The spirit in the machine: Towards a spiritual geography of debt bondage and labour (im)mobility in Cambodian brick kilns

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This paper draws on evidence from debt bonded brick workers in Cambodia to explore how animism and formal religion are articulated to retain workers in dangerous and difficult conditions. The paper shows first how factory labourers, owners, and local religious figures actively articulate spiritual beliefs by legitimising workers’ confinement to the kiln through moral recourse to Buddhist notions of merit, character, and destiny. Secondly, it shows how informal animist beliefs play a key role in shaping interpretations of, and responses to, the extreme physical conditions of the kilns. Thus, by exploring how superstition and religious beliefs work to co-constitute labour (im)mobility in the country’s brick kilns, it makes a case for linking the geographies of labour, mobilities, and spirituality. More broadly, by highlighting the role of locally articulated spirituality in immobilising workers, our paper provides a counterpoint to predominant narratives of spiritual and animist agency as resistance, demonstrating instead how such agency may serve in the workplace as a means of coercion, restriction and control.

KEYWORDS
brick work, Cambodia, immobility, migration, spirituality

1 | INTRODUCTION

From hundreds of workers collapsing due to “spiritual hauntings” in garment factories, to “possessed” activists attacking forest clearing machinery, the role of animist agency as an impediment to capitalist expansion has been the source of much academic interest in recent years. Described famously by Aihwa Ong in Malaysia (1988), much of the recent literature has dealt with the intersection of the spiritual and the physical; the cultural and the medical. Overarchingly, the concern has been to challenge hegemonic discourses of economic and biological development, exemplifying the ill fit of such categories to the complex and culturally resonant experience of work in global production networks. Yet it has also been about resistance, with spiritual possession described (see Beban and Work, 2017) as akin to Scott’s (1985) “weapons of the weak”: a hidden safety valve in defiance of an industrial system that permits no formal negotiation.

In Cambodia, a country characterised by rapid economic growth fomented according to an outward-facing neoliberal development model (Beban & Work, 2014; Springer, 2010), the sheer volume of such cases has seen the issue rise to media and policy, as well as academic attention. The well-publicised Pheapimex case of 2009 resulted in 5 hectares of an economic land concession returned to public ownership following the intervention of a forest spirit, while in the last three years alone more than 4,000 people have been involved in mass faintings in the garment industry, often associated with “spiritual hauntings” (Kawazu & Kim, 2019, p. 2) and occurring usually “in parallel with tensions between the workers...
and the foreign owners of the factories” (Eisenbruch, 2019, p. 317). As Arnold argues, “whether or not spirits have been bargaining with management on the factory floor, public sentiment started to shift” as a result (2017, p. 29). Though they may act through workers’ bodies, they are viewed as agents on their part: allies to an embattled workforce.

In this regard, spirits’ oppositional roles are often predicated on their outsider status, beyond the usual frameworks of business and thus inherently against its operation. Yet this need not necessarily be the case. Presenting an alternative perspective, this paper examines the case of debt-bonded workers in the brick industry to highlight how spirits may manifest in a disempowering, or more specifically immobilising role, benefitting owners and bosses more than workers.

In doing so, it focuses on brick production: a highly profitable industry fundamental to Cambodia’s rapid development of recent decades, yet one whose workforce remains suspended in inertia and physical degradation. Unlike other industries, the majority of brick workers are debt-bonded. Having accepted a loan from the brick kiln owner to repay debts accrued in their home villages, they are bound to continue working until that sum is repaid. Yet the low paid, insecure, and dangerous nature of the industry is such that debts are more likely to rise than fall over the years. Brick workers consequently spend almost a decade in the kilns on average (Brickell et al., 2018), enduring dangerous and physically debilitating conditions for almost 50 years in some cases (Parsons & Ly Vouch Long, forthcoming). For those who survive into middle age, debts far larger than the original loan are often signed over to children, transferring bondage to the next generation.

