

Animism in Cambodia: bioregional living in practice

The minority people of Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri provinces in Cambodia have almost certainly never heard of the term “bioregionalism.” However, their communities and lifestyles offer much to students and scholars of Ecocriticism, and in particular, of bioregionalism. The Tampuan, Brao, Kreung, and other minority groups are what Peter Berg and Ray Dasmann – coiners of the term ‘bioregionalism’- refers to as “ecosystem cultures” (Berg and Dasmann, 1977). Gary Snyder (1995) elaborates on this point: “Ecosystem cultures are those whose economic base of support is a natural region, a watershed, a plant zone, a natural territory, within which they have to make their whole living” (131). This is certainly true of the indigenous people who provide the source material for this paper, as will be demonstrated in the pages that follow. Special attention is drawn to Cambodia’s minority people because many of them still practice “animism,” which gives their relationship to the environment a religious underpinning that is composed of a nature-based spirituality. Furthermore, they are what Frederic Bourdier (2006) refers to as “vernacular people” whose societal structures and epistemology are largely shaped by their natural environments –not the other way around (p. 6). Remarking on the Tampuan, Bourdier concludes “Thus, the manner in which native populations use their environment is directly dependent on the ideas they have regarding themselves, their physical environment and their intervention in the latter” (ibid, 7). It is in this way that Cambodian animists have much to impart in the way of bioregional knowledge; they are infused with the ecological milieu and their actions are largely governed by spirits that reside in nature. Without intimate knowledge of flora, fauna, watersheds and spirit places of their region, their lives would literally come to a halt. Yet despite these attributes, the animistic, ecosystem cultures of Cambodia are on the brink of extinction due to outside forces that are not a part of their bioregion. The loss of these unique cultures would be a loss to all of humanity, for theirs is a way of life that should be studied and emulated if we are to live alongside nature into the future.

Indigenous people represent only 1.4 percent of the population of Cambodia, with the majority living in Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri provinces in the northeast part of the Kingdom¹. While the Cambodian government often refers to its indigenous people generally as Khmer Leu, there are in fact six different tribes living in these two provinces: the Tampuan, Jorai, Brao, Kreung, Kraveth and Bunong. Other aboriginal groups live in small, scattered

¹ United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Sixth Session: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/6_session_tebtebba_iwgia.pdf.

populations in distant provinces but their numbers are extremely small and virtually no ethnographic research has been done on them and it is believed that they are in the advanced stages of “Khmerization,” meaning that they are heavily integrated into mainstream Cambodian society (Ovesen and Trankell, 2004, 254). While some members of the tribes of Ratanakiri and Mondulhiri have converted to Christianity, a substantial portion of them still believe in what the West has termed “animism.” The term ‘animism’ was coined by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor in his 1871 book *Primitive Culture* though the definition he established was described in David Hume’s 1757 *A Natural History of Religion* without actually using the word ‘animism’ (Graham, 2005). This definition held that indigenous people were child-like in that they had difficulty distinguishing between animate and inanimate objects, deifying common objects and natural phenomenon out of superstition and ignorance. New definitions of animism have surfaced in recent years, most notably from British scholar Harvey Graham, who posits that the “new animism names worldviews and lifeways in which people seek to know how they might respectively and properly engage with other persons” (ibid, xiv,). The other “persons” Graham refers to are not always human, but by that he does not necessarily mean spirits, but trees, rocks, thunderstorms, etc.

In some ways, Tylor’s emphasis on the belief in “spirits” per se existing in numerous places fits closer with the reality uncovered in this research; his observation about aborigines being “naïve” or “childlike”, however, has no place in this discussion. Graham’s notion of animism being about living respectively and harmoniously with one’s surrounding was also, under the right circumstances, supported by my informants, and it is this approach to Cambodian animism which lends itself most clearly to the concept of bioregionalism.

