Development as Tragedy: The Asian Development Bank and Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia

Peter J. Hammer

Introduction

History is rife with conflicts between indigenous peoples and outsider groups. These confrontations have a timeless and often tragic quality. They are revealing because they juxtapose sometimes radically different manifestations of the human condition, and highlight tensions between divergent and often contradictory worldviews. While past conflicts played out under the rubric of colonialism or Manifest Destiny, today’s confrontations are undertaken in the name of economic development. One such drama is underway in the Northeast Provinces of Cambodia, with substantial funding from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). But contemporary development stories are different from older stories of colonization. Development agencies are exporting aid and technical assistance, with the dual objectives of market building and state building. Increasingly, these initiatives have social as well as economic components. Modern development comes complete with roads, schools and health clinics, along with pledges to reduce poverty. This is not all. Indigenous communities are now invited to participate in the process of their own development. Where such participation is not possible, development agencies will expend additional resources to build the indigenous capacity to do so.

This paper focuses on “development” as embodied in the policies and practices of international agencies like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. It examines economic development as its own distinct set of beliefs and attempts to frame and justify a narrative of “development as tragedy.” Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia face other obvious threats, such as land grabbing, deforestation and environmental degradation. These threats reflect the more naked avarice of economic markets and a predatory state. As such, these threats are more consistent with a narrative of “development as exploitation.” The narratives of exploitation and tragedy are complementary and not competitive. Each teaches different lessons. A tragedy in the Aristotelian sense is a drama that invokes deep feelings of fear and pity in the audience. The sense of tragedy is driven by the protagonist’s adherence to a mistaken set of briefs that inevitably condemns his conduct to have disastrous consequences, foreseeable to the audience but often not the actor.

To reveal the tragedy of modern development, it is necessary to make transparent the mistaken set of beliefs (the tragic flaw) underlying these initiatives. This is not an easy task, because our views about development, as well as our perceptions
of the “other,” are constructed within the context of our own society. To us, the need for development appears self-evident and beyond question. We are developed. Indigenous Peoples are undeveloped. The appropriate policy is to make them more like us. There is a strong internal logic to this analysis. It is this internal logic, however, that begins to elucidate the mistaken beliefs driving the tragedy. The German concept of weltanschauung, or worldview, provides a framework to understand the tragic nature of these programs. ADB policies toward indigenous peoples in Cambodia trigger an unavoidable conflict between disparate worldviews. That the indigenous tribes have different languages, traditions and belief systems (worldviews) is taken as obvious. We see their differences. But like fish unaware of water, members of the dominant society are largely unaware of the significance of their own worldview and its impact on their policies and perceptions.

This article critically evaluates certain ADB Reports on indigenous peoples to learn not so much what the Reports teach about native tribes, but what they reveal about the worldview and mistaken beliefs of the ADB and modern industrial societies. The first report is Indigenous Peoples/Ethnic Minorities and Poverty Reduction: Cambodia (June 2002) (hereinafter Poverty Report). The second report is Health and Education Needs of Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion (2001) (hereinafter Health & Education Report). These documents are used as artifacts. Theories about economic development act like mirrors, revealing important insights into the belief systems of modern societies. A careful analysis of the Reports illustrates how the problems of indigenous peoples, are often mere projections of the ADB's own beliefs, beliefs that are themselves largely driven by the Bank's underlying economic models. Framing the problem as a conflict between disparate worldviews further reveals the limitations of participation as a policy tool. Meaningful participation in this setting is probably not possible. If participation is possible, it would have to be approached in a very different manner than it is currently being practiced.

Section II introduces the concept of worldviews and examines their social functions. Worldviews provide a framework for comparing and contrasting different belief systems. Section III deconstructs the ADB Reports to see what they reveal about the beliefs of the authors. The article argues that the ADB's own worldview so constrains its perceptions that it is unable to meaningfully consider and address the distinct needs of indigenous peoples. Instead of trying empathetically to engage these people on their terms, the ADB projects its own beliefs upon these communities. While the unique cultures and traditions of these communities are acknowledged, these attributes are modeled as “constraints” to development that must be confronted and overcome. The ADB's cultural sensitivity is for
instrumental purposes only, affecting how policies might be implemented, but not what policies should be pursued. Section IV looks at the implications of the foregoing on the prospects of engaging indigenous peoples in the process of their own development. Understanding development as a conflict between worldviews reveals the fundamental limitations of participation as a policy tool.

Worldviews and Their Relationship to Development

To give life to the narrative of “development as tragedy,” one must make visible and knowable that which is often invisible or ignored. At its most general level, this paper argues that culture matters. But while the claims that developers and indigenous peoples have different cultures and that planning that is “logical” within the developer’s culture can be disastrous for indigenous peoples may be obvious to anthropologists, these claims are radical and even possibly “unknowable” for many development economists. Indeed, the entire modern development agenda is organized as if these claims are not true (or that the claims do not even exist).

The concept of worldviews can serve as a vehicle to make these issues more visible. It is doubtful that an anthropologist would resort to the concept of worldviews as the appropriate frame to assess the belief systems of indigenous peoples. The concept of worldviews, however, is a surprisingly useful unit of analysis for our purposes, because it can be made to fit well within the rhetoric and discourse of development economics. Worldviews deal with complicated belief systems at a fairly abstract and conceptual level. They force holistic and integrative thinking. Worldviews permit simplistic aggregate comparisons (a virtue from an economic if not an anthropological perspective). Further, worldviews function as a bridging framework between economics and anthropology. While simplistic at some levels, it also permits the blanks to be filled in with more specialized expert analysis. Nevertheless, in the discussion of worldviews, it is just as important to become conscious of our own modern industrial worldview as it is to become aware of the pre-modern worldviews of indigenous communities.

The Role and Function of Worldviews

Every society has a worldview. Worldviews are socially constructed symbolic matrices that permit individuals to make sense of their world by providing a framework to process their experiences. A worldview is a network of beliefs that helps individuals to understand themselves, their society and their place within their society. When functioning well, worldviews serve two objectives. Worldviews are supposed to (1) establish order, and (2) provide meaning. Healthy worldviews perform well along both dimensions. Worldviews that begin to crumble or fall into
disrepair are no longer able to provide order or meaning for members of the community.

By their very nature, worldviews are complex and multilayered. Given the range of individual needs and experience, worldviews operate on multiple, overlapping domains. Balcomb (2005) contends that worldviews must create functional understandings with regard to time, space, epistemology, ontology and kinetology. Understandings of these concepts vary widely between societies. For example, there are different ways to understand time. In western societies, time is viewed in a linear manner. The past is behind. The present is now. The future is ahead. In the west, this linear notion of time is combined with optimistic notions of progress. Time and history have positive gradients. According to this view, things are continuously getting better as society becomes more and more developed. This is not the only possible view of time. Particularly in agrarian societies, time is often perceived in a cyclical, not a linear manner. Seasons and individuals are in a constant process of coming into being and going out of being. Among other things, as will be argued later, cyclical views of time affect one’s concept of order and progress. Views of space and causation are also contestable. Western views of space are entirely physical and material. Other societies, particularly pre-modern societies, view space as a domain where the physical and the spiritual interact within the same sphere. Different notions of space anticipate different notions of causation – what makes things happen and how one can influence events. Correspondingly, worldviews also construct their own internal understandings of epistemology (reflecting theories of how we know things), ontology (reflecting theories of being) and kinetology (reflecting theories of power and agency). Every society weaves together its own stories, traditions and practices conveying mutual understandings of how and why things are. This combined network of beliefs constitutes that society’s worldview.

Differences in the content of particular worldviews can be profound. Even so, all worldviews serve similar functional roles within each given society. Joseph Campbell (2002) stresses four main social functions of belief systems: 1) a mystical or existential function; 2) a cosmological function; 3) a sociological function; and 4) a psychological function. The objective of the existential function is to reconcile the mystery of life with itself. The cosmological function seeks to explain the causal working of the universe. The sociological function establishes sets of social norms and rules governing human conduct and interaction in a society. Finally, the psychological function guides individuals through significant common life events – birth, adolescence, marriage, aging and death. While a simple listing of these functions makes them appear separate and discrete, in practice, the beliefs, institutions and traditions underlying these functions are intertwined in
complicated ways.

Bourdier (2006) illustrates the multiple overlapping roles of beliefs among certain indigenous peoples of Cambodia.

The function of the myth is multiple. Some, reserved for children, have an educational and practical value; others offer a view that makes it possible to understand the world and the place occupied by man in the cosmos. Some explain the behavioral norm particular to a specific group (food prohibition, interdiction of hunting, or a cultural practice for a clan among the Jorai and Tampaun); yet others evoke prominent events that were decisive in the evolution of a group and justify a current situation through an act committed by the ancestors. (Bourdier at 209).

In Campbell's terms, it is easy to envision the overlapping existential, cosmological, sociological and psychological functions of these beliefs.

