

DORISEA WORKING PAPER

ISSUE 5, 2014, ISSN: 2196-6893

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ENCHANTING FRONTIERS
A SACRED FOREST AND THE
SYMBOLIC-MATERIAL
COMPLEXITIES IN LAOS



5

DORISEA WORKING PAPER SERIES

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The research network "Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia" (DORISEA) is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and coordinated by the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Georg-August-University of Göttingen. Scholars from the Universities of Göttingen, Hamburg, Münster, Heidelberg and Berlin (Humboldt University) are involved in several projects that investigate the relationship between religion and modernity in Southeast Asia.

How to cite this paper: Michael Kleinod (2014): Enchanting Frontiers. A sacred forest and the symbolic-material complexities in Laos. In: DORISEA Working Paper Series, No. 5.

Research Network DORISEA
"Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia"

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DORISEA
Dynamics of Religion
in Southeast Asia 

FUNDED BY



Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research



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INTRODUCTION

Frontiers are odd, “wild” places that trouble the well-established, institutionalised classifications of Western scholarship. Far away, geographically as well as socially, from the arrived centres of the world economy, the frontiers of capitalism urge scholars to transcend disciplinary boundaries. This paper is an analysis of the complexity of a sacred forest in Laos, and it is also an exploration of one gap in the academic division of labour that obstructs a comprehensive, sociological understanding of current transformation in mainland Southeast Asia: the division between political economy, or political ecology, and the study of symbolic forms and practice. The general argument is that in order to understand the transformation of this specific place, the integration of these institutionally and epistemologically separated scopes is necessary. Because the conceptual context and scope of this paper is thus fairly specific, I will, first of all, have to set the discursive and conceptual scene for the following analysis of the fate of a Katang sacred forest¹ in the context of diverse frontier dynamics.

I briefly sketch out the problem (section 1) and the conceptual framework and subject of the analysis (section 2). This will help in examining diverse frontier visions and associated practices

that relate to one another in complex ways (section 3 and 4). Choosing a “traditional” sacred forest as an example, I will show that there is more to current upland transformation in Laos than just “spiritless” homogenization and rationalization from above. The example of a Katang-style wrist-tying ritual (*basi*) (section 5) will drive this point home by complicating the tenacious and habitual thinking in convenient pigeonholes. I will end with considerations regarding how “religious” elements tie into capitalist transformation.

TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES AT THE FRONTIER

So-called frontiers are mostly located in the borderlands of nation-states. Such places constitute and are constituted by very specific kinds of practices that distinctly and purposefully confuse official classifications (e.g. the territory of nation-states) in that they exploit the room to manoeuvre between legality and illegality, visibility and invisibility, representation and action.² This requires a conceptual flexibility as well as rigor on part of the scholar of such places – demands not

¹ Names of localities were altered or avoided for reasons of anonymity protection. Likewise, publications quoted in this text which may indicate the locality directly from the titles, remain, counter to convention, unquoted.

² It is quite obvious that such “frontier” practices and logics can be found in everyday life of the centers of development. Frontier places are only more explicitly structured in twisted ways, but they certainly relate to and thus can elucidate current workings of social power more generally.



easily met within the boundaries of institutionalised disciplines.

1.1 Limits of political economy

There are many important contributions to an understanding of livelihood transformation in Laos that focus on the materialities of this process (enclosures, original accumulation, reification, displacement, etc.). In most of these contributions, the symbolic (or socio-cultural) side of this process remains under-exposed. For example, Michael Goldman notes that the World Bank:

[...] does not take into consideration the effect on a "spirit territory" once everything on which the spirit and territory are based has been radically altered, i.e., forests submerged, rivers dammed, societies put on a development agenda. This exemplifies the ongoing reification process, where pieces of indigenous practices are decontextualized, objectified, and then judged in purely developmentalist terms of commensurability (Goldman 2001, 508).

It is evident how upland transformation is framed here as a process of mere dis-enchantment: it is cast only in terms of reification and rationalization. From a sociological perspective, this scope is problematic, not only because social change is always a material as well as symbolic process, but also, and more specifically, because it implies for the most part a process of mere rationalization and de-spiriting of formerly enchanted spaces, and thus carries with itself, intended or not, an idea of secularization that has become problematic:

As if secularization was ever an accomplished fact anywhere in the world, undone today by a religious roll back; as if secularization, exclusively and straightforwardly, swept religion out of the social contract and did not, from the beginning, also thwart itself, that is, established a new entity of fate which sometimes discards or accepts as unfathomably as a Calvinist God and which disseminates its own cult and incense all

*around itself: the world market (Türcke 2002, 9; own translation).*³

A radical critique of capitalist social relations, not only on the frontier, must unveil capitalism's irrationalities and therefore overcome the - however implicit - secularization assumption by treating capitalism itself as a religion (e.g. Walter Benjamin and others in Baecker 2009): there is no essential difference between capitalism and, say, feudalism with regards to the principle entanglement of rationality and irrationality within persistent domination and exploitation. While I thus certainly agree with Goldman about the aspects of what he calls "reification", I want to add that mystification is an important part of this process (section 2). Spiritual spaces may acquire new fetishes that become symbolic foundations of power-driven frontier practices.

1.2 Limits of religious studies

While "[s]ymbolism is regularly overlooked or discounted in studies of the environment and the state" (Singh 2012, 4), many ethnographic contributions on East and Southeast Asia do stress the (re-)enchanted of modernity in the sense that beliefs are persisting through, adapting to, or resisting against capitalist transformations (e.g. Ong 1987; Taylor 2007, Endres/Lauser 2012). This focus allows ethnographers to complicate modernist assumptions, such as a clear-cut divide between modernity and tradition. However, the focus is mostly on "beliefs proper" (e.g. "animism") which are seen as part of "modernity", but - as an analytical notion of capitalism is mostly absent in such works - not of capitalism, which still figures as a "rational" economy, if at all. Therefore such analyses tend to reproduce the problematic assumption that "local" (traditional, religious) people mediate an abstract, meaningless change by enchanting it with the old spirits. I thus share with this perspective the focus on the enchantment of modernity, but I add that late capitalism itself may be "superstitious".⁴ At the same time, those often imagined as "ethnic tribes" are not

³ Als sei Säkularisierung schon irgendwo auf der Welt eine vollendete Tatsache gewesen, die ein religiöses roll back nun rückgängig macht; als habe Säkularisierung ausschließlich und geradlinig den Kehraus der Religion aus dem Gesellschaftsvertrag betrieben und nicht von Anfang an auch schon sich selbst *hintertrieben*, nämlich eine neue Schicksalsinstanz etabliert, die bisweilen so unerforschlich verwirft und annimmt wie ein calvinistischer Gott und ihren eigenen Kult und Weihrauch um sich verbreitet: den Weltmarkt.

