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# BETWEEN A SONG AND A *PREI*: TRACKING CAMBODIAN HISTORY AND COSMOLOGY THROUGH THE FOREST

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David Chandler's essay "Songs at the Edge of the Forest" was one of the earliest pieces I read on Cambodia, and the first to divert my attention from modern politics to history.<sup>1</sup> "Songs" captivated me with its synergy of fairytale, psychology, and literary analysis, and with the lyrical quality of its writing. Above all, it showed me that history need never be dull. Chandler's writing on Khmer Rouge historiography, and his observations on the role of the French in carving out a central place for Angkor in the Cambodian nationalist imagination, are other key aspects of his work that shaped my interest in the colonial era and its place in Cambodian historical consciousness.

This article draws on "Songs" and another seminal essay by Chandler entitled "Maps for the Ancestors"<sup>2</sup> to reflect on the place of "place" in Khmer textual, ideological, ritual, and aesthetic narratives from the nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. Building upon Chandler's nuanced reading of several Khmer texts and other recent French and Cambodian scholarship, I examine tensions resulting from the different values that Europeans and Khmers place on space and landscapes. I

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<sup>1</sup> David P. Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts," in *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, ed. David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1982), pp. 53–77.

<sup>2</sup> David P. Chandler, "Maps for the Ancestors," in *Facing the Cambodian Past: Selected Essays 1971–1994*, ed. David P. Chandler (St. Leonards, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 25–42.

consider how depictions of generic sites (notably *prei*, or forest) refract cultural notions about boundaries, domesticity, and transformation. I examine how specific sites and features of the natural landscape became worked into Khmer and European narratives of colony and nation, and briefly explore the legacies of such colonial landscaping for Cambodia after independence. In so doing, I interrogate the narrative function and cultural genealogy of notions of boundaries in twentieth-century Cambodia.

The boundary stones, or *seyma*, used to delimit the sacred grounds of Khmer pagodas, as well as the angular, containing walls around Angkorean monasteries and temples, all indicate longstanding indigenous practices of marking off the divine from the mundane and the sacred from the secular. Yet colonial maps, monuments, and parks largely ignore such indigenous conceptual foundations, instead drawing upon a new series of demarcations—urban versus rural, backward versus progressive—which helped to anticipate, in Thongchai Winichakul's sense of the word, the entrenchment of new nation-state boundaries.<sup>3</sup> A dominant motif was the distinction between urban and rural areas. The Khmer nationalist elite that arose in the 1930s saw the emergence of new indigenous forums modeled on European approaches to the land as a foundry of national character.

Where Chandler's literary analysis in "Songs" of two Khmer folktales and one verse manuscript focused on Khmer conceptions of moral and social order, here I focus on one tale, "*Reuang Damnoek Kaun Lok*" (the story of the origin of the child-of-the-world bird), to explore indigenous notions of space. Echoing Chandler, I suggest that the forest has its own cosmology, as a place of transformation and transit, between Buddhist and animist worlds and between the normal and the abnormal, and that this cosmology and the larger worldview in which it was set entertained different notions of boundaries to those formalized in the colonial period.

#### TRANSCOLONIAL TALES: FORESTS AND FOKLORE IN EUROPE AND CAMBODIA

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century incursions by Siam and Vietnam wreaked incalculable loss and damage to human life and material culture throughout that mass of land and among people commonly identified, through such characteristics as language, familial ties, and social and aesthetic practice, as Khmer. However, this violent flux did not destabilize indigenous cosmology. Normative poems and oral history accommodated and interpreted conflict and trauma. During these periods of territorial fragmentation, a common moral vocabulary and a cosmology fusing Buddhist, animist, and Brahmin beliefs and idioms ensured the partial reclamation of indigenous narratives from cultural subjugation.<sup>4</sup> In many senses, the same held true during Cambodia's French Protectorate ("French Protectorate of Cambodge," 1863–1954). Oral history, legend, normative poems, and song were often dismissed as non-history, folklore, or "fairytale," or categorized under the broader rubric of "mores and customs" by colonial scholar-officials, many of whom were intent on charting a linear history for Cambodia. Yet alternative readings of the past persisted in the daily

<sup>3</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geobody of a Nation* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> For an example of how the Siamese invasion entered oral lore, see Alain Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge: Analyse et traduction d'un corpus de textes sur les neak ta* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), pp. 242–247, 252.

lives of most Cambodians, as reflected in the series of Khmer folktales collected and published by the Buddhist Institute in the 1950s and 1960s.

The construction of competing linear narratives in colonized South and Southeast Asia formed part of a larger, systemic expansion of colonial control over space.<sup>5</sup> In Cambodia, the organization of space was crucial to colonial projects to bring Cambodia “out” of the “degeneracy” associated with its post-Angkorean past, and “into” the present and future-perfect of the French Protectorate. During the initial stages of colonialism, political, economic, and military imperatives were critical factors in identifying, delineating, and securing boundaries, resources, and colonial settlements, and establishing telecommunications networks and routes. Strategic concerns also informed the selection, planning, and laying of centers of colonial control—notably the capital of Phnom Penh, where commanding authority for the protectorate was vested in a Résident Supérieur du Cambodge (RSC), and in the Résidences around the country, each headed by a French Résident answerable to the RSC. Even in these stages of a strictly utilitarian approach to space and its organization, cultural comparisons with “home” by administrators, explorers, and others revealed key conceptual distinctions between European and Khmer perceptions of the indigenous landscape. From the 1890s onward, a range of physical objects—including maps, parks, exhibits, and statuary—transcribed these predominantly Eurocentric perceptions into the material environment. On the establishment of the French Protectorate, the twelfth-century temples of Angkor were partially engulfed by vegetation. This chaotic blurring of ancient monument and jungle mayhem was the antithesis of *la douce France* (sweet France), whose poetic tradition described an orderly harmony of rivers, cultivated fields, orchards, vineyards, and woods.<sup>6</sup> The disjuncture between European woodland and Angkorean wilderness left at least one French visitor cold. Writing in 1865, the young explorer Louis de Carné judged Angkor in its jungle setting as “lacking in emotion,” and declared “The remains of a ruined monastery in the heart of a German forest ... move more deeply.”<sup>7</sup>

Two centuries earlier, France had sought to bring order to its “monstrous jumble” of ill-tended forests through a Cartesian regime of classical forestry that ranked trees by type and use, and aimed to clean woodlands of scraggly undergrowth, bandits, and vagrants.<sup>8</sup> In late-nineteenth-century Europe, the forest morphed into various myths of nation, ranging from Germany’s primeval forest (a site of tribal assertion against the Roman empire of stone and law), to England’s Greenwood (a preserve of royalty and sanctuary for justice-seekers), to the romanticism of France’s Fontainebleau.<sup>9</sup> But the trope of the rural idyll was not a

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Cohn, “Anthropology and History in the 1980s,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12,2 (1981): 227–52, 228.

<sup>6</sup> See Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 15, 17, 163–65; Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 153–273; and George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Howard Fertig, 1975), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Louis de Carné, “Impressions d’Asie,” *Anthologie Franco-Indochinoise Tome I* (Hanoi: Imprimerie Mac-Dinh-Tu, 1928), p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, pp. 177–78.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163–65; Knight, *Robin Hood*, pp. 153–273; and Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, p. 41.

constant in European nineteenth-century life, literature, or thought. In the 1812 edition of their collected fairytales, the brothers Jacob and Willhelm Grimm, who popularized “Hansel and Gretel,” a story in which a father and stepmother twice abandon their children in a forest during a time of famine, described hungry parents deserting their children as familiar territory for most readers.<sup>10</sup> The Grimms were writing in circumstances of widespread poverty visited on the German principalities by war, crop failures, and foreign occupation (which would be avenged by Prussia’s dismemberment of France in 1870 to 1871).<sup>11</sup> Against this climate, the forest in European fairytales was often depicted as a place of danger and temptation, inhabited by wolves and witches, where immoral actions such as the abandonment or attempted murder of children (“Hansel and Gretel,” “Snow White”) or a child’s acts of disobedience, straying from the path, or dalliance with strangers (“Little Red Riding Hood,” “Goldilocks”) invite death and disaster. Building on the legacy of Dante, who found himself “in the middle of the journey of our life” in a dark wood “where the straight way was lost,” the forest and feelings of loss and impenetrability in such tales symbolized the uncertainty and journey between the organization of a home life and parental framework that the child protagonist has left, and the path through puberty to adulthood, on which they encounter the incarnations of their deepest wishes and anxieties.<sup>12</sup>

Even the most seemingly straightforward of these “classic” stories, however, was riddled with moral ambiguities. Violence remained a staple, and its standard twin was deceit: a wolf poises as a grandmother to devour a little girl (“Red Riding Hood”); a stepmother decapitates her son but then sits his head back on his body to hide her crime (“The Juniper Tree”); and a stepsister mutilates her own foot until the blood flows, trying to squeeze herself into the slipper and trick the prince (“Cinderella”).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, as Judith Jacobs notes, Cambodian folktales are larded with “instances of mistreatment of relatives. Children are taken to the forest and abandoned when there is not enough to eat ... wives trick their husbands and try to kill them; a grandmother is eaten by her grandson for allowing the meal to shrink in cooking,” protagonists commonly resort to ruses and deception, and “Books of Lies” appear every so often.<sup>14</sup> In European as in Cambodian folklore and fairytale, deceit and disguise are close cousins.

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<sup>10</sup> Jakob and Willhelm Grimm, “Preface to the First Edition of *Kinder Und Hausmärchen*,” in Jack Zipes, “Dreams of a Better Bourgeois Life: The Psychological Origins of the Grimms’ Tales,” in *The Brothers Grimm and Folktale*, ed. James M. McGlathery (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), p. 206.

