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Speaking for the Spirits: A Reflection on Knowledge, Expertise, and Methodology in Ethnographic Fieldwork on Religion

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Abstract:

Our ways of representing the cosmological world are core issues in the reconfigured animism field in contemporary anthropology, as well as a recurring theme in the social sciences' current interest in ontologies. This paper interrogates methodological questions of decisions regarding who to listen to as cosmological interlocuters in fieldwork, and how to interpret diverse perspectives and varied claims of expertise on the spirit-worlds. The work is an attempt to be transparent about the methodological untidiness of fieldwork on a topic upon which there seemed to be a very nebulous body of ideas and practice. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Kulen plateau in northwest Cambodia, I describe an expressed paucity of specialized knowledge about the nature of the cosmological inhabitants of the place. However, when it came to engaging with the spirit-worlds, mountain residents joined together in complex ritual practice. Cosmological knowledge was not held by one but many, and supernatural solutions were sought through a network of expertise and in community. I contrast the types of knowledge held by pilgrims to the mountain with that of its long-term residents, and discuss the challenges presented in observing and representing a varied cosmological ethnoscape in a sacred place.

Keywords: anthropology of religion; Cambodia; fieldwork, knowledge expertise; methodology; sacred landscape

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Introduction

In our current Anthropocenic milieu, how do we think about and write about the more-than-human, be that supernatural or natural, ghost or orangutan or oil palm? There is rich scholarship emerging on relations between human actors and non-human or more-than-human actors (see Chao 2018; de la Cadena 2010; Haraway 2003; Kohn 2013; Munster 2016; Rose 2014; Tsai 2019; Tsing et al 2017). Among other things, these multispecies studies are an effort to upend our longstanding nature-culture distinctions and human ethnocentrism towards other kinds of beings (Bubandt 2018; de la Cadena 2015; Harvey 2014; Naveh & Bird-David 2014). Yet scholars have pointed out that supernatural beings make uneasy bedfellows with other more material entities (Fernando 2018). Our ways of representing the cosmological world are core issues in the reconfigured animism field in contemporary anthropology, as well as a recurring theme in the social sciences' current interest in ontologies.

All these matters are important. Yet in this working paper I would like to turn from these larger ontological concerns to questions of methodology—namely the matter of how one gathers and interprets data about religion from our interlocuters during ethnographic study. Whether a scholar takes a materialist stance, a naïve realist position, or sidesteps by defining spiritual actors vis-a-vis their social agency rather than their ontological essence, such positioning leaves the methodological question of who exactly to listen to as cosmological interlocuters and narrators. In Cambodia, where I conduct my fieldwork, spirits rarely speak for themselves but rather are mediated through spirit mediums, known in the narration of dreams and visions where their kind appear, and recognized in stories of encounter and engagement with their often-invisible thresholds and holdfasts. They are also known more phenomenologically in the body of a person troubled by the spirit world—evidenced through tingling limbs, through shuddering, inexplicable wasting illness, and the gripping clench of the stomach known as *jok buas*.[1]

[1] There is no official transliteration system to render Khmer into English. In this piece I am using a simplified Anglophone-friendly transliteration of my own making.

I did not use to concern myself much with the matter of representation of religious knowledge. My research has fairly recently turned from traditional ecological knowledge and social histories of war to the domain of the sacred. This paper is an attempt to reflect upon some of the untidiness of my current research into engagements with the spirit world on Phnom Kulen, Cambodia's most sacred mountain and the site of a national park encompassing nine villages. Despite a disciplinary turn towards reflexivity in the 1980s, anthropological studies often remain rather opaque about research methods—to say one does ethnographic fieldwork covers a multitude of techniques and a great many decisions about how to engage with uncertainties in information and interpretation.[2] This paper is an attempt to be transparent about the methodological untidiness of fieldwork on a topic upon which there seems to be a very nebulous body of ideas and practice.

A Sacred and Dangerous Place

Historical Khmer literature and oral tradition present two contrasting landscape types: the *srok*, the cultivated domesticated world, and the *prey*, forested and often mountainous terrain (Arensen 2012; Chandler 1996). The *srok* is also commonly considered a Buddhist domain, in contrast to the wild and feral powers of the non-human supernatural world that dwell in the *prey* (Davis 2015; Keyes 1994).

The status of Phnom Kulen both confirms and muddies this traditional landscape classification—although it is perceived as a forested domain, Cambodians regard Phnom Kulen as a sacred Buddhist mountain due to its history and possession of numerous archaeological and religious sites (Chevance et al 2019). The sandstone massif in Siem Reap province is where Jayavarman II crowned himself as the reincarnation of Vishnu and Angkor's first god-king in the 9th century BCE (Penny et al 2014). The mountain is also the site of the original Angkorian city, Mahendraparvata, which is thought to have been established in the 8th century, and many archaeological sites remain (ibid). Within this sacred landscape are villages with a long-established history—various contemporary village names may be found on maps drawn up during the French protectorate (Boulbet 1973; Stern 1938).

