

The Mountain of Precious Stones

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Introduction

THE AIM OF THIS BOOK IS TO BRING TOGETHER SCIENTIFIC ARTICLES that I have already published in various international reviews, collective books and documents, not all of which are easily accessible either in Cambodia or in Western countries. The decision to compile them in this formal edition in English was basically taken in view of the absence of widely published documentary material accessible to those who want to know more about the Cambodian heritage of the indigenous populations. This research has not been revised so that it would reflect the confused situation currently prevailing in Ratanakiri; rather, I have resolved to leave the writings nearly unchanged, that is, as they were published between 1995 and 1998 and the raw material as it was collected in the north-eastern province between 1994 and 1996. The reader should therefore be aware that facts and figures presented and analyzed in the following chapters, to a certain extent, belong to a recent past. Many changes have taken place and a second, collective book, which is now in preparation, will be concerned with them.

I have decided in this book to remain faithful to the academic perspective initiated during my two years of fieldwork. The knowledge that emerged and is presented here reflects what can be called part of the cultural memory of the indigenous populations, specifically the Tampuan of Ratanakiri. More than ever before, other than the necessity to focus on the social changes at work, it appears indispensable to record the cultural diversity of the people of the forest whose modes of knowledge, know-how and techniques regarding nature belong to the memory of human history. This does not mean however that these ethnographic data are confined to a forgotten history and have no link with the actual changing situation. A proper understanding of the social dynamics is needed if we are to know how and under what circumstances vernacular societies may be in a position to negotiate with outsiders and numerous development actors who are interacting with them. Whatever the purposes and the objectives of the projects and implementation strategies, a prerequisite is to understand before acting.

I do not claim to provide information that is sufficient or that could be taken for granted before starting to evaluate what should or not should not be done, without having first established a partnership between development actors and local indigenous populations. The scope of my investigation remains incomplete and restricted to a few specific topics (the organization of village structure, relationships between natural and social ecosystems, cosmology and perception of land, rationalities related to slash-and-burn cultivation, historical ethnic interactions). The chosen subjects do however make sense in themselves. One has to remember that demonstrating interconnections among apparently different components of a given culture is in itself

the preliminary step of the anthropologist. A society does not function in terms of isolated factors or indicators. The purpose of social science is precisely to establish links and - whenever the case - to demonstrate their close interdependence. One example: a common trend among some agents working towards social or material changes, for what is generally called the "benefit of society", is to distinguish - sometimes arbitrarily - "good" points in the society, which are to be taken into account, and "more ambivalent" factors, which should be removed because they appear either bad or superstitious and emerge from deeply irrational ways of thinking.

In fact, in making such dichotomous statements, there is the danger that our own categories of perceiving the world are projected and transferred to "good practices" (a key concept that is over-used in the language of international developers) that are liable to be taken as a model. Misunderstandings are rampant and each ethnographer faces them. I remember, for example, that five years ago I tried to ask a question of a person who conducted ritual ceremonies in a Wayampi village, in North Amazon: Why did he use modern pharmaceutical pills, but nevertheless maintain contact with the spirit of the animal meant to provide the definitive cure? He amicably replied that he understood the point of my question because he knew that I did not chance to belong to the forest (where the real men live). But he was not in a position to give a proper response because I came with my own categories and classifications and did not yet know the extent to which the forest was a living creature. Could I understand the relation between the soul of this particular animal and man's intimate link with nature? According to him, I had already decided, probably unconsciously, what the orientation of the answer should be, what I expected. He kindly suggested that I wait a little and gain a better understanding of his world and of the functioning of nature in general, and come back with an adequate question.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first one deals with some of the multifarious interactions that a population maintains with its environment, with space and time. Kinship relations that form the basis of social, economic, political and ritual organization will not be taken up as such, but are seen in connection with the forms of socio-territorial organization on the basis of which the modes of management of the natural environment develop. Whereas American theories of anthropological ecology put forward a determinist explanation and maintain that societal and cultural phenomena are closely conditioned by the natural milieu, our hypothesis advances rather the opposite: the way in which societies organize themselves and how they think and make use of the natural environment shapes it to a large extent. Social ecosystems can in no case be simply considered as by-products of natural ecosystems. Our argument is supported by the example of the Tampuan society practicing slash-and-burn agriculture. This group, comprising nearly 15,000 people, lives for the greater part in the tropical forests of the rich plateaus between the Sesan and the Srae

Pok Rivers. They have learned through centuries of experience to master their environment by succeeding in cultivating what is necessary for their survival, while taking what they need from nature (medicinal plants, extractive activities, etc.) and recognizing the limits of what can possibly be extracted from the natural environment. Thus, numerous prohibitions of a symbolic nature impose socially a frugal mode of management of the space surrounding them. Apparently rudimentary technical knowledge, which is in reality extremely rich, also bears witness to a dexterity and know-how remarkably adapted to the environment. Moreover, it appears to be clear that the use of a technology reduced to its minimum, by way of choice and not a constraint of civilization, curbs excessive reliance on the products of nature and also contributes to the maintenance of equilibrium between social and natural ecosystems.