⁴ I use the term "superstition" here partly in a rhetorical way: in order to set capitalism on the same plane

as those beliefs and practices that development thinking often terms "superstitious". My use of this term, therefore, reflects the critical standpoint of this paper: not in the sense that the author was in the possession of the "truth", but that the social transition in Laos and elsewhere is fundamentally conditioned by certain assumptions and beliefs, e.g. about nature and tradition that are as ideological as the social systems they transform. The critique of the capitalization of the Lao uplands is based in the general irrationality of capital accumulation: that it undermines its own conditions of possibility, i.e. labor and resources.



simply experiencing an imposition, but they encounter complex situations of possibilities and impossibilities in which they are active agents – applying their “traditional beliefs” quite flexibly and, in fact, rationally.

1.3. Integrating political economy and religion

I believe that both perspectives, political-economic and symbolic-religious, are immensely relevant for a sociological understanding of upland transformation in Southeast Asia. But both are limited by their implicit modernist assumptions – as if capitalism itself wasn’t religious at all. They echo conventional understandings of Max Weber’s statement about the “dis-enchantment of the world” – which already seem to be a simplification of Weber’s own account, as he writes:

As intellectualism suppresses belief in magic, the world’s processes become disenchanted, lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply “are” and “happen” but no longer signify anything. As a consequence, there is a growing demand that the world and the total pattern of life be subject to an order that is significant and meaningful (Weber 1978, 506).

This quote shows that Weber was aware that “de-magification” includes a need to re-enchant the world.⁵ It does not become clear, however, why this re-enchantment is seen as *necessary* by Weber. Marx and others, in contrast, can be read as having explicated the mythologies that capitalism itself is struck with, stressing their necessity. They located their origin in the commodity as a “sensual-transcendent thing” with a “mystical character” (Marx 1959, 76f.).

Thus, if we talk about commodification of nature, this does not only mean rendering nature commensurable, tradable, legible, and governable: just as the fetish is part of the commodity, fetishisation is part of the commodification process. The notion of fetishism in the political-ecological literature (e.g. Igoe 2010, Kelly 2011) is often underdetermined; the concept itself seems to have problematic, perhaps Eurocentric, implications. Not being able to resolve these problems here (see also O’Kane 2013, Böhme 2012, Graeber 2005), I nevertheless stick to the term. I propose a view on fetishism which departs from Marx’ ideas about the commodity fetish: the projection of social relations into things that are produced as

commodities, and that seem to have value in themselves. I share a notion of the fetish for which “the fetish-character of the commodity [is] the elementary form of fetishism” (O’Kane 2013, 58). Such a notion is rooted in a theory of value where “the manifestations of abstract social labour, as bearers of value, function as personified autonomous entities that dominate and compel the actions of the individuals who collectively constitute them” (ibid., 56). I understand value here as both economic and moral value. For example, the commodification of nature is related to rendering it morally good, a value in itself for its difference from society.⁶ Today, “eco-capitalist” social relations necessitate acting *as if* “nature” was actually apart from and untouched by society, because in the context of ubiquitous depletion and rising poverty nothing else seems possible as a force of regulation. While idealizing notions of nature and the countryside have a long history themselves (e.g. Groh/Groh 1991), they have become of integral systemic relevance only rather recently, with the rise of the ideology of untouched diversity within the regulation of crisis-ridden nature relations in sustainable development (e.g. Görg 2003, Brand et al. 2008).

FRONTIERS AS SYMBOLIC-MATERIAL SPACES

2.1 Frontier visions: rationality and mystification

The concept of the “relational resource frontier” (Barney 2009) provides us with an appropriate framework for a place-based analysis of sacredness and commodification, as it relates to the power-ridden constructionism inherent in frontier visions. Untouched lands are not simply out there; the “freely available frontier land of the development programmer’s imagination must be created; produced where it did not exist before” (ibid, 151). Like any other space, frontier space is a social product (Lefebvre 1991), i.e. it is projected and enacted. The resource frontier is thus relational in the sense that it is constructed in relation to the respective accumulation interests implied in such visions: a place is “abundant”, or “untouched”, in terms of the respective things that are looked for on the frontier, be it precious woods, endangered species, or potential religious converts. I use the term “frontier vision” here in order to account for these diverse dynamics that

the personification of tools (like cars, computers, bikes etc.), or the idolization of untouched nature and unchanging culture.

⁵ I thank an anonymous reviewer for hinting me at this point.

⁶ On such grounds, diverse enchantments and ways to “personify things” are thinkable (and therefore various theoretical engagements with fetishism), such as



constitute a sacred forest. As there is normally more than one interest projected onto one place – the second way in which resource frontiers are relational – a locality is mostly ridden by partly conflicting, partly converging interests of diverse scales that defy simplistic notions of a clear “before-after”, “top-down”, “in-out” etc. (Barney 2009, 155f.).

This offers a link to questions of how social transformation happens symbolically – a question that Barney, like many others, only touches upon. It is useful to combine this view of the Lao uplands with what Oscar Salemink (2004), relating to the Vietnamese Central Highlands, termed a “multidimensional conversion of the physical environment; of the economic system; of the religious beliefs, and of personhood” (ibid, 124) involving a “dual movement of attraction and attrition” (ibid, 126). Social transformation is mediated by subjective aspirations and investments as well as losses, sacrifices, and resistances. Locals, rather than simply being rationalised, are active and reflexive subjects, using tradition for their own purposes (sections 4.2 and 5). Development, in turn, embodies a great deal of religion and tradition, which becomes obvious in the way that these frontier visions are constituted by myths (section 4.1). The global enforcement of the capital principle, rather than a cold and merely rational process, creates its own myths that intertwine with local rationalities.

