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Identities and Space

The Geographies of Religious Change amongst the Brao in Northeastern Cambodia

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Abstract. – Protestant evangelical Christian proselytizing has increased considerably in northeastern Cambodia over the last decade, and many ethnic minorities have recently converted to Christianity. This process is having important social and spatial implications, including influencing the ways that people define "sacred spaces." This article considers the Protestant evangelical Christian religious transformation occurring amongst formerly Animist ethnic Brao people, and the spatial implications of these changes, including the struggle over "places." The marking out of social spaces to accommodate particular identities is undoubtedly an important part of the interactions that are presently taking place between Animist and Christian Brao. *[Cambodia, religion, Animism, Christianity, religious sites, spatial change]*

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Introduction

It is now widely recognized that identities are multiple, flexible, and constantly changing, and that shifts in identities have important spatial implications. Social scientists, including human geographers and anthropologists, have developed an extensive and diverse literature on the "geographies of religion" (see Kong 2001 for a review), even if the field is often neglected and misunderstood.

Lily Kong (2001) points out that "geographies of religion" are frequently conflated with race, thus reducing the degree of attention they receive. This is despite the contributions that the subdiscipline has made to better understanding how the social construction of the "sacred" is linked with places – spaces with particular meanings to certain people. For geographers, it is often the dialectical relationship between communities and places that are critical. Kong usefully reminds us that like class and race, religion is frequently imbedded in historical and place-specific contexts and should thus only be taken as a priori theory, in which specific inquiries are made at different locations and at various scales.

Bowman (1993) deals with the multiplicity of attachments to places, and emphasizes that a single religious site or place can have multiple meanings of varying significance for different people, an idea which is line with the theory of place-making more generally (Duncan 2000). Grapard (1998) agrees, and adds that the contested nature of religious spaces cannot be separated from broader social, economic, and political conditions. Instead, struggles for religious spaces often symbolize these struggles and power relations. These tussles are frequently complex and incomplete, resulting in hybridization processes that mix and fuse religious identities, and transgress previous social and spatial boundaries.

Sacred space is often a focal point in geographies of religion. Chidester and Linenthal (1995), and Gregory (2004), have usefully illustrated that sacred space is frequently contested space. These authors, and others, have demonstrated the importance of considering the role of power and identity politics in the struggle for social spaces constituted through religion.

"Ritualization" is an important part of sacred place-making processes, and Chidester and Linenthal (1995: 9) argue that sacred places are ritual places, spaces where "formalized, repeatable symbolic performances" occur. They emphasize the role of the human body and actions in the ritual production of sacred space. Ritualization is clearly crucial for the construction and maintenance of the boundaries that constitute religious identities and associated places (Vertovec 1992), but it can take many forms, and generalizing about what constitutes "rituals" can be dangerous.

Christian proselytizing is increasing in northeastern Cambodia, thus making the issue quite relevant in Brao areas. There are probably over 200 Protestant Christian Brao people in Ratanakiri Province,[1] where there were none at the beginning of the 1990s.[2] Yet despite achieving some successes in converting highlanders – albeit only about one percent of the Brao population in northeastern Cambodia – a promissionary survey of Ratanakiri Province stated in 2005 that, "Ratanakiri province is extremely hostile toward Christianity and missionaries." In 2006, a representative of a nondenominational Protestant evangelical Christian Church in the USA similarly reported that, "Cambodia is not real [sic] receptive to missionaries … They are trying very hard to keep Christianity out; not making it illegal, but making it hard on people who are working there." Indicative of the tensions, at least some Christians in Ratanakiri are resisting attempts to become registered as "Christians" with the police and the provincial Department of Religious Affairs, fearing that such information could be used against them in the future.

While the extent of the pressure put on Christians is varied, the Cambodian government has been critical of the Christian conversions that have occurred in the province. In early 2005, the National Police Chief, Hok Lun Dy, visited Ratanakiri Province and made a strong public statement that the government wanted to keep Ratanakiri from becoming Christian.

The increasing concern within the government about the Christian situation in northeastern Cambodia is undoubtedly related to what has been happening in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, where highlanders have vigorously although nonviolently protested against land alienation and the oppression of their rights to worship a particular variety of Protestant evangelical[3] Christianity called "Dega"[4] (*Human Rights Watch* 2002; Salemink 2003).

Many Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) observers are not fundamentally against highlanders voluntarily becoming Christians, but are concerned that intra-community conflict has the potential to occur when part of a community becomes Christian. For example, the Jarai village of Lom split into two when part of the population converted to Christianity a number of years ago, thus decreasing community solidarity. This issue is important, as it is generally more difficult for Christian Brao and Animist Brao to work together to solve common problems, although good cooperation between those who believe in different religions is certainly not impossible. It may, however, require more effort.

Here, I specifically look at some of the spatial implications of Protestant evangelical Christian conversions of ethnic Brao people formerly with Animist belief systems (called *sangkhom labop* or "the system society" in Brao). My goal is to illustrate how the particular circumstances of Brao religious change are having important spatial implications.