<sup>11</sup> M. Poole, “Illicit Imaginings: An Australian History of Vietnamese Stories Retold” (doctoral dissertation, Australian National University, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003), pp. 54–55. There’s an interesting debate whether Cinderella’s glass slippers were actually made of fur (*pantoufle de vair*), which, if true, fits nicely with the forest themes discussed here. See, for instance, <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language/og/archives/002886>

<sup>14</sup> J. Jacobs, *Traditional Literature of Cambodia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 18.

### NATIONAL TOPOGRAPHIES OF MEMORY

European images of the forest as an evil and inhumane place persisted in children's nurseries into the late nineteenth century. In the public sphere, however, these sinister portrayals of nature gradually gave way to nationalist narratives that romanticized woodlands as the cradle of human "earthly" sentiments and a crucible of "national" character.<sup>15</sup> In what Antony Smith describes as "the territorialization of memory" and the "historicisation of nature," the nation became naturalized in various "poetic landscapes" that invoked natural features of the land as specific elements of national history.<sup>16</sup> Homi Bhabha has described landscape as a "recurrent metaphor" for the "inscape of national identity."<sup>17</sup> In their public invocations, the benign symbols mobilized to forge a "national" landscape are often particularly twisted metaphors, statements of sweetness and order designed to conceal or negate sites and histories of violence and disorder. In many areas of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Europe, the forests remained frightening, chaotic places that offered paths of flight from war. The tropes of gentle forest sites and sentimental ruins conjured by de Carné and others in "overseas France" allowed the negation of these violent European spaces through the visualization and assertion of notions of European superiority and order over what was deemed, in colonized domains, to be chaos, violence, and decay.

To many French explorers and colonialists, Cambodia's *prei* appeared not as rich sites of history and memory, saturated with lore and spirits, but as the quintessence of the colony as *tabula rasa*—an uncultivated wilderness. A dominant view held by colonial scholar-officials was that the latent kernels of "civilization" lay deep within the Khmers, and required careful extraction, cultivation, colonial management, and education. This view was replicated in the colonial conceptualization of the *prei*, in whose tangled depths the seeds of civilized time lay buried, manifest in ancient temple ruins. These human relics of a "lost" civilization were to be carved out from the forest, cleared, and turned into parks or relocated in miniature to museums in urban settings. *Prei* were also valued as store-houses of natural specimens, as reflected in the illustrations and notations by the naturalist Henri Mouhot, whose journey to Angkor in 1860 triggered French interest in the temples. As subsequent expeditions hacked their way through the Cambodian jungle, the French state was busily incorporating such once royal parks as Fontainebleau into a new national *patrimoine* (heritage) for public enjoyment, fostering a new vogue in romantic woodland hikes. Celebrated in the rural, idyllic landscapes of the impressionists August Renoir, Claude Monet, and others, the visual rhetoric of *la douce France* worked as a cultural counterfoil to the Khmer landscape, encouraging the latter's invocation as a sign of national heritage and character doomed to degeneration and decay. This trope, which implicitly cast Europeans as fairytale figures whose heroic pursuits would rescue *le Cambodge* from the clutches of history and wicked predators, continued well into the 1920s, when France's future minister of culture André Malraux depicted the forests around Angkor as stifling terrain, sites of

<sup>15</sup> See Knight, *Robin Hood*, pp. 153–273; and Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Antony Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 135–37.

<sup>17</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 143.

“disintegration,” where “every thought grew turbid, decomposed.”<sup>18</sup> Malraux’s reading correlated with other colonial literary treatments of Cambodian forestland as an anterior realm, a site of magic and hermits, bypassed by modernity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, trees from Cambodia were shipped to international exhibitions and felled to float statues down river from the Angkorean temples to modernity’s new curiosity cabinets, namely a small but growing number of museums in Phnom Penh, Saigon, and Paris. Animals were ensnared in zoological gardens or transported to Europe’s natural history museums as exotic specimens. Meanwhile, in the colonies and protectorates of Southeast Asia and elsewhere, indigenous forests were both exploited for economic gain and naturalized as an extension of the European landscape—an arboreal endorsement of France’s *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission)—and converted from chaos into echoes of Fontainebleau.

In 1906, these missions and metaphors blended in the Bois de Bologne when Cambodian court dancers, described by French critics as living relics of the lost age of Angkor, performed in Paris before the president of the republic and King Sisowath as part of a program of festivities surrounding that year’s Exposition Coloniale, at Marseille. Several features of this “national” performance, as depicted in the leading Parisian journal *l’Illustration*, were alien to Khmer tradition. A truncated segment of court dance was sandwiched between two other European renditions, on a stage—raised, rectangular, separated from the audience, and at a height that elevated the performers above the heads of both king and president—set in carefully landscaped woods. At Marseille, as in past and future colonial exhibitions in the Metropole, dedicated displays highlighted the economic benefits of colonized forests.<sup>19</sup>

#### BADLANDS AND BIRDLANDS: TRACKING KHMER COSMOLOGY THROUGH THE FOREST

In mid-nineteenth-century Cambodia, however, as Chandler’s “Songs” demonstrates with characteristic depth and elegance, the forest—*prei*—acted as a symbol of all that was wild, lawless, and beyond the boundaries of human control. As the first Khmer-French dictionary tells us, in 1878, “*srok*, par opposition a *prei*, designe les animaux domestiques ou habitant dans le voisinage de l’homme” (*srok*, by contrast to *prei*, designates domesticated animals and those living near humans), while *prei* denotes “wild” animals or plants.<sup>20</sup> Close to a century later, these distinctions still held: Solange Thierry, the French connoisseur of Cambodian folklore, noted in 1969 the connection between “*srok*” and domesticity, “*prei*” and savagery.<sup>21</sup> Existing on a parallel realm with the civilized, orderly life in human settlements (*srok*), the badlands of the *prei*—haunted with demons (*yeak*) and infested

<sup>18</sup> André Malraux, *The Royal Way* (New York, NY: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, 1935), p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the theatricality of race in British Burma, see Penny Edwards, “Half-Cast: Staging Race in British Burma,” *Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 5,3 (2002): 279–95.

<sup>20</sup> Étienne Aymonier, *Dictionnaire Khmer-Français* (Saigon, 1878), p. 423. This dictionary was compiled by Son Diep (1855–1934) and Étienne Aymonier (1844–1929).

<sup>21</sup> E. Porée-Maspéro, *La vie du paysan khmer* (Phnom Penh: Commission des Moeurs et Coutumes du Cambodge, 1969); cited in Solange Thierry, “Étude d’un corpus de contes cambodgiens traditionnels” (Doctoral dissertation, University of Paris V, 1976), pp. 41–42.

with wild animals—gave a tangible dimension to Khmer concepts of disorder and acted as a psychic reservoir for all that was inexplicable and inhumane in the daily life of a country contorted by protracted and repeated violence and foreign occupations. This neat dichotomy between the wild and the civilized is a useful analytic device. It is also, as Chandler hints, deceptively simple. The forest as depicted in both “*Kaun Lok*” and the Wat Srolauv chronicle is a highly ambiguous terrain, that speaks not so much to a bipolar moral geography (*srok* versus *prei*, or civilized versus wild) as to a complex dialectical terrain, where notions of civilized or wild contract, expand, and shape-shift in relation or reaction to violations of moral or societal norms.

“*Kaun Lok*” tells of three girls abandoned in the wood who survive their mother’s murderous impulse through their transformation into birds. At the end of the story, the mother returns to reclaim her children and, while chasing them through the forest, she dies of exhaustion. In her elegant analysis of this tale, Thierry compares the abandonment of the three children to their being put to death: “a new life will arise from this sacrifice, and separate two worlds: that of the humans of the world, *loka*, and that of the forest protected by *devata*” (celestial beings who communicate between heaven and earth).<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the transformation of boys into birds in the Grimms’ fairytale “The Seven Ravens”—in which seven brothers disappear and become ravens as their sister is born—has been read as a metaphor for death, namely, the demise of paganism and the rise of Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, in Grimms’ “The Fitcher’s Bird,” in a veiled allusion to the practice of tarring-and-feathering suspected criminals, the eldest of three daughters glues feathers all over her body, disguising herself as a bird, and successfully escapes her captor, a wizard.<sup>24</sup> Here, as in Cambodian tales, the bird and its form symbolize flight and escape from captivity. Like this figure, and the eleventh brother in the Hans Christian Anderson fairytale “The Twelve Swans,” who ends up with one feathered arm, the girls in “*Kaun Lok*” do not achieve complete transformation. Deeds, like spells, the stories tell us, cannot be completely reversed anymore than one’s fate can be wholly escaped. Bird-women, Thierry notes, exist in Khmer mythology as *kinnari*, and also in Thai and Lao legend.<sup>25</sup> The Khmer word *sat* denotes either an animal or bird. The compound *sat lok* refers to sentient beings, while birds who enter a house are still referred to as *sat daun ta*, ancestral-birds, or birds carrying messages from ancestors.<sup>26</sup> These compounds and beliefs may themselves have ancestral origins in Indian literature, where ancestors sometimes take the form of birds, and where today, in some traditions, on the eleventh day after death, food is offered in ceremony to crows who are believed to be ancestors of the deceased.<sup>27</sup>

When Son Diep, who helped to compile the 1878 dictionary cited earlier, traveled to Paris in 1900, he likened the white-faced women, and especially Parisian actresses,

<sup>22</sup> Solange Thierry, *Le Cambodge des contes* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), pp. 140–43.

<sup>23</sup> Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>24</sup> “Fitcher’s Bird” as summarized by Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, pp. 299–300.

<sup>25</sup> Thierry, *Le Cambodge des contes*, pp. 140–43.

<sup>26</sup> Personal communication, Siyonn Sophearith, Phnom Penh, May 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Personal communication, Debjani Ganguly, August 2006.

to feathered angels.<sup>28</sup> A feathered fate also meets the female protagonist in the popular Khmer folktale of the meat that shrunk. The tale describes the genesis of a bird by tracing its cry, “*svet te chav!*” (“grandchildren, I didn’t shrink [the meat]!”), to the rejoinder of a woman who turned into a bird when she was killed by her son for stealing his meat, which in truth had simply reduced in size during cooking.

