

SHIFTING CONTEXTS AND PERFORMANCES:  
THE BRAO-KAVET AND THEIR SACRED MOUNTAINS  
IN NORTHEAST CAMBODIA

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ABSTRACT

The Brao-Kavet are an indigenous ethnic group in northeastern Cambodia and southern Laos. Although in recent decades most have been forced to resettle in the lowlands, many maintain close livelihood and spiritual links with forested mountainous areas. I discuss the shifting Brao-Kavet understandings and performances associated with sacred spaces and, in particular, the Haling-Halang, a pair of high mountains located on the Laos-Cambodia border. The Brao-Kavet do not hunt for wildlife on these mountains, and dare not cut down trees. A particular kind of thin bamboo that grows there is, however, especially useful for sucking jar beer. People are allowed to harvest it in small quantities, provided appropriate offerings are made to the powerful mountain spirits prior to cutting. Brao-Kavet identity politics are closely linked to religious practices associated with these mountains, as demonstrated by Brao-Kavet claims that only Brao-Kavet should be spoken there because the spirits do not understand Lao, Khmer, French, English, or other languages, and would be offended if anything but their own tongue was uttered. I argue that the performative nature of Brao-Kavet sacred mountains has considerable political potential for facilitating indigenous-supported biodiversity conservation, and for supporting the recognition of Brao-Kavet indigenous rights over land and other resources in Virachey National Park, where the mountains are located.

KEYWORDS

Cambodia, indigenous peoples, national park, performativity, sacred mountains, sacred spaces

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

For many upland indigenous peoples, such as the Brao-Kavet of southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia, mountains are important in supporting their livelihoods and also are of great spiritual value. While the Brao-Kavet do not place as much importance on mountains as do more northern upland groups, such as the Tibetans and Bhutanese, mountains remain important sites. The Haling-Halang Mountains are located along the border between northeastern Cambodia's Veun Say District, Ratanakiri Province, and Phou Vong District, Attapeu Province, southern Laos. These mountains are particularly sacred to the Brao-Kavet of this region. They reach over 1,000 meters above sea level, straddle the international border, and are among the highest in Cambodia. Located in a remote part of the country, the Brao-Kavet have developed particular practices and adopted certain taboos deemed important for appeasing the powerful spirits they believe reside there. The rituals and other beliefs, discourses, and behavior associated with the Brao-Kavet's relationship with Haling-Halang are conceptualized here as performances that, following the work of Butler (1993, 1997), indicate that transformations take place.

Brao-Kavet beliefs that have been partially spiritually constituted through contestation and resistance involving outside influences and interactions over the last century have the potential to serve a new purpose, one that relates to conserving nature and protecting biodiversity. This is particularly relevant considering that the Haling-Halang Mountains are located within Virachey National Park, one of Cambodia's largest protected areas. Nevertheless, protected area managers have largely failed to engage the Brao-Kavet and their spiritual beliefs in order to encourage environmental