The second chapter examines the social representation pertaining to nature and its related cosmology as constructed by the Tampuan and other indigenous groups. Connected from an early date with their territory, the indigenous peoples have come to know their natural environment and its resources and can assess periods appropriate for, and the limits of, their exploitation. Although rice is a nutritive plant par excellence, the forest and cleared areas provide many other food products, as well as those for medicinal, domestic and other uses. It appears, however, that modes of management of forest space are not exclusively governed by utilitarian reasoning, that is, only by the necessity of human adaptation to a restricting environment: the techniques in the exploitation of nature are inseparable from their forms of representation. Thus, the manner in which native populations use their environment is directly dependent on the ideas they have regarding themselves, their physical environment and their intervention in the latter. An approach that brings into relief the association of the characteristics of social and spatial organization, of religion, the level of technical development and of cultural practices, enables one to better define the categories particular to the actors and, in the second place, to determine if a distinctive type of traditional management of space is reconcilable with the imperatives of economic development and with the necessity to protect the ecosystem of the forest.

The third chapter focuses on health issues in conjunction with social organization. Only a very few NGOs are involved in the region (until 1994) and the Cambodian government faces a number of complications in providing proper health and social infrastructures. The health situation is one of the poorest in Cambodia: malaria (*vivax* and *falciparum*), typhoid fever, Japanese encephalitis, pneumonia and leprosy are the most dreadful endemic diseases in the tribal villages. The infant mortality rate, even if not exactly available, is desperately high and the health delivery system is restricted to the provincial hospital in the capital and to small dispensaries located in the eight districts and run by under-equipped paramedical staff who suffer from a permanent shortage of drugs. The dispersion of the hamlets and the inadequacy of

mobile health workers also prevent the improvement of the general living conditions. The indigenous population scattered in the semi-deciduous forest in groups of twenty to sixty nuclear families has developed an intimate relation with the environment. Women play a major role in the various activities connected with itinerant agriculture and with the gathering of forest products. They are more precocious and harder workers than men (who mostly hunt, fish and undertake the difficult physical activities), in the sense that they are responsible for the maintenance and supervision of work in the fields and go regularly in the forest to gather various products. They collect firewood and water, take care of the animals living in the village (pigs, hens, buffaloes and dogs) and have to cope with all the traditional domestic duties. The living conditions of women entail exposure to a large number of diseases. In the most remote areas, goitre is endemic and a low nutritional status is rampant, although there would be no regular food scarcity in the communities. Pregnant women have no opportunity to slacken their daily activities, they are bound to start to work as usual just after delivery and, in case of any health problems, men will hardly stand in for them and perform female activities. An understanding of gender and environmental relations is therefore an important issue in the promotion of social changes and in improving the health and awareness of the women belonging to the different Austronesian and Austro-Asiatic ethnic groups in Ratanakiri.

The fourth chapter provides more details on the intimate relation between the Tampuan and their natural environment, when confronted with external development issues. The traditional modes of spatial management, the techniques of making use of nature and the means implemented to procure forest products are the reflection of a particular cultural outlook and perception of the native groups. A detailed observation of the daily practices demonstrates the importance of socio-cultural factors in the management of the environment on the basis of a few specific examples: the practice of slash-and-burn agriculture and the strictly codified use of the forest. It cannot be denied that the "know-how", empirical knowledge, plant taxonomies and the use of the natural environment are closely linked with magico-religious conceptions, with belief in ancestors and in numerous spirits of the forest. However, these social representations are not static and can be open to modification, change and adaptation through a dynamics inherent in the society, as well as through extraneous dynamics, in this case imposed by the government and, recently, by international agencies. Sensitive questions emerge in this context. One might ask how the different social logics of those who promote a so-called development and the local populations are to be reconciled. More precisely, how can one recognize and respect the values of a society that until now has been able to maintain a certain equilibrium with its surrounding environment, and at the same time carry through imperatives of socio-eco-

nomie development supposed to "improve the lot" of the people of the forest? Finally, a community development project managed by an international NGO will illustrate the hazards and the mixed results of a development operation that, while demonstrating good intentions, did not understand or evaluate the viability of indigenous conceptions.