The term bioregionalism can be interpreted and explained in many different ways; there is, to date, no concrete definition of the word, and perhaps that is a significant advantage to researchers and students of Ecocriticism. In *Dwellers of the Land*, Kirkpatrick Sale (2000) defines bioregionalism as knowing and appreciating the place where you live in terms of its flora and fauna, its carrying capacity for human impact, and the history of man’s activities in that area (42). A bioregion can also be defined by natural boundaries such as mountain ranges, rivers, wetlands, vegetation types, or climate zones –natural lines of demarcation, as opposed to arbitrary lines drawn up by governments for the sake of convenience –lines that, for the most part, ignore natural landforms and biotic zones. Mitchell Thomashow (1995) asserts that, “The basic premise of bioregionalism is that ecological considerations should determine cultural, political and economic boundaries” (p. 61). Perhaps most apposite for this paper, however, is an approach postulated by Jim Dodge (2007), p.344):

“One of the more provocative ideas to delineate bioregions is in terms of “spirit places” or psyche-tuning power-presences, such as Mount

Shasta or the Pacific Ocean. By this criterion, a bioregion is defined by the predominant psychological influence where you live. You have to live in its presence long enough to truly feel its force within you and that it's not mere descriptive geography.”

This perception strikes closest to the way Cambodian minorities live in terms bioregionalism. Animists in Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri are in tune with spirit presences in their area and extreme care must be taken not to offend or disturb them for fear of incurring their revenge. French anthropologist Frederic Bourdier, who has spent considerable time among the Tampuan and other tribes of Ratanakiri, notes “One must also show allegiance to the spirits who dwell in the forest, at water points, rocks, hills, trails and village sites. Without certainty of the “agreement” of supernatural powers (through dreams, sacrifices, prayers), no human action can be undertaken” (p. 28). His findings reflect what my informants explained to me. Highlighting the importance of obtaining the acceptance of local spirits before engaging in activities in spirit-places, Do Yok, a Tampuan, related the story of a large tree stump near the sacred Yeak Lom Lake on the outskirts of Ban Lung:

“Do you see the cut tree there? That was done by minority people. This angered the spirits at the sacred lake, who then killed several people from the minority village where the loggers came from, and all the people from the village had to move out of the area. Even now, minority languages cannot be spoken in the park, or the people who speak it will fall ill and die very quickly.” (Source: Do Yok, a Tampuan informant, January 2010 in conversation with the author)

Do Yok informed me that the Tampuan villagers who felled the tree did so at the urging of Vietnamese buyers –distant forces who do not live in nor understand this particular bioregion who nonetheless have a serious negative impact on it. Later we will discuss how the most serious threats to animistic cultures practicing what Ecocritics call “bioregionalism” are remote, powerful entities (corporations, governments, etc), as well as economic migrants, none of whom must be allowed to wield too heavy a hand in regions where they are not a part of the ecological milieu.

The villagers who cut the tree at Yeak Lom Lake either understood the risks involved in poaching timber from a sacred locale and decided to try their luck, or they were former animists who no longer believe in the spirits. The former, according to Do Yok, represent a small but growing number of Tampuan people whose actions put not only themselves but innocent villagers at risk from vengeful spirits. As stated by Bourdier, the spirits can communicate messages through dreams; they can also make their wishes known by making people ill, thus instigating the use of a local shaman or “magic man”

to relay messages between the human and spirit world. Yet another method employed by spirits for transmitting information is the use of wildlife as mediums. Several species of animals are known messengers of the spirits, among them the muntjac (or barking deer), eagle, leech, chicken and many other varieties of birds.

According to my informants across five tribes, the muntjac is the most feared of all forest animals, and its meat is not eaten. Whether joining a hunting expedition or simply leaving the house, if a muntjac is heard or encountered within two hours of a journey, the party or individual must turn back and return home at once; the spirits disapprove of your plans. Leu, a 42-year old man from the Kreung minority group near the Da Lai community forest, told a story which was witnessed by numerous villagers:

“A man walked out of his house one morning and even before he reached the bottom of the stairs there was a muntjac crying out. The man stood there, listening to the deer, and shouted back to it defiantly: ‘Yes, I hear you, barking deer. Yes, I know that I will supposedly die within 24 hours if I do not return home. But I don’t believe you! Sure, I will die in one day. Ha ha ha!’ The man taunted the deer all the way to his motorbike and then went about his business. Within twelve hours he was hit by a truck and killed.”