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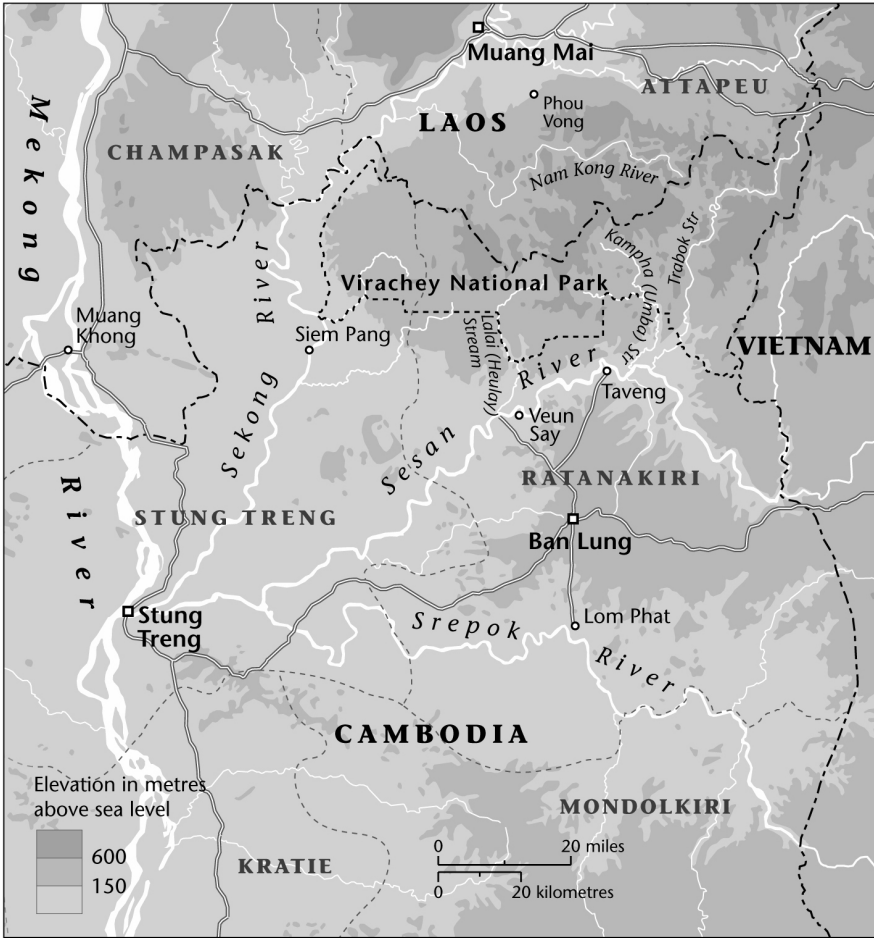
<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Culture and Religion (SSEASR) in Thimphu, Kingdom of Bhutan, 30 June-3 July 2011. The Cambodian NGO, Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP), supported some of the research reported in this paper. I thank Jeremy Ironside, Jonathan Padwe, and *AHP* editors for helping to improve this paper. I am solely responsible for any deficiencies that remain.

protection and sustainable resource management. Here, I will demonstrate the potential of beliefs and taboos related to sacred mountains to benefit nature conservation and support Brao-Kavet culture and rights over resource access through promoting types of cooperative management that are respectful of local beliefs, history, and historical tenure.

The following section introduces the Brao-Kavet people. I continue with a description of the particular beliefs and practices associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains, arguing that they are invented traditions, following Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), and that they represent particular forms of cultural and political resistance. I then consider the role of Virachey National Park in relation to Brao-Kavet interactions with the Haling-Halang Mountains, and the potential for the state to cooperate with the Brao-Kavet in support of biodiversity conservation. I conclude with suggestions as to how the disconnect between the Brao-Kavet and protected area managers might be remedied.

Before proceeding, I review the context in which this research took place. I am a white Canadian male who first began interacting with the Brao in Cambodia in 1995 as a consultant working for a local non-government organization (NGO), the Non-Timber Forest Product (NTFP) Project, based in Ratanakiri Province in the northeast of Cambodia, bordering Laos (Figure 1). I later conducted studies in cooperation with the Brao, including my Master's thesis research between 2001 and 2003, and PhD research between 2003 and 2008. I have worked with the Brao off and on for many years, and have developed close relationships with many Brao people. I learned to speak Brao during my Master's thesis research. The information included in this paper has been gradually collected since 1995, and represents cumulative diachronic research, rather than information that emerged from a short field trip.

Figure 1. Veun Say District, Ratanakiri Province and the boundaries of Virachey National Park. Brao-Kavet villages are mainly located along the Lalai 'Heulay Stream', located in Kok Lak Commune, just outside the park.



### THE BRAO-KAVET

The Brao-Kavet, typically referred to as Kavet by themselves and others, are one of nine Brao sub-groups recognized by the Brao. The Kavet, Uмба, Kreung, Brao Tanap, and Lun are the sub-groups presently in Cambodia. The Kavet, Kanying, Hamong, Jree, and Lun are found in Laos (Baird 2008c; Keller et al. 2008). Globally, there are approximately 60,000 Brao, with more than half in Stung Treng

and Ratanakiri provinces in northeast Cambodia, less than half in Champasak and Attapeu provinces in Laos, and one village<sup>2</sup> in Kon Tum Province in the central highlands of Vietnam (Baird 2008c). This paper mainly focuses on the Kavet living in the four villages of Kok Lak Commune, Veun Say District, Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia (Baird 2008c).<sup>3</sup> They, along with those from other Brao sub-groups, are presently considered to be among Cambodia's 'indigenous peoples' (Khmer, *chuncheat daoem pheak tech*; Baird 2011, 2008a).<sup>4</sup>

