



## Displacement, Diminishment, and Ongoing Presence

### The State of Local Cosmologies in Northwest Cambodia in the Aftermath of War

This article explores the role of local cosmologies in the resettlement and ongoing inhabitation of Reaksmei Songha village in northwest Cambodia. As the Cambodian civil war drew to a close in the late 1990s, forested land was allotted to those willing to risk occupancy on the former frontlines. Attempts at resettlement were interpreted with reference to longstanding Khmer depictions of the *prey*, forested landscapes replete with powerful and often malevolent spirits. For many village residents, successfully reshaping the material terrain was regarded as being inextricably entangled with successfully navigating the cosmological one. However, engagements with the cosmological landscape in the postwar era were characterized by growing uncertainty. Change and continuity in local cosmologies were embodied in village discourse and practice around two different kinds of forest beings: the *neak ta prey* and the *saccang*.

KEYWORDS: resettlement—war-altered landscapes—local cosmologies—Cambodia

HOW ARE local cosmologies affected by war and violent conflict? In the aftermath of destruction, do such cosmologies retain or lose their interpretive power? In northwest Cambodia, postwar resettlement efforts have taken place in war-altered landscapes that pose considerable hazards for their inhabitants. For many of the residents of Reaksmei Sangha village in western Battambang province, successfully reshaping the material terrain was regarded as being inextricably entangled with successfully navigating the cosmological one. Village residents sought to understand the dangers the cosmological landscape represents in order to successfully act upon and physically transform their surroundings. However, in 2009, considerable discursive uncertainty and divergence marked engagements with the spirit world.

The 1996 surrender of the Khmer Rouge based in Pailin effectively ended the fighting in the district of Rattanak Mondul in Battambang province (FLEISHER 2005). Resettlement of the area began shortly after. Demobilized soldiers, their kin, and residents of nearby resettlement sites for returned refugees comprised most of the early postwar population (BOTTOMLEY 2003). When resettlement efforts began, the once abundant fields and orchards of Reaksmei Songha village had been abandoned for nearly twenty years. In their place lay a forested landscape strewn with the remnants of war. The first wave of postwar settlers knew that they were coming to claim or buy land that was possibly mined. It was in the dangerous condition of the land, ironically, that its potential lay, creating an opportunity for land-hungry settlers. It was because of the presence of mines and the recent cessation of conflict that land in the area lay largely unclaimed. If the settlers could survive the dangers inherent in clearing and cultivating potentially mined land, they could secure land tenure and establish agricultural livelihoods. The war-altered terrain thus offered both peril and promise to those willing to enter it.

Both the explosive remnants of war and the forested state of the landscape were regarded as potential threats. In Cambodia, forests have long represented “illness, danger, and fearsome spiritual power” (CHANDLER 1999, 76). The Khmer term *prey*, often translated as “forest,” also encompasses all kinds of scrubland, wilderness, and places overgrown with vegetation (OVESEN et al. 1996; EBIHARA 1993). Two contrasting landscapes—the *prey*, forested, often mountainous, wilderness, and the *srok*, the cultivated domesticated world of the field and the village—

saturate Khmer literature and oral tradition (CHANDLER 1996). Another set of place-based oppositions, the rural and the urban, have received considerably more scholarly attention as of late, largely due to the spatial politics generated around them by the Khmer Rouge (PONCHAUD 1989; KIERNAN 2004; VICKERY 1984). However, various scholars have recently redirected attention to the importance of the *prey* as a trope for moral disorder in Cambodia's historical and contemporary contexts (HANSEN and LEDGERWOOD 2008).

Forests represent death, sickness, and disaster, and were historically considered the refuge of bandits and outlaws, people living outside of the realm of the Khmer kingdom (FOREST 1992). Yet forests are considered places of potential power as well as sources of threat, the dwelling place of ascetics, and a site of regeneration (PONCHAUD 1989; SMITH 1989). EDWARDS (2008) has demonstrated that the forest was historically a place one fled to or through, a potential refuge when the *srok* grew dangerous. Moreover, the opposition between forest and village has always encompassed transformation. Wilderness can be transformed through cultivation—the *prey* can become the *srok*. In former times when the population was small and land abundant, peasants under state or local pressure periodically moved into less populous or more remote areas and cleared and cultivated new ground (THION 1993). Land in the *srok* was traditionally inherited from one's ancestors, whereas the *prey* consisted of land anyone could claim if willing to risk the dangers inherent in forest settlement.

On a cosmological level, the *srok* is also commonly designated as a Buddhist realm, a haven for civilization that is pitted against the wild powers of the nonhuman denizens associated with the *prey* (KEYES 1994). Khmer cosmology is comprised of a general dual categorization between spirits of the *srok* and spirits of the forested wilderness (ANG 1986; CHEAN 2002). One primary category of these spirits, the *neak ta*, are place-based entities that are tutelary in nature, potential protectors of settlements as well as topographical features such as forests, mountains, and rivers. The guardian spirits of the *srok* are intertwined with human communities and will provide assistance if treated well. The *neak ta prey*, the guardian spirits of the forests, are commonly regarded as powerful, wild, and largely malevolent towards human beings (FOREST 1992; EDWARDS 2008).