So far, this has been a fairly abstract discussion. Anticipating our discussion of economic development, it is helpful to distinguish aspects of a modern and a pre-modern worldview. Much of this analysis borrows from Anthony Balcomb's thoughtful essay (Balcomb 2005). Any attempt to summarize a worldview will, by its very nature, be overly simplistic. Nevertheless, the following descriptions convey some essential truths that help ground our intuitions. Richard Tarnas (1991: 282) describes the Enlightenment worldview influencing the west as follows:

And so between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the West saw the emergence of a newly self-conscious and autonomous human being curious about the world, confident in his own judgment, skeptical of orthodoxies, rebellious against authority, responsible for his own beliefs and actions, enamored of the classical past but even more committed to a greater future, proud of his humanity, conscious of his distinctiveness from nature, aware of his artistic powers as individual creator, assured of his intellectual capacity to comprehend and control nature, and altogether less dependent on an omnipotent God.

This is a highly individualistic, man-centric view that highlights the material over the spiritual and separates man not only from God, but from nature. The modern worldview further tends to place God largely outside of nature.

The tenets of the modern worldview stand in sharp contrast with the worldview of many pre-modern societies. Kwame Bediako (1995) distills Harold Turner's six characteristics of primal or pre-modern belief systems.

*First* a sense of kinship with nature, in which animals and plants, no less than human beings, had their own spiritual existence and place in the universe as interdependent parts of a whole...

*Second* the deep sense that man is finite, weak and impure or sinful and in need of a power not his own...
The conviction that man is not alone in the universe, for there is a spiritual world of powers or beings more powerful and ultimate than himself. . . .

The belief that man can enter into a relationship with the benevolent spirit-world and so share in its powers and blessings. . . .

The acute sense of the reality of the afterlife, a conviction which explains the important place of ancestors or the living dead . . .

The sixth feature is that man lives in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. Accordingly, the physical acts as a vehicle for spiritual power whilst the physical realm is held to be patterned on the model of the spiritual world beyond . . . (Bediako 1995; 93-95, quoting Turner 1977).

While brief, these descriptions begin to suggest many ways that modern and pre-modern worldviews differ in their conceptions of self, time, causation, being and knowledge, as well as the possible complex mixing of physical and spiritual spaces.

Beliefs in the pre-modern worldview tend to be more holistic and integrated, acknowledging higher degrees of interdependence between constituent parts. In contrast, compartmentalization, independence and separability are defining characteristics of the modern worldview. These differences in beliefs correspond to differences in social organization. In modern western society, there is substantially greater specialization and differentiation in social organization. In traditional societies, there is much less social and economic specialization. These differences affect how one thinks and how one perceives the world. The greater the differentiation and compartmentalization, the more independent parts become from each other. One implication is that change in beliefs and practices in one domain can be made in the modern realm without necessarily triggering cascading changes throughout the rest of the system. Indeed, extreme differentiation itself encourages a mind-set that becomes increasingly comfortable with interchangeable matrices of beliefs made of discrete parts. For example, there can be substantial changes in modern theories regarding elementary education, or corporal punishment, or the causes of particular diseases or even the existence of dark matter in the universe without substantial implications for other sets of beliefs and practices.

Extreme interchangeability of discrete beliefs is not likely to be a characteristic of more traditional societies. Traditional societies have less social specialization and more tightly integrated sets of belief systems. In this setting, one can imagine that it is less possible to isolate and change one particular aspect of social practice or belief, without triggering potentially far-reaching and unanticipated consequences in other domains. This difference is worth noting because the contemporary development expert is trained in the modern mind-set. The economist is trained in
economics. The education expert is trained in education, and perhaps even a sub-specialty in that field. The health expert is a sub-specialist in health. The development tendency is to look at parts inside of parts. An appreciation of the significance of worldviews is, in part, an admonishment to look at the whole and to consider the importance of interdependence and interconnections. Changes in isolated economic, health or educational practices will have more than localized consequences. For example, there is considerable concern regarding indigenous communities’ lack of knowledge about the role that mosquitoes play in transmitting the parasite causing malaria (Brown et al. 2003). Without doubt, health in these communities could be improved by a better understanding of how malaria is transmitted and by taking appropriate prophylactic measures. At the same time, one must also wonder about the potentially far reaching and profound implications that these new ideas about health, illness and biological causation might have on other aspects of traditional belief systems.

Worldviews and Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia

This section focuses on indigenous peoples in Cambodia to give the reader a better appreciation of their lives and beliefs. A comment on methods is appropriate. I am a lawyer and an economist, not an anthropologist. This section draws heavily upon Frederic Bourdier’s work *The Mountain of Precious Stones* (2006). A striking feature of these indigenous societies is their geographic compactness. These are self-consciously small, self-contained communities. An empathetic engagement with these peoples unavoidably raises fundamental questions about the propriety of the contemporary development agenda. What is the fundamental logic of roads, trade and integration into the national and international economy for a people who have historically defined themselves in terms of their isolation, independence and self-sufficiency?

Bourdier’s work illustrates many similarities between Turner’s description of pre-modern societies and the worldviews of indigenous communities in Cambodia. The belief systems of these societies reflect a complex intermingling of the physical and the spiritual relating to both time and space, all of which are intimately connected to the natural environment. In the beginning and in the end, these are people of the forests.

The forest is, in effect, the realm of the souls of the recently deceased persons, ancestors and, above all, of spirits and god the creator. The supernatural entities, which are most often identified and localized, dwell in differentiated spaces that give rise to a genuine symbolic geography of places. An extremely rich and complex mythology explains why the supreme god, unable to himself watch over human society, created the spirits of the forest and lent them esoteric powers so they could
control the machinations of men, in particular respective of nature. Accordingly, the land
traditionally belongs to no one; rather, it is temporarily “loaned” to those whom the
spirits, under certain conditions, give their consent. (Bourdier at 118).

In sharp contrast with the modern worldview, man is not separate from the
gods and spirits, and the spirits are not separate from nature. Furthermore, man is
a part of, not apart from nature. “Their way of life is founded on a recognition of
the interdependence between themselves, their environment and their relation to
the spirits and the supernatural forces they believe to inhabit the surroundings.”
(Bourdier at 233). These beliefs are not compartmentalized under the heading of
religion (differentiation according to belief) and exercised only on one day of the
week (differentiation according to time) in a special building called a church
(differentiation according to space). The indigenous beliefs are more holistic and
influence all important decisions. Take, for example, choosing a new site for
planting.

The choice of a site takes two factors into account: a terrain that is suitable in terms of
agronomy and a place where the spirits of the forest accept human intrusion. These two
considerations may appear to be independent of each other, but in reality they are one.
The logic of the Tampaun Weltanschauung does not discern nature as an autonomous
sphere in which the presence of man is only perceivable through his knowledge of it.
(Bourdier at 119).

Like all worldviews, these beliefs afford not only a sense of order, but they also
provide the essential source of meaning for the individual and the community.
Material and immaterial considerations are an integral part of the daily and cyclic life of
the Tampaun. But, rather than being evidence of the fear arising in a human society
unable to understand its world in a “rational” manner, their considerations, quite on the
contrary lend meaning to life. The rituals signify to man that the place he occupies in
his natural environment is not simply that of a predator or of someone whose mission
is to master and conquer at any price the savage condition. (Bourdier at 124).

This meaning is maintained by and reflected in complex sets of social practices
designed to mediate relations between the spiritual and material realms.
Villages function according to customary notions of obligations of the ancestors and to
the family, and of respect toward the spiritual forces inhabiting the environment. Such
a customary law, stewarded by elders, means that the spiritual forces have the power
to intervene in human affairs and can afflict the well-being of the family, the group or
the whole village if duties and ceremonies have not been properly conducted accord-
ing to tradition. (Bourdier at 234).

There are many obvious points of contrast between the worldviews of
indigenous persons in Cambodia and those of modern industrialized countries. Time provides just one example. Modern views of time are linear. The past runs in one direction, the future in another. This is consistent with a belief system that is open rather than closed. It also anticipates social and economic tendencies that are outwardly directed and expansionistic, as well as gives birth to a notion of progress that itself entails constant, contrasting comparisons between past, present and future. Pre-modern concepts of time are cyclical not linear, reinforced by the seasons and the agricultural calendar. Cyclical understandings of time produce very different sets of intuitions and systems of logic. To begin with, the future will be much like the past. Time is not a linear arrow pointing upward and outward. Time and life are circles. If time is a circle, then looking back to the past for guidance makes just as much sense, if not more, as looking forward. This has normative implications as well. Things should be as they always have been. These systems tend to be more closed, than open. The focus is directed toward maintaining an equilibrium with the environment and the agricultural cycle. Social reproduction in historic form, rather than an outwardly directed notion of progress provides the underlying ethos.

Similar contrasting comments can be made about notions of space, knowledge and causation. Space in the modern realm is exclusively physical space. Causation is physical causation. Science dominates religion within the larger system of beliefs, leaving the spiritual to fit awkwardly, if at all, in the gaps left unfilled by the physical and social sciences. Knowledge is rational knowledge, subject to hypothesis making, experimentation and falsification. In contrast, space and causation in the pre-modern realm is an indistinguishable blend of the physical and spiritual. Epistemology is not limited to empirical understandings. This produces a radically different orientation to one's sense of self, community and the environment.