The Brao-Kavet, and all the other Brao sub-groups, can be historically characterized as Animists, even if this term has a troublesome history.<sup>5</sup> This means, in the context of the Brao, people who believe in the existence of a wide array of malevolent spirits who manifest in various contexts and ways. These spirits need to be appeased to remedy or avoid various health related problems and other forms of misfortune. The rituals conducted by the Brao-Kavet and other Brao almost always require the consumption of a particular form of fermented rice-beer<sup>6</sup> made by the Brao.<sup>7</sup> Ceremonies typically involve sacrificing chickens, pigs, and water buffaloes and, less frequently, cows (Baird 2008c; Baird 2009c). Brown et al. (ND) identified six sacred mountains recognized by the Brao-Kavet in Kok

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<sup>2</sup> The village is called Dak My. The inhabitants fled Cambodia in 1970 in the face of intense US aerial bombardment (Baird 2008c).

<sup>3</sup> The Kavet population in Kok Lak Commune is 2,308 (Ironside 2011).

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of how indigenous peoples are defined and characterized in Cambodia, and the recent construction of indigenous identities in the country, see Baird (2011). Importantly, while all the historically upland highlander groups in Cambodia, including people who identify as members of all the Brao sub-groups, are being recognized as 'indigenous peoples', the Lao have been discursively excluded from being considered indigenous in Cambodia, largely because they are lowlanders and because the Lao ethnic group is seen as having its own 'ethnic homeland' in neighboring Laos.

<sup>5</sup> A small minority of the Brao in northeast Cambodia have recently converted to forms of evangelical Christianity (Baird 2009c). I intentionally capitalize 'Animist' to recognize local beliefs in spirits as having the same ontological position as mainstream religions, the names of which are normally capitalized.

<sup>6</sup> Often referred to in the literature as 'rice wine', which is not to be confused with distilled rice liquor.

<sup>7</sup> The Brao observe complex and important social rules with the consumption of fermented rice jar-beer.

Lak Commune, including Haling Mountain (Halang was not included in this list) and three smaller ones located within their Community Protected Area (CPA). According to Brown et al. (ND:9):

Kok Lak villagers point to direct proof of the consequences of not paying respect before entering these areas. There is a story during the French Indochinese war of two French soldiers who went to the top of one of these spirit hills to make a sign for a plane to come and get them. They soon died and the reason stated for their deaths is due to malaria, but villagers are sure the spirit of the mountain killed them, because they were disrespectful.

The Brao spatially organize in other particular ways, and have developed important spatial taboos to regulate behavior within houses, villages, and agricultural areas. These practices indicate how agricultural fields should be situated in relation to each other, how villages should be spatially oriented, where houses should be built, and where paths should be located (Baird 2008a).

Historically, the Brao-Kavet mainly inhabited mountainous, hilly, and forested areas, where their livelihoods largely depended on swidden agriculture, fishing, hunting, and collecting non-timber forest products (NTFPs) (Baird 2008c, 2010c). With a keen detailed knowledge of the ecological conditions they live in, the Brao have a deep understanding of the environments they interact with, including numerous micro-habitats (Baird 2013a). Since the 1960s, the Brao (including the Brao-Kavet) in both Laos and Cambodia have been largely resettled to lowland areas and along roads and rivers, where they have frequently been encouraged to engage in lowland wet rice cultivation (Baird 2008c, 2009b, 2009a).

## THE CAMBODIA NATIONAL PROTECTED AREAS SYSTEM AND VIRACHEY NATIONAL PARK

On 1 November 1993, the first National Protected Areas System (NPAS) of Cambodia – including Virachey National Park – was

established through a Royal Decree signed by King Norodom Sihanouk. The Decree immediately designated 3.3 million hectares of forestlands and other ecosystems within twenty-three variously classified Protected Areas (PAs), including National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Protected Landscapes, and Multiple Use Areas. The Ministry of Environment (MoE) was mandated to manage these PAs on behalf of the state (Baird 2009a),<sup>8</sup> and this remains the case today.

