriously, yet could speak to a broad audience. While anthropological work on spirits has a long history, the subject of spirituality is still largely "taboo" in development studies (Deneulin and Rakodi [2011](#); ver Beek [2000](#)), and we acknowledge that by discussing the agency of a non-visible spirit entity (in the Cambodian language spirits are often referred to as people we cannot see) we push into territory that may chafe against so-called modern sensibilities. Religion, we interject, is historically constructed and like all historically constructed systems of belief, including modernist rationality and the nation-state that accompanies it, it is supported by ontologies, or truth claims that attest to the "way the world is".

Jonathan Friedman notes that, “landed property and money are not real objects; they are social fictions just like gods and spirits” (Friedman 1998:117). This puts “modern” ontology on an equal footing with “traditional” conceptions of reality as fictions, in Geertz’ sense of the word, as “something made, something fashioned”, rather than something false (Geertz 1973:15). Manuel Vázquez takes a softer approach, suggesting that the researcher remain “humbly agnostic” toward the supernatural (Vázquez 2011:5), but insists that the subject must be addressed because of the “powerful material consequences” of religious belief and practice (Vázquez 2011:79; see also Allison 2009). We see a growing trend in critical development studies for academics to write it as people tell it, or as it is witnessed: recounting, rather than rationalizing events in which non-human forces act as agents in their own rights (Turner 2011). In this paper, we attempt to bring together the symbolic and the material: the words of our research participants and the historical underpinnings of state/society/religion in Cambodia reveal the spirit to be a political actor whose interventions have material consequences.

We organize the article as follows. We first survey studies on legitimacy, spirituality, and the state as they relate to land issues, and discuss the challenges of privileging an ontological perspective that brings spirits and monastic power into the literature on contemporary land contestation. We explain Cambodian structures of power and legitimacy with attention to the *longue durée* of changing social and cultural forms, and to the processes by which hierarchal relationships of unequal power fold into a moral universe in which the rice and the rain depend on the sovereigns and the spirits. We then turn to our case study, describing how the spirit, the temple monks, Green Vision, regional state actors and local farmers are all part of patronage chains which structure political power and practices of appropriation and accumulation underway in Cambodia today.

Spirit Claims the Land: Bringing Spirits into Critical Geography and Development Studies

The “cultural turn” in critical geographies of development and the rise of subaltern and post-structural theoretical trends more broadly, encourages the reconsideration of human and non-human agency. Such work highlights the contingency of social, political, and ecological relations of power and complicates ideas of human intentionality and control (de la Cadena 2010; Gibson-Graham 2006; Latour 1993). Timothy Mitchell critiques the division of the world into (active) human protagonists and (passive) nature to suggest that human agency is a “product of a series of alliances in which the human element is never wholly in control” (Mitchell 2002:16). We draw on these ideas to move beyond the binaries of human/nature (with its implicit notion of land as resource for human consumption) and traditional/modern (encrypted with teleological notions of progress) to recognize spirits of the land as social agents and analyze how those spirits are woven into the everyday political economy of modern Cambodia. This is not to valorize the local or to suggest that Cambodians are “not yet” modern in their belief systems; rather, to present the multiple ontologies available to the actors in our case study (Blaser 2009:10–20) and how the “seamless web” of neoliberal capitalism depends on diverse non-capitalist logics that are not “in relation to”, but actually shape capitalist modernity (Mitchell 2002:271).

The “non-human” is frequently understood to encompass animals and plants; expanding this realm to non-material agents shifts geographical understanding of landscapes from a horizontal plane of relations to a vertical plane which recognizes memories (Baird and Le Billon 2012), and social relationships with ancestors and spirits that are embedded in particular places (Blaser 2009; de la Cadena 2010). Spirit possession can be a “weapon of the weak” (Scott 1985) which offers a form of disguised protest where overt social protest would be dangerous. This analytic, however, pays scant attention to the religious life of those involved in resistance, and neglects culturally specific forms of vulnerability and power that may be only minimally related to class interests (Ortner 1995). Our case is certainly one where class—and the continued polarization of the rich and poor in Cambodia under neoliberalism—is central to understanding social relations, but the spirit as a powerful interlocutor subsumes human class relations even as class interests attempt to harness the spirit to legitimate their claims. We suggest that a reading of spirit possession as not simply an act of human resistance, but as a non-human actor entangled in dominance and resistance, illuminates the complex intertwined relations between state, citizens, and spirits.