The ambivalent role of birds in Cambodian farming life, as destroyers of crops and spirited creatures, figures in “*Kaun Lok*,” where the girls who are sent to guard paddy from scavenging birds are later turned into birds by gods in order to protect them from their mother. The role of birds as agents or modes of transformation is a theme common to the mythology, folklore, and literature of many countries. In European fairytales, however, transformation into animals typically represents the loss of all humanity, and is generally followed by a spell that restores humanity, together with the human form (“*Beauty and the Beast*,” “*The Twelve Swans*”).<sup>29</sup> By contrast, the Buddhist-animist interface in Cambodian belief systems is evidenced in the way transformation into birds or animals signifies not imprisonment in an animal form but release. The daughters in “*Kaun Lok*,” when flying through the forest, escape their human frame and the prison of their existence as daughters of an abusive mother, but retain their humanity; their mother, who retains her human body, does not.

The story (outlined below) contrasts the fate of three girls abandoned in the forest, who survive through the intervention of gods and spirits, with that of their impoverished peasant mother, a young widow who, despite the safety of the *srok* and with material possessions lavished on her by her new husband, a thief, grows greedy. Her good animal instincts, the maternal ties bonding her to her children, are weakened, and she succumbs to the baser weaknesses of human society. Sexual and material desires lead her to take a playboy for a husband, and as her jealousy and covetousness grow, she violates not only social laws but also the behavioral codes for women enshrined in the “*Chbap Srey*” (a normative poem handed down through generations that prescribed correct conduct for women).

The story begins with the mother just widowed. She has three daughters, and the oldest can cook and fetch water by herself—an indication that she is perhaps nearing puberty and may herself represent a source of sexual rivalry to her mother, and also that she is a virtuous, helpful daughter. The middle child is old enough to take care of the youngest, who knows only how to run around. The girls help their mother chop wood and forage for vegetables to sell at the market. A vagabond courts the mother; they marry, and he moves in with her. He comes and goes, robbing people in the district, and the wife/mother takes to wearing fancy clothes and gold and silver, and grows bold. The mother and stepfather eat well, but the daughters are given only scraps, and sleep on the verandah or near the kitchen shed, where they are savaged by mosquitoes. The mother dresses up and follows her husband to market, to keep an eye on him, but he is embarrassed by this behavior and tells her to stay at home and take care of her children. Worried that he’ll soon leave her for one of the many hussies (*srey kouch*) at the market, she decides to abandon her children instead, so that he’ll have no reason to tell her to stay at home. She takes

<sup>28</sup> Khing Hoc Dy, “Le voyage de l’envoyé cambodgien Son Diep à Paris en 1900,” in *Récits de voyages asiatiques: Genres, mentalités, conception de l’espace*, ed. Claudine Salmon (Paris: EFEO, 1996), pp. 367–83, 378.

<sup>29</sup> Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 95.



them to a secluded spot in the forest, at the foot of a mountain. Here she scatters rice seeds in a pond and warns them to stay put and guard the seedlings, and that if they return home, she'll beat them to death. She provides them with three plates of uncooked rice, forty corn kernels, a clay pot, a pinch of salt, and a smidgen of *prâhok* (fermented fish paste), thinking that either tigers will devour the girls or they will die of hunger. Telling her daughters to sleep in the *ktom* (a raised, thatched shelter) and that she will be back for them soon, she heads home. When their stepfather remarks on their absence, she embellishes the truth, telling him she has left them to watch the paddy ripen, in the company of *neak chas tum* (elderly people who symbolize the stability, continuity, and order of the *srok*).

After the mother leaves the girls, they scatter the corn kernels in the pond—an initial, instinctive attempt to cultivate the wilderness around them. When night falls, the girls climb up into the hut (*ktom*) to sleep, but the roaring, howling, and screeching of elephants, wild dogs, wolves, and monkeys fill the forest, frightening even the eldest girl. An *arak devata* (guardian spirit) in the forest wonders how a mother could take her “wee little children” and abandon them to the appetites of ferocious beasts, and decides to save the girls. He frightens off the wild animals, and the next morning goes to heaven to seek an audience with King Indra, and learns that the girls will be changed into birds soon enough. In the meantime, he must protect the girls from savage beasts and keep the pond supplied with *kreum* fish, rabbit fish, and water snails.

The girls guard the paddy for three days and three nights, but they finish the rice their mother left them, and the youngest cries for food. The oldest forages for vine leaves in the forest and watercress shoots in the pond, and finds wild sugarcane; these she shares with her sisters. When the youngest still cries, the oldest takes them to catch fish, which they bring to roast; but the fire has burnt out, and so she gets her sisters to eat a little of it raw (just as birds eat raw food). Finally, giving in to her sisters' wailing, the eldest daughter leads them home. There the mother threatens and scolds the girls; she rushes at them, clubs them, drags them back into the forest, and abandons them there to die. “How pitiful these girls are,” the narrator tells us: “Their mother has beaten them until their blood ran, but still they call her ‘me’ [mom], oblivious to her murderous intent.” The youngest daughter's babbling now contrasts with the realization, by the eldest, that their path to survival lies in their embrace of abandonment. At this pivotal moment in the story, the eldest rejects her mother and the *srok*, and leads her sisters back into the forest (*prei*) to escape the violence of the home. She drags them into the *ktom*, but their mother has clubbed them so vigorously that all three girls pass out. Seeing this, the *arak devata* sprinkles water on the girls so that they regain consciousness (*smar dae*, from Sanskrit *smṛiti*, memory, remembrance, consciousness). The oldest assumes the role of nurturer, fetching rabbit fish, snails, and shellfish to share with her sisters, to whom she explains that death is imminent as their mother wants them dead.

While their mother, we can assume, is still enjoying the fruits of her husband's thievery, and dressing in finery, the girls are now threadbare. “We have only one *sampot* and one shirt each, they're already torn to shreds,” the oldest sister explains, “and when the cold season comes ... we will be naked, with only our bodies, like wild animals...” Gradually, their mouths stiffen into beaks and can no longer form words. But this is an external transformation: the girls communicate in birdsong, but retain human sensibilities and powers of aural comprehension. While their clothing shifts from woven cloth to down and feathers, the border zone that they inhabit, with

the help of the *devata*, is transformed from wild scrub haunted by beasts of prey into the grazing grounds of gentler animals. The corn kernels scattered in the pond have turned to maize, and the *devata*'s role shifts from fending off wild beasts to protecting the girls' nascent crops from deer, pigs, monkeys, and squirrels.

When a neighbor turns the girls' stepfather into the police, and he is given a life sentence at court, the mother begins to feel sorry for her daughters, and decides to go and find them. But she is too late. The girls have begun to grow feathers, and when they see their mother, they fly into the treetops, leading her deeper into the forest in a dance of death.

To inhabit the world of the *prei*, the story tells us, it is necessary to be less, or more, than human. In "real life," those humans who thrived outside the civilized realm of Cambodia's *srok* to survive in the *prei* were at the far peripheries of human endeavour and morality: they were bandits or hermits.<sup>30</sup> The *kaun lok* bird, which nests at the forest's perimeter, symbolizes the meeting place of wild and civilized, and highlights how easily one can collapse into the other.

Writing of such "wild" figures as ogres and wolves in folk- and fairytales, the social philosopher Michel de Certeau has stressed their narrative function as boundary markers that at once represent an alterity and draw attention to the narrative's topography. "The river, wall, or tree makes a frontier" writes de Certeau. "It does not have the character of nowhere that cartographical representation usually presupposes." Rather, like the reader or listener engaged in the contemporary moment of interpreting the text, the tree—or, in this case, the forest—has a "mediating role," as does "the story that gives it its voice."<sup>31</sup> In examples that resonate with the wild forests of both "*Kaun Lok*" and the Wat Srolauv chronicle, and gesture at the glimmering uncertainties of *le temps entre le chien et le loup* evoked by Chandler, de Certeau continues:

"Stop!" says the forest the wolf comes out of. "Stop!" says the river, revealing its crocodile. But this actor, by virtue of the very fact that he is the mouthpiece of the limit, creates communication as well as separation: more than that, he establishes a border only by saying what crosses it, having come from the other side. He articulates it. He is also a passing through or over. In the story, the frontier functions as a third element.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, the literary landscape of "*Kaun Lok*" mirrored a moral universe vacillating between the ideal of "human, meritorious behaviour" and "wild, unacceptable behaviour."<sup>33</sup> In what follows, I explore the convergence between these moral distinctions and the representation of that zone between *srok* and *prei*.

<sup>30</sup> Forest, "Recit 21: Le Neak Ta Yeay Nguon, Recueil," in *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge*, pp. 155–75, 204. ("Dans les temps anciens, il n'y avait là qu'une forêt désertée, peuplée seulement par les troupeaux de bêtes sauvages. Plus tard, des bandits vinrent s'y réfugier en attendant qu'on oubliât leurs crimes." [In ancient times, there was nothing but a deserted forest, whose only inhabitants were packs of wild beasts. Later, bandits came to hide out there in the hope that their crimes would be forgotten.])

<sup>31</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 127.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> David P. Chandler, "Normative Poems (*Chbap*) and Pre-colonial Cambodian Society," in *Facing the Cambodian Past* (Chiangmai: Silksworm Books, 1996), p. 49.