Virachey National Park is Cambodia's largest National Park. It covers 332,500 hectares in Siam Pang District, Stung Treng Province, and Veun Say, Taveng; and a small part of Andong Meas District in Ratanakiri Province (Figure 1). Dense semi-evergreen forests, upland savannah, bamboo thickets, and occasional patches of mixed deciduous forest cover most of the park (BPAMP 2003). The elevation of Virachey ranges from approximately one hundred meters above sea level (ASL) near the Sesan River to over 1,500 meters ASL on the high mountain ranges extending along the Laos-Cambodia border. Most of the park exceeds 400 meters ASL (BPAMP 2003; Koy 1999). Because of its large size and high biodiversity values, Virachey National Park is considered a key PA in Cambodia. Many threatened and endangered mammals, such as Asian elephants, tigers, leopards, gaur, banteng, Asiatic black bears, sun bears, douc langurs, and gibbons reside there (Baird 2009a). The PA is also internationally and regionally significant because of its transboundary links to other PAs in Laos and Vietnam (BPAMP 2003; Baird 2009a). Approximately half of Virachey National Park's 507 kilometer border constitutes parts of Cambodia's national borders with Laos and Vietnam (Baird 2009a). Koy (1999) reported that there were 11,799 people in forty-one villages and nine communes situated adjacent to or inside the park in the late 1990s, with the majority of these people identifying as ethnic Brao-Umba, Brao-Kavet, and Lao.

Over the last few years, Virachey National Park has been threatened by expansive mineral exploration concessions issued to

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<sup>8</sup> Apart from the national protected area system under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Environment, a separate national protected area system has more recently been established by the Forestry Administration, under the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishery (MAFF).

foreign companies (Global Witness 2009) and, more recently, by a large commercial rubber plantation concession within the park boundaries given to a Vietnamese company. The latter agreement is linked to building a road from the southern edge of the park and the northeastern corner of the PA, which is presently inaccessible by road within Cambodia – it is situated along the borders between both Vietnam to the east and Laos to the north.<sup>9</sup>

### THE HALING-HALANG SACRED MOUNTAINS

The Brao-Kavet people consider the Haling-Halang Mountains to be amongst their most sacred places. Located along the Cambodia-Laos border, and reaching more than 1,000 meters ASL, the mountains are presently situated in a remote, unpopulated (by humans) part of Virachey National Park, near an area previously hosting a large number of Brao-Kavet settlements, all of which were resettled along the Sesan and Sekong rivers in Veun Say District, Ratanakiri Province and Siem Pang District, Stung Treng Province since the 1960s (Baird 2008c, Ironside and Baird 2003). The Brao-Kavet have a long history of crossing the international border between Laos and Cambodia to escape from state power during periods when conditions appeared more favorable on the other side (Baird 2008c, 2010b).<sup>10</sup>

According to the Brao-Kavet, the Haling-Halang Mountains are subject to a number of behavior requirements and specific taboos linked to powerful malevolent spirits (generically in Brao, *arak*) in the mountains (Brao, *jundoo*) that are said to require those who walk up the mountain to speak only Brao-Kavet. Lao, French, and Khmer languages are said to anger the spirits, potentially leading to serious misfortune, illness, and even death. Furthermore, those ascending the mountains are required to smoke leaf-rolled tobacco in cigarettes

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<sup>9</sup> Anonymous personal communication, Ministry of Environment official, 31 May 2011.

<sup>10</sup> In some cases, the situation resembled the type of escaping behavior that Scott (2009) discusses, although I contend elsewhere that highlanders have had a much more varied and complex relationship with lowlanders than Scott would have us believe (Baird 2013b).



or pipes rather than commercially-made cigarettes. All visitors should wear 'traditional clothes', preferably loincloths. Loud, uncontrolled, argumentative speech is believed to disturb the spirits and is thus potentially dangerous to people who walk there.

The Brao-Kavet believe that spirits do not allow most trees and vegetation to be cut, and NTFPs cannot be harvested there. No hunting or fishing of any kind is permitted. Only one form of small mountain bamboo can be cut. This bamboo is highly suitable for sucking fermented rice beer from large clay jars and is found mainly on these mountains. It can be cut only after rituals are conducted to appease the spirits, which includes burning incense, lighting small candles, offering tobacco, and articulating particular performative chants.<sup>11</sup> Once completed, the Brao-Kavet believe they are permitted to carefully harvest a small number of the bamboo stems for personal use, which is not enough to deplete the bamboo or cause significant environmental impacts. The end result is that these vast mountains (the exact area is unclear due to their remoteness) are virtually fully protected from human-induced impacts, at least from the hands of the Brao-Kavet. Such practice has been referred to as 'territorial sealing' by Huber (2004), who writes that similar practices have been recorded in various parts of the world, including among Tibetan societies and Polynesian populations of the South Pacific. In the South Pacific, he pointed out that such practices are "related to prestige and power of local leaders and also to belief in supernatural or magical powers" (Huber 2004:127). This point is apt for the Brao-Kavet and the Haling-Halang Mountains. Moreover, Huber (2004) emphasizes that practices of taking control of particular territories by sealing them have religious and political dimensions, which applies to the Brao-Kavet as well.