Recounting spirits as agents is not to suggest that spirits are supporting villagers against the state, but to recognise that in much of the world spirits are understood to be the original owners of the land (Mus 1975; Taussig 2010 [1980]) and access to their “property” entails the enactment of reciprocal relationships by human “tenants”, limiting exploitation and making compensatory offerings (Blaser 2009; Valeri 2000). This complicates notions of sovereignty, for human ownership is seen as partial and extraction involves compensation. ver Beek notes that Lenca highlanders of Honduras understand their agricultural practices as acts of violence against the earth, which caused “the weed and trees to bleed and cry out” (ver Beek 2000:33); injuries for which they offer sacrifices with respect and gratitude. Valerio Valeri describes how the “original and occult” power of the land in Indonesia provides sustenance, for which it must be propitiated because “the humans are intruders on a world that owns them more than they own it” (Valeri 2000:14). Non-corporeal agents are engaged in political

encounters across the globe. In Sri Lanka a temple goddess charged against police when they attempted to disperse villagers at a celebration (Lawrence [2000](#)), in central Vietnam, generations of ghosts from many wars enter the social lives of villagers (Kwon [2008](#)), and ancestors in Namibia possess Lutheran schoolchildren (Groop [2010](#)).

The beliefs of non-European individuals, a category that has morphed to refer to non-educated or non-industrialized individuals, have been subject to derision, exclusion, rationalization, but most importantly suppression through the discourse of science, progress, and academic education. Many projects of domination have put considerable energy into expunging spirits from local ontologies: from the rationalization of Buddhism by Thailand's King Rama V that expunged all non-canonical esoteric monastic practice (Swearer [2010](#)), to acts of state that made ancestor and spirit worship illegal in 1970s post-war Vietnam (Kwon [2008](#)). This trend is changing slowly and development discourse has already turned with regard to "indigenous people"; a growing literature points to diverse ontologies often rooted in a unity of the spiritual and human worlds. In the Hnuh-ay-aht Canadian First Nation worldview, human, animal, and spiritual entities come from the same place and are able to move between each type of existence with ease (Castleden et al [2009](#)); Maori worldview in Aotearoa/New Zealand considers humans to be "Kaitiaki" of the land, a term which does not imply ownership but "guardianship" whose authority is vested in one's genealogical connection to specific landscapes (Klein [2000](#)). Cambodia has a significant population of "indigenous" swidden agriculturalists who do cultivate relationships and share the forest with spirits. The actors in our case study, however, are state-assimilated lowland Buddhist rice farmers and Buddhist monks, and the spirits of the land have assimilated the bureaucratic hierarchy of the state and the Buddhist cosmological universe alongside the villagers who share their territory (Ang [1990](#); Harris [2008](#)). The ebb and flow of empire through Cambodia has cast complementary and contradictory categories of thought one upon another through various systems of governmentality, the latest manifestation of which we call the modern state. Pierre Bourdieu notes that the potency of these ontologies rests on the fact that the state imposes the cognitive structures through which it is perceived, making common sense a politically produced relation (Bourdieu [1999](#)); the state's "universalizing vocabularies" cast previous ontological systems (in this case kings and governing spirits) against which the present state is formed (in this case a post-colonial state enacting a neoliberal agenda encouraged by Western donor states), as "exotic", "parochial", and "quaint" (Corrigan and Sayer [1985](#):12). By attending to the historicity of state formations in Cambodia in this narrative, we attempt to disengage ourselves from the categories of thought enacted by the modern state and to make visible the ontologies of our interlocutors, suggesting these are fictions to which we must also attend.