Phnom Kulen became a Khmer Rouge stronghold from the 1960s onwards (Kiernan 2004). During Cambodia's second civil war (1979-1998), fighting between different factions resulted in nearly two decades of armed conflict on the mountain and widespread displacement of residents (Motzke et al 2012). Villages were resettled in the late 1990s. Phnom Kulen was re-designated as a national park in 1993 and is currently managed by the Cambodian Ministry of Environment (Hayes

[2] That said, several anthropologists have recently reflected on fieldwork, researcher positionality, and the complexities of interpretation in the 2021 edited collection *Fieldwork and the Self*.

et al 2013). Because of its cultural significance and the mountain's proximity to the Angkor Wat complex, Phnom Kulen receives notable tourist traffic, both domestic and foreign (Motzke et al. 2012).

In the course of my earlier research, it slowly became evident that many mountain residents believe that sacred sites and beings on the mountain hold ongoing significance for their everyday life. The sacred landscape is comprised of forces and places that are both seen and unseen, above and below the ground, and I wanted to understand how this more-than-human landscape influenced ritual practice and agriculture on the mountain. The question of who to ask about such matters and how to understand the implications of their responses will be addressed in what follows.

Who Speaks for the Spirits? A Reflection on Expertise

The Villagers

How does one decide who knows the spirits best? There is no rulebook for this sort of thing, particularly as supernatural beings were believed to have a penchant for choosing individuals via their own mysterious means. The first two times we researched cosmologies on the mountain I was a primary investigator supervising undergraduate student researchers, and our study demographics included any villager over forty years of age.[3] In addition to documenting villagers' perspectives on spirit rituals and encounters with spirits over the preceding eras, we attempted to make an index of spirit names, associated places, and types. My initial inclination was to include only long-term elderly residents of the mountain villages as interlocuters, and these elders were certainly sought out for their views. But the villages exhibited the fluid demographics of a post-war population—many mountain families include lowland soldiers who were posted on Kulen in the decades of fighting who married local women and never left. A number of these men were traditional specialists in their own right. In addition, the mountain attracts those seeking engagement with the spirit world—both as residents and visitors.

Theravada Buddhism is the primary religious tradition in contemporary Cambodia, but Khmer society has a range of lay practitioners with specialized religious expertise, the *kru khmer*. This is a broad Khmer term for a traditional practitioner, encompassing expertise that may include divination, bone setting, herbal medicine, spirit-healing, astrology, midwifery, magical charms, sorcery, or mediumship. A variety of village residents turned out to possess these skill sets, but many evinced a

[3] From 2014-2020 I supervised students from various North American universities during my tenure with the Center for Conservation and Development Studies, a School for Field Studies (SFS) program. In May of 2016 and 2018, two such students carried out short field research projects on animist practice in Kulen villages.

reluctance to claim expertise. In other words, a challenge to conducting religious ethnography on Kulen was that people who do sacred things well (cosmopraxis, if you will), were not necessarily those most apt to talk about them. There is an expression in Khmer, to be *bukai netye*, skilled at speaking, and such 'good-talkers' are wonderful interlocuters for historical interviews. It is a delight when a traditional specialist is one of these narrative masters—Grandmother Nuan[4], for example, was a loquacious midwife and spirit medium who enjoyed describing a week spent in the spirit-world, chewing betel as she did so, and speaking of being fed floral nectar and seeing glowing spirit-horses.

Yet often others, even when identified as traditional religious practitioners by others, were reluctant to claim sacred expertise and often said that they were not *kru*, or that they knew only a little. I had met and interviewed one traditional midwife multiple times before I learned that she was a diviner and therefore a valued ritual expert in her community. When asked directly, she explained to us the training and testing she had undergone and showed us her divination method, suspending a betel nutcracker from a string.

Was such reluctance to disclose expertise borne from cultural modesty? Traditional Khmer proverbs are full of admonitions to be modest and not put on airs.[5] Or perhaps there is a connection between villagers' reluctance to claim sacred expertise and the reluctance to become a spirit host that spirit-healers have described to me—it was not a role most people sought and becoming a medium[6] often took a physical toll. Grandmother Nuan was commonly regarded as the most powerful medium on the mountain, and she was missing for a week before her return from the deep forest scratched, starving, and full of power. As is common to shamanic accounts elsewhere, Khmer spirit-hosts often share narratives of falling deeply ill and having a healing encounter with a spirit that requested the person become their host and help them to heal others. On Kulen, these narratives often included the spirit asking the person to move to a place of power. Several mediums described an initial resistance to play host to a spirit and the call to resettle—one medium recounted moving to the mountain and then trying to leave again, which caused her illness to return. In the end, she had to embrace her fate and new role as a spirit host and healing practitioner.