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<sup>11</sup> These rituals can be conducted by anyone, young or old, male or female. The Brao are highly egalitarian.

UNTANGLING THE PERFORMATIVE NATURE OF BRAO-KAVET TABOOS  
ASSOCIATED WITH THE HALING-HALANG MOUNTAINS

Butler's seminal writings of the 1990s present a useful framework for assessing Brao-Kavet behavior associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains. Butler is best known for her attention to the performative aspects of practices, including speech.<sup>12</sup> Butler (1993) broke new ground, by arguing that the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality are culturally constructed through repeating particular stylized acts. Arguing that these acts are "bodily" and capable of establishing particular ontological "core" gender characteristics, Butler considers gender, along with sex and sexuality, to be performative, even if such performances are frequently non-voluntary. Drawing on Foucault's ideas about "regulative discourses", "frameworks of intelligibility", and "disciplinary regimes" (1975), Butler shows how sex acts, along with performances that construct gender and sexuality, produce and reproduce certain behaviors specifically linked to the particular discourses, or narratives, that produce them.

Butler (1997) expanded on the above work by questioning the efficacy of censorship on the grounds that hate speech is context dependent. Developing the idea of "performative utterances", she notes that the ability of words to "do things" makes hateful speech possible while also being dependent on specific embodied contexts of understandings. Essentially, she argues that a word's illocutionary force varies significantly depending on the particular context in which it is uttered, thus implying that it is impossible to adequately define the performative meanings of uttered words, such as those linked to hatred. Such words must be considered with regard to their performative function, or social context. Butler believes that because the context of language-use is crucial, it is impossible to assess the meanings of words without carefully considering their use in particular circumstances. Similarly, Bauman (1986) has argued that the context of performances is crucial, and that each performance is

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<sup>12</sup> Bauman and Briggs (1990) review some of the important literature on performativity that predates Butler's work.

thus unique.

I will show how Butler's work provides a useful starting point for considering how and why the Brao-Kavet have engaged in their own particular forms of performances in relation to taboos associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains, and how these performances have emerged within the particular social and political contexts in which the Brao-Kavet have become embedded. We may consider the taboos and utterances associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains to represent particular performances, in Butler's sense. They can help us to understand why these particular types of performances have emerged; and who the Brao-Kavet perform for.

The particular ritualistic performances associated with the Brao-Kavet and the Haling-Halang Mountains are linked to changes that occurred among the Brao-Kavet in the last century. While it is difficult to precisely date – locals claim to have no memory of their origin – I contend that they developed relatively recently for several reasons. First, certain taboos associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains are clearly linked to modernity. For example, people who ascend the mountains should not smoke commercial cigarettes, which were unknown among the Brao-Kavet until a few decades ago. Similarly, the requirement that those who enter the particular space linked to the mountains wear loincloths contrasts clothing from the past with garments perceived to represent modernity. Such modern clothing includes mass-produced short and long pants that have largely displaced loincloths among the Brao-Kavet over the last few decades. Even the requirement that Brao-Kavet language be used on the mountains can be interpreted as representing the struggle between their traditional language, Brao-Kavet, and languages linked to modernity: Lao, Khmer, and French. Arguing in this forest is also taboo out of concern that the spirits would be upset. There are also important proscriptions against hunting in these spaces, and only one special type of bamboo can be harvested there, and then only when appropriate rituals are conducted. Thus, one can consider the traditions associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains to be

invented.<sup>13</sup>

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) argue that many traditions people claim as old were actually initiated recently. This concept has been widely applied for the cultural phenomena that I describe here. Crucially, the sharp distinction frequently made between "tradition" and "modernity" is actually often invented. However, my assessment differs from Hobsbawm and Ranger, who distinguish between "invented" and "authentic" traditions. I avoid this binary by considering all traditions to be fluid and invented, changing over time, but often with some link to the past. These shifts are associated with particular time and place-specific positionings, and are often articulated or demonstrated through various performances particular to the circumstances.