Most notably, I refer to “myth” quite generally as the idealizations and naturalizations that are

unquestioned foundations of a hegemonic formation, which establishes its own truth. In such sense, “enlightenment”, too - ecological or otherwise - is somehow myth-ridden:⁷

The subsumption of the actual, whether under mythical prehistory or under mathematical formalism, the symbolic relating of the present to the mythical event in the rite or to the abstract category in science, makes the new appear as something predetermined which therefore is really the old. It is not existence that is without hope, but knowledge which appropriates and perpetuates existence as a schema in the pictorial or mathematical symbol. [...] Animism had endowed things with souls; industrialism makes souls into things (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002, 21).

Myth in this sense is still active, in a different form, in “industrialism”. This quote immediately raises scepticism as to the notion of social evolution within Critical Theory and a comprehensive argument must remain absent from this paper.⁸ I contend, however, that what may appear as an opposition of animism and industrialism can be read otherwise⁹: the “endowment of things with souls” and the “reification of souls” can go hand in hand, as I will show. My point here is that such a notion of “myth” highlights the irrational, ideological workings of legitimation of social power that establish obviousness, eternal truths, and

⁷ For example, that resources are scarce and therefore should be used ‘sustainably’ is only meaningful in a society which treats nature as a “resource” and which possesses the economic will and means to deplete these material preconditions. But sustainability discourse (e.g. the Convention on Biological Diversity) constructs this truth as a somehow “natural”, or eternal one. While such untouchedness has never been a reality, it becomes a necessity today, so that its religious overtones (purity) gain practical significance – the idolization of nature mediates extensive and intensive exploitation.

⁸ The authors indeed seem to imply that animism and industrialism, on the ground of both being mythical, exclude each other. Towards the beginning of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* they also state that “enlightenment is the extirpation of animism” (ibid., 2). They seem to propose a kind of secularization hypothesis that obviously does not hold – especially not with regard to the entanglements of animism in today’s Southeast Asia. But I would argue that one does not necessarily have to read it this way. The easiest response is that the authors generally do not argue along empirical historical facts but on a more formal level. That Ulysses to them represents the proto-type of the bourgeois evidences this. The authors would not be surprised about

the persistence of animism today⁸; to the contrary, because of their general assumption that while societies do evolve historically, this evolvment is tragically double-edged. This is a clear rejection of any, let alone optimistic, belief in unilinear progress (Görg 2003).

⁹ Sweeping away Critical Theory with reference to selected sentences clearly escapes the way society is approached by this theoretical strand, more precisely, the constellative way their arguments are presented (also Adorno 2003). Regarding animism and magic they criticize enlightenment for “extirpating” a crucial mode of knowledge generation that is characteristic of animism as they understand it: the operation of mimesis: “The reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is itself mimesis: of death” (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002, 44) Mimesis, as an alternative kind of experience and knowledge is even part of Horkheimer/Adorno’s utopianism regarding social nature relations. Their message thus remains mixed, crucially “enlightening” and plainly condemning: “Magic is bloody untruth, but in its domination is not yet disclaimed by transforming itself into a pure truth underlying the world which it enslaves” (ibid., 6).



values-in-themselves. There is no pure rationalism at work but diverse relations of mystification (justification) and rationalization (exploitation).

2.2 Sacred Forests

Given the attempt at bridging the disciplinary boundaries referred to above, the choice of sacred forests as an object of study is only consequential because it requires thinking issues of sacredness together with resource exploitation and nature conservation. The term itself invokes, to a Western audience, a harmonious, spiritual, deep relationship between local culture and nature – a “field of attraction” (Tsing 1999) is thereby invoked which is tricky to deal with. Its analytical use thus seems problematic. First of all, it suggests the existence of a “sacred space” as opposed to “profane places” which, in this exclusivity, is inappropriate to an understanding of the subject. Scholars (e.g. Dove et al. 2012) have furthermore argued that this term has primordial, ahistorical overtones that invite ideological presumptions. They stress that such spaces may already be reactions to earlier resource exploitation and not some “original” expression of local culture (ibid, 7ff.).

Aware of the strings attached to this term, I use it partly because of this, but also because it is used by my informants as well. My example of such a forest refers to a small patch of land which is taboo for certain forms of human use for cultural reasons. The Lao term, *pa maheesak*, already seems like an application from outside.¹⁰ But as I will show in this paper, what is in- and what is outside of the “local community” is already a somewhat mistaken, at least very “slippery” question - not least because a relatively high degree of acculturation has occurred among the ethnic minority in question, the Katang (see Schliesinger 2003, 109ff).¹¹ For the lack of an alternative, I therefore stick to this term in a way which reflects and troubles the clear-cut and fixed oppositions that it evokes. Because of such implicit assumptions, the conversion of sacred forests into commodified spaces is likely to be mistaken too

easily for a rationalization and de-mystification of nature, imposed by “outsiders” on local custom and economy. The mystifying elements in “modern” phenomena, as in conservation or ecotourism, are thereby overlooked – as is the profane way sacredness works sometimes (section 3.2). Hence, the sacred forest, also *because* of its field of attraction, is a good point of departure for discussing symbolic frontier dynamics. I will argue that, depending on the specificity of the place, such dynamics tend to dis-enchant or re-enchant a sacred forest. “Dis-enchantment” refers to symbolic dynamics that appear, to a (Western) observer, to undermine this forest’s sacred nature by facilitating the deforestation of a sacred forest; re-enchantment means the strengthening of cultural elements that maintain or renew its sacredness as a reaction to “dis-enchantment”.¹² I now exemplify the de- and re-mystification of nature in frontier capitalism with the case of Pa Maheesak.

DIS-ENCHANTING FRONTIER VISIONS

In this section, I recount the story of Pa Maheesak and provide some information on the locality (3.1). I then outline diverse frontier visions and how they construct Pa Maheesak differently: visions that tend to “dis-enchant” (3.2, 3.3), and visions that re-enchant the locality (4 and 5). For reasons of space, I skip other frontier forces that would need to be included in a complete account of this local symbolic-material complexity, such as rural development or methamphetamine consumption.