Was a denial of expertise prompted by our asking about secret matters? Jammes has highlighted the fact that secrecy and arcane knowledge that is kept by a privileged few may well be part of the very structure of the religion in question (2022). He provocatively compares this secrecy to the act of

[4] Villages and villagers' names have been changed.
[5] To cite two examples of many, one proverb states 'The tiger crouches; do not say that he bows to you' (*kla krab; kom auy t'ha kla somp'hea)* and another 'The upright rice stalk is empty, the bowed stalk holds grain' (*ngoi skok; aon dak kroap*) (Fressange 2014, pp. 68 & 101; English translation my own).
[6] Most of the mediumship on the mountain was combined with the role of a spirit healer (that is, a traditional healer thought to have a special relationship with a spirit who enabled the healer).

fieldwork itself, positing that such research "implies a certain amount of mutual concealment, a normative mix of clarity and vagueness in the studied society (and its constituent individuals) and in the researcher" (ibid, 128). These poles of clarity and vagueness did punctuate interviews on the cosmological, but I rarely had interlocuters tell me or my students or research assistants that we were asking questions about secret matters or redirect us to more banal domains. Instead, after denigrating their knowledge levels, many elders described their stories and beliefs to us at length.

However, despite their openness to be interviewed, a ubiquitous response to the research team was a statement about the loss of expertise. The elders who truly knew about the spirits had already died, the villagers said. Those who remained had less knowledge and less faith in the spirit-world than earlier generations. I took these statements at face value and presumed that due to the events of the war, much sacred knowledge had been lost and the transmission of traditional knowledge had been interrupted. My desire to make pre- and post-war comparisons as well as villagers' reluctance to claim specialized knowledge and ritual expertise meant in methodological terms that it was expedient to interview everyone old enough to have some knowledge of the pre-war history of the mountain. It was quite without design, then, that I managed to dodge a methodological error that I would have happily conducted, that of consulting only religious specialists and constructing a cosmology solely on their knowledges (Wilerslav 2004).

The Pilgrims

Complicating this question of selecting interlocuters even further, it was not only long-term residents of Kulen who laid claim to knowledge about its sacred landscapes and powerful forces. Its visitors and pilgrims did so also, as did the Buddhist monks who came to dwell or meditate upon the mountain for periods of time.

There are no statistics kept that separate out the sacred tourist from other types of tourist, or indeed any publicly available numerical tallies of annual tourists to the national park. But even casual observation reveals that the visitors to the waterfall, the pagoda complex with a reclining Buddha carved between the 10th and 12th century (Chevance et al, 2019) and the lingam and yonis inscribed in the riverbed, include religious tourists (Terzidou, Scarles, & Saunders, 2018), both domestic and foreign. Roadside shops along the road to the Preah Ang Thom pagoda sell goods for making offerings, including folded lotuses, joss sticks, and paper money in small denominations, and before Ministry of Environment crackdowns, openly hawked traditional medicines, totems and amulets made from animal parts regarded as powerful by virtue of having reportedly lived on Kulen before their death (Wildlife Alliance 2013). Buddhist lay elders sold these goods and maintained shrines scattered

through the pagoda complex. Few of these elders were from the mountain villages--many were a sort of sacred migrant, having left their lowland villages to come and live in the pagoda in semi-permanent shacks and shelters. The presence of mountain residents at the popular pagoda was largely as petitioners of the visitors—elders and disabled villagers positioned themselves daily on the sides of the temple steps leading up to the sacred sites and begged for alms, sometimes playing traditional instruments[7].

I was slow to recognize these outsiders as potential interlocuters regarding the cosmological landscape. My inclination was to privilege the knowledge and expertise of mountain residents with a long-standing connection to the landscape. In 2019, somewhat reluctantly recognizing this other body of knowledge and practice, I worked with two SFS students to interview religious tourists and pilgrims coming to sacred sites around the pagoda complex of Preah Ang Thom.[8] Unsurprisingly, these interlocuters had different understandings of the sacred sites and different nexuses of power and ritual than village residents. It is beyond the remit of this paper, but these outsiders may alter the landscapes they visit. Some tourists or pilgrims end up becoming patrons of the contemporary sacred landscape. They seek the places of power, and in some cases, they develop them, sponsoring the erection of concrete Buddhist or Hindu statuary, shelters for ascetic monks or rebuilding existing pagodas in the villages.

I want to term this blend of locals and incomers, visitors and residents, laity, and monks, as a cosmological ethnoscape, which I will abbreviate as a cosmo-ethnoscape. The term cosmoscape is sometimes used in reference to cosmological understandings of sacred landscape and sacred geographies by archaeologist and anthropologists (Reichel, 2012), but I am referencing the use of *-scape* that was popularized by Arjun Appadurai—that is, fluid and shifting "deeply perspectival constructs" of modernity and globalization (2006: 589). Ethnoscapes are one of his five *-scapes*, and he defines them as the people who make up a given landscape—not just the residents of a place but also its visitors: its immigrants, guest workers, tourists, and so forth. To understand Kulen, arguably the most sacred place in Cambodia, the entire ethnoscape must be taken into consideration.

