

JONATHAN PADWE

*Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories: Jarai and Other Lives in the Cambodian Highlands.*

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. 280 pages.

For over twenty-five years, I have been interacting with people and landscapes in northeastern Cambodia. During the mid-2000s, when I was conducting my doctoral research with the ethnic Brao people, I met Jonathan Padwe, who was similarly conducting his doctoral research with the Jarai. I was therefore eager to read the culmination of over a decade of research included in *Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories*.

*Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories* begins with an anecdote that effectively introduces the nature of Padwe's interactions with the Jarai, and in particular, how highlanders in northeastern Cambodia often view and interact with nature, in ways that seem quite normal and logical to them but are sometimes surprising to international audiences. He frames the book in relation to landscape and memory, using the concept of intertwined assemblages to understand nature-society relations. Padwe is explicit concerning his method:

The book's approach begins from the recognition that, ironically, much writing on landscape and memory to date leaves the landscape inert, a blank canvas upon which humans inscribe meaning. In contrast to this overly anthropocentric rendering of landscape, the stories narrated here follow Jarai cosmology in emphasizing the agency of the natural world, its participation in the production of life, and, therefore, its contribution to processes of social change. (7)

After reflexively outlining his theoretical framework and research approach, including his thinking about temporality, chapter 1 provides background

*Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 16, Issue 3, pps. 153–156. ISSN 1559-372X, electronic 1559-3738. © 2021 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press' Rights and Permissions website, at <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2021.16.3.153>.

about the little-known highlands of northeastern Cambodia. Padwe introduces the main Jarai village where his research is focused—a small community near the border with Vietnam where swidden cultivation is the main means of livelihood.

Chapter 2 provides historical information about the Jarai in Cambodia and Vietnam and their relationship with other ethnic groups found in the highlands of northeastern Cambodia. As a Brao specialist, I was particularly pleased that Padwe appropriately acknowledges the dominant role that the Jarai often held during pre-European times, especially when ethnic Lao people, operating under Siamese tutelage, greatly influenced the highlands through their support for the slave trade. Indeed, the Brao, who live just west of the Jarai, sometimes remember having their villages raided by other Brao and, more importantly, by those who were sometimes thought of as “Jarai giants.” Padwe might have added that many of these slaves were traded for valuable musical gongs and large ancient ceramic jars used for making rice beer. These were among the most coveted items in highland society until just a few decades ago. Crucially, and in support of one of Padwe’s key arguments, landscapes are indeed animate in highland cosmologies, but so are the most important of these gongs and jars, which are believed to have souls that demand respect to avoid facing their wrath.

Chapter 3 focuses first on a story about a young Jarai woman who emerged from the forest in Ratanakiri in January 2007 and was characterized by the media as a “jungle woman.” Padwe uses this story as an entry point for exploring how Europeans and lowland Cambodians have long essentialized and exoticized the Jarai and other highlanders, something that I have also noticed, even quite recently, including in relation to the new category of “Indigenous peoples.”

Chapter 4 explains how northeastern Cambodia was an early base for the Khmer Rouge, before the region became engulfed in what Padwe refers to as the American War in Vietnam. This includes considering how the development of rubber plantations in Ratanakiri significantly contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge in the province.

Chapter 5, titled “Ecologies of Invasion,” engages with ideas about the introduction of non-native species, such as *Mimosa pigra*, which is believed to have arrived during the time of American military activities. This thorny

undesirable species, known in Jarai as *droi Mi* [American thorny plant] and as *Amerik* [the American plant] to the Brao, links plant life with the history of American involvement during the war, entangling war and memory with plant life.

Chapter 6 deals with the history and memory associated with Khmer Rouge control of northeastern Cambodia and especially the regime's short-lived attempt to radically reorganize how the Jarai farmed by removing them from the hills and forcing them into harsh lowland co-operatives focused on regimented and authoritarian lowland rice cultivation.

In Chapter 7, Padwe delves further into the topic of agrodiversity in Cambodia, particularly focusing on rice diversity. The dramatic political transition brought on by the Khmer Rouge began in 1970—even before April 17, 1975, when the capital city of Phnom Penh fell—when Lon Nol's rightist military withdrew from northeastern Cambodia, thus allowing the US Air Force to heavily bomb the region until 1973. I initially found the extended discussion about the reintroduction of diverse varieties of rice to the Cambodian lowlands during the 1980s somewhat out of place, considering the focus of the book on the highlands and the Jarai. In the end, however, everything comes together nicely, and I endorse Padwe's conclusion that gaining new seed varieties is commonplace in northeastern Cambodia, along with the abandoning of underperforming genetic plant material.

I would have liked to have read more about how the increasingly capitalistic agricultural system in Cambodia and elsewhere in the region is threatening agrodiversity, maybe even more than learning about the agricultural revolution imposed by the Khmer Rouge. Rice exporters are increasingly demanding uniformity in agricultural production, something that is rapidly leading to the abandonment of indigenous varieties of rice. It is true, however, that the Jarai with whom Padwe worked are not yet quite as integrated into the globalized market economy as other lowland farmers in Cambodia, but they too can be expected to gradually move in that direction.

Ultimately, I highly recommend this book. The stories that Padwe narrates are a pleasure to read and capture a sense of the world in which

the highlanders of northeastern Cambodia live. They are also in line with my own experiences interacting with highlanders and their landscapes in northeastern Cambodia. *Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories* feels like a truly authentic account of Padwe's interactions with the Jarai and their animated world.

*Ian G. Baird, University of Wisconsin-Madison*