3.1 The locality

I focus on a sacred forest called Pa Maheesak and a nearby village, Ban Chaleun. Both are situated within a National Protected Area in southern central Laos. For people in the villages around this forest, it is taboo to kill the monkeys living in it. As it happens, these monkeys are also considered endangered by conservationists and they, as well as the local culture, are a touristic attraction as

¹⁰ I chose a term that designates “sacred forests” as a substitute name for the specific forest that is the focus of this paper (see footnote 1).

¹¹ An official Lao source (LNFC 2005, 175) reports that the “Makong”, an ethnic group from the same linguistic branch as the Katang according to Schliesinger (2003, 2) and Sidwell (2005, 6), “respect and fear” their village spirit which is referred to as “the Mahesuck” – which, if correct, goes to show how “external” terms (*Maheesak* being a Thai-Lao term) become “indigenized”.

¹² Admittedly, this choice of terms is quite tricky as it requires putting in quotation marks the term “dis-enchantment” but not the term re-enchantment. As we will see in 3.2 and 3.3 the sacred forest is not really dis-encharnted, but de-forested. To an ideal-typical “Western” observer, this may appear as a dis-enchantment. Re-enchantment, in turn, points to the mystifications of developmentalism. Therefore, the somewhat asymmetrical use of these terms follows from the attempt to level out capitalist and non-capitalist symbolic-material forms.



well. The villagers from Chaleun as well as from other villages bordering Pa Maheesak are from the Katang ethnic group, linguistically classified as the Katuic branch of Mon-Khmer linguistic group (see Schliesinger 2003, Sidwell 2005). The sacredness of Pa Maheesak rests on animistic beliefs:

[...] *an old village formerly existed within [Pa Maheesak], but people from all other villages [...] could never see the inhabitants [...]. However, there existed a strong sense of trust and honesty between invisible villagers from [Pa Maheesak] and other villagers from surrounding villages [...]. It is nowadays believed that the monkeys inhabiting the [the forest] are reincarnations of [these] people [...]. People therefore continue to respect the forest and the monkeys (Coudrat 2011a).*

I was told by villagers that one day, the son of the chief of Pa Maheesak village fell from the frame of a weaving loom and died. This incident was considered a sign that the forest spirit (*phii paa*) wanted villagers to leave the “forest family” and so they did. We will return to this image of exodus according to the spirit’s will in a different context in a minute. The protection of the monkeys by the forest spirit means that anyone who cuts trees thicker than an arm or who kills monkeys will inevitably die. Still, villagers regularly use this forest for the collection of what developmentalists call “non-timber forest products” (NTFP) and, according to conservationists, most other wildlife is already gone.

Ban Chaleun, a 20 minute walk from Pa Maheesak, is about seventy years old and today there are more than seven hundred people living in 223 families in around ninety houses. According to the deputy village chief (*naai baan*), the most important economic activities are paddy rice cultivation, gardening, and weaving. The village is situated more or less directly on the former Ho Chi Minh Trail¹³ and its history is directly related to the construction of parts of the Trail. This story starts in the mid/end-1940s, when a man, expelled from another Katang village some kilometres south, founded this village. Newly Chaleun residents adopted the belief in Pa Maheesak’s sacredness from the other Katang in the area.

3.2 *The native frontier – “the monkeys are leaving the forest”*

Until today, livelihoods in Chaleun can be described as largely subsistence-agricultural. A commonality between subsistence-agricultural societies, despite their diversity (Singh 2012, 41), is the stark contrast between civilised and uncivilised space and the positive valorisation of the former. Sarinda Singh argues that a *muang-pa* (town-forest) dialectic is at work in Lao views of the forest, which includes the ethnically non-Lao population of Laos. In accordance with the limited technological means and local dispersion within a subsistence agricultural economy, nature was and still is seen as a threat: unlimited, abundant, and wild – as opposed to the ordered, civilised realm of the village. This attitude is based on a subsistence mode of production, as is the fear of the forest spirit of Pa Maheesak. This makes “animism” not the opposite, but part of a “native” frontier vision,¹⁴ and it calls into question the notion that equates spiritual taboos with an indigenous conservation ethic. The *muang-pa* dialectic is thus to be seen as a sociocultural element in Rehbein’s (2007) sense: a symbolic configuration that persists even though the historic conditions of their emergence have vanished or are about to do so. One answer to the question of why and how sociocultures persist may be found in looking at the *muang-pa* relation: its civilizing impetus seems to link smoothly, though not without uneasiness, to frontier capitalism – without necessarily excluding a belief in spirits.

It seems that fundamental economic and ecological change unfolds via this local “colonialist” projection. A master’s thesis from 2004 still notes that almost all households in Chaleun are engaged in shifting cultivation (88%) and far more than half in hill rice cultivation (60%). The dependence on forest products to supplement nutrition was high. In November 2012, however, villagers told me that only three households are engaged in shifting cultivation. This may be a politically correct answer to the questions of an outsider. But according to development workers, tourism guides, and conservationists, around 2008 people throughout the area started to cut and sell precious wood mainly to Vietnamese traders. Today, there is not much old-growth forest left inside the NPA beyond Pa Maheesak. On my visits, the amount of timber in and around the

¹³ The issue of unexploded ordnance (UXO) is therefore a grave problem in the area.

¹⁴ That things of the *muang* have more auspiciousness than those of the forest (Singh 2012, 45), however, is not necessarily the case (anymore): villagers may also

note that the forest is more important than the village for “without forest no village”, as villagers put it; they may state that they know (now) that forest must be protected but they do not know how to act accordingly regarding their (relatively poor) economic condition.



village was extensive. The relative wealth of the village in general was obvious in newly constructed, relatively big houses, in hand tractors, and Honda scooters under almost every house. On LaoFAB, an internet forum of development experts on Laos, Sarinda Singh mentioned that “[a] powerful Brou leader near [Pa Maheesak] showed his timber-derived wealth in 2 Vigo 4WDs & a massive new house, & it’s not too surprising that other young men see him & want to achieve the same.”