(Source: Leu, a Kreung minority man, January 2010 in conversation with the author)

Anecdotes such as this are difficult for outsiders to verify, but their prevalence among indigenous people in Cambodia is a testament to the significance that signs attributed to local spirits play in their culture, signs which can only be read with special knowledge of the bioregion.

Birds also carry potent messages from the spirit world. In a Jan. 13 2010 piece in *The Guardian*, Margaret Atwood wrote, “Some of us once believed that birds could carry messages, and that if only we had the skill to decipher them.” Traditional people in Cambodia appear to have retained the skill. Leu explained that if an eagle is spotted making a pass in your direction, one must return home; if the eagle flies in a straight line, one may proceed; ignoring these signals may result in illness or misfortune. In the same *Guardian* article, Atwood explains that “We believed the birds knew things we didn’t, and this made sense to us, because only they had access to the panoramic picture –the ground we walked on, but seen widely because seen from above, a vantage that became known as the “bird’s eye view.” Furthermore, birds play a vital role in determining the end of our lives. Do Yok told of how every person’s time of death is decided:

“For a person to die, three things have to agree on it: the birds, the trees and the earth. When a man or woman dies, a coffin has to be made, and for that a tree must be cut down; the coffin has to be buried in the ground, which means a hole must be dug in the earth. Birds have powerful eyes and can fly and they can see and know everything you do. The birds, the trees and the earth know all about your life and they will decide when it is time for you to go. If someday you get sick and you are lying in bed and a bird comes near your window and chirps –that’s it; you are finished. Nobody and nothing can save you.”

(Source: Do Yok, January 2010 in conversation with the author)

Being in tune with the spirits, therefore, requires careful attention to the fauna and flora of the area you live, which is also one of the main tenets of bioregionalism. Bender notes that, “Crucial to becoming dwellers in the land is knowing the particular ecological relationships operating in the specific place where we live, understanding the cultures native to our place, and knowing the distinctive lore of those who have grown up there” (374). The central theme espoused by Cambodian animists and Ecocritics alike seems to be that the more one knows and understands his natural environment, the less likely one will be to engage in ecologically unsustainable or destructive practices; being clued-in by local spirits makes this relationship all the more fecund. The man-nature rapport can become a positive feedback cycle as a healthy natural environment inherently offers man greater opportunities for healthier and more prosperous living. As the school principal on the fictional island of Pala notes, “Treat Nature well, and Nature will treat you well. Hurt or destroy Nature, and Nature will soon destroy you” (Huxley, 2002, 261).

Environmental writers provide an abundance of philosophical possibilities about what might constitute a bioregion and how one ought to live within its domain, but how do real “dwellers in the land” practicing animism in Cambodia live? Where exactly do they live and how do they go about life? Is it even a bioregion at all? And what is their current status?

The autochthonous populations of Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri had extremely limited contact with the outside world until the 1990s (Bourdier, 117). Furthermore, according to Cambodia scholar David Chandler (2008), rural lifestyles and attitudes have changed very little “since Angkorean times (from the ninth to the mid-fifteenth centuries) or even over the last few thousands years” (15). During this vast time span they have practiced swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture, switching between two land plots approximately every fifteen years. “They have developed over the centuries an intimate relationship with their natural environment by experiencing its potential resources, evaluating appropriate periods of its exploitation, as well as discerning its limits,” explains Bourdier (103). Slash-and-burn or shifting

agriculture is not, however, without controversy, and some government officials with strong ties to industry often overplay the ecological destruction wrought by this practice in order to evict indigenous people from their ancestral lands, settle them elsewhere, and establish hydropower projects or agricultural plantations on these sites. Accusations of environmental destruction are faced by indigenous peoples throughout Southeast Asia, including Cambodia. In a well-documented case in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, James Wong, former Minister of the Environment and Tourism, accused the Penan people of ecological destruction, despite strong evidence to the contrary. "I will not bow to the experts. I am the expert. I was here before the experts were born," insisted Wong, who supports the expansion of oil palm and logging on their land (Davis, 1995, 101). Astonishingly, Wong also added –contrary to numerous studies- that "logged over areas will return to normal after five years" (ibid, 103). Considering the fact that indigenous populations, including those of Cambodia, have practiced their form of agriculture for millennia without causing serious environmental impacts, accusations of ecological devastation do not coincide with reality.