1 This number is uncertain, and because of security concerns, Christian missionaries in Ratanakiri are not willing to provide statistics for the number of Christians in the province. In fact, they do not even want to provide information about the locations of "church houses" in the province, for fear that the information might be used against the Christians by the Cambodia government.

2 Overall, there were very few Christians in Ratanakiri in the early 1990s. Although the number of Protestant converts was initially low in the 1990s, in early 2005 a long-time expatriate Christian living in Ratanakiri reported that the number of people professing to be Protestants grew from 800 in 2004 to 1,500 just a year later. Most of this expansion is believed to have been with the Jarai in O Yadao District, who are mainly being converted by Jarai people from Vietnam.

3 A Christian missionary I met defined "evangelical" as "people who feel a responsibility to share the truth about God."

4 The Vietnamese government often associates Dega with the former Highland autonomous movement in the Central Highlands called FULRO (Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées), and antigovernment elements in the USA (Salemink 2003).

The Brao

The Brao are a Mon-Khmer language-speaking "ethnic group"[5] that self-divides into a number of different subgroups and encompasses a population of approximately 60,000 people in the southern Lao provinces of Champasak and Attapeu and the northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri and Stung Treng, Cambodia. There is a single Brao village located in the Central Highlands of Vietnam (Baird 2008).

Most Brao historically resided in upland forested landscapes, where they practiced swidden agriculture as their main source of livelihood. While some continue to live in the uplands, many, in both Laos and Cambodia, have been variously manipulated, coerced, or forced to resettle to the lowlands and adopt wet rice cultivation (Baird and Shoemaker 2007; Baird 2008).

Until the very end of the twentieth century, virtually all Brao people, whether in southern Laos or northeastern Cambodia, could be defined as "Animist,"[6] meaning that their primary cosmological orientations were centered on various kinds of spirits, including those residing in forests, rivers, animals, large trees, and rocks and other natural landscapes, and also those associated with ancestors and houses. These spirits require periodic appeasing to prevent bad fortune or illness from inflicting an individual, family, or village, depending on the circumstances. While sacrifices are outwardly done for spirits, and are frequently criticized by outsiders for being "wasteful" (see Salemink 2003), the reality is that only a small portion of the meat of the domestic animals sacrificed is not consumed by people involved in the ritual.

The Changing Religious Landscape

During the French colonial period a Catholic Mission was established at Kon Tum, in the present-day Central Highlands of Vietnam, but there is no evidence that this mission had a significant or direct influence on the Brao, and there were never any missions established in Brao areas. Some attempts by a Catholic Khmer missionary to convert highlanders in Ratanakiri Province did occur in the 1960s, but because of the Second Indochina War, the Church was forced to abandon their efforts before many people were converted (Jacqueline Matras-Guin, pers. comm. 2005).

In Cambodia, Protestant evangelical Christian proselytizing has become an important determinant of the human landscape, especially since Cambodia adopted a new constitution in the early 1990s that allowed for religious freedoms, and thus opened the door for foreign religious missionaries to freely proselytize.

This growth has included an increasingly active and well-organized foreign-funded Protestant evangelical Christian missionary presence in northeastern Cambodia. The Non-Denominational Churches,[7] the Foursquare Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Korean Presbyterian Church, the Baptist Missionary Association of the Philippines (BMAP), the Love Church of Ratanakiri, and the Kampuchea Evangelical Church (KEC) all have bases in Ratanakiri. Some of these groups have foreign missionaries based in Ratanakiri (e.g., non-denominational, beginning in 1994), something that was not possible in the 1970s and 1980s due to political limitations and civil war. Others support local proselytizing efforts by providing various kinds of financial and nonfinancial support to those who convert (i.e., Foursquare, see below).

For the Non-Denominational Churches, when small groups of people convert, they often organize around "house churches," which are regular houses that are not registered as churches but which are informally used for religious purposes. Christian rituals help constitute these spaces with meaning, thus making them "Christian sacred places," even if they only serve that purpose on certain days and at particular times. These spaces are ritually made "not-Animist," due to the exclusivity of the Christian beliefs being promoted. They are seen as special spaces not dominated by the state (even if they are sometimes partially constituted in response to it) – spaces where people can pray and study privately. They are spaces where highlanders can regain agency in the face of increasingly losing political and economic power, including much of their land, to ethnic Khmer people (see *NGO Forum on Cambodia* 2006).

Christian symbols are important for establishing "Christian" spaces. For example, Christian

5 Here, however, I refer to them as "highlanders," following common discourses in Laos and Cambodia.

6 I argue that Animist should be capitalized, since it is a legitimate belief system, just like other world religions (see Baird 2008).

