Introduction

Under the tides of empire, we dance to the rhythms of life and death. With and without markets, priests, and prime ministers, there is arising, and there is passing. Families and food, rain, wind, and shelter: the insistent motions of interdependence and landscape. Old forms and new morph and negotiate the environment, articulating various conceptions of community and accommodating multiple ecologies of mind and energy. Descriptive categories, like Religion, Politics, or Economics that obscure the interconnectedness of all social and material processes have a foothold only inasmuch as they are connected to subsistence and success in a given environment. The environment I describe is a contact zone at the furthest reaches of the incoming tide of empire.

This book addresses the constant motion of being human in the world: mobile families, social status, sun, rice, and dwelling in the contact zone. The village of Sambok Dung sits at the edge of the forest and the frontier of empire. It is an interstitial place between subsistence and accumulation. In the current era, we dwell in the presence of extractive technologies and global flows of capital and governance. My story deals with the intentional movements that bring both dwelling and its technological mediation into being. This is not necessarily a story of the inhabitants of this remote village. Rather, it is a story of how I experienced them: the mountains and the rice farmers, the Buddhists and the Cham, the buffalo, the trees, the spirits, the soldiers, and the timber traders at the edge of the forest. The coming into being that I describe is neither unidirectional nor consistent in form; it arises dependent on and embedded in materiality and mind. In fact, it has changed much in the short time between the events I describe here and the state of affairs five years later at the time of this writing.

Because so much has changed in this short period, I feel compelled to present the following chapters much as I wrote them at the time. In the conclusion, I present a brief sketch of the contemporary landscape, which sets the stage for

the telling of other stories recently gathered in the contact zone of potent climate change effects and impotent policies, unchanged development, and transformed livelihoods (Work 2018; Work et al. 2019). The telling of imperial tides comes first, however, and importantly, as it pulls out sticky strings of stories and practices that trap particular bits of imperial debris in the ebb and flow of tides. As the author, I also trap particular bits that attach to my own strings of relevance. Strings masquerading as knowledge, knowledge required to join the ranks of privilege that expose some of empire's founding stories. The following is my contribution toward cracking those foundations to make space for transforming practices and emerging stories in the fragile imperial landscape.

Empire, I argue, is fragile. Up against the Cardamom Mountains in western Kampong Chhnang Province, the chthonic energies of the land and the weather world thwart all attempts at solidity and smoothness. The obvious power of concrete infrastructure and combustion technology is here visible in a clumsy and futile dance with the monsoon rains that wash away the roads and trap the load-bearing trucks of commerce. Also fragile are the attempts at livelihoods I will describe and the ideological holds of various systems of "religion." This invocation of a qualified religion, bracketed as if it may not be what it seems, is a signal for me to qualify and explain. My original plan was to study religion in this emerging village. This quickly expanded in response to people's concerns over forest access, tenure insecurity, Economic Land Concessions (ELC), and the promise and perils of post-conflict, post-genocide development. When I expanded my research focus—into development, the environment, and the steadily increasing flow of commodities and commerce out to this frontier—the debris of empires past and present came into view.

This debris sticks to everything. It sticks to classifications and value, how people define each other and themselves as good or successful, as Buddhist, Cham, or Cambodian. It sticks to the laws of subsistence arbitrated by nonhuman sovereigns of the land; laws that transform to accommodate extraction, as the sovereign becomes human through multiple manifestations of empire. Debris from these shifts sticks to both stories and practices. To excavate this persistent stickiness, I deploy materialist, structural, phenomenological, and ontological interpretations of my experiences and encounters. Each theoretical paradigm differently engages particular aspects of the lived experience in Sambok Dung, but blurs the theoretical and lineage categories often privileged by scholarship. In the contact zone, religion looks like politics while magic insists on the moral codes of religion. At the frontier of empire, to have enough is to be poor; human agency is tenuous and fleeting against the backdrop of the weather, and the economic line between subsistence and accumulation is articulated through acts of avarice and the state. I attend to the emergence of categories and the ways that they harden and blur, entangling the present with debris from the past. In doing this, I adopt

a particular vocabulary that needs a short introduction before I introduce myself, my methods, the place, and the process of this book.