To claim a portion of land in Reaksmei Songha, residents had to physically occupy and cultivate land regarded as *prey*. The material exigencies of clearance and cultivation were accompanied by cosmological efforts to safely and successfully engage with the nonhuman denizens of the forested landscape. Local cosmologies both diverged and converged with longstanding Khmer cosmological conceptions of the forest. For a variety of village residents, the simultaneous threat and potential of the forest were represented by two very different kinds of beings: the *neak ta prey*, the forest guardian spirits, and the *saccang*, human-like forest dwellers.

My analysis focuses upon local extra-Buddhist cosmologies. Numerous scholars have discussed the revival of Theravada Buddhist ritual and practice in postwar Cambodia (MARSTON and GUTHRIE 2004; HARRIS 2005; SATORU 2008), and it is evident that Buddhism is a strong and dynamic force in Reaksmei Sangha.<sup>1</sup>

Large communal gatherings marked the ritual cycles of the Buddhist year, and many village elders attended Buddhist holy days. However, the village was still regarded as situated in a forested area. To a certain extent, the presence of the *wat* and its attendant bonzes was seen as protecting villagers from the spirits of the forest. Spiritual protection radiated out from the *wat*, where both Buddhist ceremonies and government and civil society meetings were held beneath a large grove of mango trees inhabited by wasps. The cosmological layout of the village was centripetal, and that center was the *wat*, its sacred boundary markers establishing the limits of its consecrated ground. As one moved increasingly farther away from the *wat* to outlying homes and farms, the monks were considered to have less influence and the forest spirits respectively more. By 2009, after a decade of resettlement efforts, area residents had in many respects achieved their goal of recreating an agricultural landscape. However, even those who lived near the *wat*, like my host family,<sup>2</sup> still had farms on land regarded as *prey*. During the year I spent in Reaksmei Songha, the majority of village residents continued to interact with the remnants of the forest and endeavored to navigate its cosmological terrain.

#### THE SPIRITS OF THE FOREST: THE RAVENOUS ONES

Contrasts marked discourse and practice about the forest guardian spirits. Many villagers engaged in comparisons of what the forest spirits had been like in previous eras and how they behaved now. There was widespread agreement amongst villagers that forest spirits had been cruel (*khat*) in the prewar period, killing and cursing those who displeased them. They sometimes manifested themselves in human dreams, but were generally known for more violent engagements with human bodies. Spirits were said to grip and twist the stomach and send illness, often malaria or seizures. Enchanted wild animals, particularly tigers and great snakes, did the bidding of the forest guardians, and humans who had been killed by such creatures were thought to have displeased the spirits. Forested land was under the protection of the *neak ta prey*, and any entry into a forest required offerings to request safe passage or success in the hunt. Trespassing upon the territory of unknown spirits was regarded as potentially deadly. Numerous villagers told stories of people who had been cursed and died from simply setting foot upon the ground of powerful spirits. Even after leaving the forest, one man explained, Khmer tradition held that if one failed to make an offering of thanks, the spirits would seize and kill the ungrateful person.

All spirits, including ghosts, were thought to prefer to reside in trees, and cutting and clearing wood was considered particularly offensive to the forest guardian spirits. In some forests, various elders relayed, the spirits were so powerful that felling a single tree meant one's death. Hunting also angered the forest spirits. A series of taboos and ritual practices surrounded hunting, an exclusively male pursuit. Even with such precautions, the forest spirits were treacherous and attempted to lure people to their deaths.

When Reaksmei Songha was first being established through the clearance and cultivation of primary forest in the 1960s, many of the original settlers reportedly fell ill from malaria. The threat of malaria has long been linked to entering the forest in northwest Cambodia. The term malaria, *kruang jan*, literally means the fever of defeat, and the Khmer have historically ascribed malaria to spirits cursing strangers in their region (MABBETT and CHANDLER 1995). The oldest living villager, Ta Boran,<sup>3</sup> claimed credit for appeasing the forest spirits during this era. He described his rites of entry to the region in the mid-1950s:

At first, it was so difficult, this place. Since I did one thing I have never been ill, my health has been good. I never take medicine, I take tree roots. When I came from Kampot, I dug up tree roots and brought them. I brought them to make drinking medicine in this place. I brought earth and stones. I put them in a basket and brought them. When I arrived here, I dug up tree roots here, mixed it all together and drank it.

Through ingestion he combined the elements of the place he had left with those of the place he had entered. His ancestral spirits from the *srok* he had left had instructed him in these rites, he explained. Once he had mixed and consumed the substances, he was safe to initiate a friendship with the unknown spirits of the new ground. He summoned the *neak ta prey* and made the following speech, he proclaimed:

Please reduce the victory of malaria,  
 You, Friend, do not go and harm others.  
 If you want to harm them  
 because you are so hungry, ask me.  
 When hungry for a boiled chicken,  
 or hungry for bananas,  
 or hungry for coconuts,  
 or hungry for candy,  
 or hungry for alcohol,  
 I will make it and give it to you.  
 You, Friend, stop cursing them...  
 Listen to me...  
 Wait for me to make you food to eat.  
 I called all of them down from the mountain, the Friends...  
 Whenever [other settlers fell] sick, they came to call me,  
 because I had initiated friendship here already.... Malaria? Those in Badak,<sup>4</sup> if  
 they had chills and reached here, they didn't die, they lived.  
 If they asked rightly, did rightly, they were healed.