7 The Non-Denominational Churches are considered to be "independent" Protestant evangelical Churches that are relatively fundamentalist and strict in their beliefs. This is the main group of Churches that foreign missionaries in Ratanakiri are supporting, and was the first group of Protestant evangelical Churches established amongst the Brao of Cambodia.

crosses and pictures of Jesus become visible inside houses. Crosses sometimes adorn gates in front of churches, thus establishing the nature of the Christian space for all to see. These Christian symbols replace the religious symbols typically seen on the ceilings of Animist Brao houses, or ritual poles in people's yards that mark where buffalo sacrifices previously occurred. This spatial (re)organization of house spaces is important, as identities are frequently closely associated with house organization (see, for example, Bourdieu 1979).

The vast majority of the Brao Christians in Ratanakiri Province are associated with the Non-Denominational Churches and the Foursquare Church. So far Brao Christians have not converted en masse. Instead, Christians have largely emerged as individuals, families, or in small groups in various villages over time. While some have returned to being Animists after trying out Christianity, others have remained faithful to Christianity for many years. Yet Brao Christians are not in the majority in any villages in northeastern Cambodia. Many of the converts are younger people and proselytizing activities appear to be focused on converting this easily influenced group, which is looking for something new in the face of the wide divide between the lives of their parents and the modern world to which they are increasingly being exposed. Easily impressionable and vulnerable groups – like the desperately poor and sick, many of whom are eager for any help they can receive – are another important target group.

Why Are Brao People Converting to Christianity?

Various factors are encouraging some Brao to convert to Christianity, even if there has been considerable resistance against Christianity by many Brao.

A number of authors have written about Protestant religious conversion in Southeast Asia.[8] Nicholas Tapp (1989), for example, found that some ethnic Hmong people in mainland Southeast Asia adopted Christianity in order to gain membership in a powerful and prestigious "World Religion" (following Weber 1922), which many see as preferable to what has been called "primitive Animism." For them, becoming Christian symbolized modernization (see, also, Keyes 1996), and this is probably an important factor for some Brao converts, even if materialism and modernization are not being explicitly promoted by at least the non-denominational Christian missionaries.

Apart from material benefits, Tapp (1989) points out that some Hmong converts are attracted by the fact that prayers have been translated into native languages, since gaining a written language helps put them at a more equal level with lowlanders socially. This, too, is a factor for highlander conversions in Ratanakiri Province, and is one of the reasons why missionaries working in Ratanakiri are emphasizing the translation of parts of the Bible into indigenous languages (*OMF* [*Overseas Missionary Federation*] 2005). I have heard Brao people tell stories about previously having a language before a dog ate the buffalo skin that it was written on. This story indicates that not having a written language is a source of concern or even embarrassment for many Brao, who see the situation as belittling.

The non-denominational groups do not emphasize financial or material benefits, as they do not want people to convert for material reasons, or for Churches to become overly dependent on foreign support. For them, sustainability is a concern.

There is evidence that highlanders often prefer not to convert to religions to which dominant ethnic groups belong. Instead, they frequently adopt religions different from those in power. Salemink (1997, 2003) and Keyes (1996) have written about the ways that ethnic boundaries are sometimes redrawn by highlanders, who have converted to Christianity, including how they apply religion in order to divide along ethnic and political lines. In these cases, losing parts of one's cultural heritage is apparently accepted in exchange for gaining other advantages. This is an important factor in northeastern Cambodia too. It is not just about highlanders adopting a "Western" religion; it is about them trying to constitute an ethnic boundary, one that separates them from those who have dominated them. In this way, conversion can create a certain degree of discursive autonomy, or "free" or "private" space. Salemink (2003) sees conversion as a way for the highlanders of Central Highlands of Vietnam to regain a certain agency in the face of not achieving political autonomy, thus creating new Christian spaces rather than agreeing to become assimilated into the dominant Kinh community. This rings true for the Brao in northeastern Cambodia as well.

Writing about Protestant conversion in Thailand and Indonesia, Keyes (1996) believes that many highlanders convert because they feel that localized Animist practices do not fit with a modern and globalized world. This is undoubtedly part of the

8 Platz (2003); Salemink (1997, 2003); Aragon (1996); Zehner (1996); Keyes (1996); Hayami (1996); Elkins (1994).

reasoning of some younger Brao people as well. Salemink (1997) makes a similar argument for the Central Highlands of Vietnam. He sees conversion as an attempt by highlanders to move away from a religion frequently associated by lowlanders with "backwardness" and "superstition."

Darrow Miller, in his book "Discipling the Nations" (1998), linked the conversion of people to Christianity with achieving modernization and development. His argument can be described as a modern evangelical version of Max Weber's "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1985 [1930]), in which the advanced state of development of the Western world was compared to other parts of the world, and advances in the West were attributed to the industriousness and capitalist tendencies that were linked with the adoption of the Protestant faith. Miller claims that development cannot be achieved unless people adopt Christianity.