Different actors in the cosmo-ethnoscape seek different things in their engagement with the supernatural. Religious pilgrims, for example, come seeking the patronage of spirits or the reclining Buddha and its *boramei*, the sacred force that it emits (see Guillou 2017, Work 2020). A very popular cosmological character for pilgrims was a hermit spirit named Aki Nei, who has a well-tended shrine

[7]Almsgiving is a meritorious act and is therefore something local visitors are inclined to do during visits to sacred Buddhist sites.

[8] I am loosely distinguishing tourists from pilgrims here, using pilgrims to refer to visitors who come with the intention of seeking supernatural patronage and well-being, often by repeatedly visiting particular shrines over long periods of time.

at Preah Ang Thom pagoda and three more shrines at other sacred sites around the mountain (Harris & Grey, 2019). One urban family interviewed had come with their mother, a military general wife, who claimed mediumship for the *boramei* of the spirit shrine. Based in Phnom Penh, she directed her family when a visit was needed, up to five times a year, and the family had brought a spread of food offerings for the spirit.

Scholarship conducted in other parts of Cambodia has shown the propensity of powerful military and political families to enter into patronage relationships with particular pagodas (Kent 2007; Marston 2008). A similar sort of patronage was attempted with spirits in sacred sites on Phnom Kulen. The Khmer term *ksai* (string or thread) is often used to describe connections or lines to powerful human others, particularly in the political sphere (Frewer 2017). Employing a similar metaphor, the powerful visitors to the sacred sites on the mountain can be seen as attempting to make ley lines, lines that connect them with these nodes of power even when they return to their lowland homes. A kind of cosmological *ksai* is being sought, a connecting line to a powerful non-human actor, and repeated visits and offerings are ways of strengthening these connections. Through these *ksai* and their patronage, an outsider can attempt to connect to the sacred landscape of Kulen even without residing on the mountain.

Residents and visitors engage with the same landscape in markedly different ways. Whereas lowlanders come seeking power and engagement with the cosmological landscape, mountain residents sometimes appear to be avoiding such engagements as they make their way around the same realm. Unlike the pilgrims who come and go, the villagers live surrounded by various manifestations of sacred power, and they seek to safely navigate it as they live upon and farm the land. Accidental trespass into more-than-human domains can result in sickness, death and disaster and necessitates the use of ritual specialists, as the following account will describe.

Hau Brahlin: A Ritual Observed

During my time on the mountain, I generally stumbled upon spirit rituals rather than getting any sort of invitation beforehand. This did not appear to be from any intent to keep the nosy anthropologist at bay—whenever I came upon a ceremony taking place, I was cheerfully invited to observe the proceedings.

One day in a Kulen village my research assistant and I found a soul-calling ritual (*hau brahlin*) being prepared, which we were permitted to join. This is an ancient ritual and one no longer widely practiced in Cambodia, based on the conception that the human soul is divisible and consists of many parts (Thompson, 1996). One of these souls may become lost, or trapped, or wander away, and then

the body falls ill. In such cases ritual specialists and the patient's community must call the lost soul home. What follows are excerpts from my field notes that are abridged and edited for clarity:

> …We have finished interviewing Uncle Mao, who is a *kru sdos*[9], and we head to Grandmother Tia's house, a traditional midwife and a diviner. She's at a house further back in the village, one of her adult sons says, "*hau brahlin*." She's been there for ages, he adds—she must be almost done.
>
> She is calling a spirit home? I say. Where?
>
> Down by the spring, the man says, and proceeds to explain the way. It sounds too vague to be practicable, so I ask if we can have a guide. The youth agrees, but first he walks around the house and then comes back. She is still at the villager's house, he says, and tells us the way.
>
> The house is set back behind Kek's mother's home, and Grandmother Tia is sitting on a bamboo day-bed surrounded by others. Around fifteen adults are milling around assembling the various offering items needed. The disabled uncle who lives across from Kek's mother is there, and he and Tia tell us that she is busy. There are incense sticks, candles, and picked betel leaves everywhere, and small sliced banana trunk segments, some already decorated with incense and betel leaves tidily folded vertically on small twigs[10]. May we watch, we ask? We are permitted. May we take photographs? Also permitted.
>
> The ill woman is lying on a day-bed behind them, wrapped in a thick blanket. I thought she might be unconscious but eventually she sits up weakly and drinks something given to her. She has been to the mountain clinic and has been sick for months, Tia says. So now her family is trying this before taking her to the lowland clinics.
>
> Uncle tells us that there are two rituals to *hau brahling*. One is less complicated than this. Grandmother Tua is assembling two large platters with multiple elements. One is for the *kru sdos*, which turns out to be Mao! He has been asked to attend along with the primary spirit medium in the village. Why Mao? we ask. Because he can *sdos*, and this will help to protect the medium while she is channeling the spirit and will help to bring her back after the possession… [My notes here contain a detailed description of the contents of offering platters for the ceremony.]
>
> Mao and the medium arrive on motorbikes, and the ceremony gets underway. We process to the site where the soul was thought to have been lost, on the edge of the village by a marsh. One of the trays is carried on one woman's head, and the spirit offerings are arranged in a beautifully woven basket also placed on the head. The *bai brahlin* [a cooked rice and boiled egg offering