"Swiddening is above all a long-term technique that stems from the knowledge of the stages of forest regeneration. Its aim is to domesticate without conquering or dominating nature," explains Bourdier (94). Furthermore, new land plots are not opened up in primary forest, and ceremonial offerings and communication with the spirits always accompany a new land clearing. Therefore, large-scale, permanent and indiscriminate destruction of forests does not, in general, take place at the hands of indigenous people who practice their traditional way of life.

Kam La, whose Brao village is located near the bank of the Sesan River across from Veun Sai district, explained that before the Khmer Rouge and before construction of an upriver dam in Vietnam, trading and travel was unnecessary; everything his village of one thousand families needed could be obtained from the forest, which to this day is designated as a "community forest" by the local government, a forest that also doubles as a buffer zone for Virachey National Park, located to the north. He explained that:

"Before the Khmer Rouge, we could get all the food we needed within a short distance of the village. Wildlife was so abundant that elephants used to raid our crops and villagers dare not walk outside at night for fear of tigers. But after the Khmer Rouge, everyone owned a gun. Everyone had a gun because everyone was a soldier, and with those weapons local wildlife populations were basically wiped out and the villagers then had no choice but to enter the national park, which is sacred [primary] forest; this made the spirits angry and sometimes our people became sick and died, but we had no choice."

(Source: Kam La, January 2010 in conversation with the author)

The Brao people did in fact live within a specific geographic area, not traveling far, and were intimately familiar with the fauna and flora and the spirits therein; it appears that they qualify as bioregionalists who broke from tradition only when it was absolutely necessary. Similar stories were related by DoYok and Leu, whose tribes reside south of the Sesan River and in and around the community forests of O Chum district.

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, the new Cambodian government offered fifty kilograms of rice for every gun turned in. Villagers, Kam La and Soukhon Thom explained, readily exchanged their arms for the ample food. This deal, which took effect in the early 1990s, was a boon to wildlife, which rebounded not only in Virachey National Park but in the multi-use community forests as well. For a time, ethnic minorities in Ratanakiri were able to return to what might resemble bioregional living, hunting local animals, fishing locally, growing their own crops, making their own rice wine, and making offerings to the local spirits. This locally sustainable way of life, however, was soon disrupted by yet another outside force –construction of a major upriver hydropower project –the Yali Falls Dam²- on the Sesan River in Vietnam.

Fish –as well as aquatic fauna and wild vegetables- from the Sesan River have provided a key source of food for indigenous people in the area for as far back as they can remember, explained Kam La, Soukhon and Do Yok³. However, with the construction of the dam, water levels now fluctuate dramatically, with the result that fish have virtually stopped laying eggs; the Sesan today is nearly devoid of fish in many sections, particularly in the Veun Sai district and near the border with Vietnam. With almost no fish to catch, villagers once again have been forced to over-hunt in the community forests, depleting wildlife populations, and are compelled to poach in the national park. Additionally, explained Soukhon, many species of bird lay eggs on the banks of the river or in low-lying trees and shrubs and during large discharges their eggs and nests are washed away; many species have been rendered locally extinct from the area as a result.