The 180ha of sacred forest appear to be a tiny enclave of “preservation” in the context of massive timber extraction within the NPA. And it seems to be at risk as well. Indeed, on a walk through Pa Maheesak logs can be found thicker than an arm. This may be due to non-locals who do not share the belief about Pa Maheesak, but I doubt that this is necessarily so. Villagers said they don’t know why, but “the monkeys are leaving the forest.” First they were everywhere, then they went to Pa Maheesak, but now they are leaving again. Whatever the specific reasons are, this means that the forest spirit wants the monkeys to leave. Here we meet again the topic of the wilful exclusion of beings from the “forest family” by the forest spirit. The first time, the result was the monkey taboo. This time, this logic means the virtual conversion of spirit land into a logging area, legitimised “animistically”. If the exodus of the monkeys and the taboos attached to them is in the end due to the forest spirit himself, this means two interrelated things: first, there is no need to stick to the cutting taboo so that the materiality of the land (a forested area) can radically change. Secondly, this material change is mediated through the symbolic persistence of the forest spirit. The deforestation does not necessarily imply dis-enchantment.¹⁵ Even though, it was stated by an elder that Ban Chaleun’s rituals regarding Pa Maheesak are becoming simpler. This may indicate a change also in the symbolic relations of villagers to this forest.

The native frontier vision seems to be a force that, around Pa Maheesak, combines with the commercialization of natural resources in the form of highly profitable illicit trade, and animism

seems a pragmatic moment in this subsistence strategy. It tends to “dis-enchant” the sacred forest in the sense that it does not resist, but rather tends to legitimize its material depletion: that it de-forests the land is not simply to be equated with de-sacralisation (for the time being). The fact that the “monkeys are leaving the forest” because the forest spirit wants them to shows, how animism, paradoxically, becomes a medium in the profanation of spirit territory. Therefore, the disappearance of the sacred forest does not imply the secularization of the Lao countryside. It is not surprising that in the process of market integration and urbanization spirit cults are in full bloom, given that the vagaries of nature and of the international economy add to each other, as in places like Ban Chaleun. Animism is widespread in Laos, not only among ethnic minorities.¹⁶ And as part of a local practice to tackle everyday threats, it can contribute to or facilitate depletion of natural resources – or as Butcher puts it with regard to ecotourism:

The existence of a set of environmentally benign ideas about how to live, running counter to an environmentally destructive ‘culture of industrialism’ [...], does not exist in a rural developing world or anywhere else – there is no ‘environmentalism of the poor’ (Butcher 2007, 125).

Non-capitalist religious beliefs and practices result from and in economic conditions of vulnerability vis-à-vis the natural environment and hence do not *per se* resist capitalist nature domination. That does of course not exclude the principal possibility of a “sustainable” link between “local communities” and their “development”.

3.3 The evangelical frontier – “lost people”

How religious beliefs “dis-enchant” certain places becomes even clearer with regard to religious conversion. Together with the transformation of the socio-economic opportunity structure, some locals shift their religious orientations. It is notable how converts throughout Laos are reported to mention economic reasons for their change of religious orientation: the obligation to sacrifice

¹⁵ It is notable that in another locality, among NPA residents from the Makong (see footnote 12) and the Lao ethnic groups, it was stated that the respective village possesses a sacred forest (*pa saksit*) which was turned into a swidden due to land shortages within the NPA; the spirit of that “forest” is still respected, however.

¹⁶ All ecotourism guides as well as a development worker based in the area and all ethnic Lao, expressed their fear of villagers practicing black magic. The

guides, who were dissatisfied with the service of the local guides, did not dare to complain because of this. This is also true with regard to other NPAs, where members of the park authority expressed their fear of *phii boop* (roughly translatable as “witch”) in the villages. Villagers are surely aware and make use of this fear.



cows and buffalos according to the will of an unaccountable spirit represents a serious economic strain. Becoming Buddhist or Christian does not necessarily imply ceasing to be animist, or quitting to partake in animist rituals at all¹⁷ – Jesus is often just the stronger spirit. Contrary to what missionaries might have in mind, “conversion” does not necessarily involve renouncing animism¹⁸ because animism is not so much a matter of faith or conviction but rather a strategy of subsistence.¹⁹

Since 2009, after initial illegal church planting activities by foreigners (according to local police from Japan, the US and “two other countries”), some Katang families around Pa Maheesak have adopted the new faith. It is hard to tell which strand(s) of Christianity is/are taking roots, some fundamentalist evangelical branch seems likely. First-hand information is difficult to gather, but internet research provides some clue about the frontier vision behind evangelization among Katang people: they are regarded as “unreached”, “unengaged”, or even “lost people”. The Joshua Project, “a research initiative seeking to highlight the ethnic people groups of the world with the fewest followers of Christ”, according to its website, links Christian belief to social science: “Accurate, regularly updated ethnic people group information is critical for understanding and completing the Great Commission.” The Great Commission, in turn, refers to the biblical instruction of Jesus:

And Jesus came and said to them: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28: 18–20 English Standard Version).

This call to evangelization is pursued today partly by scientific means, which makes it an exemplary case for the entanglement of “enlightenment” and “mythology” on the evangelical frontier. What the Joshua Project has to say about the

Katang is, therefore, fairly contradictory: on the one hand, the text, copied from a book titled *Faces of the Unreached in Laos* (1999, Asian Minorities Outreach, now Asia Harvest, a Christian ministry), bemoans the assimilation and loss of traditional culture among the Katang in terms of housing, costume and other material aspects, but on the other hand it goes on stating:

Although most Katang have absolutely no awareness of the Gospel or the claims of Jesus Christ, there is one Katang church in Laos, with approximately 100 known believers. They have faced great opposition from local authorities, shamans and community leaders, who believe the presence of the Christians will bring a curse on the village from the spirits they have worshipped for countless generations. Most Katang are too bound by fear to consider converting to Christianity.²⁰

It is, in other words, irrational fear that prevents “most Katang” from embracing the Truth. As rational as some of the rhetoric and methods of the missionaries seem, instead, when facing the alleged superstition of the lost people, monotheists revert to superstition themselves. On prayerguard.net, linked on the project website, a default prayer (which happened to address at that time the “the Katang of Laos” instead of another random “tribe”), puts a spell on the symbolism of a tradition (that is valued only for its material things):

[...] I stand right now in the authority of Jesus, and I bind the spirit of deception that has captured the minds of the Katang of Laos. I resist your influence over them and I command that you release the hold you have on them. They have been purchased by the sacrifice of Christ and you have no right to hold them back from the truth of their salvation. As Moses said to Pharaoh, I say to you, you deceiving spirit, “Let this people go!”²¹

This prayer claims theological superiority over the “spirit of deception” and is itself magic, empowering evangelicals to their claim of Jesus’

¹⁷ Christians would, for example, contribute money to an animist ceremony like the annual caring for the village spirit (*liang phii baan*), but would not partake in the ceremony itself or in the communal meal.