This arrangement effectively immobilises workers and even entire families in some cases, preventing the debt-bonded, and in some cases even their children, from seeking work outside of the kiln until the debt is repaid. Crucially, this is an arrangement that is neither supported in law nor enforced by physical restrictions. Brick kilns are open sites, with little to physically stop workers departing if they chose to. Moreover, as elsewhere in the world, bondage by debt to a particular site or workplace is illegal in Cambodia. Yet despite frequent opportunities to do so, few attempt to escape, citing obligation, loyalty, and moral character as their rationale for staying. Instead of anger or resentment, workers express gratitude to the kiln owners for the loans that bond them, accepting a resigned responsibility for their lot. They are in essence immobilised by the power-laden articulation of cultural norms, which foster immobility even in the face of physical danger.

This paper aims to show the role played by religion, spirituality, and animist beliefs in shaping and underscoring this immobility. As shown here, brick workers participate in an actively articulated spiritual discourse, propounded and encouraged by kiln bosses, who “rely on the [Buddhist teachings of] the dharma” (brick kiln owner 13 October 2017) to inculcate workers into a wider spiritual justification of the labour regime. Physically reinforced by shrines to the spirits of machines and the land on which they stand, as exemplified in Figure 1, which “construct space and time through their own specific ontological commitments” (Brace et al., 2006, p. 31), animism and formal religious belief work in conjunction, as a conduit through which the political economy of brick production is channelled.

**FIGURE 1** A shrine to the spirits of a brick-making machine, Cambodia, 2017.

*Source: Photograph by Thomas Cristofoletti. Copyright Blood Bricks. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]*
In exploring this issue, the paper that follows highlights the conceptual value of drawing linkages between the geographies of spirituality, labour, and mobility, underscoring not only the central role played by spirits in mediating relations between labour, corporations, and the state (Beban & Work, 2014, p. 594), but also conversely how labour regimes work to construct and articulate existing systems of religion and spirituality, in order to fulfil economic demand. Specifically, it builds on recent work linking mobilities and spirituality (e.g., Kitiarsa, 2010; Maddrell & Terry 2016; Wigley, 2018) to explore how its corollary, spirituality and immobility, intersects with everyday life and labour.

With these aims in mind, the paper goes on to outline the concepts, methods, and context that underpin the empirical sections. Thereafter, data are presented on the role of formal religious doctrines in shaping labour mobility. The next section then moves to highlight how the animist agency of matter plays the role of explaining and legitimating conditions in the kilns, thereby facilitating rather than resisting the physical conditions which brick workers must endure. Finally, the conclusion considers the implications of this empirical material for geography and beyond.

2 | FRAMING THE SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY OF LABOUR

The spiritual nature of work in the brick industry speaks to a growing recent interest in longstanding debates over animist and religious ontologies. Whether concerning land spirits, factory workers, or spiritual possessions, much recent scholarship on animism and religion has focused on the potential of spiritual viewpoints to open up “interstitial cracks” within an ontology that divides humans from nature’ (Beban & Work, 2014, p. 593). Continuing a lengthy tradition of scholarship concerning Cartesian dualisms and the rebuttal of simplistic mind–body dialectics (e.g., Ryle, 1949/2002), this mantle has most recently been taken up by the new materialist thinkers, who have “staged a return/turn to such objects as ‘the body’, ‘nature’, and ‘life’ in social and critical theory” (Willey, 2016, p. 992). In particular, “the boundaries of life and nonlife are the contested terrain” (Willey, 2016, p. 998) in a debate that seeks to explore and explain the boundaries between “agential/plastic” and “inert/dead matter” (Willey, 2016, p. 999). Distribute agency over movement more broadly, extending it not only beyond God but also beyond humans, and the apparently “starkly dichotomous opposition between passive and active matter” disappears (Ellenzweig, 2017, p. 33).