### MORAL PERIMETERS: MAPPING AMBIGUITY IN THE PREI

Just as they occupied the material and psychological frontier between civilized and wild, forests marked the margins between the high and low realms of Buddhist cosmology. In this respect, the natural corridor between the *srok* and *prei* can also be seen as “a transgression of the limit, a disobedience of the law of the place” whose “betrayal of an order” is embodied in the “flight of an exile”: *kaun lok*. But at the same time, as de Certeau suggests, this *interland* offers “a bewildering exteriority,” allowing or causing “the alien element that was controlled in the interior” to re-emerge beyond its ordained borders. Within the frontiers of the family, for example, the “alien” is already there: the “disquieting familiarity” of which de Certeau speaks exists in the possibility for infanticide at the hearth, and the bestial instincts in the mother.<sup>34</sup> Conversely, the girls find in becoming creatures of the wild the interiority and sense of belonging to a family—albeit to a kindred union of spirits and mythical creatures—that they had failed to find in the home.

At the outer edges of the Buddhist moral universe, the powers of forest *yeak* and wildlife such as snakes and tigers were not constrained by the moral injunctions of Buddha. These beings might occasionally transgress the boundaries between *prei* and *srok*, but their deficit of merit ensured their power would eventually be controlled by morally superior, more meritorious beings.<sup>35</sup> This contrast between the wild, uncivilized inhabitants of the *prei* and the prescribed moral behavior of humans is reflected in the Cambodian “*Chbap Kaun Chiw*,” which compares “just and honest” and “stupid and vile” humans who grow up in a kingdom under a good sovereign with the “straight” and “twisted” trees that grow into a forest, and underscores the relative merits of wild animal behavior by stating that while even “ferocious and cruel” animals can be commanded, one should simply “turn away and ... distance” oneself from such “twisted” humans.<sup>36</sup> This moral resonates with “*Kaun Lok*,” where the eldest sister learns that she and her young charges will be safer in the forest than in the savage confines of a *srok* whose domesticity is distorted by their mother’s cruelty. The act of going into the forest, in “*Kaun Lok*” as in “Hansel and Gretel,” entails a literal, territorial displacement of moral responsibility. Forests provide not only a place in which to lose children and abandon them to nature, but also, by their very distance and difference from the *srok*, allow mothers, fathers, and stepparents to entertain and execute that which is unthinkable in a civilized setting. Similarly, in the Wat Srolauv chronicle and a roughly contemporary manuscript, *Satra Lboek Robah Ksat*, male villagers assigned to stand guard over the forest during one community’s flight from the Siamese army begin to lose their morality. Thefts begin. The poor become rich, and hide their loot in the forest, whence it is plundered and lost. The narrator of the chronicle, Vénérable Batum Baramey Pich, imputes their moral decline in part to distance from their *srok* and all it embodies in terms of familial relations and responsibilities. “In great distress, far from their homes, they became greedy. They thought no longer of death, nor of the disappearance of their wealth,

<sup>34</sup> de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 126–28.

<sup>35</sup> See Chandler, “Songs at the Edge of the Forest”; and Charles F. Keyes, “Communist Revolution and the Buddhist Past in Cambodia,” in *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994), pp. 44–45.

<sup>36</sup> Kaun Chau, stanzas 24–25, in *The “Cbap”* (Phnom Penh: Reymun Publishing, n.d.).

and no longer thought with fondness of their home country, nor of their distance from their parents."<sup>37</sup> Here again, as in the "Kaun Lok" narrative, crossing the frontier, as de Certeau argues, "allows or causes the re-emergence of the alien element that was controlled in the interior."

As the above narratives indicate, the *prei* has its own complex cosmology. A preserve of *yeak*, the forest was an unregulated space, a realm of danger. But it was also a vital source of livelihood for many who sculpted their village from it, clearing land and settling at its perimeter, but still venturing back into the forest for kindling, firewood, game, wild roots, medicinal herbs, and other forest products. In tandem with this process, distinctions were made about types of foods and what they represented. As Eve Zucker has recently noted, taboos still hold in Cambodia about forest food: "wild game, alcohol, and forest foods are often associated with wildness whereas cooked rice, domestic meat products, and domestic vegetables are associated with civility."<sup>38</sup> Thus, at one point in the *Satra Lboek Robah Ksat*, villagers fleeing Siamese troops head back into the forest specifically to find wild roots and plants to prepare a soup, but find that without fish or *prâhok*—fermented fish paste here equated with domesticity and civilization—the soup is so tasteless that even in their hunger they cannot swallow it.<sup>39</sup> Over time, Cambodians established a range of ritual and belief to regulate interaction with the forest realm, and so to accommodate the daily necessity of moving between *srok* and *prei* in the search for such staples as firewood and *trakuon* (a water plant consumed by the girls in "Kaun Lok" that is a common vegetable across Cambodia).<sup>40</sup>

#### THE FOREST AS/AT THE EDGES OF RITUAL NARRATIVE

As documented elsewhere by Eveline Porée-Maspero, Ashley Thompson, and Ang Choulean, the most evocative and powerful of ritual narratives is that of *hav proleung*, or calling of the spirits. As Ang writes, forests are still perceived as the destinations of vital parts of the *proleung*, a Khmer term nearly equivalent to "soul," which can be cajoled into the forest by ghosts. "In popular belief," writes Ang, one or more of a person's nineteen *proleung* can leave the body "when spirits of the forest lure some of the *proleung* out of the body and into the forest by conjuring up false and seductive images of their domain which is, in reality, wild and harsh."<sup>41</sup> Diagnosis of this condition and performance of the ceremony to call the lost *proleung*

<sup>37</sup> Khin Sok, "Satra Voat Kroch," vol. 3, strophes 915–922, in *L'annexion du Cambodge par les Vietnamiens au XIXème siècle d'après les deux poèmes du Vénéral Batum Baramey Pich* (Paris: Editions You-feng, 2002), pp. 162, 249.

<sup>38</sup> Eve Zucker, "In The Absence of Elders: Chaos and Moral Order in the Aftermath of the Khmer Rouge," in *People of Virtue: Religion, Power, and Moral Order in Cambodia*, ed. Alix Kent and David Chandler (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, forthcoming). These distinctions have developed in tandem with moral codes, such as the belief that rabbits, which hold a special place in Buddhist symbolism and folklore, should not be eaten.

<sup>39</sup> Khin Sok, "Satra Lboek Roba Ksat," pp. 293, 337. The value of *prâhok* is reiterated in the *Wat Srolauv* manuscript, where it is featured—alongside tobacco, betel, rice, paddy, and salt—in a survival package that the King of Siam distributes to Khmer refugees fleeing Vietnamese troops into Siam.

<sup>40</sup> Miech Ponn, *Komrong aiksa sterbi propayni tumniem tumnoap kmae* (Writings about Khmer Customs and Traditions), part 1 (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2001), pp. 155–57.

<sup>41</sup> Ang Choulean, *Brah Ling* (Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing, 2004).

from the forest occurs only in vaguely defined cases of illnesses, when a person is vacillating between the two clearly defined states of “sickness and health.”<sup>42</sup> When a person becomes delirious, and seems not to know him- or herself, writes Miech Ponn, popular belief has it that some of that person’s soul, large or small, has gone off into the wilds—back to nature—to relax and recuperate. As part of the recalling of the spirits, a song is sung enjoining the *proleung* to return to the body so that all nineteen spirits can be reunited in the body, before they are eaten by wild animals in the forest.<sup>43</sup> This ceremony and the *srok/prei* binary, notes Khing Hoc Dy, feature in the story of “Heng Yan” and the *Vessantara-Jātaka* published by the Buddhist Institute in 1950 and 1966.<sup>44</sup>

A deeply spiritual place, the forest also possessed benign and protective potential. The forest was the Buddha’s destination when he sought enlightenment, and the Bodhi tree, a place of shade and rest, a site of spiritual advancement. In Buddhist texts, woodland settings are sometimes idealized as the perfect site for the forsaking of human attachment. The *Sutta of the Noble Search* thus speaks of “a delightful stretch of land and a lovely woodland grove and a clear flowing river with a delightful forest” where the Buddha sat down to think.<sup>45</sup> In Khmer culture, trees also hold a central place as shelters and repositories of *neak ta* (ancestral spirits). Ouk Samith, a revolutionary born in rural Battambang during the last decades of colonial rule, remembered:

...the benevolent protection of *neak ta* who lived in the woods. Sometimes my father and other peasants went to build up the hut of branches, behind a big tree, which protected the [*neak ta*] ... My father said “The Khmers must not attack trees, they must not forget that our ancestors came from the forest.”<sup>46</sup>

Forest spirits were not above preaching care of the environment, as in a well-known story of a legal contest between a judge and a tiger, during which a forest spirit rules in favor of the accused tiger and against the human plaintiff on the basis that “all humans staying in the forest always cut the branches or leaves” of trees and plants.<sup>47</sup> As mundane deities or “gods of the realm of men,” the *neak ta* also protected villages.<sup>48</sup> They have also acted as moral arbiters, delimiting gossip and dishonesty: to speak badly (*khoh moat khoh ka*) under a spirited tree is still thought to risk inviting

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 31. See also Ashley Thompson, “Le hau bralin: étude du rite et du texte” (doctoral dissertation, Université de Paris III, 1993) and “The Calling of the Souls: A Study of the Khmer Ritual *Hau Bralin*” (Clayton: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Miech Ponn, *Komrong aiksaa sterbi propayni tumniem tumnoap kmae* (Writings about Khmer Customs and Traditions), Part 1 (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2001), pp. 155–57.

<sup>44</sup> Khing Hoc Dy, *Pithi haov prolong* (*Notes sur la cérémonie de l’appel des esprits vitaux*) (Phnom Penh: Librairie Angkor, 2004), pp. 35–37.

<sup>45</sup> Donald K. Swearer, Sommai Premchit, and Phaithun Dokbuakaew, *Sacred Mountains of Northern Thailand and their Legends* (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2004), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> “Testimony of Ouk Samith,” in *Cambodge: la révolution dans la forêt*, ed. J. Debré (Paris: Flammarion, 1976), p. 50.

<sup>47</sup> “*Rieung Mahar Ru Si Preah Klau*,” in *Prochum rieueng preeng kmae*, vol. 3, ed. The Mores and Customs Commission (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2001), pp. 1–7.