There are less obvious ways in which the modern and pre-modern worldviews differ. The pre-modern worldview is largely concerned with explaining and controlling uncertainty in the physical environment. In contrast, the modern worldview focuses on explaining and controlling uncertainty produced by the human environment with its often hyper-complex constellations of social institutions (North 2005). Modern societies embody greater degrees of specialization, differentiation and compartmentalization. Modern “means” are increasingly dissociated from modern “ends”. This phenomenon necessitates increasingly abstract forms of thinking, and therefore the need for constant planning. There is a greater tendency to view components in isolation. Parts are separated from wholes. Parts, whether it is physical items, values, beliefs or institutions, can be put together and taken apart, assembled, disassembled and reassembled in different form. In this building-block-world, interchangeability, equivalence and functional
substitutability become the order of the day.

The contrasts in social structure between modern industrial societies and indigenous communities in Cambodia are also striking. The scale of these vernacular communities is not just small; the internal dynamics are largely self-contained and not outwardly directed. The social unit is the village. Even villages sharing the same culture and tribal affiliation are not linked in any formal confederation (although kinship ties, mutual support and defense links do exist). The sheer number of distinct peoples with distinct backgrounds, cultures and languages (coming from different linguistic families) in a relatively small area is further testimony to the intensely local and non-expansive nature of their social structures. These are geographically compact societies. This does not mean that there is no interaction amongst groups or with the outside world. There have been trade and occasional warfare going back for centuries. These societies are not closed in that sense. But in contrast with outwardly-directed industrial societies of the modern world, the contacts that these indigenous communities have with each other and with the outside world are not the activities of the business speculator, the conqueror or the missionary. Their entire world, physically and spiritually, is grounded in the compact local environment.

Again, Bourdier provides greater content to this description. At the heart of life in these communities is a relatively small village, the geographic locations of which will itself change over time, with shifting forms of swidden agriculture. “The Tampuan are scattered in villages with 50 to 500 inhabitants. Each village, which is subject to regular resettlement, has a territory composed of the group of houses, the surrounding forests and the cultivated fields.” (Bourdier at 117). These are self-consciously isolated communities linked to themselves and to the environment, but not formally linked to other villages or to the outside world. This is a radically different way of structuring life and understanding the world than what is embodied in the modern worldview. Among other things, within this mind-set there is no logic to western roads.

Generally speaking, the villages, which are distant from each other, are almost never located alongside roads; a settlement surrounded by high forest and protected from all human activity is clearly preferred. The classical configuration of the village area in Ratanakiri is thus a grouping of houses situated in a vast forest zone with regulated, sacred spaced where the felling of trees is prohibited, and other spaces can be exploited for a limited period, provided that certain rituals are carried out. (Bourdier at 197).

Within this setting, the governing ethos is one of maintaining equilibrium with the environment. It is not an ethos of growth and expansion. This has implications for the selection of agricultural techniques and the choice of appropriate tools and
Moreover, it appears to be clear that the use of a technology reduced to its minimum, by way of choice and not a constraint of civilization, curbs excessive reliance on the products of nature and also contributes to the maintenance of equilibrium between social and natural ecosystems. (Bourdier at 7).

The notions of private and property are also appropriately circumscribed. In this context, the notions of property, hoarding and speculation are nearly inexistent; the only goods the families possess are the objects that can be taken with them (gongs, tools, clothing), although most personal belongings are destroyed or buried at death. (Bourdier at 124).

These same dynamics resist specialization and divisions of labor as dominant forms of social organization. It goes almost without saying that money plays no role within these traditional societies.

Rather than relying on an anthropological definition that is in the end abstract, it is interesting to look into the manner in which, for example, a Taumpaun perceives himself and acts so as to validate his “Tampuanness.” In this case the main facts observed or mentioned by them are: ... an ability to do everything oneself (there are no specialists apart from blacksmiths and shamans), a refusal by men and women to consider wage labor with restricting hours, [and] a freedom to organize one’s work ...

(Bourdier at 198).

No matter how geographically compact, few societies can be completely isolated from outside contact. Indeed, interaction between indigenous peoples in Cambodia with larger neighboring societies has a long history. In the 1960s, Prince Sihanouk made a sustained effort to extend the bureaucratic reach of the central state to cover these remote Provinces and to integrate these peoples into Cambodian society. The policies of the Sihanouk period bore a striking resemblance to the development agenda of today. The goal of the post-independence Sihanouk regime was to integrate these isolated communities into the larger Cambodian state and society. Villages were relocated along roads and rivers. Practitioners of highland swidden agriculture were introduced to lowland techniques of wet rice cultivation. State schools were constructed and indigenous children were taught a Khmer curriculum in the Khmer language. This period is not remembered fondly by the elders of today. “[S]ome villagers remembered this period very negatively as a time when they ‘had to do like Khmer,’ stating that they preferred the relative freedom they have experienced in more recent years.” (Poverty Report at 7, quoting Bourdier (1996)).

Sihanouk’s policies were disrupted by the broadening of the US-Vietnam War.
US bombing of the areas occupied by these indigenous communities was intense. Given its isolation, the Khmer Rouge (as well as the North Vietnamese) used these same territories for strategic purposes. After gaining victory in 1975, the Khmer Rouge banned distinct cultural practices and the use of native languages, and they forced the relocation of most villages. As a testimony to the resilience of their traditions and the relative freedom wrought by isolation, after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, most of these people returned to their traditional lands and resumed their traditional practices. In the 1980s, the international isolation of the Vietnamese-installed government in Phnom Penh and the relatively low levels of economic development in the rest of Cambodia permitted the space and opportunity for the revival of these geographically compact indigenous communities.

Ironically, this respite was brought to an end by the relative political and economic success of the UN-sponsored peace process of the early 1990s that opened Cambodia up to the international community and the dynamics of globalization. Whether they want it or not, the forces of development are once again threatening to impose major changes on the lifestyles and worldviews of these communities.

The Market, the Mind and the Construction of Worldviews
Before examining particular ADB policies and reports, it is useful to explore the role that economic markets play in defining the gulf between pre-modern and modern industrial worldviews. Focusing on money is surprisingly illuminating. Relations in modern societies are based upon money and are mediated through markets. This is not true of pre-modern societies. Yet people in modern industrial economies take money for granted. It is difficult for us to imagine a world without money or markets, but these worlds define most of the human experience and continue in many parts of the world today. Similarly, we seldom pause to think about how the existence of money changes the way that we comprehend and understand the world. An historical appreciation of the effects of money and markets on the formation of the modern worldview will better enable us to understand the profound implications of extending money and markets into indigenous communities.

How do markets and money affect the way we think? Even today, money plays at most only a marginal role in tribal and agrarian peasant societies. How do people think when there is no money? What are things worth in the absence of markets to trade? “Use value” suggests that the intrinsic value of things is determined by their actual individual uses. In a simple barter economy, items obtain an “exchange value” in addition to their use value. But in barter, the comparisons are still concrete: one pig is worth five chickens. The introduction of money made of gold or silver adds another layer of abstraction. Many otherwise
incomparable items might now be viewed as equivalents, at least to the extent that they are all worth two gold coins. But indulging the assumption that precious metals have some intrinsic value, the exchange is still relatively concrete. The notion of paper money, backed by the promise of the state, or credit cards, or new forms of securitized debt are modern ideas that move further and further away from concrete forms and into realms of increasingly abstract notions of value, implicating multiple levels of exchange.

While money, trade and markets have been around for thousands of years, the more complex markets of modern capitalism are relatively recent phenomena. Living with and participating in these markets has a profound effect on how we think and how we perceive the world. This premise serves as the organizing theme of Jerry Muller’s book, *The Mind and the Market: Capitalism in Modern European Thought* (2002). This phenomenon also serves as the focus of Georg Simmel’s 1900 book, *The Philosophy of Money*. Industrialization came late to Germany and Simmel witnessed its dizzying transformation. *The Philosophy of Money* is a meditation on the many ways that markets and money change both the individual and the society. “Simmel drew attention to the psychological effects of living in an economy in which more and more areas of life could be measured in money. Such an economy created a mind-set that was more abstract,” because the means of exchange were themselves becoming ever more abstract. (Muller at 244). Labor becomes both commodified and more specialized. Unlike the indigenous Taumpan villager, modern industrialized man cannot do everything for himself. We specialize in a trade, earn money from that trade and then proceed to buy the necessities and luxuries of life with that money. This is not an intuitive or natural framework for constructing the world and operating within it. Simmel’s claim is that “[t]hrough constant exposure to an abstract means of exchange, individuals under capitalism are habituated to thinking about the world in an abstract manner.” (Muller at 244). By necessity, we become more calculating and we become skilled at thinking in terms of tradeoffs between otherwise unrelated goals and products. There is an increasing separation between means and ends. “Planning” necessarily involves complicated and increasingly indirect strategies to fulfill our desires.

In a modern capitalist economy we fulfill our desires more indirectly. To eat, we must buy food. But to buy it we need money, and that money is earned by working in an occupation. Becoming established in an occupation requires many steps, beginning with an education that itself requires years of planning and calculation to acquire. (Muller at 245).

