

Bioregions and Spirit Places: Taking up Jim Dodge's Long-Lost Suggestion

In 1981, Jim Dodge suggested that “spirit places” might be an important aspect of knowing one’s bioregion¹. However, since that time, this provocative concept has not been taken up with much vigor; in fact, it seems to have been dropped altogether². This paper, drawing on two research trips among the highlanders³ of Northeast Cambodia, concludes that a bioregional theory that does not include spirit places is myopic. Taken in the highlander context in Cambodia, such a theory is utterly meaningless. Dodge is reluctant to define bioregionalism precisely (5); he does, however, offer us several “elements” that can help delineate bioregions, one of which is “spirit places.” According to Dodge, certain mountains or bodies of water function as “the predominate psychophysical influence where you live” (7). Cambodia’s highlanders, with their animistic beliefs in such spirit places, can help shed light on Dodge’s intuition. In this paper, the Brao and other tribes of Ratanakiri province show us that knowing where spirits dwell and having a framework to deal with them is an equally and quite possibly more important dimension of living sustainably and fruitfully in one’s local ecosystem for it is the spirits that are the cause of illness, death, crop failures and misfortune, rather than biological or anthropogenic reasons.

This essay will begin with a brief description of the highlanders in order to establish how their culture and lifestyle make them ideal candidates for being bioregionalists. Next, I will describe five spirit places –Krang

¹ From “Living by Life: Some Bioregional Theory and Practice” in: *Home! A Bioregional Reader* edited by Van

Andruss, Christopher Planet, Judith Plant, et al, 7, 1990. (originally published in 1981 in *CoEvolution Quarterly*)

² Several writers, such as Thomas Berry in *Dream of the Earth* (1988) and Dolores LaChapelle in *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex: Rapture of the Deep* (1988) and Gary Snyder in *Practice of the Wild* (1990) with his “spirit of the place” idea, offer important spiritual concepts, but do not touch on spirit places *per se*, as Dodge put forth.

³ The indigenous people of Northeast Cambodia are referred to by anthropologists as “highlanders” due to the slightly higher elevation of the region. They are also called ethnic minorities, autochthonous populations, Proto-Indo-Chinese, uplanders, and other such monikers, but for the sake of consistency and in keeping with the anthropological discourse, I will refer to them as highlanders. Interestingly, Dodge (7) writes “Also provocative is the notion that bioregion is a vertical phenomenon having more to do with elevation than horizontal deployment –thus a distinction between hill people and flatlanders...” The indigenous people of Northeast Cambodia are referred to as “highlanders” because Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri provinces are at a higher elevation and viewed as distinct from “lowlander” Khmers who tend to dwell in urban or suburban areas

Mountain, Haling Halang, Kroala Village spirit forest, Poll Mountain, and Yeak Loam Lake- to illustrate how attention to spirit presences in the landscape is vital to the health and prosperity of the tribes of this region. A picture will emerge of a people who see spirits as active forces in their lives, invisible entities that reside in mountains, forests, and lakes. For the highlanders, appeasing the spirits of the natural milieu is every bit as important as knowing the practical uses of various biota, and indeed, even more so.

Indigenous people have inhabited this hilly, forested and once-remote region of Cambodia for several thousand years (Tully, 2005: 7; Chandler, 2007: 13). Their knowledge of local ecosystems allowed them to flourish and live relatively sustainable lives throughout this time (Bourdier, 2006: 7, 25). What is interesting from a bioregional perspective –in addition to the highlanders’ detailed understanding of plants, animals, soils, and weather- is the degree to which their sense of place is so intensely localized, and how many of their ideas of space and time derive from natural phenomena and ancient place-based culture, as opposed to maps, clocks, or the Cambodian government. Anthropologist Frederic Bourdier (2006) is worth quoting at length:

“the principal markers of spatio-temporal orientation are neither the cardinal points nor, even less, the territorial organization imposed by Khmers, but rather the location of ancient villages near which are buried ancestors, abandoned clearings, hunting trails, forest paths between houses, roads linking villages to the cultivated lands, rocks, original shapes in the relief, thickets in which named and identified spirit dwells, etc...most of the land clearers take their bearings from the progress of the sun during the day and that of the moon and other celestial bodies during the night. Others, like the Tampuan, estimate the degree of maturity of the grassy vegetation, the sonorous presence of birds, the flow and changing level of streams, the emanation of certain vegetal odors, and learn these manifestations as well as other distinguishing indices of time and space” (29).