Genocide and Imperial Grammar

The perspective I adopt decenters the modern empire of capital currently smoothing over all past systems of territorial expansion and resource extraction. It attends to the rhythms of stories separating humans from the productive planet and attaching them to human-centered sovereigns guided by divine "supernatural" power external to the palpable forces of the natural world. And it considers the lives of Cambodian villagers beyond the three years, eight months, and twenty days of Democratic Kampuchea.

I do not treat the Khmer Rouge years directly, rather I allow them presence as one of the many imperial effects that emerged in certain times and places during my stay at the edge of the forest. I suggest that genocide is not an anomaly, but is rather constitutive of imperial forms (see also Kiernan 2007). I further suggest, but will not explore in these pages, that the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge years are a point of fascination and spectacle for political and social elites. Memoirs and films created by the literate urbanite victims of egalitarian horror dominate the narrative of displacement. The stories I heard from non-elite, lightly literate villagers were both dramatic and banal, none who were alive remained unaffected, but the standard total view from the urban perspective is unrepresentative of the majority experience. "It was better then," was a refrain that I often heard. "We suffered, we died, and life was hard. But we all suffered together. Today we still suffer, but we can see many who don't. Like him; like you."

The "like him" in the above statement was directed toward the village chief, whose logging, land grabbing, and corruption were well known. The obvious moral inferiority of the "winners" riding the incoming tide of global capital was regularly and explicitly remarked upon at the juncture of land and resources. There was a boundary being crafted between those who could and would exploit and steal, and those who would not or could not. These dynamics are slowly being explored in other work (for example, Work 2018) and are visible in the stories I will tell here. It is a strange dance of desire, recognition, and resignation that propels subsistence farmers toward the abusive and nurturing structures of the current empire. The "like you" in that refrain was directed at me, the white anthropologist who came to live among them. I was often asked about my salary and life in my country, where people imagined the rule of law and the fair and equal distribution of resources. They asked if there were farmers like them. I told them about factory-farmed food, the rent and utilities that consumed my meager salary (which seemed astronomical to them), and of the size of my educational debt.

I also told them the leaders of my country appointed the Khmer Rouge to hold Cambodia's seat in the United Nations until the 1991 peace agreements, prolonging the fighting and destabilizing attempts to recover from their shared trauma of a failed revolution. Those same Western leaders now sponsor the elaborate trials to convict the leaders of the Khmer Rouge for their crimes before they die, sponsoring a flurry of national and expatriate salaries. No one in Sambok Dung was listening to, or interested in that spectacle, which began just after I began fieldwork. These words are said here in the introduction, but the following pages will not deal with the genocidal destruction of the Khmer Rouge years except as it emerged organically through my engagements with the people who lived at the edge of the forest and the frontier of empire. I attend more closely to the promise and perils of the coming imperial tide with which people were universally concerned.

Empire and Chthonic Power

The incoming tide swallows the landscape, at once obscuring, illuminating, and adding to what was already present. Things seem wholly other. When the tide recedes the landscape is littered with debris, but remains largely as it was before. Not radical transformations, only slight alterations: add some, take some, move sand.

I use this metaphor of ebbing and flowing tides to complicate the unidirectional, destination-oriented ecologies engineered by the imperial projects of development, progress, and economic intensification. I further complicate contemporary development initiatives by discussing them under the loaded and loadable rubric of empire. The empire I invoke is not a discrete object. This term is a container for the various formations of state that have ebbed and flowed over the social and physical landscape of the people in this study. It includes the incoming and outgoing tides of multiple Khmer kings toting Indic cosmologies, Brahmanic priests, and Buddhist monks. It also includes the Muslim influence passed along through traders, diaspora, wise men, and proselytizers whose sixteenth-century excursions transformed the kingly ideologies throughout maritime Southeast Asia, leaving kingship intact. The European colonial tide dismantled kingship and left behind its own particular forms of debris, as did the Khmer Rouge, and Vietnamese socialism. Each of these imperial tides flowed in and covered the landscape with particular ideological and material practices. When each tide ebbs, debris remains. It sticks to trees, rocks, rivers, and modes of production; it also sticks to ideas, chants, and systems of value.