The fifth part concentrates on interactions between the Khmer and indigenous people. Contrary to the generally accepted idea, relations between the Khmer and the native groups from Ratanakiri have a long history. Recent events during the past twenty-five years have changed regional features and accelerated the process of social change. The period of insecurity, in which international armed conflict, guerrillas, the advent of the Khmer Rouge and very diverse political systems followed one after the other, inevitably disrupted and challenged a number of traditional points of reference. There is no doubt that the memory of the forest people remains deeply scarred, as does that of Cambodia as a whole. However, the cultural content of an ethnic group can nevertheless change without weakening its identity. It should be noted that, in 1995, the persistence of social structures and mechanisms of solidarity such as existed twenty years ago, despite the trauma of the past, contributed new values, such as adhesion to Khmer lifestyles and the introduction of a monetary economy. Each group integrates new elements and asserts its new identity through its relations to other human groups; it redefines its socio-cultural boundaries by mechanisms of exclusion (reference to clan or lineage, delimitation of territory) and inclusion (mixed marriages, generalization of forms of sociability between the ethnic groups of the province) with the surrounding populations, and eventually reinforces a number of its particularities employed as cultural markers (consumption of rice beer, dream interpretation, ceremonies for ancestors, slash-and-burn agriculture). Not to take account of this capacity of innovation and symbolic manipulation of cultural referents is to disregard the dynamic and creative dimension of the forest societies, which are well and truly societies in the process of constant renewal. It is, moreover - in 1994 - inadequate to evoke the loss of identity and the acculturation of the indigenous populations of the north-eastern part of Cambodia. These populations indeed exist in the flesh and, despite overlapping with the Khmer culture, they are able to preserve a specificity which is continually renewed.

The sixth chapter introduces us to the concepts of roots and destiny as they are understood by the native people, mainly through primary (mythologies) and secondary sources. For a long time disregarded by the Khmer and almost ignored by scientists, the indigenous societies of north-east Cambodia have a long history, certain features of which, real or symbolic, have survived thanks to a prodigious oral literature involving epics, legends, factual accounts, genealogical narratives and diverse myths. However, one cannot assimilate the life the people of the forest with a mere substitute

of the past. The rare written testimonies that have come down over the centuries tend to indicate that these representations enriched knowledge through extraneous contributions (from Laotians, Khmer, Chinese), and broadened their geographic and socio-cultural horizons, either through commercial exchanges or by political and ritual alliances, following the example of the relations established between the *Sadets* of the *Jorai* ethnic group and the Khmer kings. There was at the same time the concern to maintain a socio-political autonomy characteristic of stateless societies. Recent history has supported the extraordinary capacity of the ethnic groups to overcome the trauma of the 1970s, to recover a way of life the Khmer Rouge attempted in vain to eradicate, and more recently to adapt a number of their traditions in the context of an intensification of inter-cultural relations. Recent geo-political considerations and the priority accorded to economic development are in the process of modifying socio-cultural phenomena in Ratanakiri.

The seventh chapter introduces us to a more systemic ethno-historical overview of the indigenous population. Very few sources, other than a small number of scattered accounts by explorers and colonial administrators, provide information about the indigenous groups of the high plateaus and the Cambodian mountains. These ethnic groups have, however, played an important role in the foundation and development of the Kingdom of Cambodia, from their participation in the building of Angkor, their alliance and engagement in internal wars, to ritual and symbolic relations maintained for several centuries between the royal power and the three *Sadets* of the *Jorai* ethnic group. Long perceived as unsociable types with belligerent morals, the Khmers and the Laotians have nevertheless maintained lasting relations of barter and exchange with the indigenous peoples. However, not only marketable commodities were exchanged by way of these contacts; one also exchanged ideas, knowledge and techniques, even though the latter would have seemed rudimentary in the case of the Khmers. Moreover, numerous myths and legends were (and continue to be) circulated among inhabitants of the plains and of the forest, and have fostered more or less consciously a social representation that one group advances respective of the others.

The last chapter attempts to foresee some unpredictable challenges. The indigenous people have now to face a number of unprecedented changes. These transformations take form in the increasing influence of the market economy, the rapid exploitation of the uplands for commercial purposes and government policies that implicitly support these changes and encourage the « Khmerization » of the highlanders by shifting their villages nearer roads, making them practice settled agriculture and trying to integrate them into the modern cash economy. These changes pose severe problems for the future subsistence, security and autonomy of the local communities. If we add the exponential increase of migrants, who take advantage of the lack of strict regulations regarding land access and who do not hesitate to unscrupulously acquire the

forest traditionally used by the highlanders, we can presume that many aspects of indigenous culture, knowledge and wealth are seriously threatened if nothing is done *very quickly* to protect the rights of these people. The most drastic change through the expropriation of forest lands by private commercial interests has already started. Not only will some of the most wonderful primary and secondary forests be destroyed by logging, but the inter-ethnic relations between Khmers and highlanders will be strongly distorted. Different measures have to be implemented to protect the elementary rights of the local people. First of all, they need *citizenship recognition with a special status, acknowledging them as an indigenous population of the land they have historically occupied*, stipulating a particular collective relationship with their environment.

Phnom Penh, 4th December 2006