Bourdier makes it clear that the highlander way of life is deeply based on and embedded in their specific local environment; they are a people who truly *live in place* and *inhabit* the place they reside. It is worth mentioning that removal from these familiar places results in confusion and a feeling of “haziness” (Bourdier, 2006: 29). Furthermore, the Brao of Ratanakiri (a district that belonged to Laos until 1904) have no word in their lexicon for the name of their province (Bourdier, 2006: 22). Indeed, the concept of a “province” would seem baffling to a people who consider anyplace more than five to ten kilometers distant as far away and unfathomable (Bourdier, 2006: 29).

The highlanders have clearly been practicing what has been termed “bioregionalism” for a very long time. However, to learn about the biological

aspects of the natural environment while at the same time ignoring what Cambodia's aborigines (and indigenous people worldwide, as will be discussed later) have to say about the spiritual dimensions of their ecological world is to be a selective, and perhaps, superficial student. As Berg and Dasmann (1977) reminded us in "Reinhabiting California," "The final boundaries of a bioregion are best described by the people who have lived within it, through human recognition of the realities of living-in-place. All life on the planet is interconnected in a few obvious ways, and in many more that remain barely explored" (36). This is where Dodge's suggestion about spirit places proves useful; it is an unexplored bioregional criterion.

Numerous environmental writers have put forth that indigenous people everywhere are our best teachers for living symbiotically and dynamically with nature (Devall and Sessions, 1985: 96; Naess, 1989: 174-5; Sessions, 1995: ix; Snyder, 1990: 22; Snyder, 1995: 57; Lynch, 2008: 52). Others (McGinnis, 1999: 2; Snyder, 1990: 40, 96; Sale, 1995: 61; Author, 2011) have suggested that indigenous populations are the original (and unwitting) bioregionalists, a way of life that persisted on Earth for the vast majority of *homo sapiens'* existence (Dodge, 1995: 5). And while the potential for learning about the natural world from native peoples is astounding, there is another element that unfortunately receives very little attention from academia –knowledge of spirit places and a system for dealing with the supernatural beings who reside therein.

Dodge offered us Mount Shasta and the Pacific Ocean as possible "psyche-tuning power presences," and that "You have to live in its presence long enough to truly feel its force within you and that it's not mere descriptive geography" (7). Dodge admitted that he is not an authority on spiritual matters (9), but his insight nonetheless provides us with an important window into an indigenous worldview that emphasizes spirit places as integral to understanding and respecting the places we live in. For the highlanders of Cambodia, this entails knowing which sections of forests and which particular mountains and hills are inhabited by spirits and then establishing a system of rules and prohibitions so that life can safely go on without disturbing the deities. As will be shown in the following pages, the presence of spirits is often signaled by illness or injury after hunting, farming or other activities in a given area. A shaman or "magic man" is then consulted who communicates with the spirits to find out what type of offense was made and what the spirits want in return to restore the sufferer's health. In addition, some particularly powerful spirit places can consider favors and will help people in exchange for rice beer and appropriate sacrifices. So while understanding the local water table and soils is undoubtedly important, knowing where spirits live and how to engage them is equally vital.

Spirit Places and Bioregional Living

The Veal Thom Grasslands⁴ is a large natural savanna in the center of Virachey National Park, a protected area that straddles Stung Treng and Ratanakiri provinces in Cambodia, that borders Laos to the north and Vietnam to the east. Veal Thom's second highest peak is called Krang Mountain, a place revered by the Brao of Holem Village⁵ and Kompong Commune, both of which are located in the park's buffer zone along the Sesan River in Ratanakiri. Mr. Son, a respected "magic man" of Holem Village explained the important role this mountain plays in the lives of the villagers in terms of providing rain in times of drought and also for halting rain during the monsoon so that fields can be cleared and burned for cultivation (creating a *chamcar*) the following season. According to Mr. Son, weather can be manipulated if he travels to Krang Mountain (a 3-4 day walk through rugged jungle terrain), sleeps on its peak, and is instructed through his dreams by the mountain's spirits regarding which animals should be sacrificed (usually chickens or pigs) and how much rice beer should be consumed. However, Krang can affect not only weather but virtually anything the villagers ask for if they are sincere.