Mobility and agency are therefore key to framing an effective ontology of spirituality and space. Yet understanding their behaviour also means broadening awareness of “the processes involved in producing space as something that can be measured and bounded” (Theriault, 2017, p. 125). Brick workers, who spend years at a time spatially confined by labour relations in conditions of extreme physical precarity, provide a key example of this. Rather than being defined by physical barriers, brick workers’ interpretation of their immobility and potential to leave the kilns logically straddles past, current, and future lives. As such, “the figuring of socio-spatial categories is rendered as transcendental” (Prorok, 2000, p. 58), constituted by processes that transcend boundaries between material, social, and psychic, and in turn shapes action in each of these three realms.

Within the geographic literature, this relationship between space, spirituality, and mobility has historically been a relatively underexplored nexus. Traditionally, geographies of religion, spirituality, and belief have focused predominantly on “sacred spaces, religion and spirituality as places of stillness and tranquillity” (Wigley, 2018, p. 412), with only the most recent literature (Kitiarsa 2010; Maddrell & Terry 2016; Wigley, 2018) devoting attention specifically to the mobilities of religion. This area of discursive interest has been termed “religious mobility” (Kitiarsa, 2010, p. 259), in order to bound and clarify its spiritually motivated dimension. Nevertheless, as this paper aims to show, such bounding may in fact downplay the breadth and relevance of the nexus, the implications of which extend beyond religious practice itself, into the “mundane and everyday routines and movements; trips for economic, recreational or utilitarian purposes.” (Wigley, 2018, p. 412).

More generally, this reflects a lack of communication between labour geography and the geography of spirituality: an intersection of growing relevance in view of developments on both sides. While the labour geographic literature has long been concerned with the situated nature of labour regimes, emphasising, almost foundationally, that “place is not an empty arena in which production is set up” (Lier, 2007, p. 817), there is a widening awareness of the need for “a more sophisticated understanding of the structural constraints and social relations that shape labour’s agency potential” (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011, p. 228).

Doing so requires, in the first instance, “reconnecting or re-embedding notions of agency into the economic and societal systems that surround workers” (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011, p. 228), a mandate that has seen the spatial confines of labour geographic work expanded and mobilised. Recent years have seen a spate of interest, for example, in the mobile and multi-local organisation of labour (Buckley et al., 2017; Strauss, 2013; Yeoh & Huang, 2015) and precarity has become a topic
of growing attention (Strauss, 2018; Coe, 2013) as labour geographers increasingly recognise that “work is more than just about wages” (Dutta, 2016, p. 3).

That labour geography has yet to engage on this point is perhaps all the more surprising given the rich history of intervention on the spiritual dimensions of labour in the anthropological literature. Scholars from Taussig (1980/2010) via Scott (1985) to Ong (1997, 2001) and Rudnyckyj (2009) have explored in some depth how markets and spiritualities interact, focusing in large part on the labour dimension of this arrangement. Nevertheless, despite efforts by key thinkers such as Kong (2001, 2010), Dwyer (2000), Dwyer et al. (2013), and Holloway (2006), Holloway & Valins (2002) to link religion to its broader spatial context, labour and spiritual geographies have generally neglected this mutual nexus, leaving the spiritual dimensions of labour isolated from their wider geographic context.

One consequence of this has been a tendency, when discussing the intersection of spirituality with labour relations, to view its implicit ontological challenge as a challenge to capitalist labour relations more broadly. Consequently, much of the literature on spirituality in the workplace has framed spirits as agents of resistance. As Ong (1988) describes, for example, workers who are seized by vengeful spirits explode into demonic screaming and rage, even going as far as attacking their supervisors in recompense for workers’ ill treatment. Moreover, as Arnold describes in Cambodia:

These voices from beyond are speaking up for collective bargaining in the here and now, expressing grievances much like the workers’ own: a feeling that they are being exploited by forces beyond their control, that the terms of factory labour somehow violate an older, fairer moral economy. (2018, p. 29)