Land and Legitimacy

Cambodia is a frontier for large-scale land acquisitions (popularly termed "land grabs") in Southeast Asia. The 5 ha of land returned in this case lies within the 315,000 ha "Pheapimex concession" in Pursat, Cambodia's largest ELC. The Cambodian experience is part of a broader trend of "land grabbing" in the global South in recent years, whereby state actors and private investors are purchasing, leasing, and forcibly acquiring huge amounts of land, spurred in large part by multiple food, fuel, financial, and climate crises (Boras and Franco [2010](#)). In Southeast Asia, vast amounts of land are being converted to plantations, leading to displacement and intensifying processes of urbanization and labor disintegration (Hall et al [2011](#); Li [2011](#); Springer [2013](#)). Cambodia is a vital case to include in international discussions of "land grabbing", due both to the scale of land transferred to corporate concessions and the importance of land for many rural people (Le Billon [2010](#); Springer [2010](#), [2011](#)). Indeed, as of 2012, the Cambodian state had reportedly granted ELCs on over 2 million ha of land, more than half the arable land in the country (Neef and Touch [2012](#):1); this in a country where 75% of people still rely on agriculture for a central part of their livelihoods (World Bank [2010](#):6).

The spirit *Yeah Tape* protects Phnom Gok, a mountain located inside the Pheapimex ELC approximately 1 mile from the main road to Pursat town. Pursat province extends from the Western side of Southeast Asia's largest freshwater lake (the Tonle Sap) to the Cardamom mountain range, and is one of Cambodia's main rice producing regions. This landscape of smallholder rice paddies and forest is changing as plantation development accelerates in the region. The Cambodian government granted the ELC to Pheapimex Corporation in 1997 without the knowledge of thousands of villagers who live within its boundaries and depend on the land for small-scale rice farming and forest products. Many farmers believed they had rights to the land they farmed, granted through possession and "soft" title (signed by local authorities), but this was trumped by the written concession agreement signed with the central government. In December 2000, Pheapimex signed a joint venture agreement with the Chinese Farm Cooperation Group to build a pulp and paper mill (Lang [2002](#)). Surveying and excavation began in the ELC in 2001, and excavation increased in 2004, prompting local mobilization against the company's actions. On 12 November 2004, over 2000 villagers converged on a local temple to protest the company's actions, blocking the main road for 2 hours until the provincial authorities agreed to speak with them. Development stalled on the concession, but has accelerated since 2009 with rapid cassava expansion into former forestland and rice fields, and the development of an on-site cassava processing plant. Collective mobilization was muted in 2009, and farmers report that land accumulation

by absentee land owners and local powerful elite, who benefit through plantation compensation, has fractured resistance in some communities. Some communal action has taken place: a local Human Rights and environment NGO petitioned for the protection of remaining forest within the ELC (AEC, personal communication 2013), and several hundred people converged on the provincial hall in 2010 asking the governor to help them. However, no land was given back at that time; none except for the 5 ha at the temple.

In Cambodia, the increase in land grabs is part of a broader embrace of capitalism since the early 1990s motivated by the neoliberal agendas of international aid agencies and the ruling elite (Springer 2010). It is also part of a longer history of vast social, economic and environmental destruction caused by years of “progress” and conflict—including colonialism, Pol Pot's ultra-modernist agricultural state, and the externally funded civil violence that continued until the late 1990s (Chandler 2008). Each era disrupted and reconfigured conceptions and practices of property and land use. Prior to French colonialism, land was vested in the sovereign through the transfer of territory from the local spirit to the king, who as the Devaraja (the God-King) became the pinnacle of a patronage network at the bottom of which were people in peripheral areas and landless slaves (Ang 1995:213; Forest 1991; Mus 1975; Springer 2013). Beyond the claims of the king, the practice of “acquisition by the plough” largely governed local land use (Russell 1997:101). Following the collectivization of land during the Khmer Rouge era, the Cambodian government introduced a series of laws that gradually established the private right to own, occupy, and sell land, eventually enshrined in the 2001 Land Law. This mandates that any person who can prove uncontested use of land for at least 5 years before 30 August 2001 (the date when the law came into force) is entitled to request a definitive title of private ownership. The law also allows the granting of ELCs up to 10,000 ha for national development purposes, a process widely documented to cause displacement, human rights abuses, and ecological devastation (Borras and Franco 2011; Greenwood 2012).