¹⁸ The lines between frontier theology and (what it perceives as) animism are not so clear, however, see footnote 22.

¹⁹ Holt (2009, 237 f.) argues that converted ethnic Lao Christians tend to view their new religion through the animist lens. Similarly, a Lanten shaman, whose wife had been trained as a Christian priest in Vientiane, said that “if you believe in Jesus the forest spirit cannot do

anything (to harm you)”. There is no big difference, according to this individual, between Christianity and animism beyond the fact that cattle is not sacrificed anymore but kept for sale. This suggests that the choice of belief and religious practice is to a large part economically motivated. Or as a Chaleun elder stated with regard to Buddhist converts: “it is cheaper to offer flowers instead of a buffalo”.

²⁰ <http://joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php>.

²¹ http://www.prayerguard.net/index.php?page_id=11&target=Katang+of+Laos&pronoun=6&role=24.



authority. Some of their means seem scientific, but this rationality is intricately bound up with their “spiritual warfare” that recalls the animist roots of the Bible.²² Both logics converge in the image of an economic transaction agreement between supernatural beings (“purchased”). Evidently, Christian proselytization deserves much more attention. It seems, however, that it uses “traditional” as well as “modern” tools to fulfil the call to evangelize the world. Christians from abroad project their own, interest-bound frontier vision onto the place: that of unlimited resources in animist and thus “lost people” yet to be saved by the Good News before the world comes to an end. Being at spiritual war, this kind of evangelization is a true frontier practice that identifies itself with being persecuted and with undermining established authority. Clandestine church-planting, presumably facilitated through ecotourism (section 4) initially, resulted in local- and district-level conflicts over issues of religious freedom.

Given this political charge, as well as these Christians’ antipathy against animist “deception”, this symbolic shift is especially relevant regarding Pa Maheesak. The elders from Chaleun blamed Christians from another village for cutting trees and hunting monkeys there. According to them, they do not believe in the power of the forest spirit anymore. Another conservationist and a development worker also said this. It is also interesting to note that supposedly, it was this other village where the belief in Pa Maheesak originated, and it is there where the new (dis)belief seems to blossom. However, the situation of evangelization around Pa Maheesak still requires further research, especially considering how village elders strategically use village identity (see 4.2). But it seems reasonable to assume that Christian proselytization proactively ties into a context where economic opportunities call for breaking with traditional taboos. The fervour

against spirit deception is a facilitator of, rather than an obstacle to, Pa Maheesak’s “dis-enchantment”.

RE-ENCHANTING FRONTIER VISIONS

So far I have been dealing with frontier visions that, while consisting of both rational and irrational moments, tend to “disenchant” Pa Maheesak as a forest protected by spirits. Let me turn now to re-enchanting projections that are in the same way ridden by rationalities and irrationalities.

4.1 *The conservationist frontier – “peaceful, untouched nature”*

The monkey species considered taboo by local custom, the silvered leaf monkey (locally called *ta’luung*, ຕະລູງ), is also regarded as the rarest and most threatened monkey in Laos. Pa Maheesak is one of the few places in the country where it can be found. Therefore this is one focal area of conservation and research activities. From a conservationist perspective, local customs like the taboos regarding Pa Maheesak protect the monkey. Thus, primatologists try to cash in on local cultural patterns and encourage villagers to uphold this tradition. However, they cannot trust the power of local beliefs anymore, and so, according to a leading Laotian primatologist surveying Pa Maheesak, the strategy is to combine local belief, law, boundary demarcation, and awareness raising activities in order to preserve the place for the monkeys.

A Canadian student, who in a personal communication expressed her fear that the cultural beliefs are being lost, created as part of her PhD project books for kids to be used during school lessons. One book, featuring another threatened

²² See for example Sitton (1998) in the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*: “Evangelicals are often ridiculed because they believe in a literal living devil, who has demons under his control, and who is actively devising detailed strategies to destroy Christians and to keep unreached peoples in bondage. To our detriment, the post-Enlightenment [...] has filtered out much of what the Bible reveals about the spirit world. [...] Since they cannot see demons, and since they cannot hear the shrieks of the rulers of darkness, and since they cannot physically feel the fiery darts of wicked spirits, they convince themselves that none of this really exists. [...] Though invisible, this encounter [between God and Satan, M.K.] in the spirit realm is more important than the conflicts we see with our natural eyes. Therefore, whether facing a jungle witch doctor or a big city bureaucrat, theologians and missiologists agree that we

are up against far more than merely a flesh and blood foe” (ibid., 72). And he sums up concisely: “Spiritual warfare is what happens when believers aggressively take the Gospel into a situation where Satan has a stronghold [...] God always wins. And through the process of spiritual warfare captives are set free. *Deliverance* is the demolishing of Satanic strongholds (2 Cor. 10:3-4). This is done through the proclamation of the Gospel, accompanied by a ‘demonstration of the Spirit’s power’ (1 Cor. 2:3-5[=“I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power”, M.K.]). Deliverance occurs when God breaks the demonic power over a person’s life and enables him to establish a relationship with Christ” (ibid., 73).



monkey species supposedly found in Pa Ma-heesak, tells the story of *Douky, the red-shanked langur* (locally *khaa daeng*, ຂາດດອງ, “red leg”) who lived together with his family and other animals in the forest; “one day men came to disturb the peaceful forest and caught Douky and his mum!” (Coudrat 2011). They brought them to the market where “Douky was separated from his mum forever.” The kids of the family that Douky eventually was brought to persuade their parents to bring him back into the “peaceful” National Protected Area. Almost as if to counterbalance the perceived loss of belief in a sacred forest, the book introduces new myths of nature: for example, the positive valorisation of untouched forests as “peaceful” or the rendering animal life as emotional in order to address the youth as “the future guardians of our planet” (imprint). Rather than being a random notion, this example ties into an ecologically modern symbolic universe, which becomes evident further when comparing an illustration of the book (fig. 1) with a painting on the wall of the US embassy in Vientiane (fig. 2), especially its centre-piece (fig. 3).

