

Repository of Ethical Worldview on Nature

Cambodia Views on Nature

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1. Summary

The Kingdom of Cambodia is a country in South East Asia with a population of over 14 million people. The geography of the country is surrounded by nature. Cambodia is said to be a land of paddies and forests, dominated by the Mekong River and the Tonle Sap lake and river. From the great lake, the Cambodians can eat abundant fresh fish all year long. The excessive fish are preserved by making Prohok (salty fish which could be left several years) and dried fish. Having been living dependent on nature, it is important to understand the perceptions of the Angkorian descendants on nature. This paper explores the worldviews of nature from Cambodian perspectives with examples of anthropocentrism, biocentrism, eco-centrism and cosmocentrism.

2. Introduction: Cambodia geography, history, people and religion

Cambodia is a tropical country situated North of the Equator within latitudes 10° and 15° N and longitudes 102° and 108° E. It shares a common border with Thailand in the Northwest, with Laos in the North, with Vietnam in the Southeast, with the Gulf of Siam in the South, with a total area of 181,035 km². The scenery of Dangrek Mountain is located in the north and Cardamom Mountains in the southwest, which forms natural boundaries to shield the country from typhoons.

Culture affects how scientific findings are interpreted and how ideas are developed. The cultural framework itself is structured through religious traditions and ideologies, politics, scientific understanding, education and the people's worldviews. Different views of nature held by different cultures therefore affect their understanding of biological processes, including interpretations of effects upon them, and their moral and ethical significance.

Cambodia's history has affected its culture. Over a period of 300 years, between 900 and 1200 AD, the Khmer Kingdom of Angkor produced one of the world's most magnificent architectural masterpieces on the northern shore of the Tonle Sap, known as Angkor Wat temple. The Angkor area stretches approximately 25km east to west and 8km north to south. There are 72 major temples or other buildings in the area. King Suryavarman II built the principal temple, Angkor Wat, between 1112 and 1150 with the collaborative labour of elephants and human beings. With walls nearly 800m on each side, Angkor Wat portrays the *Hindu cosmology* with the central towers representing *Mount Meru*, home of the gods; the outer walls, the mountains enclosing the world; and the moat signifying the oceans beyond. Angkor Thom, the capital city built after the Cham sacking of 1177AD, was surrounded by a 300-foot wide moat. Construction of Angkor Thom coincided with a change from Hinduism to Buddhism. Temples were altered to display images of the Buddha, and Angkor Wat became a major Buddhist shrine.

According to the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 90% of Cambodia's population is ethnically Cambodian or Khmer (2011). Other ethnic groups include Chinese, Vietnamese, hill tribes, Cham (Muslims), and Laos. Theravada Buddhism is the national religion, of which 95% of the population worship. Islam, animism, and Christianity are also practiced. Nevertheless, animism is deeply rooted since ancient times.

3. Outlook of the environmental concept in Cambodia Tradition: Human nature

Intertwined between Hinduism and Buddhism, Cambodia is a superstitious country. In this regard, the evidences on nature could be found tangibly and intangibly ranging from daily living

habits to temple construction. Over a thousand years ago, the king of Cambodia built temples across the country, integrating nature as one of the constructed elements. For instance, water, as an element of nature, can also be valorized in so far as it is marked by human intervention. Cambodians did so. A prime example of this phenomenon can be found in the Kbal Spean River, north of Siem Reap province. The water flows over sculptures carved directly into the stone riverbed. These sculptures represent Brahmanic mythological scenes, and comprise a particularly great number of *linga-yoni* pairs (male and female principles). The water is consecrated as it flows over these sacred sculptures before reaching the rice fields downstream. A



Figure 1: Linga-yoni pairs at Kbal Spean River, north of Siem Reap province

similar procedure serves to consecrate the water at the Western Baray, the largest artificial reservoir constructed during the Angkorian period. In the middle of the Baray lies an artificial island, the *Mebon*, at the center of which there is a large stone-walled well which is thought to have represented a hollow *linga*. As this *linga* is effectively immersed in the Baray, the water is sanctified and made fertile before irrigating the fields.