The Brao-Kavet performances linked with the Haling-Halang Mountains were not initially designed for non-Brao-Kavet people, but rather for the Brao-Kavet themselves, and particularly Brao-Kavet youth. The Haling-Halang 'traditions' already outlined emerged prior to the Khmer Rouge consolidation of control over northeastern Cambodia in 1970 (Baird 2008c), during the Sihanouk period of the 1950s and 1960s or, possibly, even earlier during the French colonial period. It is unlikely that these so-called 'traditional beliefs' existed prior to the French arrival. This is because until the beginning of the 1960s, commercial cigarettes were unknown in this area, and it was not until then that most Brao-Kavet were forcibly relocated from the high, remote mountains north of the Sesan River to consolidated villages in the lowlands along the banks of the Sesan River (Baird 2008c). Most Brao-Kavet at that time only spoke Brao-Kavet. However, beginning in the French colonial period, and continuing following Cambodia's independence from France in 1953-1954, many Brao-Kavet began increasingly interacting with speakers of other languages. Initially these speakers were the ethnic Lao who dominated the lowlands of Brao-Kavet areas in Cambodia during the French colonial period (Baird 2009b; 2010a) and, later, with the

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<sup>13</sup> Coggins (2003) describes similar sets of ecological practices in the protection of forests in China.

Khmer beginning in the 1950s and 1960s (Baird 2008c). It was during these periods that large numbers of Brao-Kavet youth began learning Lao and Khmer, allowing them to communicate with other peoples and seem more modern than those who could not speak other languages. The social and cultural implications of being multilingual are clearly important, because they gave these young Brao-Kavet opportunities to access the power of the lowlands and the state. The French appointed Lao speakers to most senior village administrative positions where the ability to communicate with the French and their largely ethnic Lao government agents was seen as crucial (Baird 2008c). Consequently, knowing Lao bestowed increased status among the Brao-Kavet themselves by providing the wherewithal to represent communities to outsiders. Similarly, after the 1960s, the Khmer, through state and state-sanctioned mechanisms, promoted the Khmer language, providing those who learned Khmer access to the Cambodian state, leading to an enhanced social status.

It seems likely that Brao-Kavet elders who mediated the Brao-Kavet spiritual world, invented the 'traditions' associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains to assert their own power and effectively resist the increased influences of Lao and Khmer cultures within their communities, and particularly among the youth. Many elders did not speak Lao or Khmer, and may have been frustrated with their own faltering power in the face of advancing outside influences. Thus, establishing taboos that promoted the use of Brao-Kavet language and other practices associated with an older way of life connected to their own power, must have been designed by the elders to link with the appeasement of powerful spirits, of which the mountain spirits are believed to be the most powerful, and particularly to discourage youth from becoming overly influenced by life in the lowlands. Appeasement of spirits is critical in daily Brao-Kavet life. Even now, not appeasing spirits means that misfortune will follow in the form of bad luck, serious illness, and death.

Creation of taboos associated with the Brao-Kavet's most powerful spirits should not be viewed romantically. Such taboos are not linked solely to spiritual beliefs associated with mountains, but as

reaction to outsiders' growing influence – a conflict between generations. They also are an attempt by elders to convince Brao-Kavet youth of the necessity, at least in an important space, of using their own language, wearing loincloths, and smoking tobacco in more traditional ways. These acts symbolize the struggle between the past and the outside modern world.

This was not the first time for the Brao to invent traditions in the face of changes of which they disapproved. Similarly, the Brao-Kreung in Kroala Village, O Chum District, Ratanakiri Province, presently claim that it is taboo to photograph their ritual posts that are associated with water buffalo sacrifices. Although they claim that this taboo has been in place since time immemorial, the taboo must have been created in recent years, as there were no cameras or people taking photos of their ritual posts until a few years ago. This taboo is likely linked to the uncontrolled nature of tourism in their village, e.g., in recent years large numbers of Western tourists have visited the village on a daily basis, usually with ethnic Khmer guides. These guides commonly fail to make any contact with the Brao-Kreung and do not demonstrate respect for locals' privacy and local control over the community. The response has been to invent the taboo – an attempt to reassert local control over spiritual space.

#### MOBILIZING BRAO-KAVET PERFORMANCES FOR A NEW AGENDA: SHIFTING CONTEXTS AND PERFORMANCES

The spiritually sanctioned taboos associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains are performative in that they were designed by elders to influence Brao-Kavet youth, who were becoming increasingly influenced by life in the lowlands. This is something that must have been seen as a threat. Time has passed since the taboos linked with the Haling-Halang Mountains were formulated, and those who created them have probably largely passed away, or are now very old. The original meanings of these traditions, and the struggles that they were a part of, appear to have largely been forgotten by present-day Brao-Kavet elders – or at least they are not prominent in today's

dominant narratives – but the Brao-Kavet still consider the Haling-Halang Mountains to be sacred. The meanings of these beliefs are, however, being produced and reproduced dramatically due to new contexts, resulting in the constitution of new political symbolism.