Simmel further argues that these changes are not limited to markets, but increasingly spill over and influence how we think about a wide range of
non-economic concerns.

The clash between markets and the mind is even more disruptive for the indigenous peoples in Cambodia than for the Germans of nineteenth century Europe. One can glean snippets of this phenomenon from the ADB Reports that we will examine in more detail shortly. Take, for example, the commodification of wildlife. “Before, we did not know about the value of wildlife. Since outsiders have captured wildlife and taken them in vehicles for sale, many people including provincial official staff, companies and some villagers see wildlife as equaling money.” (Poverty Report at 28). The introduction of money, trade and markets entails a cascading reordering of one’s understanding of the world. In the indigenous worldview wildlife is wildlife, sharing a relationship with nature, the spirit-world and man as defined by their religious and cultural traditions. A completely different understanding is derived from seeing “wildlife as equaling money.”

The disparity between value as traditionally understood and the values of the marketplace can be illustrated elsewhere.

Traditionally, highlander wealth has been stored in the form of prestige goods such as elephants, livestock, antique gongs, and rice wine jars. These are still highly prized by most highlanders and play a vital role in religious life (jars of rice wine and gongs are used during religious ceremonies, and livestock are still the most important sacrificial offerings). (Poverty Report at 22, quoting White (1996)).

“Yet market forces place a very different value on some of these surplus possessions; livestock, for example, are often seen as valuable in monetary terms. Still, even today this placing of a monetary value of livestock has not yet penetrated the village to a great extent.” (Poverty Report at 22 quoting White (1996)). To some observers these differences are viewed as curiosities: “The difference in outlook is often striking. Many Khmer are baffled that highlanders do not exploit evident economic opportunities such as selling their cattle or cultivating cash crops on a large scale to ensure a greater income.” (Poverty Report at 22, quoting White (1996)). For some this might be a curious example of cultural relativism: “Such differences reveal how culturally subjective perceptions of wealth, poverty, and what constitutes the ‘good life’ are.” (Poverty Report at 22, quoting White (1996)). It is clear, however, that much more is at stake. The transition from a non-market to a market-based economy is not just about economics. The introduction of markets inevitably triggers a complete and radical transformation of how people think, what they value and how they understand themselves and their world.
ADB Reports on Indigenous Peoples: Artifacts of the Modern Worldview

There are a number of burdens one assumes if one is going to portray development policies as a modern day tragedy. It is not only necessary to identify the “mistaken beliefs” driving the tragedy. It is also necessary to explain why developers are unaware of their mistaken beliefs and how such mistaken beliefs can be perpetuated over time. This paper suggests a two-part answer to these questions. First, the mistaken beliefs are consistent with and supportive of the political/economic self-interest of the dominant society. As such, there is little internal pressure to question, challenge or revise the misguided beliefs. Just as most citizens of nineteenth century England had little incentive to question the predicates of Empire, there are few incentives in twenty-first century America to question the predicates of economic markets and development. Second, the mistaken beliefs are not necessarily untrue or even knowable within the domain of economic disciplines. The tools of economics and the training of economists are ill-suited to assess, understand and incorporate the significance of cultures and worldviews in the process of development. Development economists working sincerely and in good faith may be fundamentally unaware of the errors implicit in their approach. This is problematic because economists are principally charged with the task of spearheading development. The ADB Reports on indigenous peoples in Cambodia are useful in illustrating these problems.

The ADB’s premise in the Poverty and Health & Education Reports is that indigenous communities have distinct characteristics and concerns that need to be understood and accommodated in the Bank’s development practices. Ostensibly, economic development should mean something different in these communities than in non-indigenous communities. What is striking, however, is how little difference these differences make in the ADB’s final policy prescription. The fundamental objectives of economic development (the first order concerns) are the same in indigenous communities as for the rest of Cambodia and, indeed, the rest of the Third World. Distinct aspects of indigenous culture are acknowledged, but rather than being used to redefine what type of development is appropriate, the distinctive practices are modeled as constraints that must be overcome for development to proceed. In short, indigenous culture and traditions are permitted to influence how development will be implemented, but not what is to be done.

The contradictions contained in these Reports are striking. At its core, the ADB’s problem is a failure of empathy. The Bank is incapable of meaningfully perceiving these vernacular communities on their own terms. Why is the ADB incapable of engaging these issues in a more empathetic manner? To answer this question begins to reveal the seeds of the development tragedy. These Reports are best approached as artifacts of the contemporary development mindset. To fully understand these
artifacts they must be placed in the paradigmatic context of development economics. The Bank's failure of empathy stems from its tendency to view indigenous communities exclusively through the lens of its own economic models. As such, the needs of the indigenous peoples that the Bank identifies are often mere projections of its own policy prescriptions. The Bank is unable to perceive, let alone transcend the biases of its own worldview.

**Development Economics as Worldview**

Economics in modern industrial societies is not merely an academic discipline. Just as scientists are the modern day interpreters of the physical world, economists are the primary interpreters of the social and political world. Tracking Joseph Campbell's functional roles of belief systems, economics plays a critical cosmological function in explaining the order and operation of the social universe, as well as a sociological function in helping to define the norms and rules which govern human interaction. There is growing appreciation and recognition amongst economists that economics, as a discipline, also functions as a worldview (Maki 2001; Wilber 2003; and Williams & McNeill 2005). Significantly, when economics functions as a worldview, it is not functioning as a positive science. This has important implications for inhabitants of the Third World. Our society treats development as an economic problem, rather than an anthropological or sociological problem, and, therefore, hands control of the undertaking over to economists. Development economics, in turn, reflects the norms, biases and values of mainstream neoclassical economics, which itself embodies, in exaggerated form, many of the attributes of the modern worldview discussed earlier – a hyper sense of individualism, autonomy, rationality and instrumental analysis. Economics then becomes the lens through which policy makers perceive and understand the needs of the Third World and its discrete communities of indigenous peoples. The dynamics of these relationships are nicely captured in Ozay Mehmet's book, *Westernizing the Third World: The Eurocentricity of Economic Development Theories* (1995).  

However, it is not just economic theory that matters. The training and professionalization of economists is also important. The development community is best approached as an epistemic community of economists. Ph.D. economists have little training to deal with problems of culture, and there is little room in economic theory for values that cannot be priced, commodified and traded on the open market. These professional biases unavoidably influence both perception and policy, often at an unconscious level. This gives partial motivation to the development as tragedy narrative and helps explain the origins of the mistaken beliefs. The economist's worldview is driven by acontextual assumptions about
individually rational decision making. This worldview dictates its own understandings of “how we know things” (epistemology), and “the nature of being” (ontology). The standards and norms of the community dictate which questions are acceptable to ask and investigate, and which are not. The relevance of culture and worldviews to development is not an acceptable question.

So how do economists define development for their own purposes? The primary objective of contemporary economic development consists of market building, with a subsidiary objective of state building. The hallmark of development is a well-functioning economic market and, in theory, a well-functioning state. If judged from an empirical perspective in light of six decades of experience, neither the market building nor the state building initiatives have been radically successful. Not surprisingly, the failure of modern development has invoked criticism and calls for reform. Particularly in the past fifteen years, the rhetoric of development economics has changed to embrace a range of concerns that are difficult to reconcile within a strict economic perspective. For example, development rhetoric increasingly reflects concerns for social institutions and gender equality. Health and education ostensibly are being given higher priority in the new regime. Development is no longer supposed to be just about roads, dams and factories. Softer values such as “governance” and “participation” are also playing a new role. Similarly, the unique needs of indigenous peoples are being incorporated into the new development framework. The increasingly “human face” afforded development initiatives is welcome, but it raises important questions. It is unclear how, or how well, these new variables will fit into the old model. Examining how the ADB Reports treat indigenous persons in Cambodia is, in part, an opportunity to shed light on these questions.

What do these artifacts reveal? To begin with, they demonstrate that the new values have not displaced old development objectives. They are simply layered over them. The development of indigenous persons in Cambodia does not stand on its own legs. The ADB’s development agenda for indigenous people in Cambodia is remarkably similar to the development policies it pursues throughout the Third World. This core formula consists primarily of an effort to build roads, extend markets and income-generating opportunities, provide credit and integrate indigenous persons into the national economy, while simultaneously integrating Cambodia into the regional and international economy. The Poverty Report describes the goals of Cambodia’s Second Socioeconomic Development Plan (2001-2005), developed under the tutelage of international aid agencies:

Specific strategies related to indigenous peoples include building or rehabilitation of the main road infrastructure; promoting agricultural development and off-farm employment in both urban and rural areas; and empowering the poor to participate in and benefit
from the growth process by improving their access to natural assets such as land, health and education services, appropriate technology, and credit. (Poverty Report at 11-12).

In addition to these aspects of development, there is also particular concern for education and health. A focus on health and education, however, fits comfortably within human capital models of economic development. As will be seen, unique aspects of the language and culture of indigenous peoples are acknowledged, but they are conceptualized as constraints to development that must be rationally addressed and ultimately overcome.