All of these bits of imperial debris, different bits for different people and places, adhere to the current imperial tide of development and poverty reduction flowing over the lives and livelihoods of subsistence farmers at the edge of the forest. The Economic Land Concession (ELC) restricting forest access and further

destabilizing precarious lifestyles was referred to as "the Chinese company." Throughout the following chapters, I retain this moniker and present the data as I experienced it. No one I talked to in the village understood that the Chinese company was granted access to develop plantation land by the Khmer-owned Pheapimex company, an important player in forest conversion since the 1990s transition to a market economy (Work 2015). Pheapimex owns the largest ELC in Cambodia, grabbing most of western Kampong Chhnang and southeastern Pursat Provinces, stopping reluctantly at the foot of the Cardamom Mountains.

At over 300,000 hectares, this concession was at the vanguard of a massive land giveaway across Cambodia (Vrieze and Naren 2012), and the countrywide effects of ELC development were just beginning to be felt during my research. None of us in Sambok Dung in 2009 saw how this concession was connected to global flows of capital and climate mitigation initiatives, at once poetic and ironic (Hunsberger, Work, and Herre 2018; Work et al. 2019). This new data helps the reader position the elusive Chinese companies, but these elements of the empire were in formation when data was collected. This is the last the reader will see in this volume of how the Chinese companies stick to global and national flows of power and energy. This is the energy of money and machines, to clear, plant, and process commodities for the global market.

Chthonic energy powers this movement. It is the constant, but disavowed, foundational element of empire. In the following pages, I attempt to position it in its rightful place as a force that animates all things, including those currently considered inanimate. Chthonic (pronounced '*thä-nik*) is a term from ancient Greek, meaning "earth." It is associated with things underground and used particularly to refer to deities. I invoke it deliberately to describe other-than-human power, often mistakenly called supernatural and sometimes referred to as "nature." The excavations I provide here, and elsewhere (Work 2017, 2018, 2019), coupled with the scholarship and provocations of others (Blaser 2013; Guillou 2017a; Haraway 2015; Latour et al. 2018; Tannenbaum 1987; Wessing 2016) form the foundation from which I posit chthonic energies as the first and final force of the so-called anthropocene. Chthonic cosmologies, often referred to as "animism," are explicitly invoked at the creation of all ancient kingdoms in Southeast Asia. These kingdoms were grafted onto colonial projects and eventually morphed into modern nations, dragging their chthonic legitimacy along with them behind claims to human sovereignty.

Imperial formations, both ancient and modern, posit a primacy to the human animal that I only begin to explore in the following pages. Human primacy is, however, especially acute in the contemporary era in which all that is not human is rendered inert, insentient, and available for servitude to the human project. Not even ancient trees or mighty rivers are immune to conversion toward the projects of global capital. Phillippe Descola (2013) suggests a "naturalist" ontology to

describe this way of being in the world that separates humans from "nature" as uniquely culture-bearing individuals. This way of viewing the human in the world is suggestively distinct from other ideas about the world, in which, for example, humans and nonhumans have the same cultures, but physically different natures: "beer" is a delicious refreshing drink for both jaguars and humans, but jaguar "beer" looks like blood to humans (Viveiros de Castro 2004). Another way of viewing the world embeds the human animal in nonhuman networks of both physical and social interdependence, hierarchy, and experience (Sprenger 2016).

My friends in Sambok Dung walk between these worlds. For them the hunter has long been vilified in favor of the civilized and abundant life of agricultural production, where the Buddhist precept against killing can be upheld (Porée-Maspero 1962: 586–87). The sentience of the rice is not conceived in the ways it once was, but Buddhist ritual invokes its power through elaborate systems that attempt to bind and capture nature's wild fecundity. At the same time, the sentient potential of snakes, trees, and freshwater springs, as my stories reveal, continue to inform an understanding of the world where humans are not insulated, but interpolated into relationships beyond human encounters. Chthonic forces are the bedrock of rice production, land claims, and assurances for the continued health and well-being of the social and ecological community. Although the strength of the current imperial tide is loosening the connection, part of my objective is to clear away the debris and expose the connective tissue between elemental energies and other projects of social power. In the following chapters, this is an implicit theme, which, like the earth, underscores all other interventions. Now, for other introductions.