[9] This phrase translates as a blowing guru and refers to a traditional practitioner who heals by blowing upon the body of the afflicted person while whispering chants in Pali.
[10] This offering object is called *bai sai* in Khmer.

for the lost soul] is carried by a grey-haired woman who arrived with the medium, underneath a large golden yellow umbrella. Everything is carried in bits and pieces by different people. Sophie gets the wooden board. I get nothing.

The procession walks fast & we are far behind by the time we push our motorbikes under the house. Some elders are brought by motorbike and overtake us. Some younger women walk carrying their young children. A man guides us off the village road into the orchard.

A crowd of perhaps 20, children included, find places to sit or stand at the site. A grass mat is unrolled at the spot, just in front of the rattan and bamboo thicket where a new spirit house has been erected, about 20 metres off the road on the edge of a cashew orchard. Grandmother Tia organizes all the various offerings while the medium and Mao sit behind her, waiting. Two other women are carrying cut banana leaves, large ones, and they crouch outside of the inner circle holding them upright (see Figure 1).

When the ceremony begins, Mao begins by chanting in Pali while dipping a betel leaf into a mug of water and shaking it over us. He holds a lit candle and three sticks of incense in the same hand which holds the mug. He then crouches down behind the medium. She faces away from him, wearing her scarf (*krama*) wrapped ceremony-style around her shoulders and raising her clasped hands in prayer. He holds a lit candle and chants more Pali, then blows spit strongly over her head after each chant (see Figure 2).

Then the ritual offering board is prepared—five beeswax candles are set halfway down it, in a straight horizontal row, stuck on with melted wax. A yellow candle is held next to them. Powdered rice is mixed with some water in a bowl into a dough and a woman rolls it into balls and passes it to Tia. She lays it out in a straight line, a little trench of dough, and sets the five incense sticks in it, parallel with the beeswax candles but about four inches apart. Then the leaf wrapped incense/candle packages are carefully laid vertically between the candles and the incense sticks. Four banana stem *bai sai* are set in front of the board, each with one small golden candle and one incense stick (see Figure 3).

While all this is going on the medium was praying in front of a steel bowl with a taller lit golden candle. At some point the medium enters into her spirit trance. A quite loud active male spirit, Ta[11] Noi, possesses her, and very quickly all the meticulous preparations are undone. As soon as the spirit manifests, the people say they want Ta Noi to help call back the *brahling* of someone in the village. Everyone is talking at once, & not all about the sick woman, some are asking the spirit for other things. Ta Noi rejects the place prepared for an offering to it and gets to his/her feet and stalks off through the bush behind the new spirit house, barefoot. A small

[11] Ta is a pronoun used for an elderly man of an age equivalent to that a grandfather. Most tutelary spirits are titled Ta or Yei, the female equivalent.

number of people, including Mao, follow, beseeching the spirit to take their shoes, telling it that there are thorns back there.

Sophie and I eventually follow. Through the broken brush we emerge into the edge of a flooded marsh. The indistinct voices of the medium and the followers are coming from about twenty feet away, and they have obviously waded along a muddy trail through the bush, in water about half a foot deep. The water-filled swamp trail bends out sight. Sophie has no desire to wade into the blackened water. I am ambivalent but after a few minutes I fear I am missing this extraordinary encounter, so I start to wade along the waterway.

After a prolonged and unscripted session in the swamp with the villagers attempting to pacify the possessed medium and get back to the ritual site, we return to the mat. Everyone who went in the swamp, myself included, has dark grey mud streaked all over their feet and lower legs. The medium is indifferent to her modesty in her trance and tucks up her soaked sarong between her legs and sits down with it hiked up above her knees for the ensuing ceremony. She demands a white top from a female participant. Why has no one brought her clothes? Two village youth are dispatched to fetch clothing suitable for a spirit.

When Sophie returned from the swamp before me, she saw Grandmother Tia finishing sculpting a female body shape with rice flour. The figure was laid on a banana leaf and covered. When I return to the group, I see two layers of banana leaf laid down on the mat. Four of the *bai sai* are set at each corner. One woman holds the brass top of a shell powder container, and this is full of water. They are teasing a young boy to drink from it and he shrieks. It's starting to drip with rain, and some of the young women with younger children climb up into the spirit house under the thicket. Most of us just stand in it. A friendly dog that accompanied us from the village hides under the shrine, after being yelled at for passing by the grass mat too closely earlier.