If any doubts existed among the Holem villagers as to the legitimacy of the powers of Krang Mountain, they were forever put to rest during the French Colonial period in Cambodia when a man from the village was captured and imprisoned by French soldiers. Mr. Son, who guesses his age at over 80⁶, explained this incident:

"A meeting was held and it was decided that I must go to Krang and ask the spirits to free him. I went there and slept on the mountain and I dreamt that the man would be released in three days in exchange for some chickens and rice beer, and it really happened. Three days later the prisoner was stunned to see his handcuffs break apart on his wrists. He was able to escape and return to our village, and since that time, everyone in Holem believes in the spirit powers of Krang Mountain."

(In a conversation with the author at Holem Village, Cambodia on January 24th, 2011)

Mr. Son emphasized that in the half a century that has passed since that event, Krang Mountain has remained the unquestioned spiritual force in the

⁴ Veal Thom means "wilderness grasslands" in Khmer, though an ancient Brao legend asserts that the grasslands were formed by an ancient and abandoned farm that was in use thousands of years ago.

⁵ *Holem* is the Brao name of the village. In Khmer it called *Kalem* Village.

⁶ It was explained that elderly people estimate their age according to how many fields have been cleared for cultivation. Typically, the soils of a given field are arable for 15 years before a new *chamcar* is cleared in the forest for a new farm (Bourdier 2006).

minds of all Holem villagers, and showing allegiance through animal sacrifices and consumption of rice beer is essential for health and prosperity. Krang appears to be a “predominate psychophysical influence” for the people of Holem, meeting Dodge’s criterion as a “spirit place.”

Mr. Wan, the chief of Kompong Commune, a one hour boat ride upriver from Holem Village, confirmed the powers of Krang and explained that the mountain was central to his commune’s way of life. When a magic man journeys to Krang, Kompong Commune is closed for the duration of the pilgrimage, and anyone caught flouting these rules is fined up to US \$100 (an astronomical sum by local standards) for the offense. He said that all of the elders believed in the mountain’s sacredness, but that only some of the young people did. However, he said, since animism⁷ was still strong in his commune and because Christianity had not yet made too big of an impact⁸, there was hope that Krang would remain important -what Dodge would call a “psyche-tuning power presence”- into the future.

North of the Veal Thom Grasslands are the Haling Halang Mountains on the Laotian border, another powerful spirit presence known by villagers throughout the region. Mr. Wan insisted that the spirits of Krang were more important to his commune, but Mr. Son, while also acknowledging that Krang was the focal spirit presence of his village, informed us that favors from Haling Halang⁹ require a human sacrifice¹⁰, and it is for that reason that requests are not made of it. Before trips to Krang or Haling Halang are taken, the blood of a chicken must be spilled at a local spirit gate where the *arah* (Brao for “spirits”) are addressed regarding the nature of the expedition. If the trip is to Haling Halang, a thickly forested massif, strict prohibitions are set on the type and amount of bamboo or other plants that can be harvested, and no logging or hunting is permitted whatsoever (Baird, 2009: 464). However, non-timber forest products can be collected from Haling Halang, and the mountain is regarded as the best place to find a particular species of bamboo

⁷ It is worth noting that Dodge feels that animism, rather than Christian or monotheistic faiths, is compatible with bioregional spirituality: “I think the main influences are the primitive animist/Great Spirit tradition of various Eastern and esoteric religious practices, and plain ol’ paying attention” (10).

⁸ Baird (2009, p. 458) estimates that only 1% of Ratanakiri highlanders have been converted to Christianity, and that, on a whole, Christian missionaries are not well received in the province.

⁹ This mountain is the abode of the most powerful god of the area, and so strong is its force that, it was explained, airplanes cannot fly over it, nor can fire burn it.

¹⁰ As part of my research, Mr. Noi, Kam-La (a Brao neighbor) and Soukhon Thon, a Lao-Khmer ranger for Virachey NP had planned to trek to the summit of Haling-Halang, however, 2 days into the trek, 3 out of 6 of us had strange dreams –on the same night- questioning our motives for the journey or implying that we should stop; Mr. Noi dreamt that he ordered a coffin. We made it within 5km of km of the mountain, and decided to turn back.

that is used for making exquisite long drinking straws for deep rice beer jugs¹¹.

While the spiritual powers of Krang and Haling Halang appear to be well known throughout the area, for many villagers, especially those south of the Sesan River, local spirit places, such as nearby forests and hills, are more important for their lives, for these locations are nearby to their homes and the possibility of disturbing the *arah* are greater; furthermore, Veal Thom and Haling Halang are simply too far away from these villages and many of the highlanders near the town of Ban Lung (the provincial capital of Ratanakiri) have never heard of them before.