ELCs have become a central means of accumulation for the Cambodian ruling elite and their patronage networks. Prime Minister Hun Sen is at the apex of this network and his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) operates as if the party were the state. Politico-business elites within the party manipulate patronage networks that underpin state bureaucratic functions, the military and development initiatives. Simon Springer describes how neoliberal donor-led reforms since the 1990s work to strengthen rather than disperse the power of elites, who channel resources through patronage networks and create an “articulated neoliberalism” whereby existing systems of legitimation remain within the logic of neoliberal reform (Springer 2011). Land grabbing by elites in this context is not just a story of corruption and illegality; the legal system itself works to legitimize dispossession of the poor by elites. Claims based on occupation, community consensus, and actual land use are deemed illegal by the Land Law, under which the burden of proof lies in paper documents that trump “orality” (Springer 2013).

The Pheapimex Corporation is illustrative of the ways that patronage chains are expanding to include corporate actors under neoliberal governance. Pheapimex is one of Cambodia's most powerful companies, claiming over 7% of Cambodia's land area (Global Witness 2007; Vrieze and Naren 2012) and its director, Lao Meng Khin, is a well known senator within the ruling party (Global Witness 2007; Scopis 2011). The company enjoys a strong relationship with the prime minister, the Cambodian armed forces, and powerful elites at regional levels through which it secures its forest concessions and ELCs. This is typical of the personalized nature of the Cambodian system, which mediates neoliberal decentralizing policies to insure that contracts go to those on “the inside” (Le Billon and Springer 2007; Sneddon 2007:167). Those on “the inside” can also include NGO directors: whether donor driven or privately funded, the NGO is both patron and client in this system.

Internal “land grabbing”, appropriating land inside the sovereign territory, makes ruling party legitimacy and its contestation highly visible. (Sharp et al 2000:4) challenge the analytical centrality of the state in questions of legitimacy and decenter the binary of domination/resistance to emphasize its multiple “entanglements”. State and non-state actors make legitimate claims linked to specific historical processes of state formation, governance, and the cultural dimensions of society (OECD 2010). For a property claim to gain legitimacy it must present messages that others “find persuasive” (Rose 1994:25) and draw on various culturally salient registers of what is moral and of how society should be (Valverde 2011) to “provide the normative underpinning to regulatory, forceful, and market powers” (Hall et al 2011:8). Our case study, in which land was returned, includes claims made by a Buddhist monk and a territorial spirit, a development corporation and provincial officials, and by a local NGO. The land claim made by the spirit and the monk were persuasive in this context, because everyone involved recognized the spirit's potential to protect or thwart occupancy of territory. To illustrate why these claims were persuasive, we turn now to historicize the role of spirits as non-human actors in the intertwined realms of state formation, Buddhism, and everyday understandings of land ownership.

Subversion, Environmental Discourse, and Development Objectives

In order to understand the intertwining of politics and religion and the reasons Green Vision became a central actor in persuading state authorities to return the land in our case, we need to have a sense for the history of Buddhist environmentalism in Cambodia. This movement began in the late 1970s in Thailand when Buddhist monks responded to the deforestation that deteriorated local livelihoods with environmentally informed Buddhist rituals and sermons. In 1988 a monk conceived of a tree ordination ceremony in which trees are wrapped in monks' saffron robes and the spirits of the land are called on to protect them (Darlington [2012](#)). This "ordination" of non-humans in consort with the embrace of forest spirits within Buddhist ritual chafed against the powers of religion and state in Thailand, but was effective in creating a forest that could and would be protected by local inhabitants and promote environmental conservation (Srivastava [2008](#); Swearer [1997](#)). These "community forests" were locally managed reserves from which residents could continue to subsist and into which outsiders could not intrude. The ritual became very popular and was eventually subverted into the service of powerful projects beyond its original intention: connecting tree ordination to the territorial projects of Thailand's king (Delcore [2004](#); Harris [1997](#), [2007](#); Tambiah [1976](#)).