This example suggests a preliminary understanding of the way in which humanity, whether the individual or the social body, is situated in an intimate, filial relationship to nature, but a nature that has been deeply marked by the demands of culture, in the broadest sense of the word. This is what we might call “human nature”.

Another example is the sacred geography of Cambodian monasteries. Very schematically, the monastery is organized in relation to the temple (*vihear*), which is its center. From the ritual point of view it comprises two sacred perimeters, which are successive and concentric. The first, which delimits the temple, is defined by eight *sima* (Sanskrit and Pali for “limit” or “boundary”), on the eight cardinal and intercardinal points, often materially expressed by stone landmarks called “leaves.” It separates the sacred territory of the temple from the rest of the monastery, which though less tabooed than the first perimeter, nevertheless remains more or less ritually marked in comparison to the profane territory of the village. It is generally surrounded by an enclosure (Ang, 1988).

3.1 Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism includes the viewpoint that regards humankind as the central or most important element of existence, especially as opposed to God or animals. The beginning of anthropocentrism probably began with the agricultural revolution 6,000-7,000BC. This was the time when human population started to grow. Therefore, humans began to breed, grow, and harvest plants as well as raise animals. Natural habitats (e.g. grassland and forest) were replaced with farmlands and village. Nonetheless, the industrial revolution in Europe in the 1800s did worse. In Cambodia, the first industrial revolution was during the reign of King Norodom Sihanouk from 1953-1970. However, the industrial progress was given up with the rise of the Khmer Rouge, who favored agricultural collectivity as an economic orientation. For the 1950s and 1960s, the public, private, and hybrid industrial enterprises were formed in a sea of rice, rubber, and other agricultural products (Ear, 1995, p.12). The expansion of factories reemerged again due to foreign investment, for example from China for the garment sector after the 1994 law of investment was issued (Bargawi, 2005, p.viii). Mining and extracting the natural resources since 2004 has been causing some imbalance in ecology. The anthropocentric revolution and human-centered ambitions have started to affect the surroundings only in recent times in Cambodia.

Thus we can say Cambodian anthropocentric views could not be seen except for the parts of the country seeking the “modern world”. To illustrate, Cambodia is an agrarian-based society, which depends largely upon productive natural resources for generating food and income. More than 40% of the national GDP is derived from agriculture, fishery and forestry sector in the past ten

years. 70% of agricultural products contribute to economic development (Ministry of Environment [MOE] & United Nations Environment Program [UNEP], 2009, p. 11)

Land is important for Cambodian people. According to a report by Cambodia's leading independent Development policy Research Institute (CDRI) in 2001, the agricultural land holdings is about 1 ha per family. However, about 20-30% of the total population owns land greater than 1 ha per household (nearly 70% of the total agricultural lands), and 30% of the total population owns land between 0.5-1.0 ha per household (nearly 20% of the total agricultural land) (MOE & UNEP, 2009, p.24). Nevertheless, during the economic crisis of the 2007, many farmers sold their lands in exchange for materials and fame. They have no more concerns and gratitude to the land, which has produced the source of food and energy. More and more people follow the trend; as a result, the lands are no longer available for agricultural use. Instead, they serve the interests of business investment, leaving the land without crops and abandoned.

3.2 *Biocentrism*

This school of thought has the view that the rights and needs of humans are not more important than those of other living things. In other words, it is permissible to attribute intrinsic value to all individual living entities into our moral consideration. Aldo Leopold, the father of environmental ethics, expressed his idea for about fifty years ago in his revolutionary essay "The Land Ethic". He said, "There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it... The extension of ethics to this third element in human environment is... an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity." (Leopold, 1949, pp. 238-239)

In daily living, Buddhist followers would avoid committing Karma (bad deeds), according to the five precepts in Buddhism. The precepts are to abstain the lay followers from harming living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication. The first parameter includes the concept of biocentrism. As a Cambodian Buddhist, the older persons would advise the young not to kill the ants even if they bite them, for the sake of precious life. More than this, the Buddhist monk has to abide a strict code of ethics. He has to abstain from practices, which would involve even unintentional injury to living creatures.