In Kroala Village in O-Chum District in Ratanakiri, a small but powerful spirit forest is located just a few kilometers outside of the village proper. So strong are the spirits of this forest that, according to Mr. Arun, the village headman, five men died a few years back simply from standing in its shadow. The spirits there are so menacing that not even the Christian residents of Kroala will venture near it. Arun told of how his motorbike engine failed when he tried to drive past the area:

“Two lizards –one black and one white- ran out of the forest as I tried to drive past. They blocked my path and stared straight at me and my engine died. It was full of gas, fresh oil, and was in perfect working condition. There was no explanation for it. I tried and tried to restart it, but to no avail. I had to push the bike back to the village and the elders told me that the spirits did not like me passing by with a motorbike.”

(In conversation with the author on January 14th, 2011 in Kroala Village)

Stories in which wild animals are taken as signs or messages from spirits are abundant among highlander communities¹², and it is in this way that spirits and spirit places merge with local biotic elements. What is important to note is that it is attention to spirit places that takes precedence in the highlanders' lives¹³; being able to identify local plants and animals (typical questions in

¹¹ It was explained by a magic woman in Mr. Noi's village that the spirits do not want this bamboo over-harvested, therefore, before setting out to collect, a shaman must be consulted so that the correct amount of bamboo to be cut can be discerned. I was told that recently a man travelled to Haling Halang to harvest this bamboo without asking the spirits and while he was cutting the bamboo a sharp piece pierced his thigh, resulting in serious injury. Furthermore Haling Halang bamboo taken without the permission of the spirits has been known to shatter in a person's hands when they dip it into a rice beer vase.

¹² Author 2011

¹³ As Bourdier (2006) remarks, “it cannot be denied that the Tampuan spend their lives performing sacrifices. But far from representing the fears of a human society that does not understand its world in the so-called rational manner, the sacrifices on the contrary lend that the world meaning” (p.79).

“bioregional quizzes”¹⁴) while certainly important, does not appear to receive anywhere near the efforts spent on placating the local spirits that live in the hills, forests and lakes, and this is the key factor that bioregional scholars must attend to if they want to learn about ecosystem-based living from indigenous people. Perhaps, with his references to indigenous people and animism, this is what Dodge wanted us to probe, and we slept on it.

Even Gary Snyder, who often refers to indigenous lifestyles and spirituality in his writing, does not cite the importance of spirit places per se; in an interview titled “The Real Work” he stated, “You know whether or not a person knows where he is by whether or not he knows the plants. By whether or not he knows what the soils and waters do” (Snyder, 1980: 69). This statement, as true as it is in terms of biological ecology, falls woefully short in the indigenous context, a surprising omission considering Snyder’s considerable interest in native cultures.

The Brao of Tom-Phoun Rueng Toch Village view Poll Mountain (in actuality, it is a small hill), located about four kilometers north of the village, as a local spirit mountain that exerts considerable influence over their lives. Poll Mountain was identified as a spirit place by Mr. Noi, the local magic man, after several villagers became very ill or totally lost (especially curious considering that there is a clear path leading almost straight from the village to this hill) after hunting or harvesting in the area. Sacrifices were made, rice beer was consumed, and the villagers agreed that this hill was off-limits for cultivation, collecting, or hunting. One unfortunate resident, growing impatient with this animistic prohibition, established a farm on Poll, and soon after fell ill and died¹⁵.

If part of the aim of bioregionalism is to live in such a way that ecosystems are not over-stressed so that native flora and fauna can continue to prosper, then attention to spirit places helps to accomplish this goal. Through respecting Poll Mountain as the exclusive domain of spirits, villagers allow the forest to regenerate and wildlife to thrive. Animals then migrate away from the sacred area and become a viable source of food coming from a securely protected zone. Similarly, with hunting prohibited in Krang, Haling Halang and Veal Thom, safe spaces are created for wildlife to feed and multiply. Nonetheless, it needs to be stressed that wildlife protection is an unplanned byproduct of respect for spirit places, and that environmental

¹⁴ Charles, Dodge, Milliman and Stockley in *Home! A Bioregional Reader* p.29- 30; Devall and Sessions 1985 p. 22; Holmes Rolston III p. 395.