The Place

Sambok Dung is a fictional name for a village that sits at the furthest northwestern boundary of Cambodia's Kampong Chhnang Province. The main reason I chose this research site was the presence of a new Buddhist temple, a new Cham prayer house, and the collection of internal migrants who hailed from many regions in the country to become villagers together in this place. I experienced it as a place of becoming. The forest is becoming village as rice fields push into the scrubby second-growth forest; the trees are at once local resources, dynamic contributors to forest canopy, transnational commodities, and channels for chthonic power.

The village was deeply isolated on my first visit in 2006, still at the furthest fringe of empire that exploded into Cambodia when fighting with the Khmer Rouge ended in late 1999. But this place held the unfinished, half-finished, decayed, and re-emerging markers of the earliest moments of the contemporary empire. A rotting remnant of the colonial era railroad, the brick shell of a colonial era shop, and especially the re-emerging land grabs, plantations, and timber extraction evoked in me the notion of imperial tides as Sambok Dung was reconnecting to empire.

The land grabs of the Chinese company reached this area only on the gossip trail, but the specter of land loss haunted those who could not or would not grab it. Loss and gain describes a rhythm in Sambok Dung where the landscape shifts and accommodates the changing values and needs of its many inhabitants who will be introduced in the next chapter.

The promise of development infused daily life, even as the cycles of weather and soil informed its rhythms. Development also constrains and directs these rhythms: thwarting some and allowing others. The trails of subsistence that persisted during imperial weakness were slowly transforming into roads, solid only in their imminence. They hardened with bursts of capital investment, only to disperse with seasonal rains and depleted funds. Places of worship built during Cambodia's colonial and independence eras were left to rot or were destroyed through the communist transition, and today transform from thatch huts into bright concrete structures. That these exceed the capacity of local economies concerns no one, as they embedded people and places in national and transnational flows of capital, influence, and care.

Methods and Author as Actor

The frontiers I choose to explore in the following chapters implicate me deeply in the work of making history. No amount of objectivity can remove me as the construction manager of this narrative; all I can do is be transparent about my position and how I came to occupy it. I learned about Sambok Dung through connections made at a small Buddhist temple in Rochester, Minnesota. I originally entered this temple to learn Buddhist meditation techniques, which I hoped would help ease a dramatic life transition. The listing in the phonebook as the Buddhist Support Society did not prepare me for sudden immersion into the Khmer culture of post-genocide diaspora, and I did not enter with ethnography in mind. I was, however, beginning a graduate degree in anthropology, and these two pieces of a new life, Buddhist meditation and anthropology, eventually merged. Had it not been for my personal connections, I would have never landed in Sambok Dung, deep as it was in shady land deals, illicit timber trade, and a highly controversial land concession.

The home I stayed in belonged to the monk whose temple-building adventures are described in chapter 5. His older sister and her family lived there and farmed rice on 1.5 hectares of land below Phnom Ta Oh, a place introduced in chapter 1. This subject position gave me a particular kind of access to the Khmer Buddhist rice farmers in the four surrounding villages served by the temple. There was a moment when I had to decide whether to focus my research on this group of Buddhists, which my hosts desired, or to take in the scope of players that the political boundaries of the village described. Obviously, I chose the latter.