Economists are fond of distinguishing between first order and second order concerns. Lawyers like to talk about substance versus process. The first order goals of development (the substantive component) remain the same in the new as with the old regime – the progressive extension of the market and the state. Cultural concerns are afforded a second order status. Cultural concerns will influence the process of how policies are implemented, but they will not fundamentally change what is to be done. Culture is acknowledged, but it is constructed as just one more variable to be incorporated into the traditional economic model. While recent years have witnessed an effort to broaden the scope of the development agenda, this effort has done little to challenge the economic worldview that dominates the field. The ADB's treatment of indigenous peoples stands as testimony to how little things will change until and unless greater attention is paid to the economic worldview controlling First World perceptions and the epistemic community of economists formulating and implementing development policy.

**First Order ADB Concerns: Traditional Economic Development**

First order concerns define the primary objectives that are pursued. The Bank has an unquestioning belief that development is good. Indeed, from the vantage point of the ADB, the “problem” facing indigenous peoples is the risk of being excluded from development, due to their physical isolation and their political disenfranchisement. “Ethnic minority groups are nevertheless facing severe problems in practice, and are at risk of being marginalized from the benefits of economic and social development.” (Poverty Report at 41). The ADB’s very definition of indigenous peoples characterizes them in terms of this perceived vulnerability.

Indigenous peoples is used in the sense of the ADB working definition to include “those with specific social or cultural identity distinct from the dominant or mainstream society, which makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the process of development.” (Poverty Report at 3, quoting ADB (1999) (emphasis added)).
The same theme can be found in the Health & Education Report. “Indigenous peoples often are not able to participate equally in the development process or share in the benefits of development.” (Health & Education Report at 3 (emphasis added)). If the problem is being excluded from development, then the solution is to “target” indigenous people for development. 4

The potential exclusion of vernacular communities from development is tied to their relative isolation. “The indigenous ethnic minorities concentrated in the northeastern Provinces of Kratie, Mondolkiri, Ratanakiri and Stung Treng represent perhaps the most disadvantaged population group in the country. Due primarily to the region's geographic isolation, these marginalized populations have not been integrated into mainstream society and face numerous problems.” (Health & Education Report at A-1). Targeting indigenous peoples for development therefore requires eliminating this isolation. This will require the building of the necessary physical and institutional infrastructure – extending the scope of the market and the state to include remote Provinces like Ratanakiri. Roads are critical to modern development and the functioning of the market economy. In economic parlance, roads facilitate transportation and lower the transaction costs of trade. But there is a danger. Roads travel in two directions. Roads bring increased contact with outsiders. Roads have brought a substantial in-migration of Khmers into the remote provinces. Roads bring commercial goods and new cultural influences. Roads also facilitate the extraction of resources and timber from the ancient forests which serve as the homes of indigenous persons. Roads are the primary instruments facilitating the clash of the modern and pre-modern worldviews.

While there is an eminent logic to roads in the modern industrial worldview, what is the logic of roads from the perspective of these vernacular communities? In a world of non-confederated, geographically compact, isolated villages seeking to live in equilibrium with the local environment, there is no logic to roads. What is the road for?

[The principal points of reference of spatio-temporal orientation are neither the cardinal points nor the territorial organization imposed by the Khmers, but rather the sites of the old village, the abandoned swiddens, the hunting trails, the paths maintained to link the village to cultivated lands, a rock, a thicket where the spirit is known to live, etc... However, as soon as one is far from familiar space, taking one's bearings becomes unclear. Everything that is outside the universe of daily custom, the distance/limit of which varies from five to ten kilometers depending on the size of the village, is vaguely described as being “far,” “over here,” “over there,” without greater precision. (Bourdier at 93).

Roads are not only lacking in logic; they are profoundly dangerous. These
cultures have been able to survive only because of the absence of roads, a point ironically acknowledged by the ADB. “Although these areas are poorer, they afford a certain amount of cultural protection. In the past, isolation limited the contact between the majority culture and the ethnic minorities, which played an important role in their cultural survival.” (Health & Education Report at 20).

What have these new roads brought? Roads have brought immigrants, commercial goods and beliefs that challenge traditional worldviews. “The research findings show effects of immigration on cultural practices and traditions such as style of clothing, types of food and housing, taboos and other beliefs, and respect for elders.” (Poverty Report at 25). Roads and immigrants bring new notions of land as being a commodity that is the proper object for delineation, ownership, exclusion and speculation. These are profoundly new ideas, with detrimental and unintended consequences. Again, when the Poverty Report wants to expressly incorporate anthropological perspectives, it cites the secondary literature and segregates the information in highlighted “Boxes” set apart from the rest of the Report, see, e.g., “Box 3, Land Sales in Kamang Village along the National Road, Ratanakiri.”

Since the initial land sales along the road four or five years ago, the number of Khmer in the district center have increased steadily, along with the expansion of Bokeo market. With many Khmer migrants seeking to acquire land for cultivation of crops, the pressure on Kamang villagers to relinquish their land rights became severe. The land parcels most desired by the Khmer buyers are those located along the road. These can be reached by motorcycle and are directly accessible by transport to either Banlung market or the Vietnam Border. (Poverty Report at 27, quoting McAndrew (2001)).

Roads and development threaten the survival of the very environment and sacred forests that define the center of these peoples’ universe.
Environmental factors loom large in the lifestyles and status of ethnic minorities. Changes in the quality of the natural environment – e.g., deforestation, erosion, decline in water quality, lost biodiversity, and changing agricultural practices have changed and are changing the cultures and economic opportunity of many minority villages. (Health & Education Report at 7).

The roads, markets and development of the modern worldview cannot coexist with traditional lifestyles and belief systems.
In recent times, the indigenous peoples who live in the wide and scattered areas of the northeastern provinces have faced unprecedented change. The ever-evolving political environment, new administrative practices, the rapidly changing economy, and the migration of groups from the lowland areas have had a major impact on the ethnic minority groups that reside in this region. With greater integration of the national
economy, the northeastern highland areas are increasingly exploited for commercial purposes.

Government policies that implicitly support these changes are also inadvertently encouraging the "khmerization" of the highland populations by moving them close to roads, encouraging settled agriculture, and trying to integrate them into the national economy. (Poverty Report at 36).

The very next line of the Report cautions that “[t]his offers both opportunities and risks for the indigenous population.” (Poverty Report at 36). The risks are fairly obvious from the perspective of the traditional worldview. What, then, are the opportunities?

For the ADB, the opportunities for indigenous peoples lie in the ability to partake in the benefits of the development from which they have been excluded. Roads can be built. Markets can be extended and indigenous peoples can be integrated into the market economy. To become full economic citizens, however, there also needs to be a transition from a cashless to a cash-based society. Hence, the ADB has identified an “urgent need” of these communities:

There is an “urgent need” to enhance the income security of vulnerable ethnic minorities through targeted programs of assistance. Incomes can be enhanced in many ways, through access to use of forest products, through marketing of produce, through agricultural and other wage employment, or through self-employment and home-based employment for artisanal and other activities. (Poverty Report at 41).

In the traditional society, there was no need for money or income. Security was based on completely different cultural and material sources. In professing this urgent need to generate income and therefore to start commodifying every aspect of their surroundings, there is no awareness on the part of the development economists of the radically disruptive effects that money can have on one's perception of self and one's surroundings. Indeed, as Simmel teaches, money and markets can affect profound changes on one's very process of thinking. The reader should recall the visceral reaction of the Taumpon villager against specialization and to wage labor. If income security is an urgent need, it is certainly not an indigenous one. This is illustrative, however, of a tendency throughout the Report to interpret the problems of vernacular communities through the lens of the modern worldview and then to project these concerns back upon the indigenous peoples. This is dangerous because needs, particularly urgent needs, are then used to define policies and priorities.

The reasoning is often circular. Income is necessary because it is essential to overcoming poverty. Poverty reduction is the central mission of the Asian Development Bank. But, what is poverty? In development circles, poverty is
frequently defined in terms of income – the percentage of the population living on less than a dollar a day. Yet, this just begs the question – what does it mean to be rich or to be poor in a society that does not use cash as its metric? Were the indigenous peoples poor before they were the targets for economic development?

If the ADB’s economic worldview constructed the problem of poverty, its economic models help the authors to diagnose its root causes. What is the cause of poverty? The primary cause of poverty is the low level of human capital. “Extremely poor human capital levels in the remote northeastern provinces of Cambodia confirm a close association between poverty status, broadly defined, and hill-tribe peoples.” (Health & Education Report at 8). Indigenous persons have low levels of human capital because they have been excluded from development. “In addition, many are socially marginalized, leading to poorer health, lower educational attainment, fragile means of livelihood, and, therefore, a compromised ability to attain a decent standard of living or to contribute to the economic development of the region.” (Health & Education Report at 1). The policy prescription then is to invest in human capital, to increase income and, therefore, eliminate poverty amongst indigenous peoples.