¹⁵ The Cambodian government does not keep a census on the population for this region (Bourdier 2006 p. 14; Ironside p. 92) and seems, generally speaking, little interested in births and natural, or accidental deaths in remote indigenous villages; unless a serious crime such as homicide occurs –something that would necessitate police involvement- it is difficult to verify the authenticity of stories such as this or of the five men dying in the shadow of the spirit forest in Kroala village.

protection, while perhaps not something the highlanders would disagree with, is not high on their agenda and is, at any rate, an entirely Western concept (Bourdier, 2006: 28). Conservation is, nonetheless, desperately needed in Cambodia, and if spirit places can be recognized as areas that are off-limits to hunting and development, then perhaps an indigenous ecosophical wisdom can take root with support on both the community and national level¹⁶.

As a final example of an important spirit place (and many more examples could be provided) there is the sacred Yeak Loam Lake Commune and its surrounding forest and spirit mountains just four kilometers east of the town of Ban Lung. Tampuan highlanders have identified this volcanic lake as the place where the spirits of the air, water and sky converge and a place where no permanent structures can be erected (Yeak Loam Lake Commune Committee). Fifteen years ago the provincial government made the progressive decision to turn over management of the lake and its surrounding jungle to the Tampuan Commune (Ibid; VSO Cambodia staff¹⁷). The agreement was that the commune could manage the lake and the surrounding forests for twenty-five years, and if it was proven that their efforts were resulting in verifiable environmental protection of the locale, then management could be extended on a year to year basis when the contract expires (Ibid). Any visitor to the lake today will notice that it is an ecological oasis in a vast monoculture sea of cashew nut plantations; it is a near-pristine lake and primary forest that is home to numerous species of birds, deer, and fish. Just how long the lake and its surroundings will remain a protected area is in serious question (as is the case for Virachey National Park), and this issue will be taken up later in this paper.

Animistic bioregionalism can help preserve both human cultures and natural ecosystems, so long as spirit places are taken seriously (Author, 2011). Author (Ibid) reported that a group of indignant highlanders, in search of fortune, cut a large tree at Yeak Loam Lake for sale on the Vietnamese timber market, a blunder which cost them their lives and which has resulted in a general reluctance to speak highlander languages in the vicinity for fear that the spirits will identify and punish any minority people in further retribution (selling hardwoods abroad is, furthermore, not what bioregionalism is about, a problem brought about by the introduction of the cash economy in

¹⁶ While regional autonomy is important to bioregionalism, in Cambodia it is the national government that is going to have the final say in whether or not a mining or logging firm is allowed to exploit an area.

¹⁷ VSO is a UK-based NGO and I conducted an unstructured interview with staffer Tania Heath, who works at Yeak Loam Lake under VSO's 'Secure Livelihoods' programme in Ratanakiri, Cambodia

the early 1990s)¹⁸. In another recent breaching of animist etiquette, a Kravet highlander who was having difficulty catching fish (a forbidden activity, both legally and culturally) in the lake after dark became frustrated and spoke profanities to the spirits of Yeak Loam Lake. Do Yok, my Tampuan guide for this area, explained that the man began to lose his mind the next day and by the following evening was in throes of delirium. Not even the doctors in the district hospital, Do Yok explained, could do anything for him. Ultimately, a local magic woman was consulted, sacrifices were made, rice beer was brought out, apologies were made to the spirits, and the man became well again.

Admittedly, anecdotes such as these are difficult to verify, but they do not surprise highlanders who are unfamiliar with the cases, and even Khmers seem to listen to them with guarded concern. What is important to realize from an ecological standpoint is that knowing about spirit places and having the cultural means (animistic beliefs and practices) to engage the supernatural beings therein allows for places like Yeak Loam Lake, Poll Mountain, the Kroala spirit forest, the Veal Thom Grasslands and Haling Halang Mountain to remain relative sanctuaries in a time of unprecedented economic development and change. As stated earlier, environmental protection is an unintended result of respect for spirit places; sacred locations are identified and tightly regulated and/or kept off-limits for spiritual purposes because the highlanders feel that their safety is at risk if they offend the spirits by hunting, logging, etc. Nonetheless, for those concerned about bioregionalism (and, it can be added, cultural and ecological preservation, which are natural beneficiaries of bioregionalism), knowledge of spirit places is an important aspect to consider in that it is the spirit places –the mountains, forests and lakes- that provide Cambodian highlanders with the cosmological orientation that is the foundation for their animistic world views.

Wade Davis (2009), writing about indigenous tribes in the Amazon, highlights the importance of the spiritual dimension of the natural environment:

“Thus, for the people living today in the forests of the Piraparana, the entire natural world is saturated with meaning and cosmological significance. Every rock and waterfall embodies a story. Plants and animals are but distinct physical manifestations of the same essential spiritual essence. At the same time, everything is more than it appears, for the visible world is only one level of perception. Behind every tangible form, every plant and animal, is a shadow dimension, a place invisible to ordinary people but visible to the shaman” (108).