Yet another problem caused by the fluctuating water levels is flooding, which washes boats downstream, causing serious financial and practical losses to minority villagers. In a tragic event in October of 2009, dam authorities in Vietnam authorized a major discharge during the arrival of Typhoon Ketsana, resulting in a rapid 7-meter rise (in some places it was 13.3 meters high) of

² [Report from Mekong River organization on Yali Falls Dam](#)

³ This statement is supported by the Living Rivers Newsletter (linked below)

the river, a disaster which claimed the lives of 2 people, killed off large numbers of livestock, destroyed crops, washed away boats, destroyed homes and endangered the welfare of the villagers and other residents in the area⁴. Vietnam has yet to offer any reimbursement to those in Cambodia who suffered losses. The dam also causes the Sesan River to dry up, and in a February 11, 2010 article in the Phnom Penh Post, it was reported that it is now sometimes possible to walk across the dry riverbed from one side to the other, and that in addition to fish depletion, villagers cannot wash and are developing rashes and sores when water is discharged because pollution levels have skyrocketed since the dam was constructed⁵.

Another threat to minority people's ability to live sustainable and reasonably autonomous lives is the introduction of a cash trading system or "market economy."⁶ With not enough fish to catch or animals to hunt, villagers now have to buy some of their food in stores in Veun Sai and other towns. One way to make big money fast is to poach rare animals that are sold to Vietnam and China, such as the pangolin with its reputed traditional aphrodisiac properties, or the macaque -two species that are now extremely rare in Ratanakiri. Pangolins can be sold to middlemen in Ban Lung for US \$100 - \$300, depending on size; macaques sell for about \$100 on average. These sums represent a considerable amount of money for many village families, and if cash is now needed to purchase staple foods that were formerly available for free in or near the village, the temptation to engage in poaching activities is understandably difficult to resist. Traditional skills handed down through generations are then used to further deplete wildlife, threatening forest ecosystems. According to Do Yok, Leu, Kam La and Soukhon, the advent of a cash economy has also led to an increase in violence, theft, and cheating in the villages. Kam La related a chilling tale from 2004:

"There were two hunters who went into the forest to catch a pangolin. They spent two days to hunt a large animal that was valued at \$300. When they got back to the village, one of the hunters agreed to go to Ban Lung to sell it while the other stayed in the village to rest. The man who went to Ban Lung returned empty-handed, claiming that his boat capsized in the Sesan River

⁴ Living Rivers Newsletter: <http://www.dtp.unsw.edu.au/documents/LivingRiversNewsletter-edition1.pdf>

⁵ This issue was reported on in the *Phnom Penh Post* by Wells and Piseth in an article that can be found online at: <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2010021131943/National-news/closed-dams-a-headache-for-fishermen.html> as well as in the Living Rivers Newsletter in note v above.

⁶ It is interesting to note that the economy in ancient Cambodia's was "somewhat peculiar because, unlike neighboring states, the [Angkor] empire never used money of any kind" (Chandler, 9).

and that the pangolin was carried off downstream. Well, his partner knew he was lying and that he had kept the money for himself. When the thief went off hunting in the forest the next day, his partner entered his home, dismembered his wife and children limb by limb, and then decapitated them one by one. When the butchering was over he stole all of the man's money. The murderer is now serving a 20-year prison term and was ordered to pay 10 water buffalo to his hunting partner.”

(Source: Kam La, January 2010 in conversation with the author)

Interactions with the market economy are set to increase as more Khmers and Sino-Khmers move to the region in search of business prospects. Bourdier notes that, “one observes in the villages near the capital the development of a market economy that tends to render previously autonomous villages increasingly dependent on external fluctuations and pressures from “new” populations” (128). Perhaps it is an axiom that migrations to the region, particularly in an age of globalization, are irreversible and futile to resist; it may also be said by some that minority people stand to gain from more outside investment in terms of education and healthcare. While there is some merit to these points (Vietnam built a school in Veun Sai that is free of charge specifically for minority children), this claim demands closer examination.