While recognising the key role that spiritual agency of this sort has played in patterns of popular resistance, this paper's focus on spiritual (im)mobilities in the workplace draws out a more nuanced interpretation of its role between labour and capital. Following Beban and Work, we therefore “analyse this story not as a coherent narrative of resistance, but to recognise the central role that spirits play in everyday life in Cambodia” (2017, p. 593). Moreover, we seek also to highlight the intersection of spiritual agency with the agency of figures operating within the formal religious establishment, and the intersection of both with the interests and operations of workplace owners. In employing this mobile lens on labour, the paper therefore highlights the joint role played by animist and formal religious agency in the management of labour (im)mobility.

From this standpoint, this paper therefore works in the first instance to build on the nexus of labour and spiritual geographies by highlighting how spiritual and religious factors play a role in the management of labour mobility. Related to this goal, it will secondly demonstrate the value of drawing recent work on religious mobilities outside of the purview of religion and into the everyday realm of labour and its management. Third, in exploring this intersection, it seeks also to posit a more nuanced interpretation of the relationship between spirituality and capitalist practice. Specifically, it will argue how animist agency is not only a force of resistance to labour conditions but, while interacting also with formal religious practice, also a means by which labour may be controlled in its movement.

3 METHODS

This paper emerges from an 18-month study (2017–2019) into debt-bonded labour in the Cambodian brick-making industry entitled Blood Bricks (Brickell et al., 2018). It comprises data collected from over 30 brick factories and three rural villages in the Kampong Cham and Prey Veng provinces of Cambodia. These data were collected according to a two-stage methodology, designed to provide a detailed ethnographic account of life, including its spiritual dimensions, in Cambodia's brick kilns.

The focus on spirituality in the brick kilns emerged originally from conversations with the project advisory board, whose members raised perspectives drawn from Taussig (1980/2010) and others, regarding the spiritual character of everyday market commodities. As early visits to the kilns began to reveal the role and extent of religion and superstition in Cambodia’s brick kilns, this dimension of the wider research project became more prominent. Further attention was therefore directed towards it as its centrality to the practice of brick work became increasingly apparent during the course of researching an industry replete with spiritual imagery, as shown in Figure 1.

On the first day of fieldwork, the research team visited the key research site, to the north of Phnom Penh, along with one of the authors of a recent report on the brick industry by the NGO LICADHO (LICADHO, 2016). In general, however, ease of access to brick-working communities reflected the laissez-faire attitude of the authorities to the practice. The relatively open, accessible, and visible nature of most brick production sites in Cambodia meant that a total of 80 interviews with brick workers and a further 31 with factory owners, foremen, and other key informants could be conducted by the research team over the next four months without the need for further assistance.
The ability of the research team to access and build trust in these environments reflects a certain national familiarity with research and researchers: for a relatively small country, Cambodia has been the subject of much NGO intervention, alongside associated policy and academic research activities. Yet it is indicative also of a broader cultural openness to space, visitation, and the circulation of people, which often extends into the private sector, but is especially pronounced in a brick kiln environment in which public space and the private space of kiln owners and workers is blurred. Indeed, despite the internationally controversial nature of bonded labour, brick production in Cambodia is not a secretive operation. Rather than avoiding or discouraging research in their kilns, owners instead used the opportunity to emphasise the pastoral, patron-like role they played in relation to their workers, the scale of their investment, and the difficulties they faced in recouping profits, predominantly as a result of workers' poor behaviour and unwillingness to work.

Although in a small number of cases brick kiln owners would refuse the researchers permission to undertake interviews in the kilns, brick kiln owners were in general approachable and amenable to their workers, or even themselves, being interviewed. Reflecting an apparent belief in workers' loyalty, or at least discipline, brick kiln owners rarely sought to intervene in or supervise interviews, allowing workers instead to speak independently. While this reduced the immediate risk of coercion over informant responses, it does, nevertheless, indicate a faith in a more subtle form of influence. In other words, that brick kiln owners were confident workers would not speak ill of them reflects to some degree the entrenchment of the patronage narrative in the kiln environment.