The red yarn is wrapped around the four *bai sai* around the banana leaf. The thread extends from the square to the end of the mat. The beeswax candles on the offering board are lit and burn through the next part of the ceremony. The medium/spirit then sings while holding aloft the golden candle in the tin bowl. I record several minutes of the song. She *sampeahs* the candle bowl and the wooden offering board and touches the bowl with flowers and betel tubes and incense while singing. To the right of the candle bowl is the bowl with betel leaves and incense and beyond that is a bowl of dry rice with a small golden candle in it. Another woman watches over that, and the medium takes a handful of grains from it with the woman's help.

While singing, the medium brings a handful of dry rice grains over to the brass top. One woman holds the top, while Grandmother Tia takes the red threads out of the candle bowl and puts them into the betel leaf bowl, which she holds next to the brass top. When the medium reaches over the brass top, all the villagers chat something as the medium sings and some grains of rice fall into the container. Tia takes the red threads from the betel leaf bowl and puts some in

the candle bowl in front of the medium. The woman holding the brass top and Tia take some of the floating grains after they fall on the water and they are put into the betel bowl with the threads. They do this each time. The medium puts her handful of dry rice over the brass top four times in a row—letting just a few grains fall out. The villagers call out as a group all four times.

Grandmother Tia appears to be removing the grains from the betel leaf bowl and putting them in the other villager's hand—for counting later. After the four times of passing her hand over the brass container, the medium throws some dry rice across the offering board. Then she puts the remaining rice grains into the candle bowl, which now has red threads laid across it, singing all the while, then puts her hands around it, later touching the wooden offering board. Her hands pass over the items while she sings, then she takes a second handful of dry rice. She *sompeahs* the offering board and the plate of offerings and the steel bowl. She takes another a handful of dry rice, but she touches the red thread square and says something. She passes a lit candle over and under the thread on each of the four sides of the encircled banana leaf with its rice woman offering, eventually burning the yarn after the circling.

Grandmother Tia and the women near her work on counting the wet rice grains. The grains are bound up in a banana leaf and tied tightly. Ta Noi says to make a road, meaning a space, and we all shuffle away from the end of the mat where it faces a cashew tree. The spirit is asked if it is living in its new house. It says it is living there with another male spirit. It says that no one must disturb or cut down the bush there. If any outsiders come they must chase them away. The people agree. Ta Noi says that the rice woman on the banana leaves and the wooden board with the incense and candles and the *bai sai* offerings should be left in the orchard. The medium tries to stand up and falls over, and is caught by the villagers around her. When you walk back to the village, the medium said, you cannot look back, and our unruly line begins its way back out of the orchard.

When I reach the house, the sick woman is sitting up, surrounded by the ceremony attendees. The banana leaf packet is wrapped in white cloth, tied securely on both ends, and this is tied to the patient's wrist while the crowd chants, calling the *brahling*. Red threads are then tied on her ankle, while everyone calls the *brahling* again (see Figure 3). The grey-haired woman who came with the medium peeled the shell of an egg taken from the cooked offerings for the soul and then shows Sophie and I, saying the *brahling* sits at the flat bottom of the egg by the yolk. It is back now, she declares, and places the egg in the bowl of cooked rice that came from the *bai brahling* bowl. The patient must consume it.

As the fieldnotes illustrate, at least three ritual specialists worked together in different roles to enact this ceremony, and the fourth woman who peeled the boiled egg also displayed interpretative knowledge. The medium performed both a spirit-channeling role and led the soul-

calling chant with the assembled villagers. The village diviner and several other community members led the production and assembling of the numerous ritual objects involved in the ceremony, as well as participating in the floating rice grain rite to test the lost soul's return. The Pali chanting healer Mao was responsible for protecting the medium before the summoning of the angry spirit. At no point in the ceremony, even when the wild spirit went off-plot and rushed off into a swamp making unexpected demands, did anyone seem uncertain of how to proceed with the ritual or to respond to the unfolding circumstances. And the participants were certain at the end of the ceremony that the unseen missing soul had returned and was somehow present in the grains of rice in a banana leaf packet that they gently tied onto the ill woman's wrist back in the village.

Uncertain Knowledges and Nebulous Beliefs

I was very surprised to encounter a *hau brahlin* ceremony in a place where scores of people had told me little sacred knowledge remained from earlier eras. By October 2020, I had amassed large amounts of frustratingly vague data about perceptions of the sacred landscape. Different actors in the cosmo-ethnoscapes had markedly different perceptions and ideas about the mountain's supernatural residents. Unsurprisingly, lowland patrons tended to recount knowledge of only a few sacred actors, usually ones represented at the sites around the Preah Ang Thom pagoda. For local residents, the protectors of place were manifold, if vaguely known. They were also often fiercely local, differing even from one village to the next down the rutted road, reminding me of Bird-David's call to pay attention to the scaling of the animist world (2017).