<sup>48</sup> Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), pp. 49–80.

retribution from the *neak ta* who inhabits it.<sup>49</sup> Today, oaths at court are still sworn not to the state or before the image of the Buddha, but in the presence of the *neak ta*.

The historian Alain Forest has argued that *neak ta* represent the only figures of pardon in Theravada Buddhism as practiced in Cambodia.<sup>50</sup> The “*Kaun Lok*” story also reveals an understanding and caring pantheon of spirits outside the orbit of the malicious, soul-snatching spirits of the forest and of those *neak ta* whose protection, much like some modern-day Mafia, is only secured by placatory offerings. Even when life takes such a calamitous turn that people, such as the girls in “*Kaun Lok*,” are so preoccupied with their own survival that they fail to make offerings to the Gods, *devata* can intervene.

In addition, forests offered sanctuaries from the elements, from war and destruction, combining the promise of protection with a sense of permanence. The Khmer term *mluap* (shade or shadow) has benign connotations, associated with protection, and lacks the sinister associations (shady, being shadowed) of its English equivalent. Just as forests were beyond the sway of the Buddhist moral order, they were also at least partially out of range of foreign armies. When occupying troops—Siamese, Vietnamese, or French—went forth to instill “order” and allegiance in violent displays that confirmed the laws of Buddhist impermanence, by burning civilian habitats such as temples and houses, forests escaped such targeted destruction.<sup>51</sup>

As a place of ancestral genesis, the forest was a place to come *from*. As a refuge in times of chaos, it was also a place for ordinary people to run to, but only when one was running *from* danger and unwanted change, and not as a point of destination per se. The function of the forest in “*Kaun Lok*” and in the Wat Srolauv chronicle is not dissimilar from that of sylvan sites in European fairytales such as “Hansel and Gretel.” It is a site for transformation, a flight path (from wicked parents, who may or may not symbolize local or royal leaders who have abandoned their people); a journey through time; and a refuge from a home rendered alien by domestic threat (the wicked mother in “*Kaun Lok*”) or external upheaval (the Vietnamese troops met by Narin and Meas in the Wat Srolauv chronicle). For European readers brought up on Grimm, Anderson, Kenneth Graham, and Disney, both stories lack satisfactory resolution: there is no “out” from the forest to the certainty of home. Witches and weasels are not vanquished. Instead, the girls become creatures of the forest, while both the mother in “*Kaun Lok*,” a woman of scant merit, and Meas, a man of meritorious deeds in the Wat Srolauv chronicle, die there.

In “Songs,” Chandler stresses the role of vertical units and strictly measured and regulated arrangements in structuring Khmer aesthetic, moral, and social worlds. Writing on storytelling, mythology, and fairytales, Walter Benjamin has entertained the notion of “the hierarchy of the world of created things” at whose apex is “righteous man,” and which “reaches down into the abyss of the inanimate by many gradations.” Benjamin also suggests a hierarchy of narrative form, where fairytales occupy a more civilized stratum than myth, and argues that animals who come to the

<sup>49</sup> Personal communication, Maurice Eisenbruch, January 8, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge*, p. 83.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Forest, “Recit 17: Les Neak Ta Ta Srei et Yeay Bo,” in *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge*, pp. 183–84. During the reign of Ang Duong at Longvek: “Countless Vietnamese mobilized to fight Cambodia. The Khmers could not resist them: they escaped en masse into the forests, for fear of Vietnamese exactions.”

aid of children in fairytales epitomize the empathy between humanity and nature, and convey a lesson to “meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning (*untermut*) and high spirits (*übermut*)...” The liberating magic of the fairytale, in Benjamin’s analysis, is this lesson of nature’s complicity with a man liberated from the constraining interpretive frameworks of myth.<sup>52</sup>

“*Kaun Lok*” upturns the notion of animals coming to the aid of man, and also upsets the order of things implicit in most European tales of transformation, where bad spells transform humans into animals (e.g., “The Frog Prince,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “The Twelve Swans”) and good spells release them. Rather, the girls are helped by supernatural spirits in their translation into birds, a metamorphosis that allows them a release from the mortal coil which tied them to an abusive mother.

Building on Benjamin, de Certeau, Eco, Thierry, Forest, and Chandler, I suggest that the composers and re-tellers of “*Kaun Lok*” were not simply mobilizing the forest as a symbol of the wild and lawless in order to reinforce a preordained hierarchy between the wild and the civilized, but that both tales used the forest as a realm of possibilities for transformation, and as a site of transition. In “*Kaun Lok*” the forest also offers scope for mobility and transformation, offering narrator and listeners an exit from the turbulent topography of war, displacement, and bereavement. In the same way that mid-twentieth-century readers of “Hansel and Gretel,” a tale fashioned in an earlier era of chaos and darkness, used aspects of this and other fairytales to make sense of a world plunged into the abyss by World War II, so the audience of “*Kaun Lok*” and the Wat Srolauv chronicle had in these texts a means of making sense of the violence and displacement that war had rendered quotidian. As moral boundaries are transgressed, geographies collapse: the catalysts of disaster are humans acting with animal heads and hearts.<sup>53</sup>

In “*Kaun Lok*,” as in many other Cambodian folk stories, writes Thierry, animals are “the brothers of men,” reflecting Buddhist beliefs in the transmigration of souls and rebirth in animal form.<sup>54</sup> In “*Kaun Lok*,” the girls are reborn as birds before they have died, and thus transported into the ultimate twilight zone of premature reincarnation. But as the story unfolds, the departure of their spirits is hinted at again and again. On their first night, the girls are literally frightened out of their wits: so scared, in the narrator’s words, that “it is almost as if they’ve lost their *proleung*.” On their attempt to return home for food, their mother beats them so fiercely with a club that they collapse into oblivion, and it is the *arak devata* who restores their consciousness. Here is the pivotal moment of death and awakening; but, as Thierry suggests, their abandonment was a form of moral and spiritual murder: “A new life arises from this sacrifice, and separates two worlds: that of the human, the world *loka*, and that of the forests, protected by the *devata*.” In the story, their consciousness and place in the human world is tied to what they eat, how they dress, and their powers of speech. Not only do they stop eating cooked food, but their one *sampot* and one shirt turn to rags, and as their mouths harden into beaks, they find they can no longer form human words. But they retain their human sensibilities, and their powers of aural comprehension, lest anyone should come looking for them: an inner, inviolable core of humanity.

<sup>52</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1997), pp. 101, 103.

<sup>53</sup> Donald Haase, “Children, War, and the Imaginative Space of Fairy Tales,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24 (2000): 360–77.

<sup>54</sup> Solange Thierry, *De la rizière a la forêt: contes Khmers* (Paris: Harmattan, 1988), p. 8.

The forest in “*Kaun Lok*” and in the Wat Srolauv chronicle becomes a place of spiritual, as well as social and geographic, mobility; a place of incalculable outcomes, where the art of transition, of movement, of flight—as of restoring temples and accumulating merit in the Wat Srolauv chronicle—become crucial. The categories of “*srok*” and “*prei*,” civilized and wild, function as useful idioms in such proverbs as “*thvoe kar aoy prei, bat kar aoy phteah, thvoe kar aoy phteah, bat kar aoy prei*” (you cannot work at the same time in the home and the forest),<sup>55</sup> but are insufficient to narrate and make sense of this world whose moral and social spaces have been inverted and destroyed by the extremes of war. The notion of a clear, linear boundary between these categories is similarly inadequate. Instead, the spaces in these stories where humans enter the forest and thus ensure both the partial domestication of the wild/animal habitat, or the partial bestialization of the civilized/human habitat, offer scope for movement: for descent, decline, error, escape, loss, and release—whether through death or flight.

In the late nineteenth century, when Cambodia was still thick with forest, *prei* served not only as a marker of what was not *srok* but also denoted freedom and potential; in a Rousseauian twist, its savagery was tinged with scope for nobility and mobility. Writing in 1878, Aymonier and Son Diep translate *prei* as “forêt, liberté” (forest, liberty); a *prei sueng* as a “citizen” or “free man”; a “*kaun prei*” (child of the forest) as a child born out of wedlock; and *dey prei* as “virgin territory.”<sup>56</sup> The forest accommodates animist beliefs and explicates change that does not fall within strict Buddhist frameworks. These are untrammelled forces, which defy the control of destiny or the legislative power of *kamma*, but are not completely outside the orbit of human communication. As Ang shows, over the centuries a complex system of exchange has developed between the “*srok*” and the “*prei*,” regulated by ritual offerings of food that, both raw (bananas and sugar cane, symbolizing “domesticity and sweetness”) and cooked (rice), all contrast with “the wild, rough ... sphere of the forest.” Here, the bipolarity of the wild and the civilized comes unstuck: unruly, wily forest spirits lure *proleung* from the *srok* and into their domain through shape-shifting and mirage, while members of the *srok* entice the forest spirits with the exotic fruits of planned cultivation and domestication.<sup>57</sup> This corridor between two worlds is symbolized by the location of the girls in a *ktom*: their mother does not abandon them to the forest floor, but leads them to a raised, thatched shelter that is still a common feature of rural Cambodia; such shelters are used seasonally as living stations near paddy fields. The same word, and a similar structure, is used for spirit houses, or *ktom neak ta*.

Both “*Kaun Lok*” and the Wat Srolauv chronicle tell a lesson not only about the value of communicating with the natural habitat and the animal world, but about the place for human agency and for *übermut* (high spirits) and *untermut* (cunning) in negotiating with one’s environment and dealing with change. There is little room for either in the harsh human habitat and forest environment of “*Kaun Lok*,” but the eldest daughter emerges as a paragon of morality in adversity, whose later decision to care for her younger charges, rather than blindly obey her mother’s admonitions, teaches us that it is not enough just to listen to our elders.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph Guesdon, *Dictionnaire Cambodgien-Français* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1930), p. 1274.