While facilitating interviews, this presents a problem of balance to the researcher. Consequently, in order both to seek out a greater range of perspectives and to further understand the context from which brick workers originate, the second research phase involved visiting the villages from which workers originated in order to understand the conditions that led them to the industry. Having questioned each worker on their village of origin as part of a more extensive qualitative interview, three villages were finally selected on the basis of the greatest number of households working in the brick industry. Using brick workers' relatives and village heads as points of access, qualitative research was then undertaken for two weeks in each sender village. Interviews were conducted with brick workers' sender households, returned brick workers, non-brick workers, the village leaders, and religious figures such as monks, traditional healers, and fortune tellers, generating a total of 80 additional rural interviews.

Throughout both phases of fieldwork, interviews were conducted in Khmer by a two-person team comprising one native speaker and one proficient non-native speaker. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were undertaken with workers who had finished work for the day, audio recorded, and independently transcribed and translated into English. Reflecting the need for sensitivity in relation to vulnerable participants, repeated interviews were used wherever possible, with amenable participants facilitating further interviews with less confident groups in rural areas, such as younger female informants. In particular, key informants such as village leaders and fortune tellers, though not directly involved in the relationship between kiln owners and workers, played an important dual role in this respect. Not only did they possess a useful overview of the situation not available to everybody in sender and destination areas, but they were also able to suggest and facilitate meetings by demonstrating their knowledge of and consent to the research process.

In addition, the subject of spirituality itself requires a degree of nuance in its approach, as it is not a useful basis for research to assume or suggest that all of a community share a certain belief. As Chakrabarty outlines, for example, “the question of whether or not the workers had a conscious or doctrinal belief in gods and spirits [is] wide of the mark; after all, gods are as real as ideology is – that is to say, they are embedded in practices” (2000, p. 78). Accordingly, the presence of spirits in these contexts is complex, being discussed both in terms of belief and also in a largely objective manner, as if they were human actors. In order to avoid the dualistic and implicitly othering approach of a secular researcher approaching spiritual issues from an external perspective, it was necessary during the course of the research to build a relational vocabulary of spirituality in the kilns. Questions were therefore framed over time in terms of the practices and beliefs of known and unknown others, resulting progressively in a perspective on kiln spirituality as a differentiated landscape of social and power relations, rather than a holistic entity. For the purposes of this paper we reflect this nuance by referring to Buddhist religious practices as “religion,” while the wider milieu of spiritual practice, including the more earthbound beliefs associated with neak ta – formerly human spirits associated with certain objects and geographical areas, explained in more detail below – are cited as “spirituality.”

4 | BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY: BELIEF, SPIRITUALITY, AND NON-CARTESIAN LOGICS

Spirits are alive in Cambodia's physical, social and political landscapes and their persistent presence denies the truth of their absence preached by the so-called modern world. (Work, 2017, p. 389)
Cambodia’s recent development has been a story of chaotic acquisition according to a neoliberal development model characterised by the “continued polarisation of the rich and poor” (Beban & Work, 2014, p. 597; Springer, 2010). Moreover, as assets have become concentrated, credit has proliferated at breakneck pace. Since the mid-1990s, the microfinance sector has grown from a base of only 50,000 borrowers (Ovesen & Trankell 2014) to achieve one of the world’s highest levels of profitability and credit penetration today (Bateman et al. 2019).

In conjunction with urban growth and the rural environmental pressures wrought by climate change, Cambodia’s untramelled rise in household debt has contributed to a transformative phase of rural marketisation, locking an increasingly mobile populace to mutually dependent translocal household economies (Parsons, 2017; Lawreniu, 2017). Mechanisation and rapid rises in rural wages (IBRD and World Bank, 2015) have promulgated a mass transition towards capital-intensive farming methods, which must either be funded through remittances or purchased on credit against a successful harvest. A bad harvest, which arrive with increasing regularity due to the impacts of unseasonal rain driven by climate change (Diepart, 2015), therefore results not only in a lack of assets, but also a lack of means to repay due debts.