The tree ordination ceremony remains symbolically powerful and has been adopted by Buddhist monks and environmental NGOs in Cambodia in ways that are equally entangled and productive of power (Bradley and Oberndorf [2005](#); Buddhasāsanapaṇḍity [1999](#)). Green Vision was founded by Sath Chan, who at the onset of ELCs in early 2000 quit his job with the provincial bureau of land management and joined a Buddhist-based environmental organization. He later founded a small NGO to pursue his vision that the forest ruins of ancient empires, also venerated by local people, could join with Buddhist discourses and the power of the spirits to intervene into Cambodia's rapid deforestation. When he learned that the spirit of a mountain with an ancient site had lashed out against the company, he encouraged Ven. Trum to hold an ordination ceremony. The productive intertwining of Buddhist merit and morality with the local level power of the forest spirit and the ancient site brought over 200 locals to the ordination ceremony. The tree-planting ceremony performed by the government 2 years later gathered almost 100 government officials, plantation managers, and local residents and entangled the ceremony with the legitimization of state agendas, just as in Thailand. Darlington contends that the spirit of the land "remains place specific" and as such may be "ultimately more powerful than national symbols ... as they are more difficult to appropriate" (Darlington [2007](#):174). Our case study shows the appropriation of the spirit's resistance into the national discourse of development, contrary to Darlington's suggestion, but also shows how place, manifest in the spirit, ignited power in the midst of domination.

Spirits and Dignitaries: Complexities of Legitimation

Although spirit possession is fairly common in Cambodia, it is also quite complex, and when it occurs spontaneously to a layperson outside the structure of a celebration, like the incident we describe, it can bring forward unexamined beliefs that are often frightening for people (Wiener [1995](#); Willford [2006](#)). The woman who experienced the spirit possession was not a professional spirit medium and was not a local of this place; her land was in a village 50 km to the west and she came to the mountain to work on the plantation. After 2 months working for the company, the woman said she was visited by the spirit of the mountain in a dream: "The spirit told me I would become a medium ... I shouldn't be afraid, I would be protected ... I was afraid ... I wanted to tell the spirit that I could not do it." Later that week she went to the temple to attend the holy day service and make an offering to the monks. It was on that day the spirit possessed her and chased the men away from their bulldozers. After the possession episode that halted forest clearing for 2 weeks, the monk, Venerable Trum, went to the village head and the local police to make a complaint.

Ven. Trum was first called to this location during lengthy meditation sessions while at his home temple in Kompong Chhnang. When he arrived in 2006, the area was lightly developed with a few homes and rice fields nearby, and a small trail leading up the mountain. Although the mountain was within the ELC, this was prior to the plantation development and there was no sign of the company at the time. Ven. Trum climbed the mountain and found the ancient ruins with evidence of recent offerings by villagers and a small hut for the *neak ta* of the mountain, Yeah Tape. He spent 2 months there in silent meditation accompanied by two nuns from his home temple, after which the three of them left to visit 16 powerful mountains in the region. When he returned from this pilgrimage, he visited the village head, recounted his story and asked for land on which to build a temple: 31 ha were granted to the monk, 15 at the base of the mountain and 16 going up the hill that encompasses the ancient site and the location of the *neak ta*. Ven. Trum and the head nun began clearing the land to build the temple. Water flowed from the mountain where before there was none and local villagers came to receive blessings and healing from the monk. Word of his presence, of the spontaneous fresh water spring and miraculous cures spread and Ven. Trum acquired powerful patrons who donated money for building projects.