With local residents, any attempt at asking about relative power and ranking of the unseen world failed. From village to village, mountain families differed on which spirits were most powerful and which ones they made offerings to most frequently. There were widely varying levels of territory a given spirit was said to control, from spirits who represented the entire mountain and whose offering sites were on the main routes on and off the mountain to spirits who represented a single geographical feature or physical site, such as a spring, a pond, a cliff, an Angkorian ruin or a piece of such a ruin. Some sacred domains were well-known and spirit shrines were erected in those places and visited by passersby. In other cases, particularly on undomesticated land, villagers might find out they had trespassed on an unknown spirit's domain only by illness such as the one described in the fieldnotes above. There were figures who residents all agreed were terribly powerful yet at the same time paid little practical attention to, even when passing by their shrines. One such example is a shrine on the entrance road to the national park at the foot of a cliff, said to be the connecting point with the mountain

guardian Bot Komphem. Traditionally, villagers stopped to make offerings and ask for protection whenever descending from the mountain to the lowlanders. A wealthy lowlander had a new shrine installed and an expensive statue of Vishnu erected at the site in recent years. Mountain residents said they still whispered prayers when they passed by but that they no longer stopped to light incense or make offerings since lowland visitors did so instead.

It seemed that proximity had more relevance than power in the local context. The tiger on the other side of the mountain may be mighty but the tiger in the nearby thicket needs more of one's personal attention. Village tutelary spirits (*neak ta phum*) were the most commonly discussed spirit category by most mountain residents, unless they had personal relations with spirits from their lineages or individual encounters. Annual ceremonies were hosted for the village guardians in the dry season, *phum laung neak ta*, which were said to draw fewer villagers than in the old days but still well-attended (personal communication, Kulen village chief, January 2020). Interviews revealed fairly standard bodies of practice surrounding these village guardians, all of whom had shrines.

But the spirits themselves were only vaguely known to most villagers. Few specifics were known about their attributes or identities. Very few people knew the village spirits' names and said that knowledge had been forgotten, although everyone knew their most common human mediums. Instead, these village guardians were addressed by their age-gender pronouns as humans are and were often identified by the behavior of entranced mediums—for example, elders in one village said their guardians consisted of an elderly male and female couple and a daughter. The daughter-spirit had made herself known at the last village spirit ceremony by requesting perfume and lipstick via her medium, adolescent concerns announcing her youth. If named beyond their age-names, these guardians were given ubiquitous epithets such as Red-Necked Grandfather[12] or Grandmother Mao. But these names did not seem to be linked to a specific character or personality—Red-Necked Grandfather, for example, is a very common name for spirits across Cambodia, and does not seem to be accompanied by any shared history or story like some translocal spirit actors such as Khleang Muang (see Guillou 2017).

Villagers were also not preservationist when it came to their representations of these *neak ta*. It was regarded as honoring the spirits to upgrade their shrines and iconography. Earlier representations of the spirits, often rocks, were kept, lined up next to newer additions. In one village, primordial-looking wooden statues were said to have been recently carved by village youth (see Figure 3), and in many of the shrines, purchased concrete figurines sat, mold-poured spirit couples painted brightly and generically as Chinese-style elders with long white hair (see Figure 4). Even the shrines themselves

[12] A red or orange cloth is often tied around the neck of statuary representing spirits given this epithet.

had been moved in some of the villages, such as Ta Penh, where the village chief said they had moved the shrine out of the bush to the side of the road to spruce it up and make it more accessible to visitors.

Moreover, although I had gathered many accounts of power and prohibitions regarding geographical features of the landscape, including perceptions of an invisible sacred landscape of trails and canals crisscrossing the plateau, there was much disagreement of what made certain places enchanted or how these nodes of power should be understood. I initially assumed that all this disagreement and general vagueness resulted from a loss of once fuller knowledge. The loss of many elders and their specialized knowledges due to the decades of conflict is an agreed upon and much-lamented fact across different registers of Cambodian society (Zucker 2008). As described earlier, the elders themselves repeatedly ascribed a loss of expertise in these terms. I had accepted this loss as a given and perceived my work as documenting the remaining fragments of knowledge in order to construct a cosmological model around the gaps.

However, I have come to question these conclusions in response to provocative work by Wilerslav in northeast Siberia. Wilerslav conducted his fieldwork armed with an elaborate cosmological model developed by classical ethnographers yet found that Yukaghir hunters' ideas of the spirit world seemed "mostly vague and confused, and very difficult to put into any order whatsoever" (2004: 396). He considered forced acculturation as a factor but concluded that the earlier ethnographers had drawn heavily on certain shamans and their subsequent models had probably never represented the understanding of most of the Yukagkir population. Wilerslav goes on to propose a phenomenological explanation. This model of animism, first popularized by Ingold (2000) and expanded upon by Wilerslav 2013), holds that animist cosmology does not emerge from a cognitive worldview mapping the sacred, but rather unfolds in relation to perception and experience by a given actor responding to environmental stimuli.