The human capital model logically prioritizes health and education as principle means of furthering development. “Governments, donors, NGOs, and communities are challenged to work together to develop strategies aimed at reducing poverty and raising the level of human capital for ethnic minority populations.” (Health & Education Report at 33). Health and education, in turn, are important to income security. “Education and health were found to be the basic needs of indigenous people in order for them to develop their knowledge and skills to attain secure livelihoods.” (Poverty Report at 21). Similarly, poor health is a concern because it reduces human capital. “Cambodia suffers from a range of health problems that shorten the lives of its population and reduce the quality of its human capital.” (Health & Education Report at A-4-5). Just as the ADB is oblivious to the pernicious effects of money, the human capital model treats health and education simply as economic concerns. There is no appreciation for how notions of health and well-being also implicate central spiritual and cosmological aspects of the pre-modern worldview. Formal education in modern societies is not just a means of producing human capital; it is a mechanism of social reproduction. It transfers and inculcates in the students the fundamental values and beliefs of the larger society, but this begs the question of whose values and whose beliefs. These are profoundly intrusive interventions. In the economic worldview, however, they are simply instrumental means of facilitating the building of human capital, to enable income security, reduce poverty and further the ends of development.
Second Order ADB Concerns: Indigenous Culture as Constraint and Variable

Obviously, the development of indigenous peoples also raises concerns about traditional religion, culture and lifestyles. The ADB acknowledges this. Indeed, this premise lays the foundation for the two Reports. These concerns, however, are afforded only second order status. Culture and religion may influence how development is to proceed, but they do not influence the fundamental prescription of what is to be done. Moreover, there is a tendency in the Reports to view these communities exclusively through an economic lens and to address the “problems” raised by cultural concerns completely within the framework of the economic worldview.

The perceived needs of indigenous peoples have become an established part of development discourse. There are now workshops, policy statements, Inter-Ministerial Committees and elaborate reports (like the ones being examined here) addressing the issue. In Cambodia, the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Highland Peoples Development (IMC) is based in the Ministry of Rural Development (MRD). The IMC is the main body tasked with coordinating governmental activities. The IMC actively collaborates with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and International Organizations in their work. Moreover, there is a Department of Ethnic Minorities Development under the MRD to follow up on IMC recommendations. The Department of Ethnic Minorities is additionally charged with planning and conducting research on issues of identity and culture. This brief outline of the organizational chart established to address the needs of indigenous people nicely illustrates the tendency of the modern worldview toward specialization, differentiation and compartmentalization. The “problem” of indigenous peoples now becomes a part of the system.

The problem is not a lack of attention or a lack of programs. In fact, there may be too much attention. In addition to the ADB, the World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF, the World Health Organization and dozens of international and local NGOs are also actively assisting in the “development” of the indigenous peoples. As Bourdier observes:

Ratanakiri, land – or even laboratory – of experimentation and a stake for international aid that covers the largest to the smallest organizations, is in the process of becoming a microcosm reflecting the efforts of globalization through an international order, which is apparently quite unmindful of the relation to otherness. (Bourdier at 126).

The real question is not whether, but how groups like the ADB address the needs of vernacular communities. ADB has sponsored workshops and cataloged the problems that need to be addressed:
Challenges to the traditional way of life were highlighted at this workshop, particularly the growing immigration of lowland Khmer to Ratanakiri Province which is increasing the population density and preventing traditional swidden agriculture, as well as causing access problems to nontimber forest products. (Poverty Report at 21-23).

The ADB has assisted in the development of Draft Guidelines intended to ensure that the concerns of indigenous peoples are incorporated into the national planning process. The 1997 Draft National Policy Guidelines identify important rights and concerns. “The draft policy states that all highlanders have the right to practice their own cultures, adhere to their own belief systems and traditions, and use their own languages.” (Poverty Report at 10). As in other domains of contemporary development practice, the Guidelines embrace “participation” as the principle means of protecting the interests of vulnerable peoples. The Draft Guidelines “include a recommendation, among others, that highland peoples have a right to participate in and be consulted on all decision making, plans and projects that effect their lives and communities.” (Poverty Report at 10). It is telling that these Draft Guidelines have never been adopted.

The effectiveness of participation as a policy tool will be addressed in the last section of the paper. This section will examine how the cultural and religious needs of indigenous persons are dealt with in the context of the ADB Reports. My starting premise is that the authors of these Reports and others working at the ADB are sincere. They think that economic development is beneficial. They understand that indigenous peoples raise important and distinct concerns. They want to address those concerns. What is revealing is how these sincere individuals are trapped in their own worldview, and therefore seem unable to act insightfully on their good intentions. The subsequent projection of a modern policy prescription upon pre-modern societies is the mistaken belief (tragic flaw) that lies at the heart of the Aristotelian development tragedy.

The ADB clearly believes that the interests of development and those of indigenous peoples can be reconciled. Reconciliation, however, consists of successfully extending the benefits of development to these excluded groups.

A dichotomy that is often raised between cultural survival on the one hand and globalization and development on the other hand is a false one. Ethnic minorities do not live in a bubble separated from the rest of the world and they deserve to benefit from development. (Health & Education Report at 33).

The Report adds: “Central to this ABD project is the belief that development is both possible and desirable in a multiethnic society.” (Health & Education Report at 33). The focus then becomes how, not whether, development should proceed in light of these distinct cultural concerns.
The language of the Reports is telling. In economic parlance, the distinct cultural needs of indigenous peoples are modeled as “constraints” to what is otherwise a standard optimization problem. The objective is to maximize development subject to the constraints imposed by these different values and beliefs. While the ADB seeks to “[i]dentify strategies, approaches, tools and interventions that respect minorities’ chosen ways of living,” (Health & Education Report at 2), its very frame models the traditional “ways of living” as a choice variable. Choice variables are subject to manipulation and, in theory, should rationally respond to changes in the exogenous parameters of the relevant decision matrix. Implicitly, these groups could rationally choose other ways of living.

Health and education constitute the self-defining focus of the ADB Report, *The Health and Educational Needs of Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion*. The Report unquestioningly accepts the first order objectives of development. Education and health are essential components of human capital and, therefore, instrumentally necessary to generate income and reduce poverty. Cultural differences are important, but only to the extent that they might influence how these programs should be implemented. Just as the problems of indigenous peoples more generally were defined in terms of their exclusion from the benefits of development, the problem here is defined in terms of lack of access (exclusion) from these social services.

The policy analysis and qualitative field work have focused on the access that ethnic minorities have to social services and the “constraints” that impede their effective access... Better access improves the opportunities that ethnic minorities have to raise their health and education status. (Health & Education Report at 3 (emphasis in original)).

The objective then is to improve access to modern forms of health and education. The problem of access is itself subsequently modeled completely in economic terms – the interaction of supply and demand. This becomes the exclusive lens through which the authors view these communities.

By using supply and demand of social services in health and education sectors as lenses to focus on minority groups, the study results identify related issues raised with respect to social exclusion, poverty, environment, and infrastructure, among others. (Health & Education Report at 3 (emphasis added)).

Unique aspects of culture and lifestyle emerge explicitly as “constraints” that must be overcome to improve access to these social services. Table 3.1 of the Report identifies numerous “Constraints to Access and Use of Social Services by Ethnic Minorities.” These constraints include, among others: (1) lack of understanding and knowledge about the population to be served; (2) competing knowledge systems, practices
and values; and (3) language. With respect to the constraint of lack of understanding and knowledge about the population, the Report states that “differences in language, educational level, class, and ethnicity can create barriers to real communication and effective service.” (Health & Education Report at 18). In terms of the competing knowledge systems, practices and values constraint, the Table contends that “standardized interventions... often fail to acknowledge and validate the use of traditional indigenous knowledge systems. In turn, minority peoples can be skeptical of services that challenge traditional knowledge and practices, and resistant to participating in such services.” (Health & Education Report at 19).

Lack of Understanding and knowledge about the population is identified as a variable that can impede both the physical access to services as well as the use of existing services. According to the Report, the “locus of possible solution” lies with the service provider on the supply side of the equation. Competing knowledge systems, practices and values is another factor that can impede the use of existing services. Interestingly, the “locus of possible solution” rests both on the supply side with the provider, but also on the demand side of the equation with the “community to be served.” Changing traditional beliefs and values, which the ADB treats as a choice variable, will naturally lead to an increased demand for modern education.

The notion that improper sets of beliefs can simply be changed is found elsewhere in the Report. “All societies have beliefs about the best way to maintain health and the proper way to educate children and adults. In the case of health, this includes beliefs about how people become sick and what steps should be taken to maintain and improve health. Societies also have beliefs about what should be taught to their members.” (Health & Education Report at 25-26). The Report quickly adds, however, that “[i]t is important to point out that traditional beliefs are not necessarily fixed and unchangeable.” (Health & Education Report at 26).

The first order goal is to provide health and education. The challenge then becomes how best to design and market these programs. This is where cultural sensitivity and community participation come in, but these concerns only influence how things are to be done, not what is to be done. The Report states that “[e]xpanding consultations with local communities in order to understand the local sensitivities and opinions will enhance project and program success.” (Health & Education Report at 37). Programs also need buy-in on the part of the local population. “To be most effective, outreach and program interventions need to be designed by highland minorities themselves, adapted to the unique culture of each ethnic group served, available in the language of each ethnic minority group served, and led by ethnic minority people.” (Health & Education Report at 37).