Many middle-aged and most elderly minority people in Ratanakiri cannot speak Khmer; they speak only their tribal language and perhaps another tribal language. Busy raising a family, farming, hunting, and making offerings to the spirits, they have little time to learn Khmer; it goes without saying that they are also illiterate, as their languages are strictly oral. In addition, they do not have bank accounts, credit cards or telephones and many do not own vehicles. Many of these vernacular people have little or no formal education⁷. As such, they are not well positioned to compete in a cash economy against new settlers, particularly Chinese or Sino-Khmer, who arrive with enough money to buy land (lands which in some cases are the minority people's ancestral lands) and set up businesses. Do Yok shared a popular Khmer idiom that sums up the situation: “The Chinese make the Khmer move, the Khmer make the minorities move, and minorities make the spirits move.” This means that the minority populations are pushed so far out of their original zones by migrants that they are forced to build homes in cemeteries. If cash-rich outsiders come to dominate all trade in Ratanakiri, then it is quite possible that the Tampuan, Brao and other minorities will meet a fate similar to that of the Penan of Malaysia –selling traditional jewelry and clothes and performing native dances and songs for camera-toting tourists where they

⁷ NGO Forum: Land Alienation in Indigenous Minority Communities –Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia. (2006). p. 9

are paid very little to make a spectacle of their extinguished culture⁸. This is hardly a lifestyle the knowledgeable, competent minority people of Ratanakiri would choose.

This situation is exacerbated by the arrival of Japanese, Malaysian and Vietnamese companies looking to set up rubber, oil palm, or other plantations. Unlike with swidden agriculture or selective logging, once plantations are established the native plants species are permanently extirpated and a once biodiverse region is transformed into a biological desert of monoculture plantations. Worse still, indigenous knowledge systems that developed over millennia with these lost ecosystems are rendered almost useless. Vandana Shiva notes (1993, pp.6-7) that,
“Monocultures are in fact a source of scarcity and poverty, both because they destroy diversity and alternatives and also because they destroy decentralized control on production and consumption systems. Diversity is an alternative to monoculture, homogeneity and uniformity. Living diversity in nature corresponds to a living diversity of cultures. The natural and cultural diversity is a source of wealth and a source of alternatives.”

Several benefits are therefore achieved by the establishment of large plantations: minority people are evicted from their traditional lands and thus brought a step closer to being in the fold of mainstream society , “unproductive” natural forests are converted into cash and tax revenue-earning crop lands, the hardwood trees standing on those lands are sold off to furniture companies in Vietnam, and the wildlife can be caught and sold into the pet trade, traditional medicine market, or consumed for food.

There seems to be little that minority people can do to stem this trend, particularly in a nation as notoriously corrupt as Cambodia. Bourdier (p.63) explains that:

“These investors, among whom notable Cambodians have insinuated themselves, come to a conquered territory with cash and in collusion with the highest level of Cambodian government; connivances that promoters of provincial rural development cannot resist, even less the local populations who have nothing to say in the matter.”

⁸ In Sarawak, as well as performing for tourists, indigenous people give blowpipe shooting lessons for \$1.00

Compounding this problem is “land-grabbing” by powerful elites who can simply force minority people off their land under the threat of violence and other forms of retribution⁹.

Another direct threat to vernacular cultures grounded in animism in this region is the work of Christian missionaries, who make it plain that their mission is to extirpate animism¹⁰. My informants described how villagers often profess faith in Christ in order to receive much-needed aid, such as medical help or assistance in finding jobs. In this sense, some Christian missionaries dangle a proverbial carrot before needy villagers who have few other alternatives but to accept Christianity and the rules that go along with it. This is not to say that all Christian missionaries are conspiring to overtly ruin traditional cultures in Ratanakiri; the free medical service they sometimes provide is of significant help to many minority people. Nonetheless the fact remains that conversion to Christianity means the end of animism for that individual, with a resulting disconnect from the community and its links to the environment.

Many villagers, however, coyly use the missionaries for help while secretly maintaining their animistic beliefs¹¹. Leu explained that some people in his village “go to the church and pray to the God, but in their hearts, only animism. They go to the church because they need help, but deep inside, they are animists.” Do Yok said that his mother heard that the Christians could help young men get jobs, so she pressured him to join the faith. “I tried to be a Christian for one month,” he explained. “But then I got very sick, and my mother had to sacrifice a chicken, and after that I got better and went back to animism.” Nach Norb, of the Bunong tribe of Mondulkiri province, told of how the Christians “tried” talking to him:

“They wanted my family to get rid of our rice wine jars [when drinking rice wine, prayers are said to the spirits while stirring the brew], my spirit rice and my spirit things [ancestral shrines]. They told me to read the book about God and then my life would be happy and I would not have problems, but I read the book and I still had problems; I did not see the God –I only read the book, and I still had my problems. How

⁹ NGO Forum: Land Alienation in Indigenous Minority Communities –Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia. (2006). p.8.