Salemink (1997) and Tapp (1989) mention another important motivating factor in converting highlanders to Christianity, one that is also relevant among the Brao of Cambodia. People perceive that converting to Christianity can save families significant amounts of resources since animal sacrifices, which can be quite expensive, are no longer necessary once one becomes a Christian. This argument is commonly evoked to convince people to convert to Christianity in northeastern Cambodia, and an ethnic Tampuan friend in Ratanakiri told me that this is the main reason she converted to Christianity. However, amongst the Brao I have heard counter discourses. Some argue that highlanders have no money to buy medicines, but that they do not need cash to sacrifice their own chicken, pig, or buffalo, thus making Animist rituals more appropriate for "poor" people. They sometimes mention that people spend millions of riel at the doctor but are still not cured, whereas sacrificing a single chicken can sometimes do the trick.[9] Since sacred spaces are often linked with illnesses by the Brao, health is an important issue for which struggles based on religion are common.

Roman Catholics tend to be more tolerant to "traditional practices," such as smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol, compared to Protestant forms of Christianity (Tapp 1989). This is certainly the case in northeastern Cambodia. For the Brao, not being able to smoke or drink alcohol, as recommended by the Protestant evangelical Christians, are probably the main reasons why converts revert to being Animist.[10] Few Brao are even aware that much more moderate varieties of Christianity exist than they have been exposed to.

One difference between Protestant evangelical Christianity and Theravada Buddhism is that the former demands that adherents honor no other spirits or gods, whereas Buddhism is generally more tolerant and flexible in terms of adherents participating in Animist rituals.

Protestants are generally concerned about not straying from a rather strict rendition of the Gospel, and a foreign missionary working in Ratanakiri told me that one of his main roles is to ensure that new Christians follow "the right path," which seems to at least partially mean working to try to prevent hybridization of belief systems or "contextualization," something that is more common with the Catholics. Protestant missionaries feel that it is important to have "doctrinally-sound Christian literature" available for highland groups.

In Ratanakiri, one missionary told me that he believes that converting people to Christianity will ultimately lead to the protection of "Brao culture." This might seem surprising to some, considering that religious conversion is about changing somebody's belief systems, which is certainly fundamentally linked with one's culture. However, missionaries appear to believe that losing some aspects of their culture could make it possible for them to protect other aspects, even if what remains is a "culture" that no longer has its core non-Christian beliefs associated with it.[11]

Christianity and Messianic Movements

In June 2004, a movement briefly arose amongst the Brao of Ratanakiri Province that indicates that links between messianic movements and Christianity sometimes exist. The "Jarai king" movement,[12] as it came to be known, was apparently most ac-

9 In fact, most minorities are willing to use modern medicines as well as follow traditional practices to cure illnesses.

10 The Christians in Ratanakiri do not strictly prohibit alcohol, although they do strongly recommend against consuming it. Christians are allowed to drink jar beer if the jar has not been anointed as part of an Animist ritual. Alcohol and meat that has been part of a ritual is not supposed to be consumed. The idea is that the Christian "God" is the only one who deserves the respect of the people, and so meat that comes from sacrifices honouring others should not take place.

11 When Protestant evangelical Christianity first came to Ratanakiri Province, Brao converts associated playing musical gongs as being related to Animism, and thus abandoned gong playing. However, in 2004 Brao Kreung Non-Denominational Christians in Ratanakiri began playing gongs again, adapting the music to their new Christian faith.

12 It is also considered by some to be a "pan-Jarai" movement.

tive in Taveng Leu and Taveng Kroam Communes in Taveng District; Cha Ung and O Chum Communes in O Chum District; and Labang Commune in Lom Phat District, all of which are dominated by the Brao. The movement had something to do with the rising-up of a Jarai king who would lead the highlanders to an autonomous future, but not necessarily secession from Cambodia. Brao Christians in the district center of Taveng and in Dun Village, Taveng District, initially became involved via a Brao Christian who could speak Jarai and had been assisting Jarai refugees[13] fleeing persecution in Vietnam. The movement continued until August 2004, when it was snuffed-out by the government, which threatened to use force to stop it if other means were not successful. The people succumbed. Amongst the Brao and Kreung in Ratanakiri, apparently 500–1,000 people joined at its peak. The organization of the movement involved taking photos of highlanders, much like one would if joining a political party in Cambodia.

The original Cambodian highlander proponents of the story that a Jarai king would come to free them from oppression fled to the forests when the government cracked down, but returned three or four months later, after an amnesty agreement was arranged.

Christian Conversion and Conflict

> Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (The Holy Bible, 1995, Luke 12:51–53).
>
> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (The Holy Bible, 1995, Mathew 28:19).
>
> Whether missionaries are inclined to admit it or not, they are professional agents of culture change, for there is no other way of establishing, consolidating, and perpetuating the Church in a society than through its culture. Since missionaries are by their vocation uncompromising agents of culture change, the study of missionary techniques cannot be divorced from the study of culture (Luzbetak 1963: 6).

