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AUTHOR(S):

Arensen, Lisa

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Tides of Empire: Religion, Development, and Environment in Cambodia

COURTNEY WORK

New York: Berghahn Books, 2020.

After a long hiatus, there is a welcome resurgence of ethnographic research emerging from Cambodia. Monographs have recently been written by Eve Zucker (2013), Erik Davis (2015), and Krisna Uk (2016), and 2020 marked the publication of both Courtney Work's ethnography and a study by Jonathan Padwe (2020). With the exception of Davis's urban study, these are anthropological studies of rural or forest-dwelling communities, and most focus upon the social and material changes wrought by the three decades of intermittent warfare and suffering that wracked Cambodia from the late 1960s to the late 1990s.

Tides of Empire is an innovative study of a Cambodian village's rapidly changing forest frontier, based upon fieldwork conducted in 2015. Although Work does not explicitly frame it as such, her work is a landscape study, embedded in contemporary theoretical treatments of landscape as an entangled material and immaterial terrain that is processual and always becoming. Work employs a post-humanist approach to her material, paying attention to both human and non-human actors and agencies, including the weather-world, the trails and roads, the nearby mountain, and the spiritual entities embedded in the landscape and residents' social imaginaries.

Unlike her contemporaries, Work intentionally avoids a focus on the years of conflict and genocide except for when they were directly discussed by her interlocutors. She argues that the residents of her field site were focused on present and future subsistence and the discursive promises of the development state rather than the vicissitudes of the war years or the vagaries of the Khmer Rouge tribunals. The study is populated with former soldiers and land-hungry postwar settlers, but Work keeps her historical gaze wide, aiming to show the similarities in various forms of state and non-state formations that have by turns swept across the landscape and its residents. Work names all these forms "empire," a term she defines as a "container for the various formations of state" that have influenced the people of her study (p. 4). Her use of the term also encompasses contemporary flows of global capital, development and poverty reduction schemes, and religious traditions, specifically Buddhism and Islam.

Work employs a tidal metaphor in relation to these formations, invoking both the image of incoming and receding tides and the debris that retreating ideologies and states leave behind in their wake. She also emphasizes the interstitial nature of her field site, a frontier zone situated between “subsistence and accumulation” (p. 1), which she conceptualizes as a contact zone where mutual but unequal constitution of subjects and relations to power emerge (p. 15), following Mary Louise Pratt (2008). Work emphasizes both the fragility and the hegemonic properties of these successive “tides of empire,” although the book is primarily focused on the contemporary forces of extraction, accumulation, religion, and development influencing the frontier setting of her study.

After placing the residents of the village into the scene by describing postwar settlement and in-migration, Work focuses on other actors in the landscape. In the second chapter, playfully titled a “roadology,” Work explores the history of the village’s trails, roads, and rails. Local use and projects by the Cambodian state, development actors, and private companies are all examined. The abandoned railway is also discussed as an example of long-neglected infrastructure, now being reconsidered in the current era of market intensification in ways that will end residents’ creative use of the tracks with simple motorized platforms (*lorries*) that locally move goods (p. 41). The chapter effectively contrasts the discourse of promises of development and progress offered by roads with the grounded realities of road building and disintegration in what Work terms the “soft and malleable world” of the landscape, where monsoon weather and moving soil change the surface of the land every rainy season (p. 46).

In contrast to the many and diverse articulations of power that have swept across the landscape, Work argues that landscape itself contains a foundational force of place, which she terms chthonic energies or “other-than-human power” (p. 5). By doing so, keeping tides as our metaphor, Work wades out into the complex cross-currents of the ontological turn. She never directly states her ontological stance, but since her text argues for the primacy and prehuman existence of animating natural forces, she appears to position herself within a plural ecological approach to post-humanist theory (Cadena 2015). In effect, with her emphasis on chthonic energies, Work is presenting an ur-narrative that predates the arrival of humans or the practice of organized religion, which she argues is inextricably entangled with king-making, imperial enterprises, and claims to territory in Southeast Asia. This is provocative positioning but also places Work in somewhat murky theoretical waters. On what grounds can any scholar firmly posit the ontological existence of nonbiological beings and forces? We can present no evidence beyond the phenomenological experiences and interpretive narratives of human subjects. Cosmological subjects by definition evade empirical examination.