These patrons were not powerful enough to give him any leverage when Pheapimex, citing their signed concession agreement, claimed what he thought was temple land. As Ven. Trum took his protests beyond the village head to the

provincial government, the plantation experienced mysterious calamities around the temple and especially in the fields in front of the temple. Workers said that machines broke down, tires blew, people were injured, and toward the end of 2011 malaria spread through the plantation, cutting the company's workforce nearly in half. While Ven. Trum threatened Pheapimex managers with the destructive potential of *Yeah Tape* and the ancient site that she protects, a man associated with the plantation contacted his friend Sath Chan, the head of Green Vision, recounting the stories of the powerful spirit and the Angkorian ruins on the mountain. Mr Chan visited Ven. Trum and suggested that a tree ordination ceremony would "raise the light of this ancient place that has sat for over 1000 years without anyone thinking about it". After that event Mr Chan began talking to provincial administrators, many of whom he knew, to arrange for a peaceful solution to the problem.

The tree-planting ceremony presided over by the assistant provincial governor was held in July 2012. Dignitaries ceremoniously planted individual saplings while hired plantation workers attended to the 5000 other trees for the cleared land. Attending were villagers from the surrounding area and the monk's home temple, local police, provincial officials, and representatives from the plantation. The signs over the presiding dignitaries sported slogans encouraging forest conservation and the speeches invoked respect for the forest, the spirits, and for Cambodia's cultural heritage. The assistant provincial governor's speech celebrated the state's relationship with the spirits, the temple, and the forest, and implored the villagers to cooperate with state plans:

“ I have seen the ordained trees and it makes me so happy; I can see a relationship develop here between the ministry of tourism and the temple to bring people to this region to see the ancient site and the natural forest ... the Chinese company will make a positive contribution to developing this region and will provide a laterite road all the way to the state highway ... and will build a school too ... It will be done for us soon and we will all work together to develop the region and protect the forest. ”

Some attendees at the ceremony celebrated the state's efforts, while others were not so convinced by this attempt to gain legitimacy. As the assistant provincial governor finished speaking, one of the local villagers whispered: "We will never see that school. The road maybe, if it helps the company. But those are just empty promises." Ven. Trum expressed similar but stronger sentiments and was not pleased with the government's appropriation of the ceremony. He objected to the larger project of plantation expansion in the country, and was concerned with his own conflict with local officials. He felt that the 5 ha was insulting and was angered that he was not allowed to fly the Buddhist flag or the Green Vision flag during the ceremony. In a rather heated exchange with Mr Chan, Ven. Trum said: "They come here and act as if it was all their idea. As if Yeah Tape and you, Mr. Chan, had no part in this. As if my coming to this mountain and learning from the spirits had no part in this. They make themselves the heroes." At this outburst, Mr Chan encouraged the monk to be calm: "They returned the land and planted the trees. Your temple will thrive ... the forest and the spirits will be safe. We do not have to trust them, but we have to respect them and believe they will honor this deal."

Spirits and the Everyday in Cambodia

Mr Chan illustrates an important tension in the entanglement of legitimacy: although respect and honor are suspect, by performing the ceremony the state is invoking its longstanding relationship with the spirit of the land. This section lays out the relationships that have historically legitimized both state and individual claims to land use, which are based in reciprocal relationships with the spirit-owner of the land.

All the actors in our case study are familiar with the idea that legitimate use of land and resources, in Cambodia and in much of Asia, is founded on social relationships of reciprocity enacted with a land spirit known regionally as the owner of the land (Holt 2009; Mus 1975). The ethnographic record in Southeast Asia offers numerous examples of the social relationships cultivated between the spirit-owner of the land and subsistence farmers and hunters. Among highlanders in Vietnam, Georges Condominas (1977) recorded this blessing after the rite to burn the forest:

“ Let us eat of pork without eating to excess
Let us eat of the buffalo without eating for no reason
Let us kill the chicken without killing for no reason. ”

During fieldwork with Cambodian subsistence farmers who recently cut new fields from the forest, Work recorded how people understand this relationship. One woman offered this description:

“ The spirits of the forest are only dangerous when we are careless with words and greedy in deeds. We built the spirit-hut first; we made offerings to the owner of the water and land and asked permission ... We are only poor, we said, please let us stay ... We don't come to eat until there is nothing left, only to raise our children. Please protect us from illness and hunger... (Work, fieldnotes 2011; see also Arensen [2012](#) for similar contemporary descriptions in Northwestern Cambodia).