Some stories are shared, such as the Buddha promulgated the rule against going on a journey during the rainy season because of possible injury to worms and insects that come to the surface in wet weather. The same concern for non-violence prevents a monk from digging the ground. Once a monk who was a potter prior to ordination built for himself a clay hut and set it on fire to give it a fine finish. The Buddha strongly objected to this, as so many living creatures would have been burnt in the process. However, they still eat meat offered to them, unlike Buddhists in some other countries.

3.3. *Eco-centrism*

Eco-centrism is explained as a point of view that recognizes the ecosphere, rather than the biosphere, as of central importance, and attempts to redress the imbalance created by anthropocentrism. Eco-centrism goes further, giving moral consideration to ecosystems including non-biological natural features such as rocks, mountains, and rivers.

One related case in Cambodia concerns illegal logging. According to Transparency International, Cambodia's track record on illegal logging has been called into question many times before. Cambodia routinely ranks among the most corrupt countries in the world. Despite this ugly truth, there is a group of monks in the northern part of the country who are lobbying for over a dozen protected forests to go onto the global carbon market (Mahr, 2011). This group of people understands the value and numerous advantages the trees brought to other beings. In 1982, UN General Assembly's *World Charter for Nature* recognized that terrestrial and marine ecosystems were, literally, life support systems. It also introduced ethical considerations, as in, "Every form of

life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man, and, to accord other organisms such recognition man must be guided by a moral code of action. ... Nature shall be respected and its essential processes shall not be disrupted."

Cambodia does have laws for preserving endangered species. Due to the presence of megafauna such as the Asian tiger and Asian elephant, 26% of the country's land was preserved for conservation compared to 16% of Thailand, according to a 1992 review by the UN's World Conservation Monitoring Center. This large area for wildlife may also be because such species require large undisturbed terrain for survival. Moreover, Cambodia has some unique ecosystems, and is famous for Tonle Sap freshwater lake with more than 149 species of fishes recorded. This natural lake provides a habitat for 11 global threatened and 6 near-threatened species of vertebrates such as spot-billed pelican, and grey headed fish eagle (Ali, 2010). The country has been engaged with private foundations and conservation groups to assist in managing the environment involving Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation (MJP), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Wildlife Alliance and some others interested partners.

3.4. *Cosmocentrism*

Cosmocentrism explains the relationship towards world or universe. This can be seen in the intricate carved reliefs surrounding Angkor Wat on all walls. 'The Churning of the Ocean of Milk' located on the east wing revealed the most celebrated one regarding a cosmocentric relationship of the being and universe. The episode could be summarized as followed.

In Hindu mythology, 13 precious things including the elixir of immortality were lost in the churning of the cosmic sea. Finding them again required a joint dredging operation between gods and demons. Assisting in this endeavor was the giant serpent *Vasuki*, who offered himself as a rope to enable twirling of a "churning stick." The serpent was yanked back and forth in a giant tug-of-war that lasted for a thousand years. In the bas-relief panel, the front end of the serpent is being pulled by 91 surly-looking *Asuras* (demons), anchored by the 21-headed demon king *Ravana*; on the right are 88 almond-eyed *Devas* (gods) pulling on the tail, anchored by monkey-god *Hanuman*. The central pivot, or churning stick, is a complicated piece of imagery. *Vasuki* has wrapped himself around Mount Mandara, represented by a tower. At one point Mount Mandara started to sink, and had to be propped up by a giant tortoise, an incarnation of *Vishnu*. The Sea of Milk, or the Ocean of Immortality, is represented by innumerable fishes and aquatic creatures, which torn to shreds as they swim close to powerful air currents near the churning stick.

Directing operations at the center is the large four-armed figure of *Vishnu*, closely associated with Angkor Wat's builder, King Suryavarman II. The smaller figure above *Vishnu* is *Indra*, god of the sky. The actions of the gods and demons cause *Vasuki* to rotate the tower-mountain and churn the sea into foam, like a giant cosmic blender. This releases a seminal fluid that creates divine ambrosia, *amrita*, the essence of life and immortality. Many other treasures are also flung up. Born of this action are *Apsaras* (celestial dancers), a purely Khmer innovation. The seductive *Apsaras* promise a joyful existence for those who attain the ultimate incarnation; it is assumed that higher incarnations will be male in form."