It is in this way that bioregional theories, with their emphasis on learning about the physical dimensions of place, miss much of what it is to truly *live in*

¹⁸ Cash was not used in Ratanakiri until the early 1990s (Bourdier 2006: 9)

place in the indigenous context. And it is in this way that indigenous people – whether they are from Cambodia, the Amazon, or North America- can be our best teachers for understanding the places we live in. This is also where Dodge proves useful, offering the possibility of spirit places as bioregional markers; his insight, of course, has been common knowledge to native peoples for millennia.

Deep ecologists have written volumes on the importance of acknowledging intrinsic value in nature. In light of the animistic cultures of Ratanakiri (and, indeed, elsewhere in the indigenous world, as Davis shows in his description of the people of Piraparana), this value system can be taken a step further: certain ecosystems ought to be protected because of their spiritual associations as well as their cultural and ecological value. Bhagwat (2009) argues that ‘sacred natural sites’ often render verifiable “ecosystem services” in that they: preserve landscapes, support watersheds, regulate the atmosphere, serve as a storehouse for traditional medicines (which many indigenous people rely on) and lastly, bear strong cultural significance for local communities (420-1). Perhaps the Cambodian government, which certainly sees the tangible benefits in protecting sacred sites such as the Angkor Wat temple complex, can be persuaded to recognize the sacred *natural* sites revered by the indigenous people of its Northeastern provinces. In highlander world views, intrinsic value derives from more than what is visible to the eye, and we will need to acknowledge and respect spirit places if we are to fully look after our Earth household. If we don’t know where to look to find the spirit places that Dodge alluded to, indigenous people throughout the world can be our teachers.

Current Realities in Northeast Cambodia

Presently, both Yeak Loam Lake and Virachey National Park (in which Krang Mountain, Veal Thom Grasslands and Haling Halang are located) are designated as officially protected areas, though in actuality they receive very little funding for adequate conservation measures (Author 2011)¹⁹. While the combined threats of poaching and illegal logging are considerable (especially in Virachey National Park), they pale in comparison to potential development plans. An enormous portion (figures range from 60%-90%, though precise numbers are difficult to come by as the government is not disposed to revealing the facts) of the national park has been conceded to mining

¹⁹ Virachey NP, in addition to being a national park, is also an ASEAN Heritage Site, though it receives no funding from the ASEAN Foundation; rangers are paid between US \$30-60 per month, depending on rank and experience, to protect a 3,325 sq. kilometer mountainous rain forest that faces not only domestic poaching and logging threats, but also those from abroad in Laos and Vietnam as the park is located at the intersection of the three nations.

exploration²⁰, and Chinese and Vietnamese rubber companies have recently surveyed the area for future plantations²¹. Both mining sites and agricultural plantations would result not only in ecological destruction of the areas where they are set up, but they will also entail the building of numerous roads, which will also be used by poachers and loggers; indeed, the Cambodian government sees a dual profit potential in the granting of concessions: liquidation of the valuable hardwoods and taxation from new mineral exports and agricultural products. David Quammen's prescient insight that *de-gazetting* is "a word with which we should all acquaint ourselves; it's a word, unfortunately, of the future....What has been done, however noble and farsighted, can be undone"²² is particularly applicable to the national parks and protected areas of Cambodia.

The situation at Yeak Loam Lake is equally grim: a foreign company, BVB Ltd, recently purchased a spirit place –Youl Mountain- located just 1.5 kilometers from the lake and considered part of the sacred geography of the area by the Tampuan people; developers plan to construct a gambling casino on the top of the mountain, which they hope to link up to the lake via cable car²³. According to Mr. Deth²⁴ Retia, manager of Motel Phnom²⁵ Yaklom²⁶,

²⁰ The president of the Cambodian Association of Mining and Exploration Companies is an Australian named Richard Stranger, which is interesting from a bioregional standpoint for two reasons: firstly, it is a foreigner who is the head of the organization, and secondly (and ironically), his surname is *Stranger*, as in someone who is not from the area, the antithesis of local management on two levels. Stranger remarked, in a 2 January 2011 *Phnom Penh Post* article titled "Mining association seeks standards and action," that there could potentially be "an absolute bonanza" of mining activity in Northeast Cambodia: <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2011010245810/Business/mining-association-seeks-standards-and-action.html>

²¹ This was revealed by a colleague in Northeast Cambodia on January 15th, 2011 in Ban Lung. The Vietnamese want a 10,000 hectare plantation in the park's eastern flank near the border with Vietnam; just how large the Chinese are prospecting for is unclear. In an update on this development, Soukhon sent me an email on February 22nd, 2011 stating that the Vietnamese have been granted a 28,000 hectare concession in the eastern side of VNP to develop a large rubber plantation. The Vietnamese reportedly have a 70-90 year lease on the land.