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The historical record shows that conquering kings of the past also linked their territorial projects to the spirit-owner of the land. The ways that land spirits assimilate small territorial projects, like those described above, facilitate the enclosure and appropriation of people and land by imperial projects and their universal cosmologies like Buddhism. The ease with which state-sponsored extraction projects harnessed the logic of the tree ordination ceremony is connected to the ways the early Khmer kings used the technologies of Brahmanic priests and their pantheon of sky gods to expand their empires. Historical records tell of the legitimate “purchase” of territories from local spirits in front of witnesses, with promises of development to enclose sanctified areas and erect temples through which offerings will be made (Ang [1990](#), [1995](#):214; Cœdès [1937](#)): villagers only agreed to these royal acts in so far as they were translated through and performed before the spirit-owner of the land (Ang [1990](#):139). Mus’ ([1975](#):10) research explains how the earliest rulers from China understood this spirit as the “divinization of the energies of the soil” and consciously engaged that energy, materializing it through sacrifice and representation. In both China and India, conquering kings engaged the spirits of the land as they expanded territories and enclosed communities: situating the conquering ruler at the apex of a powerful contingent of local leaders, both human and spirit. The term Devaraja is most often translated as god-king, but could also be understood as “king of the gods” (Filliozat 1965, cited in Pou [2002](#):146). Early investigations into the Brahmanic influences in Khmer religion suggested that the Brahmanic gods subsumed the animist deities of the local inhabitants (Bhattacharya [1961](#); Harris [2008](#)). More recent research rejects the notion of syncretism and instead recognizes the primacy of local practices that absorb new influences into the existing framework (Cannell [1999](#); Forest [2012](#); Holt [2009](#)). That perspectival shift accounts for the similarity between so-called indigenous spirit practices and those that persist despite Buddhism and so-called modern rationality. However, it does not mitigate the exploitative nature of the king's reign and in many Southeast Asian languages, the king does not reign over a kingdom, but “eats” the kingdom.

The longstanding dominance of Buddhism in Cambodia adds an explicit moral veneer to the attributes of the kingdom-eating Devaraja, the king of gods, who is also the *Chakravartin*, the king who turns the wheels of the Dharma. Connections between the moral capacity of the king, the security of the territory, and the bounty of the harvests are found carved on stele and written in the chronicles of ancient kings, in writings from the middle kingdom (Thompson [2004](#)), and in colonial records that tell of elaborate ceremonies in which Khmer provincial leaders propitiate the *neak ta* for fear of both spirit and villager retaliation (Hansen [2007](#):112). In contemporary Cambodia, spirits are very much a part of life and continue in their role as powerful protective entities with the capacity to cause harm. The dangerous power of *neak ta* arbitrates justice in the Cambodian courts before whom the accused swear an oath not to lie (Khmernews [2008](#)) and they appear regularly in Cambodian literature and popular media: murdered forest activist Chut Vuthey was immortalized as ‘*neak ta*: protector of the forest’ in a drawing circulated online (Sacrava [2012](#)) and photos posted online show a small ceremony soliciting the *neak ta* for help against the Pheapimex corporation (Soy [2012](#)). All provincial capitals have a *neak ta* to whom the smaller village spirits report and for whom yearly celebrations are often prepared (Chor [2007](#)), ceremonies at the royal palace to honor the spirits of kings continue (Hang [2004](#)), and spirits of the land represented in stone linga of ancient kings remain ensconced in Buddhist temples now patronized by Cambodia's political elite (Ang [1995](#):223; Guthrie [2002](#)). The current Prime Minister, Hun Sen, is rumored to be the reincarnation of a sixteenth century king, who rose through his own prowess to take over the kingdom (Noren-Nilsson [2013](#)); he now builds schools and hospitals that bear his name just like the kings of old (Wolters [1982](#)) and engages the magical arts of ancient Buddhist practice (Edwards [2008](#)), consciously positioning himself as the Chakravartin. In his assumed role as the righteous and ravenous king, he appeals directly to villagers through idioms of concern that declare, for example, a “war on landgrabbing” (Yun [2007](#):1–2), even while most land grabbing is meted out through his own patronage networks (Springer [2011](#)).