According to Angkorologist Eleanor Mannikka, who has been studying the place [the wall] for over 20 years, the bas-relief has a practical function in marking the number of days between the winter and summer solstices. Mannikka maintains, "the 91 *Asuras* mark the 91 days between the winter solstice and spring equinox in March, while the 88 *devas* represent the 88 days to the summer solstice after the equinox period." Mannikka continues, "this is just one of the *hidden cosmological meanings* coded at Angkor Wat, and that the temple is remarkably attuned to the movement of the sun and moon." (Buckley, n.d.)

In addition, the cultural monuments of Angkor are a precise sample of how the Khmer people have interacted with the environment over a thousand years ago through the location of the city. The Angkor temples were built of local sandstone from the Kulen Mountains. The temples were constructed to resemble mountains or situated on hills, symbolizing Mount Meru, the spiritual

mountain at the center of Hindu universe. Reservoirs (*Baray*) on the entrance sides were built as a symbol of the ocean surrounding the central mountain.

4. Cambodian culture and nature

4.1. *Symbiotic*

The interaction between two different organisms living in close physical association, typically to the advantage of both is known as symbiotic. This happens naturally in the ecology to ensure the healthy equilibrium of the nature itself.

4.1.1. Highland culture

Interestingly, the indigenous or “highland” people of Northeast Cambodia have traditionally been animistic ecosystem-based cultures whose way of life is a perfect manifestation of what is called “bioregionalism”. They are people from Brao, Tampuan, Bunong and other highland groups of Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri provinces (Stock, Petitet, & Fauveaud, 2011). To this group of people, their relationship with natural world is understood by spiritual terms and with respect to their substance livelihood. Nature does not just consist of objects for consumption or economic profit, but is growing and directed by life forces, often referred to as “spirits. They practice certain rituals to ensure that any actions they take and impose on the environment are in favor of nature’s powerful forces. This hill-tribe society has developed an inter-relationship between people itself and the natural resources on which they depends daily on. O’Brien (1999, p.374) reports that, “indigenous people acquired knowledge and skill through hand-on experience of living in close contact with their environment and their system of resource management have developed as a response to their needs”.

4.1.2. Folk dances

What is the relationship between the Cambodian person and the surroundings? The idea could be illustrated through the observation of Cambodian folk dancing. In Cambodia, folk dance mostly involves animism and express beliefs in the supernatural. The Cambodians have been living reciprocally with nature. Therefore, folk dancing was created, miming the animal expression or placing gratitude to the mother earth for bearing plentiful yields the whole year. In a book written by Sam-Ang Sam and Chan Moly Sam (1987), the specialists in Khmer traditional art, listed the numbers of Khmer folk dancing. Interestingly, there are 19 of them including Trod dance, peacock of Pursat dance, wild ox dance, candle dance, coconut shell dance, fishing dance, frog dance, harvest dance, pestle dance, krab dance, Chhayam dance, mouth organ dance, birth wedding dance, crossbow dance, gum lac pounding dance, sacrifice of



buffalo dance, Kouy dance, magic dance and peacock of Palin Figure 2: Peacock dance dance. In this regard, folk dance not only reflects a great culture of recreational and entertaining resource, but also best describes the great bond between the Cambodian and nature. The authors stated “nature is always the strongest inspiration of all [Khmer] dances coupled with customs, traditions, and beliefs, all of which have much in common. In other term, dance is not merely an optional luxury: it is a way of life, music, song, poetry, and dance is all integral parts of Khmer life.

4.1.3. Proverbs

Folk dance is not the only form of expression which reveals the relationship between the Cambodian and nature. Many Khmer proverbs draw a significant bond respectively to the nature in language creativity to convey morality lesson to the younger Cambodian generation for the respect to the elders. For instance, the proverb “Ngoey skork, Aon dak kroap” (ងើយស្កក ខ្លិនដាក់ក្រាប) meaning “the immature rice stalk stands erect, while the mature stalk, heavy with grain, bends over.” In Khmer, the word “Aon” signifies respect. Another example is “Tver srae neng tek, tver sek neng bay” (ធ្វើស្រែនឹងទឹក ធ្វើសឹកនឹងបាយ) which means, “To grow rice, you need water; to fight in the battle, you need rice.” As mentioned, water and rice are the two crucial elements in daily life of Cambodian people.