²² "An Endangered Idea" by David Quammen in *National Geographic*, October 2006, p.63

²³ <http://www.facebook.com/pages/BVB/108013635887080>

²⁴ Ironically or perhaps fittingly, this man's first name is pronounced "death"

²⁵ Phnom means "hill" in Khmer

²⁶ Visit <http://www.phnomyaklom.com/> for more information on this motel, which, in addition to desecrating a spirit mountain to establish its business, went a step further and paid \$170 to Tampuan villagers to perform a dance ritual asking the (now displaced) spirits to wish Mr. Deth Ritia a successful business endeavor

which itself sits atop a (former) spirit mountain, the casino and gondola plan are a done deal.

Extraction of natural resources, conversion of forested lands to monocultures, and the damming of rivers by distant and/or foreign companies and governments are some of the greatest threats to bioregional ways of life of life today everywhere from Cambodia to Brazil to Alaska and beyond²⁷. Without citing the term, Davis (2009) addresses the tragedy of bioregionalism undone by outside interference:

“Environmental concerns aside, think for a moment of what these proposals imply about our culture. We accept it as normal that people who have never been on the land, who have no history or connection to the country, may legally secure the right to come in and by the very nature of their enterprise leave in their wake a cultural and physical landscape utterly transformed and desecrated. What’s more, in granting such mining concessions, often initially for trivial sums to speculators from distant cities, companies cobbled together with less history than my dog, we place no cultural or market value on the land itself” (119).

This is precisely the situation the highlanders of Northeast Cambodia find themselves in today²⁸, and anthropologists who have worked in the country for many years fear that the entirety of what is left of the natural world in this region has been quietly conceded to outside investment groups with an eye to convert the region into profit-making enterprises (Bourdier, 2009: 184; White: 367, Ironside, 2009: 98)²⁹. Summarizing the situation in sobering terms, Bourdier (2009) remarks, “At this stage, the silence of the government is one of its most powerful and terrible arms” (184).

²⁷ In addition to the threats cited in this paper, a mega-dam has been approved for construction for Brazil –the Bel Monte- a project which will flood a large area of rainforest and displace numerous aborigines (Nu River Dam Project in China is another example: http://www.gokunming.com/en/blog/item/2230/china_to_dam_nu_river_by_2015) and generally speaking, many lands on which indigenous people live –which are very often places of rich biodiversity- are threatened by development

²⁸ The company with the largest mining concession is Indochine, a new and unknown firm headed by two “flamboyant” Australians who have been coined the “Bananas in Pajamas” pair after being arrested following a Sydney-Abu Dhabi flight where they stripped naked, became intoxicated and sexually harassed flight attendants. The story can be found at: <http://www.crikey.com.au/2007/09/25/cambodia-braces-for-an-australian-mining-invasion/>

²⁹ This map shows that the majority of Virachey NP has been ceded to mining exploration to the Indochine group: http://altmapcambodia.blogspot.com/2007_08_12_archive.html and a recent document shown to the park rangers shows that over 40,000 hectares of land has been signed over the rubber plantations, the felling of trees for which has already commenced and been reported on in the two English-language Cambodian newspapers

If developers have their way in Ratanakiri, not only will the ecological integrity of the area be severely compromised, but the spirit places –sacred areas which have always served as cultural and mythological anchors in highlanders’ lives by reinforcing their animistic world views- will be destroyed as well. I asked several elders, including magic men and women, what will happen to the spirits if development proceeds. The answers were nearly all the same: the spirits will leave the area, but the highlanders will be punished first, and many people will get sick and die. Even Deth Retia admitted that he and other developers –including the Governor of Ratanakiri- understood that indigenous people feared that they would die at the hands of angry spirits if development plans went ahead. However, this scenario, which is almost certainly read by the authorities as superstition³⁰, may not be sufficient for convincing officials to reconsider their plans.