Brao responses to Christianity have varied and are dynamic. Some are creating "Christian spaces," others are consciously designating "non-Christian spaces." There are discourses associated with different sides of the debate.

I have frequently heard the Brao criticize Christians for "burying their dead like dogs" because they allegedly do not cry when their dead die. That is, it is said, that Christians are told to not cry when someone dies, since dead Christians go to heaven. Although missionaries in Ratanakiri insist that crying at funerals is not discouraged, this story is frequently evoked by Animist Brao. Similarly, Khmer Buddhists have become upset about stories of full-body baptisms where Buddhist images are buried at the edge of the stream. Once the person baptized emerges from the water, he or she is said to be encouraged to stomp on top of the spot where the Buddhist images are buried, to symbolize their conversion from Buddhism to Protestant Christianity. Foreign missionaries in Ratanakiri claim that there is no truth to the story.[14] Exaggerating situations, or even fabricating them, are ways that non-Christians are resisting Christian proselytizing efforts and the expansion of the Church. These discourses appear to be variants of what James Scott writes about in "Weapons of the Weak" (1985). People are not happy with what is happening, but feel relatively powerless to do much about it. Therefore, making Christianity look bad is a way in which they can safely defend their belief systems, and regain some agency.

The Protestant evangelical Christian agenda for changing the belief systems of the Brao and others, even when not misrepresented, has been described by some as "aggressive." A Protestant evangelical Christian group posted the following provocative statement on their website:

> The Brao are a war-torn people who need emotional healing and spiritual hope. There are presently three missions agencies working among them; however, few of the Brao have accepted Christ. Additional laborers, evangelistic tools, and increased prayer efforts are needed to effectively reach them with the Good News (*Bethany World Prayer Center* 1999).

In one case in Taveng District, Ratanakiri Province, an old Brao man told me that his son was dead. I asked how he died. The man responded that his son was not actually physically dead, but that he might as well be, as he had become a Christian and was no longer willing to participate in family or village Animist rituals. When a sacrifice is prepared,

13 These Christians in Vietnam were apparently associated with the "Dega" movement there.

14 However, these types of actions have previously been recorded elsewhere in the world (Lewis 1988; Hvalkof and Aaby 1981).

his son simply left the Animist space where the event was occurring. He tried to physically remove himself so as to stay within spaces that he deemed compatible with his new Christian faith. His father was clearly upset, angry that his son had been converted in the district center after going there to study at school. Many young people are converted when they go to study in the district center, and as a result some Brao do not want to send their children there to study.

Even those sympathetic to Christianity in Ratanakiri acknowledge that social upheaval is sometimes associated with conversion to Protestant evangelical forms of Christianity. One foreign staff of the Christian NGO International Cooperation in Cambodia (ICC)[15] highly recommended, in an interview he did in Ratanakiri, that missionaries should come for the long-term to do mission work because some short-term work had caused "quite a lot of division and damage to local villages" (*OMF* 2005).

Christian missionaries in Ratanakiri claim that their main role is to support already converted Christians, rather than to convert new ones. They say that the highlanders of the province are the main messengers of the Gospel to new converts. With highlander-to-highlander transmission prevalent, some missionaries even feel frustrated with their personal inability to convert large numbers of people.

One American missionary with the Overseas Mission ary Federation, who is involved with "indigenous village churches" and "house church planting," told me that efforts to convert the Brao to Christianity are very much like development work. He suggested that there is very little difference between him attempting to convert someone to Christianity and a development worker trying to change the attitudes of indigenous people towards, for example, gender issues. Indeed, he is fundamentally correct. While some development people work in participatory ways to promote ideas that at least partially originate with villagers, both missionaries and "fundamentalist" development workers push particular agendas based on the assumption that certain types of social change are desirable, regardless of what locals think. Just as the development worker is sincere about bettering the lot of women by changing gender relations, the Christian missionary is convinced that converting people to Christianity is for the best. Of course, both are assumptive, as developers and missionaries believe that the way they understand things is necessarily right. Both may be incorrect. Missionaries interpret Animist spirits to be "demons" or "the devil," and envision the people as eternally suffering.

This reasoning for converting people is interesting, especially when juxtaposed with development activities, but it does not, in my view, justify attempting to convert people to a different religion, although it does stand as a strong critique against certain types of development.

It is noteworthy that missionary discourses are generally not encouraging Animists to abandon their beliefs, as those who believe in spirits are generally more open to Christian proselytizing than those who have abandoned Animist beliefs. Illustrative of this, one missionary told me that he advised people not to give up their Animism in favor of becoming a secular highlander. Essentially, if one believes in devils, it is easier to convince them to believe in a "God."

An American Christian missionary told me that he did not want conversion to Christianity to cause conflict, but he acknowledged that in the Bible Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."[16] For him, some suffering is apparently justified to achieve what he believes to be a better future. I asked another missionary about the sometimes divisive nature of Christian conversion. She quoted the Bible, which says, "Come out from among them and be separate."