<sup>56</sup> Aymonier, *Dictionnaire Français-Khmer*, p. 309.

<sup>57</sup> Ang, *Brah Ling*, pp. 1, 10, 13.



Literary critic Umberto Eco writes that there are two approaches to a walk through the woods. The first is destination-based, and involves trying “one or several routes (so as to get out of the wood as fast as possible, say, or to reach the house of grandmother, Tom Thumb, or Hansel and Gretel).” The second is journey-based, and involves walking “so as to discover what the wood is like and find out why some paths are accessible and others are not.”<sup>58</sup> In Eco’s “fictional woods,” as in the tales of “*Kaun Lok*” and the chronicle of Wat Srolauv, the emphasis is not on fault lines separating the forest from other realms, but on pathways in, through, and across the forest—and, sometimes, out of it as well. This metaphor of the path is reiterated by the mobility of the key protagonists. What emerges from Chandler’s readings and translations of “*Kaun Lok*” and Wat Srolauv, as from the ethnographies of Ang and Thompson, is recognition of the absence of a notion of a linear boundary, of a circle cordoning off the space of the forest from that which is around it. The messy edge inhabited by the *kaun lok*, the spatial equivalent of the twilight zone, and a nesting place for negotiation between the human and the wild as symbolized in the feathered girls, is not dissimilar to the slip zone between the *srok* and the *prei*. “[N]othing precisely defines the *srok*” (my emphasis), writes Serge Thion; it is “neither a network of villages, nor an ecclesiastical unity, and barely an administrative unit” but, above all, “a range of activities that one can cover on foot.”<sup>59</sup> As more recently defined by Khing Hoc Dy, “*srok*” can mean rice paddy, vegetable fields or fruit orchards near houses, and an assortment of buildings.<sup>60</sup> In other words, the boundaries of the *srok*, unlike those of Buddhist monasteries and Khmer temples, are marked not by fences, walls, boundary stones, milestones, or other artificial markers, but by human paths of experience and the force of habit.

As Forest notes, *sroks* were born of cleared *prei*, and their founders inhabit their domain long after their deaths through their conversion into *neak ta. Prei*, the forest, was a space that had not yet been managed and brought into the fold of the *srok*. The best and the worst can emerge from this confusion, writes Forest:

The forest is a place of illicit and monstrous relations, a space of dangerous forces, all the more dangerous when they remain there, not clearly identified, and which can come out of the forest at any moment to attack and destabilize the *srok*. But it is also a place of regeneration from which, after clearing, the *srok* is born.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, notions of boundaries between kingdoms in Southeast Asia and China were of broad swaths of land that in and of themselves constituted landscapes and possessed their own cosmological meanings and their own dynamism, moving north, west, south, or east as dynasties and the populations over which they held sway contracted or expanded. These were no fine, immutable lines on a map. They

<sup>58</sup> Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> Serge Thion, “Remodelling Broken Images: Manipulation of Identities towards and beyond the Nation: An Asian Perspective,” in *Ethnicities and Nations: Processes of Interethnic Relationships in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific*, ed. R. Guidieri, F. Pellizzi, and S. Tambiah (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1988), p. 239.

<sup>60</sup> Khing, *Pithi haov prolong*, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge*, p. 15.

were broad corridors where what Anderson has called the “imperceptible shifts” in sovereignty, as played out between Southeast Asian polities and dynasties, paralleled a similar fluidity of movement between existences in the human realm.<sup>62</sup> In the forest as constituted in “*Kaun Lok*” and the Wat Srolauv chronicle, we see the moral and cosmological equivalent of these border lands: territories beyond the absolute sovereignty of man, animal, Buddha, or spirit; these were zones allowing for transit and transformation. As the horizons of human settlement and mobility expanded over the centuries, Buddhist, animist, and Brahmin beliefs became intertwined, the landscape of the Khmer empire became sacralized through a complex network of names, markers, shrines, sightings, and sitings.<sup>63</sup> During the French Protectorate, more-secular, political notions of spatial and conceptual boundaries contracted and solidified.

#### POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY IN PRECOLONIAL AND COLONIAL CAMBODIA

Chandler’s particular gift as a historian has been his enthusiastic embrace and acute analysis of a broad range of materials, long before it was fashionable to mobilize multiple media in the interests of scholarly research. Elsewhere he has brought to light and analyzed Khmer representations of spatial and moral order through a reading of two nineteenth-century list-maps (defined below) that date at least to the reign of Yasovarman I (889–c.910), founder of the Angkor empire. Chandler describes these documents as “an inventory of the kingdom, a map of and for the use of the ancestral spirits [*neak ta*].”<sup>64</sup> Neither strategic instruments nor scientific images, these documents mapped the spatial, temporal, cultural, and spiritual coordinates of the Khmer Empire. A legend to a larger, unwritten map of the Khmer cosmological universe, they provided the key coordinates linking the Cambodian land mass with the ancestral guardians of the Kingdom’s destiny. In both their presentation of information and their intended application, these early Khmer list-maps thus differed markedly from nineteenth-century European maps, whose abstract organization of space effaced indigenous social structures, reducing complex cultural topographies to blank spaces. By rendering uncolonized territories as *tabula rasa*, European cartography flattened the spiritual significance of the Cambodian landscape and made the colonial appropriation and occupation of foreign territories a much easier proposition.<sup>65</sup> From 1903 to 1917, the French Protectorate oversaw numerous land surveys and mapping exercises resulting in the production of three distinct “official” maps for Cambodia, the development of a Geography syllabus, and the production of Indochina Geography primers for use in colonial schools.

One of the strongest features of the precolonial Khmer government was its regional character. If Angkorean architecture mirrored Mount Meru, then the

<sup>62</sup> Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, NY, and London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>63</sup> Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, pp. 52–53.

<sup>64</sup> “L’inauguration d’un monument commémoratif royal au Cambodge,” in *Bulletin du Comité d’Asie Française* 97 (1909): 171–73.

<sup>65</sup> Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 94. See also J. Brian Harley, *The History of Cartography* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1994), p. 279.

administrative structures replicated that of the animist network of *neak ta*, each anchored in a *srok*: their powers nontransferable beyond their immediate locality.<sup>66</sup> Khmer *neak ta* are mired in networks of protection, placation, and patronage that resemble those tying governors to particular fiefdoms.<sup>67</sup> New administrative policies enacted in Cambodia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to shift this traditional “galactic” arrangement of power to one in which the central government had tighter control over outlying regions.<sup>68</sup> The French Protectorate supplanted traditional territorial arrangements with a series of municipalities, town councils, provinces, and communes modeled on European systems of land and people management.

The entrenchment of colonial rule and investment in infrastructure from the turn of the century onwards saw vast tracts of brush and forestland cleared in the name of the colonial national aesthetic, the salvation of heritage, or the creation of new roads. Trees were tamed and pruned into telegraph poles, whose signature wires crisscrossed the sky. New roads reduced the potential for pondering which route to take through the forest; the roads cleaved the forest into bitumen strips, or bypassed it altogether, thereby shrinking the physical and temporal distance between town and countryside, and facilitating the mental leap from local to national centers of identity. New telecommunications systems cemented notions of community across vast areas of space, albeit among a small, educated elite, allowing the consolidation of a new system of administration, run on a “territorial-cartographic basis.”<sup>69</sup>

It was, however, through the attempted enforcement of crystalline boundaries between “city” and “country” milieus and its regimentation of rural and urban space that the European administration most directly clashed with Khmer notions of “*prei*” and “*srok*.” In Cambodian tradition, the divide between *prei* and *srok* accommodated a broad spectrum of human and animal life. All that was tamed—including domesticated, agricultural animals such as pigs, hens, and oxen—resided firmly within the boundaries of *srok*, and as such were deemed compatible with urban living. From 1900 to 1905, a string of legislation tightened the municipal organization of Phnom Penh. The hygiene of markets was regulated, the price of a boat ride fixed, and traffic rules created. It was henceforth forbidden to drive elephants on the streets, to ride horses at a gallop, to set off firecrackers, or to hold cockfights or other games likely to attract crowds.<sup>70</sup> Integral to the capital’s expansion and modernization was the redesignation of preexisting settlements of Cambodian tradespeople and farmers who, once a major constituent of Phnom Penh, were now pushed to its physical and social periphery. Legislation enacted in August 1907 divided the capital into urban and suburban spaces.<sup>71</sup> In a further attempt to sanitize

<sup>66</sup> This immobility contrasts with the broad spirit circuits in which some of Burma’s thirty-seven Nats travel.

<sup>67</sup> See Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge*, pp. 86–87, 89–90, 97–99, 102.

<sup>68</sup> Anne Hansen, “Religion and Identity in Cambodian Buddhism,” a paper delivered at the Association for Asian Studies Conference, March 1998 (Washington, DC), pp. 3–4.

<sup>69</sup> See Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, p. 310; and Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 170–78.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Meyer, *La vie quotidienne des Français en Indochine 1860–1910* (Paris: Hachette, 1985), p. 138.

<sup>71</sup> The European, Chinese mercantile, and royal/elite Cambodian Quarters demarcated by the Tonle Sap, Boulevard Miche, Kampot Avenue, Bak-Tuk bridge, and Doudart de Lagrée Boulevard, were declared urban. The suburbs incorporated the Khmer districts of Russey Keo,

and urbanize the capital, legislation in December 1907 imposed punitive taxes on horses, cattle, buffaloes, goats, and dogs. Ox carts were now taxed at up to five times the tax on a pedicab.<sup>72</sup> Throughout the following decades, such legislation increased, as did the disparity between city and country.