These scholars' work has challenged me to revisit my own assumptions and my methodological efforts to gather particularities. First, it has forced me to consider the possibility that perhaps cosmological understanding has always been vague for most people on Kulen, outside of specific specialists, and that borrowing too heavily from specialists in describing local belief and praxis would be unjustified. It also has prompted me to rethink the role of loss in what I have been describing as a vague and nebulous set of interpretations amongst living mountain residents.

After all, it was ritual practice, not taxonomy, that appeared to matter to the residents of the sacred landscape. Certainty was sought at the points of human-supernatural intersection when an unwanted outcome occurred for the human actor, such as illness or disaster. Villagers may not have known the name or character of a given non-human actor, but they knew how to interpret signs of its displeasure and who to consult to assist them in mending such fateful engagements. From a theoretical

perspective, animist practice on the mountain will need to be analyzed through both the fruitful model of hierarchical animism recently proposed for the region by Århem, K. & Sprenger (2016) and the phenomenological model that emerged from research with hunters in the circumpolar north. From a methodological perspective, it pushes me towards a focus on ritual practice and an accurate representation of the vagueness of cognitive perceptions of the spirit world, rather than constructing elaborate models. I will conclude by returning to the question of expertise with which I began this reflection on methodology.

Nets and Lines: Expertise in Practice

I have described a paucity of specialized knowledge about the nature of the cosmological inhabitants of the mountain. However, in practice, as in events like the soul-calling ritual, I observed a shared network of expertise that enabled complex ritual practice. In that event, cosmopraxis was not limited to the leadership of the medium, a critical ritual specialist for the rite; rather, multiple practitioners had roles and parts in the event. In the plateau villages, then, cosmological knowledge is not held in the hands of one but many, and supernatural solutions are sought through a network of expertise and in community.

I do not doubt the cultural losses caused by the death of so many over the long decades of war. But it appears that the villagers are as resilient in interpreting and engaging with the cosmological realm as they are in other domains. It may be impossible to conclude whether the cosmological landscape was once known differently or has always been loosely known—if that nebulousness is part of its inherent nature. The invisible landscape people described to me was experienced as inhabited by beings that flicker in and out of view, emergent only at points of engagement. And the body of people who can diagnose the nature of these interactions and the rites that must follow may be a thinner crew than in the past. What was visible in the rituals I observed was a network of distributed knowledge and ritual practice. People came together, bringing their knowledges, and they enacted rituals together, thereby creating and enacting the needed sacred expertise to engage with the unseen residents of the place.

This distributed expertise was both networked and social. Such expertise elicits different metaphors than the far-flung thread-lines I described earlier in relation to lowland visitors who seek links with sacred sites and beings on Kulen. Rather than single lines stretching from one actor to another, the villagers' thread-lines crisscross and intermingle. Contemporary social science is replete with metaphors of rhizomes and mycelium, organic metaphors for networks between actors. Yet I prefer the more prosaic image of the cast-net used by fishers, with its knotted threads, able to be mended when holes form. These fishing nets of expertise allowed the villagers to plumb the unseen

worlds overlaying their visible geography and to find the ways back to safe co-existence with these forces.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

It is tempting as a social anthropologist to limit my focus to these villages and these local residents, ignoring the larger waves of people who flow and in out of the ethnoscape. But Kulen mountain is a sacred site not only for its residents but also for its visitors, as it has been for centuries. Returning to the earlier question of who speaks for the spirits, the overwhelming reality is that everyone does, albeit with varying levels of confidence and expertise and diverse goals. Therefore, in both my fieldwork and my writing on the sacred landscapes of Kulen, there must be some attempt to represent the vagaries of the entire cosmological ethnoscape. This includes following both the thread-lines of lowlanders seeking power and the knotted nets of local villagers trying to disentangle themselves from the often-unwanted demonstrations of such power. It means giving up tidy religious schema for the conflicting and conflicted world of interpretation from multiple actors, in an untidy attempt to represent all who wish to speak for the spirits.

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Figures.

Figure 1. Preparing the ritual site for the soul-calling ceremony on the edge of an orchard. @Arensen 2020.

Figure 2. One ritual specialist chants in Pali to protect a second ritual specialist preparing to channel a wild spirit. @Arensen 2020.

Figure 3. Preparing the elements of a ritual offering board for the wild spirit. @Arensen 2020.

Figure 4. Ritual specialists and community members tie a cloth packet containing grains of rice onto the patient's wrist with red thread. @Arensen 2020.

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