However, what an easy way it would be for the embattled Australian entrepreneurs and the notoriously corrupt Cambodian government to get some good press if they scaled down or outright cancelled some of their development projects, citing indigenous spirit places as the reason. In a very short amount of time they would find themselves in the good graces of the highlanders, NGOs, wildlife conservation groups, and the local and international media. And who knows, maybe when they witnessed the material benefits –huge carbon sinks intact, watersheds functioning properly, a content indigenous population, enhanced ecotourism potential, and the good press- these development actors might decide that honoring spirit places might not be superstition after all.

Conclusion

Mircea Eliade (1959) wrote that “Revelation of a sacred space makes it possible to obtain a fixed point and hence to acquire orientation in the chaos of homogeneity, to “found the world” and to live in a real sense” (23). Without these sacred places, the highlanders of Cambodia are at risk of losing not only their spiritual orientation but the main cognitive reference points in their lives, rendering them physically, culturally and spiritually displaced in a sea of monoculture plantations and boomtowns. White (344-8) and Baird (2010, 275-80) have written that the highlanders have survived numerous disruptions to their lives: ancient slave raiding parties from Thailand, Laos and Phnom Penh; French Colonization; Japanese occupation; King Sihanouk’s integration policies in 1960; Khmer Rouge persecution; American B-52 bombardment and chemical defoliation during the war in Vietnam; Vietnamese occupation, and finally a new Cambodian

³⁰ Considering the fact that many highlanders cannot speak Khmer and are totally illiterate, and thus woefully non-competitive in the market economy, predictions of death and suffering in a post-forest era in Ratanakiri are not without merit; in fact, predictions of death and misery are almost certainly highly accurate.

government, the CPP³¹. But through all the turmoil the forest remained, and when the occupiers finally left, the highlanders have always been able to return to their animistic –and bioregional- way of life (Bourdier, 2006: 165; White 351; Hammer, 2009: 152). However, whether or not they can survive the latest threats –the arrival of the market economy, economic migrants, land speculators, and large-scale resource extraction and forest conversion- is highly questionable. If the remaining forests disappear due to the greed and economic interests of distant powers, currently self-sufficient highlanders may be reduced to day laborers on rubber and cashew nut plantations, needing cash to purchase items such as food, which were formerly acquired in the community through farming and bartering.

Watersheds are often cited as one of the defining characteristics of a bioregion (Dodge 6, Snyder, 1995: 235, Sale: 57). The Veal Thom Grasslands is the watershed of four major rivers (the O-Pong, the O Lai Lai, the Krae and the Tok Mok) as well as numerous streams; Haling Halang is the watershed for the Gan-Yu River, as well as rivers that flow north into Laos. These rivers, in addition to supporting an incredibly rich biosphere that includes Indochinese tigers, clouded leopards, Asian elephants, gibbons, Douc langurs and a plethora of other wildlife³², feed into the Sesan River, which provides fish for the people of Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces. It should come as no surprise, then, that these places are viewed as sacred; they give and nourish life. Virachey National Park, Yeak Loam Lake and the various spirit forests throughout the highlander villages of Ratanakiri form a mosaic of ecological oases in a bioregion fragmented by vast monoculture plantations. The highlanders respect and protect spirit places for their own well-being, and in turn, the biodiversity of this region is holding on, if tenuously.

The highlander's ecosystem-based skills have enabled them to live a self-sufficient (though never entirely isolated) existence for centuries without destroying their natural environment, and knowing how to live harmoniously with the spirits that dwell in forests, lakes and mountains has been an essential part of this success. Mainstream Khmer society –and, indeed, the world- has much to learn from Cambodia's highlander people in terms of bioregional living, and I think this is what Dodge was getting at in "Living by Life" when he refers to spirit places, animism, and indigenous people in relation to bioregionalism. So, when studying how to live fruitfully and dynamically in one's local ecosystem we should not forget perhaps the most

³¹ Cambodian's People Party, headed by Prime Minister Hun Sen, who wields almost complete power.

³² ASEAN's information on Virachey NP: http://bim.aseanbiodiversity.org/biss/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19:virachey-national-park&catid=3:asean-heritage-parks-programme&Itemid=32

important bioregional lesson that the highlanders (and indigenous people throughout the world) have to offer: knowledge of spirit places, which is also a way of knowing that some places are sacred, and that chainsaws, bulldozers and guns have no place there. However, when bioregions are *enclosed* within national boundaries sometimes nothing –including local knowledge, watersheds, and spirit places- is sacred.

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Yeak Loam Lake Commune Committee. (sign posted at the entrance at Yeak
Loam Lake; no printed

literature available from committee)