4.1.4. Festivals

Furthermore, the major festivals of the Cambodian calendar celebrate different stages of the agrarian cycle, which reinforce the importance of the land and water resources to the people. *Bonn Om Tuk*, known as the Water Festival, held on the full moon of the Buddhist month of *Kadeuk* (usually in November), ushers in the fishing season as well as making the reversal of the current in the Tonle Sap river. Another festival, which marks the start of ploughing season, is *Bonn Chroat Preah Nongkoal* (The Royal Ploughing Ceremony). This is the first traditional agrarian festival, featuring the connection amongst his majesty of the country, the King, farmers, and farming.



Figure 3: Royal Ploughing ceremony in Cambodia

4.1.5. Sculptures and Tales

Besides folk-arts, traditional festivals and proverbs, it is notable to examine the tangible cultural resource that reflects the close relationship with the environment and which has sustained the lives of the population for centuries. The Naga (*Niek/ Neak*), a popular Buddhist image in Khmer art and architecture, can be seen to express the close relationship the Khmer people have with the natural world. Naga is a mythical snake-like being which dwell both in the earth and water in the function as protective guardians. Naga could be found in many Cambodian folk tales such as *Preah Thong Neang Neak* (also known as *Kaundinya Soma*).



Figure 4: 100 Naga on Independent Monuments in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

4.1.6. Khmer Traditional Calendar

Cambodia has a different calendar system known as Chankitek (ច័ន្ទគតិ), which means a luni-solar calendar. The calendar is based on the movement of the moon and calendar dates are synchronized with the solar year to keep the seasons from drifting. Since the number of days in a lunar year is shorter than the solar year, the synchronization is accomplished by adding an additional month or day to a particular year.

4.1.7. Animal Year

Cambodians commonly identify a year of birth by using a system of 12 animals in conjunction with a ten-numeric cycle system. The twelve animals that identify the Cambodian year are named in Khmer as Jute (rat), Chlov (ox), Karl (tiger), Thos (rabbit), Rorong (dragon), Masagn (snake), Momee (horse), Momay (goat), Voke (monkey), Roka (rooster), Jor (dog), and Koar (pig). These names are not translation words for each of the animals but are special names created for each year. Cambodians believe that each animal possess specific and unique qualities. Thus, people

born to a particular animal year share explicit qualities associated with that animal. These qualities determine a person's characteristics including personality, fame and fortune.

The ten numeric cycle system is called *Sak* (ស៊ក់). In Khmer, *Sak* means era or counting the sequence of year, which refers to a numbering scheme from one to ten used to identify a particular year. It starts with a key word Aek, Tou, Trey, Jaktva, Pagnjak, Chor, Sabpak, Ardak, Noppak, and Somrithik, which means one to ten respectively. Then the word "*Sak*" is added to the end of each word. For example, *Aeksak* means the first year and *Tousak* means the second year. Cambodians use the *Sak* system to distinguish the same animal years that are in a different twelve-year cycle. To exemplify, a 10-year-old person is born on the same animal year as 22-year-old person, but are born on a different *Sak*.

4.2. Integrationist

In Siem Reap province, there is a floating village of Chong Kneas with a population of roughly 5,000 people living on and around the water. The village is located on the shores of the Tonle Sap lake, approximately 15 kilometers south of the city. People live ebb and flow with the currents of the 4,000 km-long Mekong River which feeds Tonle Sap. The main source of income for this villager comes from fishing. Nevertheless, despite the plentiful water, the standard of living in Chong Kneas village is poor with no proper sanitation and no clean water. In other words, people consume the water around them. This scenery violates the belief of the Cambodian on water. There is an old saying stating, "Wherever water exists, fishes exist."

Moreover, the village does not have a permanent address. As the water recedes during the dry season, bottoming out in April, the floating houses relocate further into the lake. When the wet season arrives, peaking in October, villagers move back inland. The population of Chong Kneas includes Cambodian, Vietnamese and Cham (Muslims), who co-exist peacefully (Nabrdalik, n.d.).