Various industries – from cyclo-riding (Parsons, 2017) to garment work (Parsons, 2016) – are characterised by such rural imperatives, but brick work, in particular, is defined by it. The majority of the sector’s employees possess substantial debts accrued either by failure in business or agriculture and are attracted by kiln owners’ offers of a single, interest-free sum to repay them, to be repaid over time with labour in the kiln (see also LICADHO, 2016). As in the South Asian “brick belt” (see Bates, 2017; Shah, 2006), the majority of brick workers therefore begin their work in the industry contractually indentured to the brick kiln owner – a semi-legal agreement in which the debt is permitted but the exclusivity of labour is not – and thus unable, until their debt is repaid, to take on additional work elsewhere.

However, unlike in the South Asian “brick belt” (see Bates, 2017; Shah, 2006), these bonds are rarely seasonal, meaning that workers must remain on site throughout the relatively lucrative dry season – when bricks dry quickly and production need not stop for the rain – and the far less profitable wet season, when production falls dramatically and with it piece rate wages. During this latter period, debts invariably increase rather than decrease as brick workers borrow money from the brick kiln owner for daily expenses, rendering overall repayment difficult, if not impossible. Money borrowed for both medical treatments and lifecycle events such as marriages are similarly added to workers’ debts over time, leaving many workers owing far more than their initial loans after a few years in the industry.

Consequently, few of those who enter the kilns with substantial debts leave while they still have the ability to work. Yet worse still is the tendency of children to follow their parents into the industry. While debts are not formally intergenerational, the small loans on which workers depend for subsistence throughout parts of the year often begin to be denied once they reach middle age. This results in many children – usually with little or no education and thus few opportunities – ultimately taking responsibility for their parents’ debt in exchange for further small loans, often for their own or family members’ medical treatment. Nevertheless, the kilns are not hopeless places. Rather, workers’ continued willingness to toil under such circumstances owes much to a worldview in which the hardship of the physical environment is subsumed within a broader spiritual framework of action, reaction, and rationality.

Spirituality is therefore highly visible in Cambodia’s brick factories. As shown in Figure 2, Buddhist imagery is often a feature of the compound, while alcoves cut into the face of each kiln hold spirit houses containing offerings and incense. These spirits play an integral role in the broader Cambodian landscape of belief. Amidst a wide range, “the spirits most fearfully respected are those of the dead” (Lester, 1973, pp. 134–135): formerly powerful humans or animals who return to influence worldly affairs. Yet these animist entities are not segregated, but integrated into formal religious practice. Many pagodas contain spirit houses for their neak ta watt – malicious spirits co-opted as enforcers of religious rectitude (Chouléan, 1988) – and most villages additionally possess a “neak ta who exercises his dominion over the whole village community” (Chouléan, 1988, p. 36).3

Key to understanding the behaviour of these spirits is their physicality. Invisible but semi-material (Arensen, 2012), neak ta depend on humans for their well-being and are quick to anger if mistreated. Trespassing on the territory of unknown spirits is “potentially deadly” and people may be cursed or even die from “simply setting foot upon the ground of powerful spirits” (Arensen, 2012, p. 162). Lesser spirits or more minor infringements may result in illness or pain, accidents or misfortune, all of which both monks and lay practitioners – most commonly the self-taught kru Khmer who practice fortune telling and healing in the community – devote much time to resolving among the afflicted.