First, as explained in detail by Baird (2009a), the Brao-Kavet in Kok Lak Commune have long been dissatisfied with the way the Virachey National Park was planned and created without consultation, and without asking their permission to take control of the lands where the Brao-Kavet historically resided.<sup>14</sup> This has caused the Brao-Kavet to adjust their performances associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains. While taboos, chants, and particular forms of utterances associated with the required rituals may not have changed a great deal, the audience members are increasingly linked to new Brao-Kavet relations with outsiders, especially Western and Khmer NGO workers and researchers associated with Virachey National Park. Evoking ideas about the Brao-Kavet having particular taboos associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains, even if the actual chants or rituals are not heard or seen by outsiders, may potentially help establish Brao-Kavet access rights within the park. Their beliefs demonstrate their historical spiritual connection with the core area of the protected area and also help more firmly establish themselves as 'indigenous peoples' (first peoples). These practices demonstrate that the Brao-Kavet historically protected expansive areas of forests and the wildlife found there, and thus serve as a discursive tool, a particular narrative, for establishing a form of tenure deep within Virachey National Park. They also demonstrate to the state and others their ability to protect forests and wildlife in ways

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<sup>14</sup> Most protected area managers and rangers accept that the MoE have the right to manage areas inside Virachey National Park, and not the Brao-Kavet or other groups of people who historically used the area. This environmental narrative is, however, disputed by the Brao-Kavet, who contend that they were not consulted about their land being confiscated. This lack of consultation associated with creating the NPAS, including Virachey National Park, is not something remembered by most who are involved with protected area management. It is not unusual for Brao and, presumably, other indigenous groups, to remember important historical events of the past in both living memory and beyond, as Baird's (2007) example illustrates.

that may not mirror the protection frameworks mandated through the National Protected Area System under the MoE. Furthermore, they manage to potentially result in protection similar to what the NPAS aims to achieve.

To date, this discursive strategy has been largely unsuccessful with the protected area management and their foreign donors, including the Wildlife Fund for Nature (now WWF) in the late 1990s, and the World Bank BPAMP project of the early 2000s (Baird 2009a, BPAMP 2003). Instead, BPAMP established CPAs for the Brao-Kavet villages in Kok Lak Commune as part of Virachey National Park's management plan. However, PA managers did not seriously consider the Brao's management of the sacred mountains, including the Haling-Halang Mountains in the far north of the core area of the national park (Baird 2009a). Instead, they arbitrarily decided that CPAs must be situated within a four-hour walk from settlements. Consequently, the Haling-Halang Mountains are now officially inaccessible to the Brao-Kavet.

This situation is a lost opportunity for Virachey National Park managers, especially now that BPAMP has ended, and the number and salaries of park 'rangers' have been reduced. With a protected area as large as Virachey, it is unrealistic to expect rangers to protect the entire park without support from the many communities living in close proximity to Virachey's south and west boundaries. Furthermore, I have heard Brao elders on various occasions over the last decade voice concerns about Vietnamese poachers entering Cambodia and Virachey from the east border and unsustainably hunting and harvesting NTFPs in Brao territories, including on their sacred mountains. These elders would welcome a role in protecting nature from poachers deep inside the protected area, especially if they were given at least partial rights to use resources within the park in what they believe to be a sustainable manner. This would include the Brao-Kavet agreeing to not hunt threatened or endangered wildlife species. They have also expressed, at various times, dissatisfaction with illegal logging operations within and near Virachey National Park organized by ethnic Lao and Khmer loggers living near Sesan River in Veun Say District. As one Brao-Kavet elder



told me in relation to Vietnamese poachers a few years ago:

The park rangers just stay on the main paths. They cannot stop the Vietnamese poachers. Only we Kavet know how to stop the Vietnamese but nobody has asked us to help.

Brao-Kavet elders have expressed concerns about foreign mineral exploration with the park, and rubber plantations that have been granted through economic land concessions allocated by the central Cambodian government. With regard to mining, a Brao-Kavet elder once brought a sample of a rock embedded with the mineral that the companies were searching for. He was keenly interested in knowing what the mineral was, what it could be used for, and its value. He was concerned that the mineral would be over-exploited and depleted by outsiders. For him, the mineral was an important part of his homeland, and his identity, even if he did not use it himself.