¹⁰ The 1st Commandment, regardless of faith, essentially reads as: I am the one and only God, thou shall worship no other Gods before me. Animism, which is unfamiliar with a single omnipresent God and maintains that numerous spirits live in everything from animals to trees to waterfalls, is incompatible with Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, etc.

¹¹ This practice is widespread across Southeast Asia and is also described by Thom Henley on Siberut Island in Indonesia with the Mentawai people in *Living Legend of the Mentawai* (2001).

about my parents and grandparents? They cannot read and they don't understand the words when you explain it to them. And how about my great big forest? It cannot read either."

(Source: Nach Norb, Mondulkiri province, February 2010 in conversation with the author)

Nach confided that he felt confused about why the Christians insisted that he dispose of his animistic paraphernalia, and that he was left feeling that the missionaries did not properly understand his culture or why these items were important to his family.

Kam La's wife converted to Christianity (there are approximately 30 converts in his village), and she has encouraged him to convert as well. However, Kam La related, "It is very difficult for me to believe in Jesus because I spend a lot of time in the forest and I know that there are many spirits there and I am afraid of them." It seems probable that in seeing and experiencing nature, animists "see" the manifest forms of spirits and supernatural powers; a single, remote, omnipotent God is unfathomable to my informants, and they were skeptical of biblical claims¹². Leu took an Israeli man trekking who told him about "God the Creator in Heaven." Leu asked him: "have you seen this God for yourself, or did you only hear about Him on the news?" The Israeli admitted that he had only heard about Him on the news. Similarly, Den, a Bunong elder in Putang village outside Senmonorom, remarked "Every Christian just reads the book; they don't know God by their eyes. They just read the book." Perhaps it should be taken into consideration the extent to which reading or "studying" about God in a book would seem unduly abstract to a peoples who have always found spirituality in nature. Furthermore, missionaries should not underestimate the importance of ritual to minority people's daily lives and should understand that in demanding that they dismantle their traditional belief systems that they are, in effect, asking that they deconstruct their entire community and way of relating to the world.

Foreign religion is yet another threat from outside which arrives under a supposedly positive pretext but works all the while at undermining indigenous culture. Combined with the arrival of a market economy, economic migrants, agricultural corporations and large development projects such as hydroelectric dams¹³, the future existence of what resembles

¹² In *Primitive Culture*, Tylor notes (with exaggeration) "Without any exception, they are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition" (Tylor, 7).

¹³ It was reported in *The Phnom Penh Post* that a second dam called the Sesan 2 has been approved for the Sesan River in neighboring Stung Treng province in Cambodia. And more recently, a 3rd dam, financed by a Korean cable company, is being considered for the Sesan.

bioregional living among the indigenous people of Ratanakiri appears increasingly uncertain. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno assert that, "Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, 1). On the following page, they put forward, "The disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism" (ibid, 2). Furthermore, they explain, "The local spirits and demons had been replaced by heaven and its hierarchy, the incantatory practices of the magician by the carefully graduated sacrifice and the labor of enslaved men mediated by command" (ibid, 5). Originally published in German in 1944 as *Philosophische Fragmente*, this text is a prescient observation for the fate of indigenous people throughout the world and in particular for those in Southeast Asia and Cambodia. The world, Adorno and Horkheimer note, had to be "disenchanted" in order for "progress" and "development" to prosper under the auspice of "enlightenment." Explicating Afro-American author Richard Wright's theory of modernity, Paul Gilroy points out that "religious morality" and "religious sensibility" that was founded in pre-rational lifeways throughout Africa had to be overcome in order for the modern world to be successfully established (Gilroy, 1993, 160). In this sense, Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri provinces represent two of the last bastions of true animism not only in Cambodia but in Southeast Asia as a whole; these are places where traditional culture makes a stand, but it is a position that is coming under relentless threat from well-equipped outside forces who have little knowledge of and probably less interest in understanding the spiritual and cultural elements that allow for the indigenous people to live prosperously and sustainably within their local ecological milieu.

