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Peer Review

Review of: "The Bearing of the Less: Fulfilling Carbon Neutrality and the National Political Economy in Virachey National Park, Cambodia"

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This is a well-researched and important piece, calling out the extreme injustice and cruelty of conservation initiatives in Cambodia and globally. The authors put forward the idea that Indigenous communities losing autonomous economic lifestyles to the marketization of livelihoods 'bear the weight' of the system. In order for carbon sequestration to happen, and for conservation areas to be established, people must be removed. This, however, is only one piece of what this paper reveals. It is more than bearing the weight of environmental governance. They also bear the burden of the deliberate cruelty *required* of such land grabs in the service of the 'greater good'. They bear the systematic devaluation of their knowledge and the systematic erasure of their independent economies. They bear this, and the rest of us do not; we go on in our coffee shops. It will soon be impossible to be economic outside of the market because no one will know how. In this way, we will all bear the burden of that cruelty. The authors might consider their own privilege and the unmistakable role it plays in this process.

That said, the role of the international community and "international standards" is fully unexamined. Instead, Cambodian government actors are framed as the primary villains in Kavet and Brao displacement, vilification, and forced assimilation to an obviously dysfunctional economic system. Certainly, the Cambodian government is culpable, but researchers must examine the origin story of the dysfunctional system those officials are enacting. Take, for example, your powerful data that shows one official first vilifying local Brao and Kavet villagers for degrading the forest with their *chamkar* and then praising the industrial plantation (ELC) for providing jobs (pg. 4). This is absolutely symptomatic of the current situation, in which massive forest clearing by ELC is praised and local subsistence forest use is

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vilified. This is not a Khmer discourse. When a Khmer ruler (or a Venezuelan ruler) does not properly propitiate the global market through the designated tribute channels, history shows what happens to that ruler. They do not operate in vacuums. Ignoring that system, and ignoring the ways that natural rubber (or sugar, or mangos, timber, cassava…) creates comfortable people enjoying a coffee and a smoke by the riverside, is part of the violence that perpetuates it.

Unfortunately, the authors did not closely read the important article by Work, Theilade, and Thoun. The point of that article was not to claim that Cambodian corruption constituted a "shadow state" as the authors claim on pg. 10. The point of that article was that the extra-legal wealth-seeking activities of the Cambodian state were in fact protected and facilitated by the canopy of development aid, which legitimates the sovereign claims of a brutal regime. Continued funding for 'strengthening governance' is supported by the same collective that creates the international standards to which the Cambodian government pledges allegiance on paper and violates in practice.

On page 10, the authors claim that "international actors" are "reluctant to challenge" the Cambodian system. Where does this reluctance come from? What is being sustained through the spectacular ruination of the independent economic activity of all geo-bio processes? This question remains unasked and thus unanswered.

The authors provide a most excellent description of Brao and Kavet histories in the region, as well as an insightful critique of the 'indigenous' in Asia. The long history of human migrations and the tensions between accumulation-based and subsistence-based economies is only just emerging through archaeology in the region. On page 15, you note that there is no evidence of the linguistically and thus, ethnically similar people in this region "shared the same sovereign State". You also nicely connect the slave trading and land grabbing (aka "territorial expansion", pg. 16) in a continuous line from the ancient to the colonial state. Although you cite McElwee's brilliant piece on Vietnamese 'environmental rule' from the colonial period to the modern, you miss her key point, which is that the discourses of proper land use do not change. Colonial, communist, modern, autonomous economic activity is simply not acceptable. In the effort to eradicate these villainous practices, fictions of forest degradation and illegality persist through hundreds of years of so-called forest governance. In this context, it seems short-sighted to point a crooked finger at Cambodian agents of the state, as if they are somehow uniquely villainous. Villainous, yes, but if they refused to be villains, how do you think that would go for them?

The U.S. News & World Report just ranked Cambodia the top country for natural environment. Yes, this happened! All those who know anything about the 'natural environment' in Cambodia are currently

choking on their coffee and cigarettes. This was published after you finished your article, but one of their criteria is balancing economic development with environmental sustainability. We should all be wondering what is going on here.

Virachey National Park is an important node in this process, as one of the last massive swaths of forest on the planet. This article is an important addition to our collective knowledge about the issues, with a solid point about how those bearing the full force of the cruel system of elite privilege are fully capable of living outside of it. The fact that this is not acceptable, that autonomous economic activity is criminalized, is not yet explicitly pointed to. It is made very visible, however, through this well-researched piece.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.