It is telling how, in constructing the mind-set of indigenous persons for
purposes of evaluation, the authors of the Report project a very rational cost- 
benefit formula on the indigenous decision makers. In assessing education the 
Report asserts: “For many ethnic minorities, the costs of education may well 
outweigh the benefits, especially if the quality of teaching is low, students don’t 
speak the language used in the school system, textbooks are in short supply, and the 
education is seen as irrelevant to the community.” (Health & Education Report at 
12). The projections of the Poverty Report are similar.

Indigenous children are less likely to go to school than the average Cambodian 
children. Some reasons include (i) the low standard of living of indigenous people, so 
that in many cases the opportunity costs are too great (children are required to help in 
the field and look after siblings and animals, while the planting and harvest season 
needs intensive work in which all household members must assist, such that during 
these times many children drop out of school); (ii) the schools are often too far from 
their homes; (iii) there is a lack of learning materials; and (iv) many people cannot 
afford school uniforms for their children. The high cost has to be compared with the 
benefits of education which appear to be low in the highland area. (Poverty Report at 
19).

This is exactly how I, as an economist, would break down and evaluate the 
relevant factors. The point is not that these factors are irrelevant, nor that 
indigenous people do not think in a rational manner, rather, the point is that it is 
questionable whether this strict cost-benefit analysis accurately reflects the actual 
thinking of the “targeted” communities. A similar projection can be found in the 
assessment of health care services. The Poverty Report acknowledges the linkages 
between health and worldview: “The health status of indigenous villagers cannot 
be separated from spiritual beliefs or social life.” (Poverty Report at 32). The Health 
and Education Report, however, reverts to standard cost-benefit analysis. “In 
addition to considering the costs” of services, households must also consider the 
value of the services they are using. If services are of poor quality, they will not 
be used regardless of the cost.” (Health & Education Report at 17). Medical 
anthropologists would note that there are many other ways to think about how 
health fits within the constellation of traditional beliefs and how decisions are made 
at the individual and community level.

The ADB is incapable of escaping the limiting parameters of its own economic 
worldview. To be sure, an analysis that recognizes the different linguistic and 
cultural differences as factors to be considered in program implementation 
produces more defensible policy recommendations than one that does not. The 
Reports make persuasive recommendations that the educational system should 
better conform to local needs. “Education projects should take into account the 
labor needs of households and adjust the school schedule to reflect the agricultural
calendar.” (Health & Education Report at 22). The Reports also advocate for curricular materials better suited to the discrete needs of the indigenous communities (rather urban Khmer dwellers in Phnom Penh) and for greater openness to the use of local languages. These are appropriate second-order refinements for policy implementation, assuming that modern educational institutions are in fact called for. A mind-set that treats culture and belief only as second order concerns, however, can never be self-critical as to whether its first order development prescription is appropriate in the first place. The failure to understand the culture, belief systems and lifestyles of indigenous peoples as part of a larger integrated worldview makes real understanding, dialogue and participation impossible. Trapped in the confines of its own worldview, the ADB is incapable of empathetically engaging the other.

The Clash of Worldviews and the (Im)Possibility of Participation
Participation is now an important buzz word in development discourse, particularly as it concerns indigenous peoples. What participation actually means and whether it is possible present harder questions. Participation requires a sufficiently common sense of community to permit meaningful dialogue. There needs to be shared values and shared understandings. The dramatic differences between the modern and pre-modern worldview begin to suggest some of the difficulties. Moreover, if participation is not simply going to be a charade – a policy instrument to implement predetermined development objectives – then those who are participating must have some degree of meaningful control over the outcomes. Put starkly, if the ADB is really committed to participation, it must also be prepared to respect the choice of indigenous peoples not to be developed.

The ABD’s formal commitment to participation is clear in these Reports. In fact, participation has become the primary framework through which the development dilemmas of indigenous peoples are to be addressed.

In 1999 the Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved a Policy on Indigenous People in order to provide a framework for its commitment to recognize the vulnerability of certain socially and culturally distinct groups to being disadvantaged in comparison with mainstream society, and to identify measures to satisfy the needs and development aspirations of such people. The policy focuses on their participation in development and the mitigation of undesirable effects of the development process, especially the incidence of poverty. (Poverty Report at 1 (emphasis added)).

These concerns were incorporated into the 1997 Draft Guidelines intended to govern development decisions affecting Cambodia’s indigenous peoples. Given that there is no history of such participation, the ADB further identified the need for
capacity building. “It is necessary to provide capacity building for government, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and indigenous peoples so that they can actively participate in formulating action plans as well as in ADB-sponsored programs and projects.” (Poverty Report at 1).

In practice, it is difficult to tell whether participation is intended to facilitate the implementation of preordained objectives, or to authentically engage vernacular communities in planning their own futures. It is also unclear what real choices are being left on the table by the planners. But even if indigenous peoples are genuinely being asked to participate in planning their future development, it must be acknowledged what a “modern” notion this is. The entire planning exercise assumes that the future is some distant and different place. It assumes that time and history are linear progressions and that individuals can and should take charge of their futures and mold it to their own liking. Planning of this nature is not an indigenous practice.

Nowhere do these Reports discuss what participation really means, whether it is feasible and how it might actually be accomplished. These are important questions. Can indigenous people really decide for themselves whether they want western style development? Can any real decisions be made, if they must be made according to western notions of participation? At one level, entire communities are being asked to decide between two disparate worldviews, one their own (pre-modern) and one that is still quite foreign and alien (modern). What would be necessary to make this type of choice an authentic one for indigenous peoples? It is doubtful that anyone can make conscious choices between different worldviews. Our worldviews shape us far more than we are consciously able to shape or alter them. They are not simply choice variables. Furthermore, participation in this realm is neither innocuous nor value-neutral. The very act of requiring participation and having indigenous peoples make these types of choices can have significant cultural implications, regardless of what choices are made. If one goes too far down the path of building sufficient capacity within indigenous communities to “participate” and educating them enough about modern concepts of development so they can make meaningful choices, it may no longer be possible for them to return to their initial practices and beliefs, regardless of their actual preferences.

From this perspective, it is easy to see how hollow the ADB’s notion of participation really is. What are indigenous views toward development, poverty, education and health care? Is there any authentic means to obtain this information and have it determine the content of proposed ADB projects? What real power do these people have to decide that they would prefer to have no part in the process? Even if such choices were possible, there are other pragmatic concerns. In what language should this discussion take place (in practice, participation never takes
place in indigenous languages)? According to whose customs? Who defines what items will be on the agenda?

Some indication as to how westernized the ADB’s views of participation are can be found in the projection of outside notions of gender equality on these indigenous communities. Consider the following passage in the Poverty Report.

Participation by indigenous women has not been equal to that of men; despite much training on gender issues provided by NGOs/IOs, men do not respect women in meetings. (Poverty Report at 15) (emphasis added).

The implications are clear. Indigenous people will participate. They will participate in accordance with western notions of gender equality. Capacity will be built and they will be trained in the correct manners of gender-sensitive participation. Finally, they will be criticized to the extent that they permit their own culture and worldview to influence how they actually participate.

The authors of the ADB Reports are so captured by their own worldview that they are not aware of the serious “problems” raised by this passage. Can one obtain gender-sensitive participation in these communities and not already substantially change the local culture in the process? Should indigenous people be able to choose for themselves how gender sensitive and in what manners they want to be? The dominant tone in the Reports is that indigenous peoples must take development on western terms. Furthermore, whatever participation is envisioned, it is not permitted to redefine the first order components of development. Ironically, the envisioned participation is not even flexible enough to permit indigenous participants to redefine the ground rules of the participation itself. Participation must proceed in accordance with western norms and conventions. The thought of participating in the native languages or building the capacity of the ADB to participate is never raised or discussed.

Again, projects addressing issues of gender help highlight these underlying tensions. UNDP has initiated a program for “reducing the workload of hill tribe women in Ratanakiri.” The objectives of the project are defined as follows:

This project sought to improve the status of women in Ratanakiri by reducing their daily work load and increasing their opportunities for decision making, education, and income generation through formation of a women’s group, exchange visits, monitoring and interaction with VDCs [Village Development Councils]. (Poverty Report at 17).

The project to reduce the workload of hill tribe women further illustrates the modern tendency toward hyper-compartmentalization. The first slice is to look at gender in isolation from other aspects of the social context. The next slice is to focus on sex-based divisions of labor, then to look at labor in terms of workload, with workloads being predominately a category that is best understood and measured
in time. Reducing workloads saves time. The saved time is then a substitutable commodity that can be redeployed and used for other objectives in furtherance of the modern worldview – opportunities for decisionmaking, education, and income-generation.

From a western standpoint, this may be an excellent project. It frames and analyzes the problem in a sophisticated manner. It respects important western values and it resonates with a progressive modern worldview founded on principles of gender equality. The problem, however, is that these values are being projected upon others who operate in accordance with a different set of values and beliefs. Again, the problem, such that it is, is a projected problem. The frames for understanding the problem and the proposed policy prescriptions are also modern projections. Even if one believed that the problem were real, and that the women in these traditional communities are the ones who should be afforded the ultimate choice as to whether and how their workloads should be reduced, there is no obvious way to know what that choice would be, and probably no means of soliciting such a decision that did not itself do serious damage to traditional norms and beliefs.