Ta Boran offered the spirits the terms of a relationship via the preparation and offering of domesticated foods. Also of note is the elder's diagnosis that the source of the spirits' cruelty lay in hunger, in being ravenous. His account was my first exposure to a critical local opposition used to differentiate the *srok* and the *prey*. The forest was classified as a place of hunger, the *srok* as a place of abundance.

The settlers had come to the forest to grow food, to transform the place into *srok* through human cultivation. Ta Boran contended that such cultivation could buy them cosmological safety if they were wise enough to share its fruits.

#### THE STATE OF THE SPIRITS IN THE POSTWAR ERA

Postwar settlement saw people entering and clearing forested areas in much the same manner as the early settlers. There was a clear continuity in ritual practice, namely the presentation of food offerings to the forest spirits, accompanied by prayers for protection and well-being. Shrines for the forest spirits were ubiquitous in Reaksmei Songha. However, there was considerable debate about the state of the forest spirits in the present. There was widespread agreement by the generations that had lived through the war years that the *neak ta prey* had diminished in both presence and power. Explanations for this diminishment were twofold. One was that many of the forest and mountain guardians had fled their former places, and the second was that the spirits remained but behaved differently, either because they had grown weak or because they had been tamed in one way or another.

I turn first to the latter contention. Ta Boran's diagnosis that the guardian spirits' cruelty stemmed from hunger was shared by others and most notably expressed by an old military commander. Ta Nuon was convinced that the spirits were less cruel in the current era than in earlier periods:

They have eaten their fill already.  
 Now the area is full of markets, crops.  
 Before was an era of poverty, people didn't have enough.  
 If the people have plenty, the spirits have plenty,  
 if people are full, the spirits are full.  
 They were cruel in the past because they didn't have enough food.  
 [Now] they give to the grandchildren<sup>5</sup> for they are full already...  
 Now they allow you to cut the forest:  
 you cannot cut their places but can cut around them,  
 if you see tall trees, that is where they live, do not cut.

Despite the destruction of forested habitat, this elder regarded the domestication of land as beneficial rather than detrimental for the *neak ta prey*. Agricultural prosperity, in this view, benefits both humans and spirits. The settlers were removing the habitat the forest guardian spirits protected, but because the bounty of the *srok* quenched their hunger, they permitted these changes to be wrought upon the landscape. Other residents also stressed that the spirits are gentle when people make offerings and call them to eat, a practice abandoned during the war era and reinstated in the aftermath of the conflict.

Another interpretation of this state of affairs was that the *neak ta prey* had been influenced by Buddhism. Ta Sabai, a traditional healer and a prewar area resident, told me that there were no longer problems with the guardian of Niang Lem

mountain. Once a cruel spirit who killed people with improper behavior, it had stopped harming people and become gentle and easygoing (*slot*). This change was ascribed to the guardian having begun to follow Buddhist precepts, which Ta Sabai argued that the spirit had learned from observing the forest monks who meditated at the mountain. The huge old white tiger which had once guarded the mountain had departed, he added, a sign that the guardian had left the old ways. Others concurred that various guardian spirits now “held to the precepts” of Buddhism, emphasizing that in the past, these same spirits punished human wrongdoing. Both the idea of the satiating and conversion of the spirits posit that the forest spirits grow weaker as *srok* grows stronger, whether in agricultural terms or as a Buddhist domain.

Flight was the other explanation for the present-day weakness of the forest spirits. This flight was variously ascribed to the destruction of forested habitat or to the war. For many village residents, the loss of the great trees that had once filled the landscape was linked to a diminishing presence of the *neak ta prey*. Such accounts displayed local beliefs that the forest spirits were vulnerable to human actions:

In the old days, the guardian of Morning Star mountain was cruel.... You could not let your mouth speak evil.... In the old days, it had a fire, like a lamp. It was bright like the morning star. It flew. So they named it Guardian Morning Star. During the Pol Pot time, they cut the forest, cut the trees until they were all gone completely, cut all the trees on the mountain to plant squash and pumpkin. When that happened, it was lost, and we no longer see it. In the old days when I lived here, on Buddhist holy days I saw the guardian flying. Now I do not. Somebody was working the earth there once and they saw a snake fall from above on the mountain—it rolled down to the earth, slippery and huge.

In this account the cultivation of the landscape not only weakens but defeats the denizens of the wilderness. The displacement of the guardian is symbolized by the snake’s fall from the once powerfully guarded mountain.