Religious Conversion and Spatial Change

In northeastern Cambodia, changing sacred space is an important part of converting the Brao to Christianity. This is not a new idea. The father of structural anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss showed long ago how Christian missionaries in Latin America consciously provoked changes in village territorial organization as part of their strategy to open communities up to evangelization and modernization processes (cited by Bourdier 2006). Gordillo (2004) has similarly, but more recently, shown this to have been the case in the Chaco region of Argentina. Bourdier (2006) suspected that missionaries were adopting a similar strategy in Ratanakiri in the mid-1990s, and he claimed that the adoption of Christianity by some Kreung Brao was leading

15 ICC includes World Concern as one of its members. World Concern no longer operates independently in Cambodia.

16 *The Holy Bible* (1995: Mathew 10:34). To be clear, the missionary was being metaphorical, and was in no sense advocating violence.

to the loss of social systems that protect nature. In other words, the sacred spaces in nature that were once sacred to Animists are now profane to Christians. Religious conversion is also bound to affect peoples' value systems, which are inevitably intertwined with peoples' relationships and the natural world.

The sacred places of the Animist Brao are often found in nature. For example, the Haling-Halang Mountains along the Laos-Cambodia border are sacred to the Brao Kavet, and it is taboo (*da-ah* in Brao) to cut trees or hunt on the mountain. They must perform an Animist ritual to be able to take a small number of pieces of thin bamboo for making into straws for drinking jar beer. For Christians the sacred landscapes change, with old sacred places, like the Haling-Halang Mountains, losing significance to varying degrees. New sacred places become prominent, but for the Christians in northeastern Cambodia these places have apparently so far not included forests. Christianity generally puts less emphasis on "sacred nature" compared to Animism, although there are exceptions. Newly converted Kavet Christians in Kok Lak Commune, Veun Say District, claimed that their new faith would be advantageous in protecting nature, but Animist Kavet from Kok Lak told me that they have now lost faith in the claims of those Christians, as some have recently been caught engaging in damaging practices, such as electricity fishing. In Taveng District, the head of the house church became involved in legal logging, and generally in Ratanakiri, both non-Christians and Christians are involved in land selling.

In Laos some highlanders that were converted to Catholicism during the French colonial period organize their villages in circular patterns like the Brao. However, Animist communal houses are not located in the centers of the circles. Instead, the Christian church is located in the center of the village, thus taking over the ritually sacred and powerful space at the center of the village.[17] This is a good example of Catholics superimposing Christian sacred spaces on Animist spaces, and is common worldwide.

Spatial division is frequently associated with religious change. In the Brao Kreung village, Dun,[18] in Taveng District, for example, a large number of families have converted to Christianity (Non-Denomination Church), and the Christians have tended to gravitate to one side of the village, while the Animists have located their houses on the other. The social control of religious space appears to be an important factor in this (re)organization of house/village space.

Sacred space can become contested when some convert to Christianity. The Brao Kreung village of Kroala in O Chum District, Ratanakiri Province, is a good example. The Brao historically organized their villages with houses located in concentric circles (Baird 2008; Matras-Troubetzkoy 1983), and while many Brao now live in "long" or linear villages, Kroala has retained its circular shape. Their communal house is located in the center, the powerful epicenter of the village. The people from Kroala frequently sacrifice domestic animals: buffaloes, cows, pigs, and chickens. When communal village sacrifices occur, it is socially important for all families in the village to participate, and the symbolism of everyone in the housing circle being involved is culturally significant. Therefore, it was upsetting for many in the community when a small number of families decided to become Christians, as the converts no longer wanted to participate in village sacrifices, which they have been taught are fundamentally opposed to their new beliefs.

The type of Christianity being preached in Ratanakiri is indeed a strict and fundamentalist variety,[19] which increases the potential for conflict due to it being relatively less flexible than other varieties of Christianity. That is why those who become Christians are taught that it would be disrespectful to their God if they participated in village Animist ceremonies, be it at the family or village levels. Consuming rice jar beer that has been anointed as part of a sacrifice ritual is similarly off limits, as is meat from sacrifices. There is very little social space for valuing other religions, as is the case for most Buddhists[20] or even Catholics.[21] As a result, social conflicts frequently arise, especially when younger people convert and then refuse to

17 See, for example, "Km 15 Village" in Bachieng Chaleunsouk District, Champasak Province.

18 The Khmer call this village "Tun."

19 For example, writing about similar groups in Vietnam, Salemink (1997: 523) described them as "an interdominational evangelical society that adheres to a Christian fundamentalist doctrine."

20 It should be noted, however, that the Khmerization process in Ratanakiri has also included support for the "state religion," Buddhism. Ruohomaki (2003: 88) has pointed out that Buddhism has expanded in the northeast in recent years as well, and he mentions that, "missionary monks have been active in propagating Buddhism in Ratanakiri."