Arguments may be put forth that the idea of "preserving" or "saving" indigenous people from modern society is a "romantic" notion. However, this is a cliché'd and hollow observation. Emphasizing the active verbs "preserving" and "saving" is a blind reversal of logic. It is modern society that is "threatening" these cultures, therefore, if we did not try to "destroy" them, there would be no need to "save" them. This is not a case of a "damsel in distress" or a pair of warring tribes threatening genocide on one another whom the international community must rush out to rescue; quite the opposite: these are highly knowledgeable, skilled people who have survived through the ages due to their intelligence and understanding of the natural world.

If the Cambodian government and affiliated investors can demonstrate some tolerance for diversity and some ecological and cultural foresight, there is no reason why indigenous people cannot share their province with Khmers, Sino-Khmers and foreign agro-businesses who operate in fair and sensitive ways. Indeed, both indigenes and outsiders have much to share with one

another and both sides would almost certainly stand to benefit if the correct approach is taken. It is now impossible to prevent outsiders from penetrating these (once) remote areas where animist cultures survive, but instead of sidelining indigenous people when it comes to decision making, Cambodia should offer them an important role in regional planning or, better yet, let minorities take the lead; from this a healthy relationship might follow where local knowledge systems thrive and are shared with outsiders who can benefit from ecological insights that have been cultivated over thousands of years. Ecocritics writing on bioregionalism note that regional autonomy is a key condition for bioregional living; however, a realistic assessment of what is possible in a given area needs to be made. The conversation animists in Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri have with their government on this issue might have less to do with political autonomy than it would with being able to continue their way of life alongside new neighbors who do not cast too great a shadow on their valuable and fascinating culture and land.

Works Cited

- Berg, Peter and Raymond Dasmann. (1977). "Reinhabiting California." *The Ecologist* 7, no. 10, 399-401.
- Bender, Frederic. (2003). *The Culture of Extinction*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- Bourdier, Frederic. (2006). *The Mountain of Precious Stones: Ratanakiri, Cambodia*. Phnom Penh: Center for Khmer Studies.
- Davis, Wade and Ian Mackenzie, et al. (1995). *Nomads of the Dawn: The Penan of the Borneo Rainforest*. Pomegranate Artbooks: San Francisco.
- Dodge, Jim. (2007) "Living by Life: Some Bioregional Theory and Practice". In *Architectural Regionalism: Collected writings on Place, Identity, Modernity and Tradition*, edited by Vincent Canizaro. (Originally in *CoEvolution Quarterly*, 32, 6-12 in 1980)
- Gilroy, Paul. (2003). *The Black Atlantic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, Graham. (2005). *Animism*. Hurst & Company: London.

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. (Original work published in 1944)

Huxley, Aldous. (2002). *Island*. Perrenial Classics: New York. (Original work published in 1962)

Ovesen, Jan and Ing-Britt Trankell. (2004). "Foreigners and Honorary Khmers: Ethnic Minorities in Cambodia." In *Civilizing the Margins*, edited by Christopher R. Duncan. Cornell University Press: Ithaca.

Sale, Kirkpatrick. (2000). *Dwellers in the Land: the bioregional vision*. The University of Georgia Press: Athens.

Shiva, Vandana. (1993). *Monocultures of the mind: perspectives on biodiversity and biotechnology*. Zed Books Ltd.: London and New York.

Snyder, Gary. (1995). *A Place in Space*. Counterpoint Press: Washington, D.C.

Thomashow, Mitchell. (1995). *Ecological Identity*. The MIT Press: Cambridge.

Tylor, Sir Edward Burnett. (1958) *Religion in Primitive Culture*. Harper Torchbooks: New York. (Original work published as *Primitive Culture* in 1871)