In certain regard, the ability to cope with surrounding by moving the house twice a year could illustrate the integrationist idea in the livings of the Cambodian.

4.3. Apocalyptic

It is skeptical to examine a very catastrophic moment to the demise of Angkor era. This breathtaking ancient infrastructure with religious idea was found the reasons to the collapse recently due to the prolonged droughts, according to an article released recently (Choi, 2012). Despite the previous causes suggested for the fall of the Khmer Empire in the late 14th to early 15th centuries including war and land overexploitation, the tree rings from Vietnam suggest the region experienced long spans of drought interspersed with unusually heavy rainfall. The ancient Angkorian built a complex network of water management systems such as channels, moats, embankments and reservoirs (*Baray*) to collect and store water from the summer monsoons for rice paddy use in the case of drought. The scientists analyzed a 6-foot-long core sample of sediment taken from the southwest corner of the largest Khmer reservoir, the West Baray, which could hold 1.87 billion cubic feet (53 million cubic meters) of water, more than 20 times the amount of stone making up the Great Pyramid at Giza. The result was that around the time Angkor collapsed the rate at which sediment was deposited in the *Baray* dropped to one-tenth of what it was before, implying that water levels fell dramatically. The scientists claim, "The water management systems of the Khmer might have been insufficient to cope with sudden and intense variations in climate."

In this regards, the collapse of the magnificent temple draws a considerable momentous lesson on how the nature drives change without prior notice. The notice could be abrupt and unavoidable.

During Democratic Kampuchea (known as the Khmer Rouge regime), the Cambodians were living as slaves for agriculture for almost 4 years. The Khmer Rouge emptied all the cities and towns as well as the monetary system. Yet they made people work on planting rice and building dikes and canals. All Cambodians, including both sophisticated and uneducated, were forced to do

hard labour under harsh conditions to reach the rice production target decided by the *Angkar* (central committee of Khmer Rouge), 3 tons of rice per ha land. There was no technology being used. As a result, approximately 2 million people died of starvation and sickness due to malnutrition, exhaustion, diseases and execution under Khmer Rouge's leadership between 1975-1979. It is ironic to mention that the inventory of irrigation systems in Cambodia that was conducted in 1993-1994, found 79% of the scheme was conducted during the Khmer Rouge time (Himel, 2007, p.5)

Although this catastrophe is rather viewed as an apocalypse due to the ideology of the leader, the Cambodian people also experienced tough times with nature.

4.4. Managerial

Do humans manage nature? Or does nature manage humans? Between the two actors, which one is greater and more powerful? Most Cambodians consider that nature manages humans. However, it is said that humans are the clever being who could manage the natural resources, allocating some for present consumption and retaining natural heritage for future generations. To fulfill quality of life, humans make use of agriculture, mining, fisheries and forestry. Certainly, people and their livelihoods rely dramatically on the health and productivity of the landscapes, and our actions as stewards of the land plays a critical role in maintaining health and productivity.

Nevertheless, have people effectively managed the resources? The answer probably is no. This is pessimistic, so to speak. However, we could see from the number of times major natural disasters hit different corners of the world. This evokes the question of how much traumas have people experienced due to the poor natural management of oneself? Cambodia experienced a terrible flooding in late 2011. Although less affected than Thailand, the flood caused 1.2 million people to be affected out of 14 million population based on United Nations' estimates. The same article included a very poor managerial disaster relief from the Cambodian government compared to Thailand, "In Thailand, the government has used helicopters, military vehicles and an array of equipment to reach and assist flood victims, but in Cambodia the work of providing basic necessities has been largely left to private organizations" (Fuller, 2011).

A recent concern in Cambodia is mining. From 2004-2006, the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy (MIME) had granted a total of 9 mineral exploration licenses to local and foreign companies, for projects were to explore for metallic minerals: 3 for iron ore, 2 for gold, 2 for bauxite, as well as one for coal. Furthermore, since 2005, the MIME had granted mining licenses to 11 companies; five of the licenses were for gemstone (zircon) projects, five were for limestone projects, and one was for a granite project (Wu, 2006).