During Democratic Kampuchea, the forest around Morning Star was “cut, ignited, and burned,” an elder stated. Guardian spirits fear fire, he said—if humans burn a forest, the spirits flee. Many argued that the *neak ta prey* also leave if the trees they defend are cut down, abandoning the forest or mountain they protected. Some argued that they leave behind lesser spirit minions instead, which have less protective power. The spirits’ absence was linked to the destruction of much of the forest cover of the area. However, the logic of the spirits’ abandonment cycled between the spirits leaving because of the logging and the logging only being possible because of the spirits’ departure:

All the mountains had guardians residing there, so if the people spoke heedlessly, they were bitten to death by snakes or tigers. It was like this since earlier times, but now it is ruined—there is no more wood, no more forest. How could there be tigers or elephants? Only small snakes [remain], the great snakes cannot stay, the ones that were controlled by the guardians. They moved to live in this or that other place. If they were still there, maybe we wouldn’t be able to cut wood.



In the alternate explanation for the spirits' flight—the fear of war—the vulnerability of the spirits mirrored that of the human populace. Several of the elders argued that the guardians were weakened with the creation of the Khmer Rouge. Perhaps they were frightened when the people shot at each other, Ta Sabai speculated. At any rate, from that time on, they were “lost, not like before.” Another elder also affirmed that the *neak ta prey* flee war. They can be shot, he said, despite the fact that they are invisible, so they flee gunfire. The guardians are thought to live far longer than human beings (up to a thousand years, Ta Sabai insisted) but they are not immortal. Neither humans nor spirits have reached nirvana (*nibbana*); both kinds of beings are still trapped in the cycle of reincarnation. In this interpretive historiography by the elders, the growing powerlessness of the populace was mirrored by a growing cosmological absence.<sup>6</sup> The spirits' circumstances echoed those of the population—they too had fled the intensifying fighting and the destruction of their homes. “They fear guns like we do. When fighting starts, they flee like we do,” Ta Sabai stressed.<sup>7</sup> Villagers stressed that as the spirits retreated to far-off forest strongholds, they left their former domains absent.

Whether residents believed that the spirits had fled the fighting or the destruction of the forest, it is important to note that these spirits were not thought to have ceased to exist but rather to have been displaced. The mobile denizens of the Khmer wilderness, the forest spirits and the wild beasts, were repeatedly said to have gone elsewhere, upwards and outwards to the forested highlands. For example, tigers were not gone from Cambodia, villagers assured me, only from the area. They had simply retreated to other mountains and other forests, and a host of other beasts along with them.<sup>8</sup>

These narratives of loss and diminishment were common but not absolute. There were those that asserted the undiminished and ongoing presence of the forest spirits. One elder scolded me for being overly literal in linking the spirits to their forested habitat, saying: “The forest in Cambodia will not end easily. Even if there is no more forest, the spirits can still care for people. If they have nowhere to go, they will stay in the rocks.” Many villagers were engaged in ongoing speculation about the spirits' presence and engagements with area residents, trying to ascertain the signs and workings of spirits upon bodies and crops.

A pair of great snakes is traditionally thought to reside in deep caves under every forested hill, protecting the hill for its spirit guardian. On one notable occasion, the village was abuzz for an entire day about a neighboring village's encounter with these enchanted denizens of the *prey*. My host mother, Ming Ti, commanded the narrative from her seat in a hammock beneath the house to all passersby. An excavator was digging earth out of a hill when it cut open the den of a pair of great snakes. The female snake escaped into the earth, but the male attacked the excavator. It wrapped its tail around the machine and held it, wrapped right round, Ming Ti said. The snake was 12 meters long and weighed 200 kilograms, her daughter added. The female was larger, as big as a coconut palm. The driver of the excavator was afraid, Ming Ti explained, so he crushed the attacking snake's head with the shovel. No one seemed to cheer this victory. On the contrary, it was clear that



there was quite a bit of admiration for the snake. The villagers had reportedly cut off the snake's head and preserved its body so that people could view it, and several interested villagers had gone off to investigate. That evening one villager returned and reported that the python's body had not, in fact, been preserved. Those hungry villagers ate it all, the various people sitting beneath our house concluded with merriment.

The primary importance of this account lies in the manner in which the story was told and received that long afternoon by the many visitors to the chief's home. The story was not a cautionary one—there was no suggestion that people should stop their efforts to transform and change the physical landscape. The man and his excavator did, after some struggle, crush the snake's head. Yet there was more to this tale than the strength of people and their technologies. Its tellers and listeners exhibited an almost pleasurable sense of confirmation that the great snakes remained, harbingers that the ground was still inhabited or influenced by powerful nonhuman presences. And although one beast had been vanquished by the excavator, its mate, the truly large one, had gotten away, vanishing back into the depths of the earth. The power of the narrative lay in its confirmation of what its listeners had suspected or experienced in a variety of ways. It constituted an example of the ongoing presence of the remnants of the wild *prey* under, around, and alongside the cultivated *srok*. Indeed, despite discourse about the diminishing power or presence of the forest guardian spirits, I met virtually no families who had neglected to light incense and pray for permission to settle in the area. Ritual practice around the forest spirits, in other words, was still ubiquitous, and the following section will discuss the kinds of discourse surrounding such practice.