21 For example, Catholic priests do not object to Catholics entering Buddhist temples or places of worship for other religions, or even showing respect for other religions. However, this is not permitted by Protestant evangelical Christian groups, who advocate much more separation between those following their religion and "religious others."

participate in important rituals that their parents and grandparents organize.

The refusal of the new Christian converts to participate in village sacrifices was seen as problematic for the Animists of Kroala. Therefore, many Animists felt that it was necessary for the Christians to spatially reorganize. In the past, when important community conflicts occurred, villages would sometimes split, and at one point it was proposed that the Christians in Kroala move away from the village, since they could no longer participate in the most important village social activities. However, a spatial compromise was negotiated, in which the Christians agreed to move themselves from the houses that make up the concentric circle of the village, and position themselves in new dwellings just outside of the village circle. Therefore, they are still officially part of the village, but the Animist families that make up the inner circle are able to participate in village sacrifices without feeling that the Christians who are not involved are violating their sacred "social space," which to them is linked to village solidarity and their sense of "community." In other words, the Animists have taken control of the center of their village.

Exclusion from village space is another Animist strategy against Christian proselytizing, whether by missionaries or others. For example, since I am Caucasian, I have often been erroneously identified as a Christian missionary. In one case, a group of Brao men who had been drinking rice beer prior to my arrival, and were a bit tipsy, frankly told me when I first arrived at their village, that if I was a missionary, I was not welcome and should leave.

In the mid-1990s the Christian NGO, World Concern,[22] was working on a literacy program in some Brao villages in Taveng District, but they were asked by the elders of three villages to stop working there after a Brao World Concern staff, who had recently been converted to Christianity, tried to use non-formal education activities as a means to proselytize in the villages. The Senior staff at World Concern claim that the acts of this highlander staff member were not approved, and that the individual was fired for transgressing the organization's rules. The point here is that keeping their village space uncontaminated from Christian influences was clearly important.

Religious conversion affects the spatial organization of the Brao in relation to their observance of taboos, many with important spatial dimensions. The Brao recognize five different types of taboos (*da-ah*, *kun-trung*, *gumbrung*, *grung*, and *huntre*, see Baird 2008), each of which has important spatial dimensions. For example, in the past most important sacrifices were associated with village or house level restrictions in movement (called *kun-trung* in Brao), including not allowing people to enter and leave particular spaces for one or more days. There are *da-ah* taboos that keep people from doing particular things. There are also *huntre* taboos that restrict certain types of movements, such as *huntre dung ja* which prevents people from hunting on land and fishing in the water during the same trips, or *huntre maw aw*, which keeps relatives from borrowing household items from each other on a regular basis (Baird 2008). Those who convert to Christianity generally no longer respect these taboos, thus leading to changes in the way people's lives are spatially organized.[23]

Creating Separate Christian Spaces: "Orphanages"

The Foursquare Church's activities are the most controversial of the Christian groups operating in Ratanakiri. Since arriving in the province in 2002, the Church has set up a number of what they call "orphanages" in Brao communities, including in Kalai Commune, O Chum District, Phnom Kok and Kok Lak Communes in Veun Say District, and at the edge of Ban Lung District near the border with O Chum. Even some Protestant evangelical Christian missionaries in Ratanakiri have criticized this organization for converting highlanders into "rice Christians," even though there are few differences from the religious doctrines of these groups.[24] While no foreigners work full-time for the Foursquare Church in Ratanakiri, groups of Americans frequently make short trips to Ratanakiri to visit the churches. According to their website,

> With the orphan population growing in epidemic proportions, there is an enormous, immediate need for orphan care around the world. We offer a fresh, dynamic approach to confront the problem, through establish-

22 They are now a part of a consortium of NGOs together called International Cooperation in Cambodia (ICC).

23 However, it would be inaccurate to claim that Christianity is the sole cause of decreasing adherence to taboos. There are certainly other factors as well, the most important being modernization and Khmerization efforts unrelated to Christianity. Zweers et al. (2002), for example, reported that highlanders in Ratanakiri are decreasing their respect for traditional ritual and other activities.

24 In February 2008, Foursquare formally left the Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia, a national umbrella organization whose members are not supposed to use material means to lure people into become Christians.

ing and supporting church-based orphan Homes. Each Church Home has a family atmosphere based on love and compassion that is touched by the word of God. Every home shares a building with the local Foursquare church (*Foursquare Church* 2005a).

The orphanages in Brao areas are, however, not really "orphanages" but rather "Christian places" where families can give their children over to be raised by the Church. At Kok Lak there were 12 Brao Kavet children living full-time at the Foursquare orphanage in early 2007, but in reality none of them are actually orphans.[25] The implications of these orphanages will not be fully understood for a long time. However, they may end up being the equivalent to the Residential Schools for native peoples in Canada, which were Protestant Christian-based, and continued to operate until the 1970s. While the orphanages in Ratanakiri are fundamentally different, in that people volunteer their children to live there, they may well lead to similar important identity problems later. For the very young children that have mainly ended up there (often children from poor families), there is little awareness about what they have been "volunteered" for. Many are not Christians when they arrive at the orphanages.