Work argues that the *neak ta* (literally “the old ones,” and generally conceptualized as tutelary or land guardian spirits) are not spirits but rather more fundamental forces at the heart of economic and political relations. The book contains little focus on human-spirit engagements common in

similar studies, such as the interpretive and diagnostic role of human mediums and diviners. Instead, Work makes a strong historical case that beliefs in the powers of animist entities were channeled into imperial claims of legitimacy and continue to be sought after by both local human inhabitants of a place and the contemporary elite in Cambodia. However, Work limits her engagement with other scholars of what has been termed the new animism studies, presumably because she takes an iconoclastic approach to traditional classificatory systems and wishes to position animism outside of what scholars generally term religion. A productive comparison of her own field site, for example, could have been made with Zucker's 2013 ethnography of another frontier village, a work which discusses local beliefs about increasing inaccessibility to the spirit world in the postwar milieu of economic accumulation. One concept that Work does productively engage with at length is the polyvalent use of the concept of *parami*, which is drawn from the concept of perfection in Buddhism yet is also used in Cambodia to describe potency emerging from natural places with varying degrees of connection to animism and Buddhism. Work equates *parami* with her concept of chthonic energy and argues that this circulating energy has always undergirded and strengthened claims to legitimacy and power by "Buddhism, Brahminism and the kings they support" (p. 72).

Postwar scholarship on religion in Cambodia initially largely focused upon the revival of religious practice and new movements. Work's study is a valuable addition to emerging scholarship offering a critique of the inequities in power and privilege connected to such religious practice. Work's study is more engaged with themes of political ecology than traditional themes of the anthropology of religion. Work focuses upon "the political and the religious as coexisting modes of power, each with particular agendas for making subjects" (p. 134). The ways in which power and protection are sought through engagements with animist entities, Buddhist forces, and global Islam by her interlocutors are carefully explored. These efforts are analyzed in parallel with efforts to channel the promises of the development state and the current capitalist forces of extraction. Work's ability to demonstrate similarities across very different objects of analysis is one of the strongest contributions of her novel study. Her chapter on merit building and claims to moral power is particularly insightful.

All too often academia continues to ignore the material, to write as if humans and their meaning-making projects exist in thin air. This ethnography has a laudable emphasis on the grounding offered by a material landscape that weather plays upon in largely predictable seasonal patterns, often stymying human efforts at landscape transformation. Village residents are subjects of the study but do not dominate the analytical stage. Instead, Work seeks to remove historical debris and excavate chthonic forces of place that are acted upon by external projects of state formation and organized religion. Whether or not one agrees that such forces can be divorced from the classificatory categories of religion, this study provides a provocative analytical perspective for a study of landscape. Using a diverse set of methodological perspectives, Work repeatedly foregrounds

the power and potency of the mountain and the soil in the face of tides of historical and ideological change. In one final provocation of my own, I question whether this emphasis upon the chthonic aspects of landscape is actually too grounded, offering too little recognition to the mobility and uncertainty of the cosmological world. As Andrew Johnson (2020) has argued in another recent study, ecological and infrastructural change brings new sources of uncertainty, and that emergent uncertainty holds the potency and the promise of new powers—utopic and potentially apocalyptic ones. An exploration of the cosmological implications of the dramatic changes Work outlines in her closing chapter, which occurred only a few short years after the end of her fieldwork, could yield fertile future analysis.

Lisa Arensen

Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti of Brunei Darussalam

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Islam, Humanity, and Indonesian Identity: Reflections on History

AHMAD SYAFII MAARIF

Translated by GEORGE A. FOWLER

Singapore: NUS Press, 2019.

This book is valuable for its exposition of a characteristically modernist Muslim perspective on Indonesia's future. Its writer, Ahmad Syafii Maarif (b. West Sumatra 1935), finds models for that future in the history of Islamic modernism in the country, and especially in the example of the Masyumi party. This party was a strong player in Indonesian politics until 1960, when it was broken apart by Sukarno, who was at that time intent on reducing the legislative power of the