#### NECESSARY TRESPASS:

#### DISCOURSE AND RITUAL PRACTICE IN A FORESTED DOMAIN

Whereas accounts of the spirits' cruelty generally emphasized the time before the war, even in the present, offending the *neak ta prey* was reported to have negative physical consequences. Ming Ti described experiencing stabbing pain in her legs one whole night after failing to keep a promise to offer a guardian spirit a hand of bananas. The sudden onset of illness or an illness that failed to quickly respond to treatment generally prompted consultations with spirit mediums and healers to discern whether a spirit was responsible (EISENBRUCH 1992; BERTRAND 2001).

Trespass was still considered a primary reason for arousing the anger of the remaining forest spirits. One young former soldier described this act of trespass as abusing or imposing upon the spirits. War itself had been one such imposition upon the forest spirits, he argued. The area's inhabitants during the war years, he said, did not feed the spirits but instead merely "shot all over the place, having no fear for each other."

A great deal of talk still surrounded the matter of how one safely behaved in a forested domain. What constituted immorality in the forest was variously con-

strued, but there was agreement upon several points; namely, loose or irreverent talk and greedy behavior. The ways in such a person might be punished were diverse, ranging from being struck ill to encountering tigers, snakes, and landmines. A former soldier described the following possibilities:

Some people go and walk in the forest.... And those people don't guard their speech, don't keep taboos, they speak bad things.... Sometimes if you abuse the spirits, bother them,  
it's not a mine—  
sometimes a snake bites you.  
Sometimes a tree falls.... We speak, curse a lot, speak carelessly,  
so the angry spirit persuades the eyes.  
As in, it has a magic technique,  
it seizes you by confusing [your] reason—  
“O, I don't need to take this path.  
This path is closer.”  
When you carry the wood there, you step on a mine there.  
It's as if your eyes are drawn there—  
when you came, you didn't take this path.  
But when you already have a lot of wood, heavy wood,  
you think “*Huuuh*, this path is not easy, this one is closer,”  
you go there and *ping* [used for the sound of a mine explosion].

Yet the spirits would not harm people who did good, I was repeatedly told. Those who have “wicked hearts” cannot live in the forest. People with deceit in their hearts “don't live here long.” By implication, those that successfully enter, clear, and live in forested landscapes are those with good and moral hearts.

Nearly every household in Reaksmei Songha had some sort of *rong*<sup>9</sup> shrine for the forest spirits. These were located outside of the house, usually on the family's farmland (FIGURE 1). “We make offerings, we don't allow them to forget us,” a former soldier explained—“we bring incense to offer to them, this is the affair of the *neak ta prey*, the lords of water and earth.” These offerings were considered imperative at the time of settlement, particularly before forest clearance. Liquid, smoke, and fire elements accompanied any offering to the spirits—joss sticks provided the smoke, candles (or sometimes cigarettes) the fire, and beverages ranging from pure water to tea to beer constituted the liquid. A local government deminer said he also made such offerings and requested well-being whenever he began to clear a new minefield. He placed the offerings upon his demining machine<sup>10</sup> and addressed the guardians: “We tell them we have come to cleanse the mines to liberate the people. Do not mind that which affects Grandfather, Grandmother. And we ask them to keep any of the mines from being tilted.”

The difference between being blessed or cursed by the spirits was located by these informants in the act of requesting permission, not in leaving the forest intact. Village residents rarely held back from altering the landscape on account of the spirits, but the procedures surrounding that alteration were taken seriously by



FIGURE 1. Forest guardian shrine in the stump of a felled tree. All photographs are the property of the author.

many of them. Alongside the importance of respectfully acknowledging and supplicating the spirits was the repeated assertion that the spirits respected destitution. Residents described necessity as an acceptable rationale for behavior. In the prayers the villagers related to me, permission for settling and disturbing the forest landscape was requested on the basis of their need. The following statement was typical:

We came here and asked the guardians to please allow us to live here. We are not here to defeat them, to lord it over them. We are destitute. We have no place to live apart from this one. Please let us stay here and have well-being.... If I do not come to live here, I have nowhere else to go.

I was often told that the spirits had taken pity on villagers because of their poverty. Alongside this discussion of destitution was a counter-narrative that the spirits punished greed. One settler argued that he lived safely in the forest because of the purity of his motives and actions:

I have not come with ambition. Some come and shoot animals. I don't think like this, I only take what I need to raise my family.... You request only that which you need to do.... Now we know that the forest has very many landmines. But we don't know what else to do. O, Spirit-Sir, I must cut here, please allow it, please grant us well-being. If it is done like this, nothing bad happens. Many people have one road already, [yet think] never mind, let us cut another! Act quickly! Many are like this. Many of us humans have lazy ideas.

This comparison between need and greed surfaced repeatedly in the village. Greed was presented as unacceptable to the spirits and, as will be seen in the following section, the *saccang*. Large landholders were not necessarily viewed favorably. Numerous residents informed me that the forest was diminished because of rich landowners who bought up large tracts of land and clear-cut it, not small-holder farmers.

