

Troubled ways of relating: Humans and More-than-humans in land struggles

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Format

We would like to organise a single session with 3 to 4 presenters and a discussant, taking the opportunity of being able to alter its standard format. The panel contributors would be asked to circulate a short paper (5 pages) ahead of the conference. The panel would start with short presentations by each contributor, based on a particularly relevant ethnographic vignette and/or photograph of their choice. After having rendered contributors' research vivid, a discussant would provide input to launch an exchange between the contributors, and then open up to a general discussion, involving everyone who would like to take part. Our choice to privilege exchange and discussion aims at being able to reflect upon the intersections of the different contributors' research.

Abstract

In Cambodia and all across Southeast Asia, people have been wrestling to defend the land on which they were living and farming in the face of large-scale land acquisitions via Economic Land Concessions and other reverse land reforms (e.g. Hall & al. 2011; Li 2010; Schoenberger & al. 2017), relying on strategies ranging from protests, over (collective) land titling, mediation processes, to legal complaints (e.g. Baird 2013; Bourdier 2019; Li 2000; Milne 2013; Mahanty & al. 2021).

A rich body of scholarship, going far beyond the region, points out how such struggles are often complicated by diverging conceptions of land and ways of relating to it (e.g. Gordillo 2002; Kent 2008; Leemann 2020; Tusing 2021). Further, increasing attention came to be paid to "ontological conflicts" implied in land struggles, that is on involved parties' different and sometimes opposing ways of seeing the world (e.g. Blaser 2009; de la Cadena 2012; Escobar 2008). In these works, which emerged from research in (Latin) American contexts, the accent tends to lie on the opposition of animist and naturalist (or Euro-modern) 'worlds', and related equivocations. This approach has been criticized for being overly binary (Bessire & Bond 2014), and for concentrating on issues that those who are concerned in the first place might not consider the most pressing (Cepek 2016). However, its exhortation to take the role of more-than-humans seriously on the political stage appears extremely relevant in Southeast Asian contexts (e.g. Allerton 2009; Beban & Work 2014; Endres & Lauser 2012; Guillou 2017).

Building upon these different strands of research, we propose to explore how struggles for land involving diverging notions of what is at stake and diverse modes of organizing and acting, affect Southeast Asian people's ways of relating to the world, to fellow humans as well as to spirits and other more-than-humans. We also ask how their values and conceptions of what is fair, right or wrong might be called into question and altered in the process, for instance as people are trying to conform to imposed criteria of what makes a legitimate claimant (Humphrey 2012; Scheer 2021).

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