As a live-in participant in the village, I was asked to teach English to local students in their school, which had a tin roof and one wall. I agreed, and most weekdays at 4 o'clock in the afternoon the children and I practiced English conversations. This was a surprising research method, and my relationship with the children bridged prickly places where I might not have been able to tread. I taught the children of all members of society including the police chief, the soldiers running timber, the Islamic Cham, as well as the Khmer Buddhists. The kids loved me, and we had a ton of fun as they indeed learned basic English conversation. The parents were somewhat forced to love me too, and when I came by to chat in the shade and ask them a million questions, they agreed to have a chat. I conducted all interviews, informal chats, and conversations in Khmer, and traveled with the son-in-law of my host. He helped navigate the region, and in the early days of research, helped translate between my classroom Khmer and the special vocabularies of village Khmer and Cham.

I attended every event I could in the village. When NGOs came promoting whatever life improvement scheme, I attended the meeting. When new development initiatives from the national level were communicated in meetings called by the village chief and attended by most villagers, I was there. Celebrations at the Buddhist temple, weddings, celebrations at the sites of *neak ta* (nonhuman land sovereigns introduced in chapter 3), at the rice harvest, and harvest celebrations, I participated and observed. I took photos, videos, and voice recordings of people, chants, and proclamations. I often used photographs I had taken to find and interview people, which lead me into the "forest" neighborhoods and the lives of the loggers. I walked the streets, descending upon people with small gifts of sugar and tea in exchange for their time for a chat in the shade of their homes. I also accepted invitations shouted from familiar homes or shops to come and drink coffee, beer, or rice wine.

I spent one calendar year in the village, from September 2009 to 2010, and returned for short visits (ten weeks each) in 2011 and 2012. This is the data that informs this book. I have since returned many times for short visits. The data from these later visits has appeared in other publications and will be included in another manuscript, as well as in the conclusion of this piece. Conclusion is not really an inaccurate word to describe the ending of this story of ebbing and flowing. The village I entered in 2009 is not the same today. It is still becoming. There is neither finishing nor ending, only constant motion.

The Processual Content

The stories that people recounted, of constant movement, of placement and displacement, were disruptions borne of the state, including war, private ownership of land, religion, market activities, social hierarchies. But many of their movements and placements are those that go on with or without a state, such as subsistence,

travel, families, health, death, birth, and the need to engage the productive energies of the water and land. What I want to pull out through the following pages is the way that these stories "impose order" and "found space" and of what that ordered space consists, but I want also to attend to the contact zones of the stories and how they mark frontiers and establish borders "only by saying what crosses [them]" (Certeau 1984a: 119, 123, 127).

The first chapter tells of movement and details the stories people told me about who they were and how they came to be in this place. All these stories wandered through the years of displacement and changes to land tenure that accompanied the imperial grammar of the communist states. This chapter situates the reader in the built and unbuilt environments where the rest of the story takes place. It also introduces the theoretical and operational framework of the story. The second chapter attends to contemporary development initiatives through an examination of the infrastructure of roads and trails in the village, which connect villagers to each other, to their subsistence livelihoods, and to the markets and programs of the coming empire. Chapter 3 introduces the chthonic entities of the land *neak ta* (aw, *`anak tā*), and their social and physical place in the village. Chapter 4 plays with history and the diasporic stories of the Cham minority, who are currently pointing their energies toward the external funding of global Islam. Chapter 5 deals with the flexible concept of merit-making and temple-building that attaches Buddhist practice to the imperial grammars of Indic, colonial, and modern conceptions of social power, but does not fully contain them.

I do not resolve all of the tensions I set up in this piece. They do not really resolve; the material structures are only fleetingly solid. They arise, remain, and dissolve dependent on the multiple energies and events that are productive of time and space as conceived by discrete nodes of conscious existence. The effect I hope to portray is one of movement and incessant change, highlighting the discourse of life-improving development and juxtaposing it with its messy, uneven enactment, but I also want the reader to feel the surprising constancy that underlies the ebb and flow of imperial tides. In conclusion, I wrap up some of the theoretical threads woven through the disparate chapters and end the book with a new starting point to explore the ecocidal effects of development in Sambok Dung and the imperial grammar for the coming apocalypse. I maintain, however, that we dwell and subsist under the tides of empire. Both before and after, in and through the apocalypse, we dance to the rhythm of life and death.

Map 1.1. Topographical Map: Cambodia and bordering countries, sourced from the Library of Congress.