In addition to requesting permission to settle upon and clear the ground, offerings were also made in relation to agricultural matters—offerings of thanks for harvests and requests for rain and protection from wild animals (FIGURE 2). Villagers



FIGURE 2. A harvest offering to the forest guardian spirits.

were as likely to invoke the forest or mountain *neak ta* as the agricultural *srok* spirits during such ceremonies—this could have been due to the still-fluctuating nature of the landscape, which was variously and in some locations simultaneously described as *srok* and *prey*, or to the fact that so few residents had past knowledge of the area and its cosmological specificities. The mountains<sup>11</sup> were the most immutable feature of the natural landscape and the keystone of the conception of *prey* in the area. The forested condition of the landscape had undergone successive waves of change. Moreover, the location and identity of specific forest guardians was quite an indeterminate matter. If they did not appear in dreams, residents most often found them by stumbling upon them, by finding a water source or a great tree, or by falling ill after crossing a certain area. Mountains were, on the other hand, visible and fixed sites, and a guardian spirit was said to reside on each and every mountain. Laying a claim to guarding a mountain was seen in terms of chronological primacy. All manner of different kinds of spirit beings could be guardians; it was simply a question of which spiritual being arrived first. These mountain guardians were known by the name of the mountain. However, there had been such radical changes in human demographics during the long years of conflict that many of the mountains had been renamed, some on multiple occasions, and thus some of the names of the mountain spirits had been forgotten. At the harvest offering rite I attended, this lack of specific knowledge was resolved by a prayer inviting any and all local wild spirits to consume the prepared feast offerings.

A few villagers professed to have specific relationships with area spirits. I knew of five *kru khmer* in Reaksmei Songha, ritual specialists in extra-Buddhist practice.<sup>12</sup> Ta Dara was considered the most powerful *kru* in the area and acted as a spirit





FIGURE 3. Ta Dara crafting protection amulets to ward against malevolent spirits.

medium and healer. Under Khmer Rouge rule, when all ritual practice was forbidden, Ta Dara said he had rolled his treasured scroll of Pali inscriptions in a tube of bamboo and secreted it in a thicket. He had hosted various spirits during his lifetime, but since his return to Mount Anong as one of the first postwar settlers, he had been a healer on behalf of the mountain spirit. His home was dominated by a large shrine to this spirit, and Ta Dara said that his fealty to it meant that he could no longer go to the *wat*. After a long life of war and displacement, Ta Dara was spending the last years of his life fixed to a place—the spirit was so strongly tied to the mountain, he told me, that it made him ill if he strayed too far from the mountain or stayed the night elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> People travelled to him for diagnoses, exorcisms, and the crafting of protection amulets against malevolent spirits (FIGURE 3). This local spirit was thus not only regarded as not displaced but as actually able to fix its medium in place, but it was exceptional in this regard.

#### THE *SACCANG*: TALES OF BOUNTY IN THE FOREST

The forest was also thought to be inhabited by a very different kind of being, the *saccang*. Accounts of the *saccang* stressed the fertile potential of the forest rather than the emphasis on hunger often invoked by discussion of the *neak ta prey*. In academic literature, the *saccang* are often described as powerful forest hermits. They are often represented in Buddhist temple statuary as old men with white beards and top-knots, dressed in animal skins (HARRIS 2005; MARSTON 2008). However, in Rattanak Mondul district such forest ascetics were referred

to as *thudung*, a Thai term. In local discourse, the *saccang* were regarded as a different and particular kind of being. The *saccang* were distinguished from other kinds of spirits, but they were not regarded as “normal” humans either. As one man explained to me, the *saccang* have bodies like humans, but we can rarely see them. They live in our world, yet they often remain invisible to us. They were said to reside in the forest, but their world was a *srok*—orchards and houses and domesticated animals. The general consensus was expressed best by Ming Ti, who explained: “They are in our world with us but it seems different. We see the forest full of trees, they see fruit. The fruits are there but we cannot see them.” Land we see as “normal” might be for the *saccang* a beautiful lake visited by animals and ringed by their houses. *Saccang* were also said to be fond of beautiful caves. Although their belongings appear to us as mere boulders, Ming Ti said that their occupancy could be seen by the marks of their brooms, visible on the smooth-swept floors of caves for which they cared. Other elders spoke of seeing golden lights emitting from mountain caves at night and hearing the tinkling sound of traditional instruments on the wind. One woman was taken in a dream to the *saccang* village and permitted to walk through their land. She was shown the unmarried son and daughter of the Great Lord of the mountain, beautiful like celestial divinities. She was shown the great snakes that acted as their guards, and the tigers that they regarded as pets. However, the *saccang* usually appeared to people in pairs, as elderly couples with long white hair living in houses in the forest. All of these accounts preceded the war years.