Colonial landscaping and the introduction of secular associations such as Scouts and Youth Hostel Associations served further to subvert Khmer cosmologies and to convert the spaces on maps into lived experience of the “national” habitat. In the 1930s, the cultivation of the notion of “a national landscape” and bonds between that landscape and elite Cambodian youth were forged through regulated youth camps and scouting activities, aimed at the education, “civilization,” and character-building of city-dwellers through regulated exposure to the *prei*. Founded in the 1930s, the Cambodian Scout movement worked to inculcate a love of the land through forest hikes, camps, and outdoor activities. Excursions to the provinces of Kampot and elsewhere involved long treks to such scenic sights as Phnom Sah, Phnom Bokor, and the waterfall at Teuk Chu, to teach the “various skills [lit: *vicchea*, knowledge] that scouts must and should know, in order to become ‘civilized beings’ worthy of their King.”<sup>73</sup> The year 1938 also saw the launch of Cambodia’s first Youth Hostel Association (*yuvasalaa*), which established hostels in Takeo, Kampot, and Siem Reap in the tradition of “big countries like France” that “build many such places to visit, relax, take fresh air for health during holidays ... wherever there are mountains, waterfalls, and fine forests.”<sup>74</sup> By this point, at least in the minds of Cambodia’s few, Western-educated nationalist elite, the “*prei*” had become a tool for sculpting the national character. In a parallel development, the forest retreated from what was now taken as a natural, national “Khmer” habitat. Stone temples became the focus of national anthems, and a deforested, clean Angkor was featured on the national flag. The national landscape celebrated in the first Khmer novels—from Kim Hak’s 1932 novel, *Water of the Tonlesap*, to Rim Kin’s *Reuang Sophat* of 1939 and Nou Hach’s later *Melea Toungcet*<sup>75</sup>—was a rural idyll of green rice paddies dotted with palm trees. However, the incorporation of “*prei*” into a national landscape and a rational cartographic grid did not denude forests of their supernatural attributes.

As one Cambodian colleague recalls, when visiting Phnom Bokor in the 1960s, he and his friends took care not to mouth the words “tiger” or “snake,” referring instead to these creatures in code, as “PM” (*polis militaire*, or military police) and “ivy,” so as not to anger forest spirits.<sup>76</sup> In a report on the Cardamon Mountains published on the eve of the civil war, students of the Faculty of Archaeology in

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Boeng-Kak, Boeng Decho, Petit Takeo, and Chruï Changvar. Archives d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, INDO GGI 2189 GGI Beau, Arrêté, August 16, 1907.

<sup>72</sup> Archives d’Outre-Mer, INDO GGI 2189 GGI Beau and RSC Luce Arrêté, December 25, 1907.

<sup>73</sup> “Yeung baan tutuel sombot tvay preahpor chaymonkul mouy ombi puk khrumkayrithi doucmien secday khangkhraom nih” (We have received the following letter of blessing from the Scout Group), *Nagaravatta*, April 24, 1937, pp. 1–2. The language used in this letter indicates that the author is royal.

<sup>74</sup> See Monsieur le President du Yuvsala, “Yuvsala” (Youth Hostels), *Nagaravatta*, September 10, 1938; “Ploang Dei Yuvsala,” *Nagaravatta*, December 24, 1938, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> The first modern Cambodian novel was Kim Hak’s *Tuk Tonlesap*, serialized in *Kambuja Surya* in 1932. See Klairung Amratisha, “The Cambodian Novel: a Study of its Emergence and Development” (doctoral dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, 1998).

<sup>76</sup> Personal communication with Tuy Someth, Phnom Penh, July 25, 2006.

Phnom Penh observed the existence throughout Cambodia of “a legendary geography (*une géographie légendaire*) which merits collection.”<sup>77</sup> Within a year, massive aerial bombardments were transforming that mythical landscape into the scar tissue of war, obliterating human life and fracturing cultural memories.

#### LANDSCAPING WAR AND REVOLUTION

Despite the continued effervescence of the worlds outside the surveyors’ lens, colonial town planning and the corresponding stratification of Cambodia into “urban,” “suburban,” and “rural” spaces would lead to massive social cleavage. The cleavage was reiterated by Sihanouk’s post-independence policies of not allowing “peasants” to go barefoot in the streets or to pedal cyclos bare-chested, and by the continuation of colonial ordinances restricting the maintenance of livestock in urban areas. Such polarization ultimately laid the groundwork for the iconoclastic anti-urbanism of the Khmer Rouge (KR), which had used the *prei* as a base of its operations from the 1960s into the 1970s; and that, on gaining power as Democratic Kampuchea (DK) in 1975, catapulted *prei* into *srok* and *srok* into *prei*, obliterating colonial cartographies and overturning Khmer cosmologies.<sup>78</sup>

In the DK, the *prei* resumed its nineteenth-century role as a place of fear, moral turbulence, and darkness. In rare instances, *prei* retained its ambivalence: a site of abduction and execution for most, it also offered a perilous escape route to the border with Thailand and with Vietnam, and for some, to eventual resettlement in third countries. But for most living under the DK regime, the forest was no longer somewhere one could run “to” or through when running “from;” instead, it became a terminal, a place where the regime took, and frequently dispatched, suspected infidels. The forest’s function as a legitimate, free source of sustenance was also denied. While abolishing property, the DK declared *Ângkar* owner of even the minutest forest fruit. Fresh water snails and clams became a delicacy whose clandestine foraging invited savage retribution.

As Ebihara cautions, the transformation of *srok* to *prei* was not purely the work of the DK. Her research site at Svay suffered daily bombings over a protracted period during the summer of 1973, and many villagers fled to Phnom Penh. In 1975, after the KR victory, they returned to Svay, only to find an overgrown wilderness where their homes had once stood.<sup>79</sup> As in the verse narratives of Wat Srolauv, war, and not just individual political ideologies, played havoc with the ecological underpinnings of sociocultural stability. But the DK fashioned a new nightmare from this lunar landscape. Where earlier nationalists had worked to territorialize memory, the DK sought to erase memory itself, attempting to demolish the social habitus and emotional bearings of millions of Cambodians through relocation, reeducation, and demolition campaigns that aimed to eradicate both familial attachments and attachments to specific places. The map was recast. Provinces became zones, and

<sup>77</sup> La redaction, “Métiers de la forêt et vie religieuse dans les Cardamones,” *Bulletin des Étudiants de la Faculté d’Archéologie* (December 1968): 82.

<sup>78</sup> See François Ponchaud, “Social Change in the Vortex of Revolution,” in *Cambodia, 1975–1978: Rendezvous with Death*, ed. Karl Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 154–59.

<sup>79</sup> May Ebihara, “Memories of the Pol Pot Era in a Cambodian Village,” in *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, ed. Judy Ledgerwood (DeKalb, IL: Southeast Asia Publications, CSEAS, Northern Illinois University, 2002), pp. 91–108.

names became numbers. This subversion was seen not only in cartography, but in the emptying of cities of people, and the planting of coconut palms in the capital. This emptying of the cities found an eerie echo in the legendary depletion of Phnom Penh's bird population.

In her moving account of the deterioration of a village in Svay during the Khmer Rouge period, May Ebihara shows how the *srok*, or human habitat and domesticity itself, became fuel for the revolution, and notes that just as "aspects of the landscape can be culturally conceptualized, the physical setting can, of course, be literally constructed and materially altered by human actions."<sup>80</sup> Village homes were torn down and used for firewood. The temple pond, a symbol of meditative tranquility, was filled in and used as a vegetable garden. For villagers from the once tidy, lush habitat of Svay, the months spent in the *prei* at Kok King in 1975, before their final relocation, "served as a transition, a Turnerian liminal period ... between the old society and the DK regime that inverted or destroyed most of the villagers' former ways of life and thrust them into a new revolutionary order."<sup>81</sup>

In its bestiality, ignorance, and neglect, the regime took on all the characteristics of the mother in "*Kaun Lok*," abandoning its people to the forest with rations equivalent to those with which she sent her daughters to their fate. Like the mother in "*Kaun Lok*," who took her children into the forest to achieve what she could not perhaps bring herself to do in the morally calibrated landscape of the *srok*, the DK also took people away. Despite the extraordinary depths of bestiality plumbed at S-21 or Tuol Sleng, the regime, as if in an effort to maintain a "clean" capital, transported their victims to the exterior of Phnom Penh, choosing for their execution site the overgrown grounds of a former Chinese cemetery at Cheoung Ek. Those who died natural deaths, often from disease, malnutrition, and starvation, received at best hurried burials, returning them to the soil, while those dispatched in the "killing fields" and the badlands of the *prei* were left to rot.

The new regime inherited from the colonial progenitor it blamed for its country's ills a stark binary view and an obsession with borders. There was little room among those on the borderline or on the wrong side of the boundary between "new" and "base" people (a boundary itself inscribed in the label "17th April people") for cunning or high spirits. The state itself appropriated divine rights of transformation, attempting to sculpt new people into old, and city dwellers into farmers. At the same time, its extremist ideology and its increasingly paranoid purges denied some fighters and cadres in its rank the rights to personal, political, or societal transformation for which they had strived. "When we were soldiers ... we fought until we nearly died," remembered one woman who had entered the notorious 703rd Division of the Khmer Rouge army when she was a teenager, fleeing the *srok* for the *prei*: "We slept in the forest. But after the victory, it turns out that *Ângkar* will not let us stay in Phnom Penh."<sup>82</sup> Like many others, she was subsequently imprisoned for suspected disloyalty to the regime.

In his recent memoir *The Gate*, François Bizot tells of his captivity in a Khmer Rouge "liberated zone," where a patch of bamboo, pond, brush, and forest at the foot of a mountain, similar to that in "*Kaun Lok*," becomes a prison camp and murder site.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 93–95.

<sup>82</sup> Huy Vannak, *The Khmer Rouge Division 703: From Victory to Self-Destruction* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Centre of Cambodia, 2003), pp. 72, 156, 157.