Conclusion

Recognizing the centrality of cosmological understandings in land struggles enriches our analysis of contemporary “land grabs” by broadening the framework through which we understand claims to legitimacy and the logic through which land

accumulation continues. Louise Child suggests that spirit possession is more than a claim to subaltern power, it is an activity that effects “radical transformative relations between persons” (Child 2010:54). The radical transformation we describe came about in a number of ways at the plantation and began the process by which the provincial government was induced to return 5 ha of land to the temple and to plant 5000 saplings. We do not claim that the spirit was the only actor in this drama, or even the most important; the legitimacy of this claim was also facilitated by the charisma of the monk, the large local demonstrations against the plantation, and the international discourses of Buddhist environmental movements and cultural heritage sites introduced by the NGO. The effects of this land return were ambiguous: it presented a small local victory against the ELC and simultaneously reinforced the claims to legitimacy made by the Cambodian state at it demonstrated the state's relationship with the spirit, the temple, and with forest protection. Even if this display was seen as a fiction by the Monk and some villagers, it allowed the state to point to this as an act of stewardship in the government-controlled media (Human Rights Watch 2013). It is difficult to determine whether state officials were fearful of the spirit and the ancient power of the site or were strategically using the legitimacy of these culturally salient entities. Whether people “truly believe” in the spirit is unknowable, and less important than the fact that all involved recognized the spirit's agentic power.

An analytical focus on how historical processes of state formation and cultural dimensions of moral power shape the ways certain claims to land gain legitimacy, opens scholarship on land contestation to consider the importance of multiple actors in land claims. Beyond the limiting binary frames of state/local, domination/ resistance, the role of spirits as political actors emerges. Theoretically, this account brings together scholarship on the political economy of Cambodia's patronage networks and work on non-human actors to show how non-capitalist logics are not subsumed by, but rather shape, capitalist modernity. The spirit was powerful precisely because spiritual beliefs remain salient as Cambodian people accommodate both basic subsistence and politically organized subjection: spirits are part of the patronage chains that underpin all legitimate land claims. The problem of legitimacy is never solved but remains a fluid and dubious domain in which actors make themselves amenable to locally salient registers of morality and proper sociality: re-configuring diverse ontologies. The retaliation of *Yeah Tape* at the base of the mountain in Pursat is part of an ancient drama in which the powerful spirit of the land lashes out against territorial violations, and subsistence cultivators are appropriated by kingly projects of territorial expansion and extraction. The discontent we encountered during recent fieldwork, from subsistence farmers and spirits alike, suggests imbalance between righteousness and ravenous consumption. Ongoing contestation against ELCs and the substantial losses of Hun Sen's political party in the 2013 election reflect the widely held belief that the nation's current poverty comes from that imbalance: contemporary governing systems inadequately attend to the moral attributes of social power that ameliorate their inherent violence (Kent 2008:77). In this context, the categories of thought that “spontaneously apply to all things of the social world” (Bourdieu 1998:35) come not only from the modern state or development agendas, but also from older categories and other systems that legitimize and contextualize human relationships of unequal power.

Philip McMichael (2010) argues for the importance of studying social mobilization that seeks to open possibilities beyond capitalism, for while the impact of localized movements on processes of social change may be “trivial” or unknowable, they are important because they—and the scholarship that seeks to understand them—make an epistemic or ontological change. If our move toward elaborating alternative ontologies chafes against the enlightened, rational, and scientific worldview underpinning academic ways of knowing, we suggest this is a good thing. The fictions and obfuscations that keep afloat the dominant paradigm of technical control over the natural world and the exchange relations of capitalism are giving rise to what could be the final enclosure of land on the planet. What we suggest is not that we all start propitiating the spirits of the land, but rather that we acknowledge the claims that these spirits make to the land and critically examine the ontological certainties that pulled *Yeah Tape* out of the mountain and into that woman to put a stop to the bulldozers: the certainty that all land is designed for human production and consumption.

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Endnotes

- 1 As told to Work (fieldnotes 2011).

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