*Saccang* were described as distinct from both humans and the *neak ta prey*—unlike humans, they were said to always be honest. And unlike the forest guardian spirits, they were not thought to harm or curse people who trespassed upon their property. I think it pertinent that they can be compared to the *neak ta prey* and humans in another way: in their orientation towards food. Unlike the forest guardian spirits, they are not ravenous, and unlike humans, they are never greedy:

In their spirit, they don't want to be rich. They don't want anything. They don't exploit others. They only take what they need. If they go to catch fish and they need one, they only catch one, never two. They are not greedy.

The world of the *saccang* was described by all as bountiful. This bounty was on occasion shared with humans, but the *saccang* did not allow greed:

*Saccang* have their own villages. If you get lost, they will tell you the way home. If you want to stay with them, you are asked to be honest, no stealing, no speaking in error. If you cannot do it, they will send you back.

The *saccang* were said to have interacted with human beings more frequently in the past, although they always withdrew if people failed to follow their moral codes. The elders told various stories to illustrate this point. One elder stated that when people in the past held ceremonies, they were able to borrow dishes from the places of the *saccang*. But the people did not return the dishes, and the *saccang* ceased their lending. In another story, a golden oxcart began to slowly emerge

from the earth in a village. They would give it to the villagers, the *saccang* told them, in exchange for a four-eyed person, a pregnant woman. When the villagers refused, the oxcart sank inexorably back under the earth.

It was honesty and the purity of the *saccang* that was thought to afford them their power. The *neak ta prey* fear the *saccang*, one elder emphasized. The forest spirits eat whatever they are offered, he went on, even disgusting and spoiled food, but the *saccang* only eat good and fragrant food. This statement flags the dependence of the *neak ta prey*—despite their reputation as powerful and sometimes cruel, they are regarded as bound to people by their consumption of food offerings. Perhaps it is because the *saccang* are considered less dependent upon people that they were seldom said to be undiminished in the present. All agreed that they are seldom seen or encountered now, but their houses and gardens were believed to remain. The lack of sightings was ascribed to the failings of the present age, particularly a general decline in morality. “People tell lies, cheat, trick, so they won’t let us see them,” one elder said. “People are not as honest now,” another elder insisted, “when people believed in good and bad merit, they saw them often.”<sup>14</sup>

The *saccang* story I will relate in detail is set near a refugee camp on the Thai border. Unlike the other accounts I collected, this story was set in the 1980s, in the midst of the turmoil and war that marked the life of its storyteller, Ta Somnang. Bored and constrained by life in the camp, he narrated, six or seven young men slipped out and climbed a nearby mountain:

And three were lost. They reached the top of the mountain and saw no paths. They walked and walked, but still arrived at the same place.... That night they were strongly hungry, then the *saccang* [said] these are righteous people, so they wanted to feed them. They ate and drank at the place of the *saccang*. There were pomello trees, bananas, and sweet potatoes to eat, and rice. They were a couple like humans, like an elderly couple who lived on the mountain, cutting a farm.... The three men [later] told people that there were only three rolls of rice on each plate, the size of a child’s wrist. For those hungry men, it appeared too little to fill them up. Then the old woman called them, Grandchildren, let’s eat rice.... They finished the first piece and their energy returned, the second piece and were almost full, the third piece and they were as full as when we eat two or three full plates of rice at home. Then the *saccang* went to pick a pomello. They brought back just one and cut it into three pieces for dessert. When the men slept, it was in a small hut. They slept in hammocks, but no mosquitoes bit them.... They slept easily until dawn. Early in the morning, when the light came, when the sun rose, the three young men said their farewells.... They said, Grandfather-sir, where is a way to the refugee camp? The elders pointed to a very dark way. The men saw only forest, but as they went along, there was a road shining with light, a road where hundreds and thousands had walked. The *saccang* had opened the road so it could be seen. The men descended, went straight along it, walked down from the mountain easily, in an instant.... When the young men reached their homes they were asked, where did you sleep last night? [They said,] we slept in the house of Grandfather and Grandmother on



the mountain. But there was no such house. I have walked there also but I have never seen a house there.

In the story Ta Somnang heard while displaced and living in a state of great insecurity, another world is glimpsed, a world of mercy and abundance, a world where there is a road even in the remote wilderness. The men are lost, but the *saccang* are at home in the dark woods. Instead of refugee rations, the seemingly small amounts they are fed fill them utterly. They sleep easily, in contrast to the camp residents who slept every night with the threat of shelling and hurried flight (GETLIN and HALL 1992; SHAWCROSS 1984).

Villagers' accounts of the forest guardian spirits emphasized linkages between moral practices and safety in the forest. *Saccang* stories emphasize morality as well, but they also function as a promise of the potentiality of the forest. Even in the forest, the world of the *saccang* is full of agricultural plenty, the bounty sought by those willing to undergo the arduous conversion of *prey* to *srok*. Entering their world, which is actually our own, affords a glimpse of what the forest can be. It also provides a vision of what humans should be. Descriptions of the *saccang* link their morality with the agricultural and natural plenty they enjoy. According to my informants, it is human failing that has led to the *saccang* receding from view—unlike the forest guardian spirits, they are not displaced by human greed and human activity. They remain present, yet out of view. In the world that is now so seldom seen, their lives are full of agricultural and moral goodness. In this manner the *saccang* illustrate both promise and judgment—a promise of what the forest can become and a judgment of what humans so often fail to be.