Here, like the girls in “*Kaun Lok*,” people are knocked unconscious and left to die. On his return to confront these demons some thirty years later, Bizot senses “their souls slipping away like whitefish among the blades of grass.”<sup>83</sup> This malevolent landscape is bereft of guardian spirits; the world has turned so far that the fate of the “*Kaun Lok*” girls is to be envied compared with that of millions of Cambodians abandoned to an early grave. Here and there, surreptitious invocations are made to Buddha and the *neak ta*, but with a ban on religious observance, no food to spare, and all but a handful of monks disrobed, spirits cannot be placated, and new merit cannot be made. In some sites, however, folktales persisted. Heng Kimvan, who lived in Kong Mieh district of Kompong Cham during the DK period, remembers hearing the story of the woman who shrank the meat. The bird, its cry of “*svet te chav*,” and the telling and retelling of this tale, were all part of the soundscape of his DK childhood. Its themes of violence, escape, disappearing food, cannibalization, and the transgression of family bonds, Buddhist strictures, and filial ethics may have helped its listeners to anchor the apparently meaningless wilderness of their lives into a pre-DK cultural terrain.<sup>84</sup>

Other meanings and functions of the *prei* continued during this period, alongside the DK’s meta-narrative of progress and revolutionary modernity. Next to *Ángkar*’s human machinations and the repeated failures of the state to protect its citizens, the protective powers of forest spirits retained strong allure. In tangled scrub at the foot of Phnom Sah in Kampot, destination of an earlier mentioned 1930s scout-group outing, a small, thatched shrine (*ktom*) was maintained by villagers with the tacit consent of their village chief, during DK and after. Here, in surreptitious silence, villagers who had long lost faith in both the party and their king, whose calls to revolution had led them into the maquis in 1970, venerated a spirit king they described to me in 1995 as lord of all the forests and mountains in the region—the powerful *neak ta* Bentougong.<sup>85</sup>

#### VISUAL AND VERBAL NARRATIVES OF *PREI* AFTER THE DK

In the 1980s, the state-sponsored visual arts of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) often equated the DK with wilderness, even as it pursued its own campaigns to carve out a space in the forest, notably through the notorious K-5 campaign. Book jackets and memorial murals framed violent DK soldiers against a black silhouette of the forest, suggestive of the jagged edge between the *srok* and *prei*. Cartography met “thanatourism” in a map sculpted from skulls, at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crime, where territory and memory were remapped in a temporal narrative that wove human remains into a macabre mortuary landscape showing DK zones.<sup>86</sup> Elsewhere, the natural habitat was invoked to symbolize the

<sup>83</sup> François Bizot, *The Gate* (London: The Harvill Press, 2003).

<sup>84</sup> Personal communication with Heng Kimvan, Phnom Penh, January 19, 2005.

<sup>85</sup> Penny Edwards and Chan Sambath, “Ethnic Chinese in Cambodia,” in *Ethnic Groups in Cambodia*, ed. W. Collins (Phnom Penh: Center for Advanced Study [monograph], 1996), pp. 109–75.

<sup>86</sup> “Thanatourism” refers to the phenomenon of visiting places of death; see J. Lennon and M. Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (New York, NY, and London: Continuum, 2000). The map hung at Tuol Sleng for twenty years, from the early 1980s until 2001.

violence of silence in the DK.<sup>87</sup> A far cry from the 1930s and 1940s novels mentioned earlier, with their lush, green, fertile riverine landscapes, artist Phy Chan Than's *The Koh Tree* (oil on canvas, 1999) depicts the violent dislocation of the DK through a split and dismembered trunk, surrounded with a crimson current signifying a PRK slogan that people had lived in a river of blood and their bones had "grown into mountains."<sup>88</sup> Phy Chan Than's repertoire includes another work of the same year that entirely banishes the *prei* from an Angkorean temple scene, rendering Banteay Srey in soft hues and strokes. Reminiscent of Claude Monet's 1906 *Water Lilies*, this work conjures the rural idyll of *la douce France* which de Carné and his contemporaries had found so lacking at Angkor.<sup>89</sup> Writing of the metaphoric use of the *prei* in contemporary visual narratives of Cambodia, Ingrid Muan emphasizes the popularity of pastoral scenes for domestic display. Many of the consumers and producers of these idylls, she writes, are Khmer Rouge survivors who, "as urban dwellers, carry a sense of uneasiness—if not terror—for the countryside where they spent those fearful years." But that terror is erased from the benign images that artists produce in multiples, images that deny their own histories. Is this the "blankness of trauma," Muan asks, or is it "the will of the damaged to forget and go on?"<sup>90</sup>

This erasure of the Khmer Rouge era from such depictions of the *prei* may be seen as a reclamation of the forest from the one regime that, perhaps more than any other, occupied it and transformed it most fully from a place of refuge and a site of transformation, mobility, ancestry, spirituality, and escape to the lived antithesis of Rama's enchanted forest, a place where thousands and more died not "alone," like Meas of the Wat Srolauv chronicle, but in the company of their executioners or fellow victims; a place not for flights of birds or fancy, but a place smothered with too many memories, collective and individual, of death, denial, and destitution.

## CONCLUSION

In his analysis of children, war, and fairytales in Europe, Donald Haase has emphasized the ambiguity of settings such as towers, forests, rooms, cages, ovens, and huts in their ability to conjure threat and promise, exile and return, alienation and familiarization. Haase suggests that readers and storytellers and their audiences during World War II and the Holocaust used fairytales as a template for their own experiences of displacement and future hopes, and that survivors familiar with such tales used the visual rhetoric of faerie realms to interpret unfamiliar and violent post-war landscapes. In the same way, the narratives analyzed by Chandler would have helped listeners and readers, in the nineteenth as in the twentieth century, to map the trauma of war and negotiate their way between the reality they faced, the idealized image of a world they knew, and the threat and promise of tomorrow.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Ingrid Muan, "Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration, 1918–2000" (doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 2001), p. 336.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 336–37. My comparison with literary landscapes is flawed, but as Muan notes, Cambodian artists were prevented or dissuaded from painting landscapes at the time these novels were published, and in this respect they constitute an important record of indigenous aesthetic conceptions of the land.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 324, 330.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>91</sup> Haase, "Children, War, and the Imaginative Space of Fairy Tales."



Eco has argued that while the wolf in a fairytale may well be traded for any other monster, such as an ogre, the reader is irreplaceable, and remains a “fundamental ingredient not only of the process of storytelling but also of the tale itself.”<sup>92</sup> The relationship between text or story, reader and listener, in Cambodia today is calibrated by decades of civil and political chaos, and their legacies of moral ambiguity. As analyzed by one contemporary Cambodian researcher who grew up in a country at civil war, “*Kaun Lok*” illuminates the possibility of conflict within individuals and families: not only the bodies, but also the “fragmentary souls of the girls,” are reconfigured through interactions with the forest. During this “time of evolution,” the girls “suffer from the conflicts between opposing forces that determine their realities and way of life.”<sup>93</sup> Decades of war followed by accelerated globalization have led both to ruptures with tradition and a dilution in the oral transmission of tales such as “*Kaun Lok*.” In rural as in urban areas, stories still circulate in temples, particularly on holy days, and in homes. A researcher at the Buddhist Institute found in 2004 that “*Kaun Lok*” did not figure in the memories of one village in Kompong Cham.<sup>94</sup> However, the tale still features in the folklore syllabus of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, where one lecturer’s interpretation of “*Kaun Lok*” dwells not on transition and transcendence, but, reflecting 1980s prerogatives spelled out in public education, on the restitution of normality and order in a world emerging from chaos. Arguing that people should stay within the paths mapped out by society and the state, this lecturer uses the story to teach that crime does not pay, and that women must not forget their role as mothers and wives as set out in the “*Chbap Srey*.” Here, the mother in the story is both antihero and antithesis of the *srey krup leak*; she is a *srey derichan*, a bestial woman whose savagery exceeds that even of the tiger, which guards its offspring.<sup>95</sup>

As societies change, so does the cultural literacy required to make sense of such tales.<sup>96</sup> In his essay for this volume, Alexander Hinton illuminates an unlikely intertextuality between the destruction of an entire “lineage” in the *Tum Teav* epic and attempts to destroy an entire “faction” described in DK forced confessions and reiterated in DK slogans. Ghouls and the ghosts of recent history haunt some new Cambodian cinema, but television, rap, karaoke, and electronic games are the storytellers preferred by youth. But, even among urban youth, the *prei* still holds its resonance as a metaphor. On the walls of a dance room for disadvantaged youth, in a Phnom Penh slum building from whose fissured walls sprout shrubs and young

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<sup>92</sup> Eco, *Six Walks*, p. 1.

<sup>93</sup> Hel Rithy, “Dependent Origination: Towards a Theory of Meaning” (master’s thesis, Royal University of Phnom Penh, 2004), pp. 74–76.

<sup>94</sup> Than Bunly, “The Status of Oral Folktale Narration in Contemporary Phreah Theat Thmor Da Village” (master’s thesis, Royal University of Phnom Penh, 2004).

<sup>95</sup> Heng Kimvan, lecture notes: *Prajum rieuangpreeng kmae piek buen (Mien 12 reung) saklbong seksa reuang daemkommaet sat kaunlok. Prophup: Reung as’chaar* (Collected Khmer Folktales Volume 4 (12 stories): Attempts to study the story of the origins of the child-of-the-world bird: Source: Wonderful Tales); personal communication with Heng Kimvan, Phnom Penh, October 3, 2004, and January 18, 2005.

<sup>96</sup> For an insightful analysis of the changing social meanings of Khmer folktale in the State of Cambodia, see Judy Ledgerwood, “Gender Symbolism and Culture Change: Viewing the Virtuous Woman in the Khmer Story ‘Mea Yoeng,’” in *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*, ed. May Ebihara, Carol Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 119–28.

trees, one slogan reads: "At home we each have our own mother, in the *prei*, we only have one mother." Here, the *prei* functions as a metaphor for urban modernity, where a growing number of rural-to-urban migrants, as well as children from broken families, must make substitute families and look out for each other.