Unfortunately, participation is being institutionalized on a scale that far exceeds individual development projects. Contemporary development consists of state-building as well as market building. In a move potentially as disastrous as building roads to the doorsteps of indigenous villages, the SELIA experiment of decentralized and deconcentrated governance is seeking to reshape local processes of decisionmaking in Ratanakiri, and to better connect these apparatuses to the central state. (Poverty Report at 16, McAndrew (2001). Distance from the modern state and the ineffectiveness of bureaucratic institutions to project state authority to these distant Provinces is what helped ensure the cultural survival of these communities. The systemic institutionalization of western-style, ground-up forms of participation will substantially undermine traditional forms of social organization and decisionmaking in indigenous communities.

Conclusion: Development as Tragedy
Framing development as tragedy teaches different lessons than thinking about development strictly in terms of exploitation. Organizations like the ADB are pursuing policies premised on “mistaken beliefs” that will lead to unfortunate, unintended consequences. There are implications for indigenous peoples, as well as for the Bank and the broader development community. What is the likely fate of indigenous worldviews once development policies are fully implemented? For some, the capstone of the development process might be to effectuate a complete transition from pre-modern to modern ways of thinking. In this view, the
communities will not only have markets, roads, schools and clinics, but they will also think about, understand and utilize these social institutions in a western manner. Development here seeks to change minds as well as markets.

This approach to worldviews is both naive and dangerous. It is true that no worldview is static. By their very nature, worldviews are dynamic and adaptive. They must be if belief systems are to continue to produce order and meaning in a changing world. At the same time, however, worldviews are self-constrained in their abilities to change and adapt. They can stretch, but they can also break. The best conceptual analogy is to an ecosystem. Worldviews need to be approached as integrated wholes, recognizing the high degrees of interdependence between constituent parts. Entire ecosystems can collapse if subjected to improper strains. Ecosystems also embody illustrations of cascading effects and unintended consequences. The same is true of worldviews. Like an ecosystem, worldviews can also crumble and fall into disrepair. The pragmatic test is whether the existing belief system continues to provide order (adequately explain events) and to provide meaning (the existential function). When worldviews fall into disrepair, the results can manifest in forms of social psychoses for members of the community. Dalton (1967) talks about the social malaise often associated with development in tribal societies. Campbell discusses the fate of the American Plains Indians, with the killing of the buffalo and the resettlement on reservations. (Campbell 2002). Within a single generation, the Plains Indians’ symbolic ordering of the universe was completely destroyed. The psychosis took the form of the sweeping in of the peyote cult and the apocalyptic Ghost Dance movement. The disrepair of a worldview also makes individuals and entire communities vulnerable to religious conversions, which, from this perspective, is an attempt to trade in one belief system for another in a desperate search for order and meaning.

Why should this matter to development theory? Building from development paradigms of food security, income security and physical security, Adam Ashforth advocates the need to pay attention to the spiritual security of communities (Ashforth 2005). The concern for spiritual security naturally follows from an appreciation of the significance of worldviews. This is not an abstract or esoteric diversion. Spiritual insecurity is directly triggered by the failure of the prevailing worldview to serve its primary functions. External development policies can be appraised in terms of their likelihood to disrupt existing belief systems and trigger the forms of social stress and psychosis that historically have been observed. Pragmatically, Dalton argues for the need to help facilitate cultural and technological innovations to accommodate the changes wrought by economic development. (Dalton 1967). The failure of the ADB Reports on indigenous peoples to even consider such possibilities is testimony to the ADB’s blindness to the relevance of
worldviews, their own and those of others, to the development process. It is
difficult to imagine meaningful discussions of the real needs of indigenous peoples
that do not expressly incorporate these concerns.

The development-as-tragedy narrative has implications for the ADB and for
development economics more generally. Juxtaposing the worldviews of the ADB
and indigenous peoples is useful because the stark contrast helps highlight the
“mistaken belief” or “tragic flaw” underlying contemporary development theory.
One lesson is that worldviews do matter. A failure to understand the role of world-
views, both of self and others, makes it difficult if not impossible to perceive the real
needs of others, anticipate difficulties and design appropriate policies. These
problems go far beyond indigenous communities. The worldview that most rural
Cambodians operate under has more in common with the pre-modern views
outlined here than the modern worldview of the distant West. I would hazard to
guess that the same holds true for most rural agricultural communities in the Third
World. The biases and limitations of the dominant economic worldview raise
serious questions about the current development agenda of simply exporting
western models of markets and states around the world. To the extent that the types
of market and state systems being transplanted are themselves derivative artifacts
of the modern worldview, they are unlikely to take root in countries with sub-
stantially different belief systems and manners of thinking. An appreciation for
the significance of worldviews has additional implications for recent reform
initiatives of the ADB and the World Bank. Efforts to embrace softer values such as
participation, gender-equality and governance will have little effect if the underly-
ing economic worldview remains unchallenged. A greater self-awareness of the role
that the economic worldview governing development plays would be the first step
in a process of real reform.

Unfortunately, the contemporary story of encounters between indigenous
peoples and outsider groups is unfolding today largely as it has in the past – as a
tragedy. The protagonist remains unaware of the flaw of his “mistaken beliefs,”
while the audience is left with a deep sense of pity and fear.
Notes
1. “We are, in fact, in the presence of populations that are scattered in outlying zones of the country, societies without a script and that have a matrilineal line of descent, the federated organization of which does not exceed that of the village and whose dispersed settlement is nearly sedentary.” (Bourdier at 202). “Above the village unit whose average is about 200 people there is no collective forms of socio-political organization, notwithstanding the mutual recognition between villages belonging to the same group or to different ones.” (Bourdier at 233). “It is of course permissible, and entirely pertinent, to characterize the indigenous societies in Ratanakiri as stateless societies . . .” (Bourdier at 201).

2. Tellingly, when the real lives of indigenous peoples find their way into the ADB Report, it often comes in the form of excerpted materials from the anthropology literature. These excerpts are cabined in Boxes of highlighted text and physically separated from the ADB’s own textual narrative. This information comes from “Box 1-A Definition of Highland Poverty.” (Poverty Report at 22).

3. Not surprisingly, people in other academic disciplines with different professional training will approach the same issues with radically different methods and come to radically different conclusions. Contrasting the contents of Don McCaskill and Ken Kampe (1997) collection in Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia with the ADB Reports on indigenous peoples nicely illustrates this point.

4. Others have commented on the prominent role that military terminology like “targeting” and “interventions” play in contemporary development rhetoric. (Bourdier 2007). Viewing indigenous communities as objects to be targeted is not conducive to empathetic engagement. Ironically, the ADB’s Health Report also provides some vivid examples of the darker side of being targeted. “The Khmer Rouge targeted the Cham, forcing them to adapt Khmer names and requiring them to give up Islamic Practices.” (Health Report at A-2). “The Pol Pot Regime targeted the Vietnamese community and forced virtually all of its members to leave the country, killing many in the process.” (Health Report at A-2). “The Chinese often were targeted by the Pol Pot Regime due to their wealth, although not with the same fervor as the Cham and the Vietnamese.” (Health Report at A-3).
References


When the Margins Turn One’s Step toward an Object of Desire: Segregation and Inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in Northeast Cambodia

Frédéric Bourdier

Preface:

It has been said and re-said that indigenous populations residing in the border areas are, more than others, facing a growing exclusion, not only due to the location of their territory, but to their legal condition of being socio-culturally marginalised, and generally their perceived status as vulnerable ethnic groups.

Although such statements deserve careful attention, they cannot be taken for granted as a whole, either. Rough categorisations remain full of reductionism and can be misleading. Changes occurring in Ratanakiri illustrate the way some so-called minority groups – who in fact do represent the majority of the provincial population – can no longer be considered as “closed” collective entities, sharing similar priorities, strategies and interests. Recent interfaces with the outside world, mostly with Khmer civil servants, migrants, investors and developers, have led some of the peoples of the forest to take advantage of these socio-economic and cultural confrontations, while on the other side some are left far behind. Such heterogeneous interactions and selective connections have various implications for village life conditions and for improvement in the quality of life.

In some hamlets taken as “case studies,” it has been observed, beyond drastic changes, an increasing social disparity in access to land and other commodities, compared to the relative homogeneity which previously characterized socio-economic life at the village level. This paper proposes to provide an overview of this diffracted situation. The analysis may provide some tools to suggest more adequate concepts liable to reflect the given complexity of social changes occurring at the provincial level.

In the two northeastern provinces of Cambodia (Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri), native populations, socio-culturally distinctive from the Khmers of the western plains, have for long settled in small villages in a forest milieu. With approximately 100,000 persons, they still represent the majority of the whole provincial populations. The territory where they are now living remains a huge geographical space compared to other provinces in the country. But recent historical accounts of French colonization, national state administration and immigration processes reveal that the place allocated to the highlanders (or indigenous populations) has been drastically reduced, and will be even more condensed in the future. Such reduction, which interconnects people and space, is metaphorically projected through the notion of “ethnic minorities,” which claims that indigenous