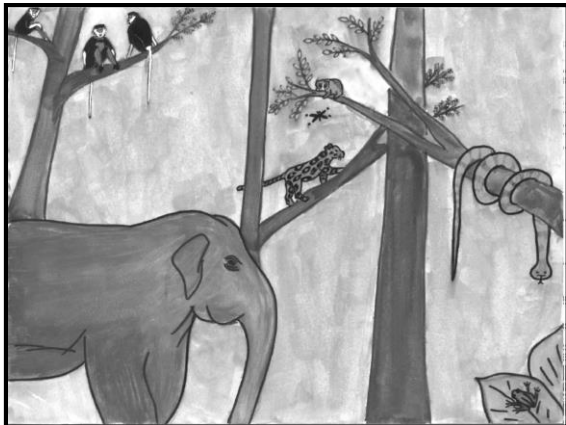


Fig. 1: Illustration in “*Douky, the red-shanked langur*”.



Fig. 2: “Environmental triptych”, US embassy in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR.



Fig. 3: Centre-piece of the “triptych”.

What this comparison shows is a striking similarity in the way nature is envisioned in the respective images. The main protagonists in both pictures are what has been termed charismatic megafauna (Entwistle/Dunstone 2000). Clearly, both representations draw from the same symbolic source. The image of untouched nature inhabited by charismatic megafauna is an irrational (emotional) element that converges with rational moments: current capitalist nature conservation is, to a large extent, driven by campaigns focusing on “flagship species”, charismatic animals that have emotional appeal to potential financial supporters. In this sense, conservation today relies financially on emotions and stereotypes. The embassy painting can be read as an “environmental triptych” on the value of nature. Without wanting to deny the reasonability of nature conservation, my point is that there are symbolic patterns at work that tend to re-enchant a place like Pa Ma-heesak. The vision of nature as a pure, peaceful realm devoid of human disturbance, a hoard of biodiversity which has intrinsic value (e.g. see the Convention on Biological Diversity) is an ideologically clothed economic interest – and one which is not likely to be approved by villagers as it contradicts their lived reality: the notion that the forest is peaceful and best left untouched is foreign to the subsistence lives of the local communities who materially depend on them.

The conservationist frontier vision is thus based on a notion of untouched nature as something to be preserved from the ubiquitous depletion of nature that encroaches into pristine, charismatic wilderness. Rational in the sense that something must be done to counter capitalism’s drive to over-exploitation, this action is based on



a romantic, transfiguring notion of nature. There are many parallels to religion and aesthetics here, such as the focus of conservation on “charismatic species” (Burckhardt 2006, 87f.), such as the silvered leaf monkey. My point is that with regard to the situation around Pa Maheesak, the conservationist frontier seems to work towards a re-enchantment of the forest either by encouraging animist taboos as ways of protecting natural resources or by projecting an image of nature as peaceful and pure.

4.2 *The recreational frontier – “a starkly different world”*

There is no institutionalised link between monkey protection and ecotourism in Pa Maheesak. However, ecotourism as a concept and practice is *per se* part of conservation efforts.²³ Much of what I have said about conservation also applies to the “recreational” frontier. Specific about ecotourism’s frontier vision and fetish is, however, the desire for the actual existence and experience of a different, more authentic world. Authenticity is mainly related to the *appearance* (MacCannell 1999) of non-capitalist, meaning pre-capitalist, conditions, and its experience is central to ecotouristic practices. In the local context of transition, the way tourism constructs Ban Chaleun is strangely typical. A leading guidebook represents local reality as the conventionally exceptional animist ethnic other:

The Katang villagers [...] live in a starkly different world to the Lao Loum [...]. They are not Buddhist, but instead believe strongly in the myriad of spirits that surround them in the forest [...] and as a visitor it is vitally important you don’t break the taboos.

This othering, by itself, is not surprising given the promise of an authentic experience that ecotourism is based on. What is notable, however, is the discrepancy between this projection and reality (see above). Actual touristic practice is situated in this space between projection and reality: for instance, the sacredness of Pa Maheesak and its story are, surprisingly, not exposed and capitalised upon in the make-up of the touristic experience. Similarly, the list of taboos to be followed by the visitor as advertised in the guidebook is hardly put into practice either: rather, the hosts invite tourist to just make themselves at home.

²³ Main objectives for the ecotourism pilot project resemble those everywhere in the country: “to provide an alternative source of income to local communities in order to reduce their reliance on natural resources in the NBCA [NPA]; to provide local communities with an

The authenticity projection is not thus enacted to the full of its potential – and in this point the destination is clearly sold at less than its value (which is due, among other things, to the current lack of capacity on the part of the ecotourism office that runs the tours). But the animist other remains implicitly present.

However, animist identity is also explicitly enacted in Ban Chaleun, even if not regarding the sacred forest. Despite having a substantial amount of Christians and also some Buddhist converts in their own village, for example, villagers in Chaleun will keep on telling paying visitors that all inhabitants are animists. They also seem to attempt to force Christians to renounce their faith, according to a religious freedom NGO. Until some research from my side, even the guides were caught up in this act of self-othering, which in turn influenced the way they presented village life to the tourists. According to the elders, who seem to be decided animists, Christian families are excluded from any tourism-related activity. As touristic actors, villagers thus seem to play the animism card because of the revenues that are derived from maintaining an authentic appearance. Ecotourism thus imagines and reproduces the place as a cultural frontier where people “still” live untouched by the mainstream culture and modernity. Katang culture, and by implication Pa Maheesak, are an index of actually existing authenticity. The authenticity gaze, answered by local self-othering, enchants the place with a quasi-sacred aura.

KATANG-STYLE *BASI* – ENACTING A GLOBAL COMMUNITAS?

But there are several levels or dimensions of authenticity involved in ecotourism. How “religion” becomes intertwined with commercialism in a way that defies a simplistic equation of commoditization with inauthenticity is exemplified in the *basi* ritual for the tourists in Ban Chaleun. It is clearly a staged, commodified event for the paying visitor and an opportunity for the hosts to display their animist identity. But it is one of the most popular parts of the tour. One tour participant explains why the *basi* was one of the highlights of the tour:

I had the feeling that at the ceremony the people were being authentic [...] when they were

economic stake in the NBCA and to demonstrate to them the value of conserving these resources; to generate a modest income, which will be used for NBCA management and conservation activities”.



singing and chanting, even though the language barrier was obviously a problem for us, there, you know, with the alcohol flowing, I didn't have the feeling that they were just putting up a show for us but that they were enjoying it too. Because maybe it was a break from their daily routine for themselves, I don't know. But I didn't have the feeling that this was anything that was staged. So that's what I liked.