Despite the potential for win-win scenarios involving Brao-Kavet communities and PA managers, there have been only half-hearted, irregular, and unsustainable efforts to cooperate with communities in protecting and sustainably managing resources within Virachey National Park.<sup>15</sup> This neglect has frustrated many Brao-Kavet and has expressed itself in critical, but frequently private admonishment of those responsible for managing Virachey National Park. These represent particular types of in-community performances, or performances for sympathetic outsiders, and may be considered performative utterances as discussed by Butler (1997).

Furthermore, park rangers have unfairly confiscated bamboo-handled forest knives that the Brao-Kavet routinely take to the forest; and provisions such as rice, have also been seized. A Brao-Kavet dog was killed by park rangers in one case, which enraged many Brao-Kavet. In another case, when the CPA boundaries were demarcated by protected area personnel in the early 2000s, PA staff did not accompany Brao-Kavet community representatives to confirm the appropriateness of the boundary demarcation process, resulting in a great deal of confusion. Initially the Brao-Kavet thought the

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<sup>15</sup> See Borrini-Feyerabend and Ironside (2010) for a similar perspective.

boundaries were designed to prevent them from entering their CPA, rather than simply indicating the boundaries for community use. This illustrates the mistrust that has accumulated and led to bad feelings. In this case, in a form of resistance in line with what Scott (1985) wrote about in his now classic *Weapons of the Weak*, the Brao-Kavet knocked down a boundary sign put up by PA staff, although the park officials were not in the area at the time.<sup>16</sup> For the Brao-Kavet, this action symbolized their resistance to PA enclosure, a practice that is presently frequently referred to as 'green grabbing'.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have addressed the performative nature of the production and reproduction of ideas about sacred mountains and associated taboos among the Brao-Kavet of Kok Lak Commune, Ratanakiri Province, northeast Cambodia. There has been an important shift in the representation of Brao-Kavet performances associated with the Haling-Halang Mountains and other, smaller, sacred mountains due to changing circumstances and contexts of their relations with outsiders and within their own communities. This is in line with Tannenbaum's (2000) observation of the changing roles of rituals in relation to local protests linked to tree ordinations in northern Thailand. I hypothesize that construction of the Haling-Halang sacred mountains was initially linked to efforts by Brao-Kavet elders to resist outside influences threatening their power within the context of increasing cultural and linguistic hegemony coming from the seemingly 'modern' lowlands. Later, however, within the context of the establishment of Virachey National Park, as well as the arrival of NGOs, especially the NTFP Project, and foreigners working with them on natural management issues (including me), the symbolic relevance of their sacred mountains changed.

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<sup>16</sup> Also see Baird (2009a) and Ironside and Baird (2003) for more examples of tense moments between PA managers and rangers, and indigenous peoples living near the park.

A new discursive political element was introduced, involving the maneuvering of positioning in order to use 'traditional beliefs' associated with sacred mountains to claim their rights to increased involvement in the use, management, and protection of the park. Their efforts, however, have been more enthusiastically received by some NGOs and especially their Western consultants, who have tended to see these sacred beliefs as a potentially important foundation for future win-win collaborations designed to benefit the livelihoods of indigenous peoples, and biodiversity conservation, than by the protected area managers (Ironsides and Baird 2003). Unfortunately, this is not the only example of protected area managers failing to take advantage of possible alliances with indigenous peoples with an interest in protecting sacred sites. Shen et al. (2012) have, for example, recently reported similar lost opportunities in relation to Tibetan sacred mountains in western China.

The reality remains that the Brao-Kavet are largely willing to engage in a particular performative positioning that could be advantageous to protected area managers and their foreign donors. Hopefully, more people will realize this potential and take concrete steps to appeal to the legitimate concerns of the Brao-Kavet, while simultaneously reinforcing Brao-Kavet beliefs regarding the need to protect sacred mountains. This would benefit the Brao-Kavet culturally and socially, improve their livelihoods, and lead to a more sustainable future for Virachey National Park. Helping produce new environmental performative narratives, as socially constructed as they may be, is an important opportunity for both communities and the park. Such opportunity should not be ignored by those interested in protecting biodiversity within Virachey National Park, or those focused on the rights of indigenous populations.

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