#### CONCLUSION: MOVING COSMOLOGIES

The residents of Reaksmei Songha did not shy away from potentially perilous engagements with their surroundings, but they actively sought to reduce their vulnerability while doing so. This article has considered cosmological efforts to that end, illustrating that forests, always uncertain and threatening places, had become even more ambivalent in the aftermath of war in northwest Cambodia.

Local cosmologies characterized the forest as a site of both danger and promise. The potential agricultural bounty of a forest transformed to the cultivated *srok* was embodied in accounts of the *saccang*. Its threats were housed in the forest guardian spirits, whether in descriptions of their ravenous state or in accounts of their punishment of unwary and immoral persons. The forest could yield to *srok*, or its guardian spirits could fell a greedy human. The body of cosmological discourse and practice around such matters was intended to reduce such uncertainty and secure the forest's potential.

Many residents used need to justify trespassing on a cosmological level. People said they had entered and altered the territory of the *neak ta prey* because they had nowhere else to go. Residents diverged from longstanding Khmer tropes of the malevolence of wild spirits in their arguments that the purity of their motivation for

such trespass—raising their children, making a living from the land—would assure their safety when accompanied by respectful conduct towards the spirits. This emphasis upon correct motivation and behavior in the forest was a repeated theme in accounts of how to live safely in a threatening and dangerous environment.

However, like the rapidly changing material landscape, the cosmological landscape was awash in flux. Area residents had divergent opinions about the fate and state of the forest spirits after war and human resettlement. Villagers' discourse about spirits traditionally regarded as malevolent and powerful often construed them as surprisingly vulnerable. Discursive attempts to make sense of the violent changes to the landscape and its inhabitants often elided human experiences and the fate of the spirits in the years of turmoil. Many saw the fortunes of humans and the *neak ta prey* as closely bound together, such as in arguments that people's lack or wealth of food affected the condition of the forest guardians, or that the threat of danger, displacement, and death applied equally to humans and nonhuman denizens of an area. Divergence of opinion also surrounded the question of what the act of forest settlement, the conversion of *prey* to *srok*, did to or for the denizens of the forest. Some residents were unsure or skeptical of whether the spirit world remained at all. Yet continuities of thought and ritual practice were also very evident. In short, the cosmologies at work in Reaksmei Songha village were both durable and vulnerable, an increasingly uncertain but nonetheless lingering resource for life in the aftermath of war.

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#### NOTES

\* This research was generously supported by several research awards from the University of Edinburgh and a fieldwork grant from the Center for Khmer Studies.

1. However, at the many rituals and ceremonies I attended, it was often acknowledged that there was a loss of religious knowledge and practice from before the 1970s.

2. While conducting research in 2009, I resided in the home of the village chief.

3. All informants' names have been changed, but I have followed the customary Khmer practice of using age-specific pronouns before older villagers' names. *Ta* is the term for grandfather, used for men once they are around sixty years of age, and *Ming*, or aunt, generally refers to women in their thirties and forties.

4. Badak was the farthest village along the road in that era.

5. As with Khmer royalty, cosmological figures are frequently referred to as grandparents and human beings as their children or grandchildren.

6. A few elders asserted that they had not been abandoned by the spirit world, even during the chaos and terror of Democratic Kampuchea. These elders accounted for their survival in terms of spiritual protection, variously crediting *neak ta* spirits, *tevoda* (Brahmanic celestial beings), or the Buddha (see FOREST 1992 and PONCHAUD 1989 for similar accounts).

7. I was able to find only one reference in Cambodian scholarship to a similar account. OVESEN et al. (1996) discuss an account by a medium in a trance of a *neak ta srok* who had been displaced by the Khmer Rouge alongside the villagers under his protection.

8. Several mountains were a common reference point for this wilderness refuge, such as Mount Oral in Pursat province and the mountain ranges stretching along the Thai border.

9. This Khmer term designates a rough shelter and is used for both spirit houses and human rest platforms erected on farmland.

10. This is a massive tank-like machine used for defoliating minefields and detonating anti-personnel mines.

11. The Khmer term *phnom* encompasses both large mountains and small hills, such as the hillock in the heart of Phnom Penh that is said to have been where the city was founded. The *phnom* I refer to in Rattanak Mondul district are various freestanding hills and ranges of hills, all considerably under 1,000 meters in altitude.

12. There are an array of specialities performed by different types of *kru khmer*, who range from herbalists, soothsayers, black magic practitioners, and spirit medium healers, to purveyors of protection spells and love charms (see OVESEN and TRANKELL 2010 for comparative accounts of indigenous healers). Four of the village's five *kru khmer* in 2009 acted primarily as spirit medium healers. The fifth was a traditional herbalist.

13. According to OVESEN and TRANKELL (2010), injunctions against sleeping away from home are common for *kru khmer* mediums.

14. ZUCKER (2007) explores a similar discourse in a southwest Cambodian village, where contemporary immorality was also said to be removing human access to the enchanted world.

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