The meanings of staged-ness and authenticity and the relation between the two become complicated here. The Katang *basi* is not a complete touristic invention. Rather, its ritual content is linked already to issues of travel, departure and returning, and the touristic commodification does not stand against this - on the contrary. It therefore has a somewhat "hybrid" structure. It is, to a large part, "traditional" in the sense that at least certain ritual elements do not have an origin in ecotourism, such as when village leaders tie threads of yellow raw silk around the wrists of visitors, invoking the village spirit (*phii baan*),²⁴ to whom a chicken is offered by the ritual community. This is followed by fortune-telling from the chin of the chicken and the collective consumption of its meat. Now the ritual enters into different kinds of acts: improvised Katang songs are chanted to the sound of the *khaen* (Lao "pan flute"), accompanied by the continuous circulation of rice whisky - and contribution of songs by tourists from their respective countries. The rather excessive consumption of alcohol makes the ritual typically "local", but it also relates to very general, global ways of celebrating together. What is enacted in this part of the Katang *basi*, in other words, is a temporary global-local *communitas*. This ritual structure implies that we can distinguish the enactment of different notions of authenticity: first, an exclusive part, in which animist local community is enacted, and second, an inclusive part, which integrates the tourists as equally contributing to the ritual.

Despite being commoditised as a service, hosts as well as guests truly enjoy this part of the visit (as opposed to other, awkward experiences, e.g. not sharing meals, not being able to communicate). The commercial nature of the ritual does not matter much during the event. The "religious" content of wrist-tying as a ritual of "communion" is not necessarily contradicted or inhibited by the fact that it is done for money. It serves the ecotourist's (quasi-?) religious longing for experiencing a community with animism and it reconfirms

and refreshes traditions such as Katang *basi*. Although it is a commodifying force, ecotourism does not necessarily de-spirit the *basi*, fixated as it is on authenticity. I suggest that this ceremony shows how easily local tradition and global accumulation can connect. This collective social practice is commoditised as part of a profane service agreement; it would not take place without payment for the experience. Yet the specific form of this commoditised social relation, the direct interaction in the framework of an animistic ritual, manages to create a sense of communion that transcends the differences between hosts and guests. Thus, capitalism is embedded in local traditions, but local traditions also become embedded in generalised commodity exchange as capitalist entrepreneurs enter into or spring up from a specific area.

It should not be forgotten, therefore, that this ceremony is the result of and an active moment in the integration of Pa Maheesak and Chaleun into a regime of global capital accumulation, which ascribes to local Katang the roles of service providers, biodiversity stewards, and poachers while tourists are mere sources of revenue. As a part of ecotourism, it thus reaffirms and refreshes all the tensions and contradictions in and around ecotourism precisely through the "anti-structure" it creates (Turner 1969, 129). The next day, payment for the *basi* service proceeds somewhat surreptitiously and rushed.

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN LOCAL RATIONALITIES AND GLOBAL MYTHS

In this article, I was only able to scratch the surface of the dynamics converging in this "relational resource frontier". I wished to emphasize that social transformation in Laos is not simply comprised of cold calculations from the outside, overrunning local spiritual harmony with nature. Instead, the commercialization of natural resources is interfused with mythology as well. The traditional sacredness of Pa Maheesak is at threat, indeed, but not least by "indigenous" frontier visions. The general dependence of subsistence peasants on, and their vulnerability towards "uncivilised" forests entails their civilization as soon as conditions, material aspirations, and opportunities allow. This indigenous frontier vision seems to be prone to "dis-enchant" Pa Maheesak, although it happens on "religious" grounds; either in an animistic way (the spirit of the forest wants the monkeys to leave, and with them, the

not mess with spirits", invoking the village spirit must be seen as a "serious" act and not *just* a show.

²⁴ It is clear that invoking and inviting the village spirit cannot be a sole staging of culture: since "you do



only reason why there is still an old-growth forest there); or by way of religious conversion. Christianity, while not exactly a rationalizer (although it uses scientific means, such as ethnographic data and evangelization indicators), seems to work towards a “dis-enchantment” of Pa Maheesak, too, because it aims at freeing the Katang from the Satanic “spirits of deception” (whose existence and reality it affirms). In turn, the most “secular” forces depicted here, conservation and tourism, appear to be working in the opposite direction: to the extent that they value authenticity or untouchedness, they are re-enchanting Pa Maheesak and the local culture. This does not contradict the fact that, as we saw in ecotourism, animism becomes instrumental in a “modern”, abstract way: not the “deals” with specific spirits in order to handle everyday issues are the central features but that “animism” as authenticity is acted out for the economic (exchange) value it has on the market of symbolic goods.

As we saw, certain arrangements, like the Katang-style *basi*, may at times manage to produce a limited liminal space where an inclusive sense of authenticity (fun together, direct relationship, communal drunkenness) is created despite - or rather through - the capitalist service relation, thereby confusing clear-cut binaries of all sorts. This is a cold comfort, of course, in the context of virtual universal depletion and the dollarization of nature and culture, in the framework of which the fate of Pa Maheesak must be understood. A more comprehensive analysis of symbolic-material conversion thus needs to bring domination back in more explicitly than was feasible in this

paper. The conflicts and alliances between the diverse frontier visions depicted here need further elaboration as well. Any pondering upon the social reality of the frontier, however, will have to transcend disciplinary boundaries between sociology, ethnology, geography, history, etc., but without sliding into conceptual randomness. Multiple lenses, a “kaleidoscope” (Rehbein 2013), and critical reflection of assumptions are preconditions for bringing about better alternatives than the conventional one, which sees no other role for “ethnic tribes” than to keep them living close to “nature”, whose natural guardians they are - or into which they can be turned with some incentive. In fact, a “sustainable” alternative “which appropriates and perpetuates existence as a schema” (Horkheimer/ Adorno 2002, 21), might not be an alternative at all.

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