There are concerns about the ethics of some of the Foursquare's activities. For example, the Kavet chief of Kok Lak Commune told me that he was promised a new motorcycle by Foursquare if he agreed to allow an orphanage to be established. However, once he had signed off on the idea, the motorcycle was not provided.

The local Brao people who are being paid salaries to look after the orphanages are strictly regulating the children's actions. Although these places are in villages, the social spaces that they occupy are different than other non-Christian spaces in the villages. As Foursquare's website (*Foursquare Church* 2005a) puts it, "A healthy, flourishing environment filled with love and songs of worship is found at each Church Home." These spaces are clearly meant to be "Christian spaces" in villages that are mainly Animist. The children are, for example, discouraged from watching videos in non-Christian parts of the village. They are not allowed to return home to visit their parents, unless one of their minders from the orphanage comes with them. Visits are invariably short. In that many of the children are only five or six years old and actually have families, it is as if they have been discursively constructed as orphans to gain external support. Socialization with their parents and siblings has been severely disrupted, and family organization has drastically changed. While these orphanages are supposed to provide a "family" environment, it is clear that these are "Christian family spaces," not actual family spaces. On Sunday, for example, work of any kind is prohibited. The children still work in swidden fields on other days, but the orphanages rather than families cultivate them. This is a fundamental change, both socially and spatially.

The American leader of the group in Cambodia, Ted Olbrich, has indicated the particular Christian spatial divide from the rest of the community that has developed,

> Rene and Kristi [two American Christians who visited the orphanage at Kok Lak with him] attracted a lot of attention so, a small crowd of fifteen or twenty villagers followed them to the church, but stopped at the edge of the church property, more than 100 meters from the building, not being believers in the "New God" (*Foursquare Church* 2005b).

Olbrich also claimed that Kavet villagers saw a "whirlwind of fire over the church building" (*Foursquare Church* 2005b) when people were praying in the church, either in Brao language or in the "Spirit (tongues)" that they believe in (they are "Charismatics"[26]). The implications are that this could only happen to a "Christian space." Although Foursquare's website claims that local non-Christian people were amazed by the fire, none of the non-Christian Kavet that I asked about it had ever heard of the alleged event.

Conclusions

In this article I have tried to present a contextualized account of the recent phenomenon of Protestant evangelical Christian proselytizing and conversion amongst the ethnic Brao people in northeastern Cambodia, hoping to make some sense out of the geographies of religious change that are beginning to transform the spiritual landscapes of the Brao in northeastern Cambodia. I have tried to show how religious change has important spatial implications, and how spatial change affects the ways people socially organize, including designating "sacred spaces."

25 There is no mention of this fact on the Foursquare Church's website.

26 Charismatics believe that the Holy Spirit (the Holy Ghost) enters a disciple's body and causes that person to "speak in tongues," which sometimes involves speaking in different languages that the speaker does not know.

Sacred space is contested space, and place making is often closely linked to "making sacred." Whether one sees particular changes as positive or negative – or potentially a bit of both – it is crucial to recognize that the present circumstances are resulting in considerable social and spatial upheaval and stress amongst the highlanders, sometimes to the extent of breaking families and communities apart. In particular, it can be argued that what is happening in Ratanakiri is extremely ill-timed, considering the tremendous economic, cultural, and environmental pressures that the highlanders of northeastern Cambodia are already facing. One of the big concerns about the rifts caused by Christian conversion is that they will fundamentally weaken communities and make them more vulnerable to losing their land. Land alienation is already a serious problem in Ratanakiri (Baird 2008; *NGO Forum on Cambodia* 2006), and community conflicts are unlikely to help the people defend their lands and resources. It seems like yet another major change that these people must deal with. Missionaries, however, argue that what they are offering is especially needed at this time of crisis. They want to help people adapt to the rapid changes occurring that are linked to modernization.

One key question that arises is whether those involved in promoting Christianity are actually making an effort to help highlanders deal with the rapid changes and various crises that they are experiencing. Are they advising or otherwise assisting highlanders to maintain control over their lands? Are they helping highlanders to protect their forests from commercial logging concessions? Are they assisting those affected by large hydroelectric dams gain fair compensation for their losses? Are they supporting highlanders in defending their rights and resources from various kinds of predatory investors, or are they colluding with those trying to take those resources from highlanders? In northeastern Cambodia, it does appear that at least some Christians are quite active in trying to help protect resources for the highlanders. Others, however, are less concerned or active in these matters. Moore (1981) sees timely support for the struggles of threatened indigenous peoples who are faced with outside onslaughts on their land and resources as a crucial test for Christian missionaries, and considering the tremendous pressures currently facing the highlanders of northeastern Cambodia, this issue is definitely paramount for the Brao as well.

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