How much has Cambodia prepared for the effects of resource extraction? To what domain that Cambodia is able to manage the imbalance of the surroundings?

4.5. Apathetic

Apathy means showing or feeling no interest, enthusiasm, or concern. The trait has become common for people in the 21st century for the sake of business advantages. Deforestation is a form of apathy regardless of the tremendous harmful effect side effects to the beings. The forest, which was reported to cover 13.2 million hectares and account for approximately 73% of the country's total land area in 1969, has been, unfortunately, reduced by 2 million hectares in 1993 due to deforestation (Eang, 1999). The newest figure estimated by UNDP shows, the forest cover the country has dropped to 57%, facing constant threat from logging, fuel wood dependency, lack of alternative energy sources, clearance for agriculture, weak forest sector governance, economic and social land concessions (Ker, 2011).

Another format of apathy, which shows the increasing figure, is urban immigration, leading to pollution problem. Many people moved to live in the capital city, Phnom Penh, seeking the possibility of employment and better educational opportunity. As many people move in, Phnom

Penh has become densely populated, with traffic jams and heavy smokes from vehicles with over 2 millions people living there in 2012. As urbanization is increasing, more infrastructures are needed. As a result, people are rather surrounded by human-made environment such as houses, being cut off from the natural ones. Natural resources such as forests are put under increasing pressure for the industrials and the needs of the consumers, as they are taken-for-granted.

4.6. Animistic

Animistic belief in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe is deep-rooted in the Cambodian mindset. A small god house in the front yard in almost every household expresses the idea of animism. The god living inside is called “Preah Phumi” (the earth god) who will protect the house. A similar type of animistic belief could be found for the offering sweets, candies to the young little spirits, known as “Ma-rinh Kong Veal”. Most Cambodians believe that these young little spirits would take good care of the family and prevent the bad incident that will happen in the future.



Figure 5: The house of Ma-rinh Kong Veal (young little spirits)
Photo by Christa Neuenhofer

A deeper animistic belief is that of the Phnong, an ethnic group populating the eastern part in Mondulkiri province. They live off the land and still practice shifting cultivation – slash and burn. Proven to animism, a magic pole could be found in almost every household as well as in the paddy field. The poles are decorated with bamboo fibers that have been dyed with



Figure 6: The magic pole with bamboo fibers and small huts
Photo by Christa Neuenhofer

red paint (formerly with blood), a small slit drum to call the spirits, a small elephant head which symbolizes strength and can thus protect the people and their possessions and a small kind of basket, similar to the ones that are used for offerings. These are normally more or less the same items that can be found at houses and fields. At wells there are often small water buffaloes instead of elephant heads. Sometimes the poles can also have additional items as e.g. a small house. The reason why the Phnong people carry this intense faith is that the pole will invite the spirit to protect people, care for good luck and good harvest and especially ward off the evil spirits. Furthermore, the Phnong people are still practicing animal sacrifice to appease angry spirits or to thank benevolent spirits for helping them for a good harvest or cures the people illness (Neuenhofer, n.d.).

Conclusion

It is undeniable that the Cambodians are strongly attached to nature. With the favourable geographical landscape, abundant natural resources and the glory culture of the country, Cambodia has been living harmoniously with her surroundings. Rarely has Cambodia been trapped in major natural disasters except droughts and flooding. In addition, religion plays a very strong and influential role in Cambodian lives. Although the national religion of the country is Buddhism, it is more comparable to a “hybrid” of Hinduism and the main religion itself. Nevertheless, not many Khmer realized that some rituals belong to Hinduism; it is ironic. Moreover, the pillar, which also contributes to natural prosperity, is culture. Folk dancing, proverbs, festivals and architecture style leads out a clear idea of how the Khmer maintain the relationship with lifelong partner, nature.

Unfortunately, the Cambodian is being globalized, giving rise to pollution, urbanization as well as several major problems like deforestation. Unlike developed countries, Cambodia has not prepared her stance to welcome the upcoming effects of the natural extraction action plan yet. In great hope, this paper should be able to draw attention of people including the Cambodia itself to

understand the core value of reciprocity living with nature and reconsider the ways people treat nature in the present state.

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