Though they may be especially prominent here, the co-existence of these animist dimensions with the more formal precepts of Buddhism is no quirk of the Cambodian religious milieu. Rather, it reflects a religious perspective within which “all of the rituals of the Buddhist way, taken together, promote and express a symphony of life in which all of the various themes – the monk, the layman, the old, the young, the living, the dead, Buddha-power, and spirit-power – are constantly interacting in reciprocity” (Lester, 1973, p. 146).
By collapsing the distinctions between body, mind, and soul, this situated form of spirituality releases agency into the wild. The illness that kills a family member, the drought that devastates a crop, or even the bad luck that plagues a business, is rooted in each case in both reason and rationale. “In this cosmic order, subjectivity and intentional agency constitute the ultimate ground for being and order” (Århem, 2015, p. 5), a position that grants considerable power to explanatory frameworks and those who posit them. A highly profitable industry whose workers toil in physical danger and poverty, this is a context in which a great many moral and spiritual explanations are required and a great many proffered. Indeed, as section 6 will show, the very physicality of brick work is, for those who must do it, fuel for its spiritual vigour. First, however, section 5 will outline how formal religious frameworks of morality and karma underpin (im)mobility in the kilns.

5 | IMMOBILITY AND THE DHARMA: MANAGING LABOUR THROUGH FORMAL RELIGION AND MORALITY

Nobody wants to be a brick worker. Generally viewed as a last resort, taken up by those for whom interest payments on debts accrued outside of the kiln have become unmanageable, it is an occupation renowned for its hardship and inescapability. Thus, something of a conundrum is in evidence. Life in the Cambodian brick industry is nasty, frequently brutish, and all too often short, but it is not guarded or patrolled, and only infrequently gated. Brick factories are for the most part open sites: workers pass in and out of the gates to buy food and medicine and are in some cases allowed to visit home during festivals. And yet they return. Runaways are not uncommon, but neither are they the norm. Most remain immobilised by a complex milieu of factors extending far beyond the physical.

In Cambodia’s kilns, labour is legitimised and immobilised by debt, but also negotiated in view of the spiritual logics of karma, loyalty, and religion. This process is exemplified by the following conversation, which took place between two former brick workers about the same kiln, the first speaker having worked there for a considerable period and the second for only two weeks, before leaving. Their contrasting attitudes reflect the manner in which workers’ perspectives on brick kilns and their owners alter over time, as a result of the spiritually infused labour regime underway in these harsh working environments:

*Visal, male former brick worker:* ‘the brick factory owner at Siem Reap always provided transportation for all workers to go to the pagoda on holy days. That boss was very kind and he did only good deeds’.

*Mony, female former brick worker:* ‘I worked there for half a month. The boss used the workers like slaves from dusk to dawn. Even if you have money to pay off your debt, they wouldn’t accept it and asked for it to
be paid back double. They even provided more loans just to keep us there’. (Former brick workers, 1 March 2018)

The distinction in these two former workers’ testimonies highlights how performed patronage and spiritual attentiveness by bosses play a role in recasting worker perspectives on coercion in the light of spirituality and religion. Specifically, religion plays two key roles in immobilising labour in Cambodia’s brick kilns: legitimating working conditions and transposing desires of mobility beyond not only the present time, but even the present life. In this way, hopes of escape are retained, but in a different guise, as thoughts turn not to tangible goals, but to the next life and its possibilities: a place beyond the self that renders bearable the permanence of the labour regime. Those in the worst situations continue to hold out hope for an end to specific material torments, but simply transpose their expectation from the current life to the next one, as exemplified by a woman whose husband had left her in a dire situation:

My husband is addicted to alcohol, [but] when I suggested that he stop, he became angry and ran away, which left me with two children to feed … [When I went to the pagoda] … I prayed for a better living and a good husband in the next life … I prayed only for the next life. I thought that in the present life no one would help me. (Chanti, 15 February 2018)

Chanti’s account highlights the intertwining of narratives of escape in both morality and belief. The response to her husband’s mobility is not to follow him, or to escape herself from the kilns, but to remain, her desire to leave articulated via the prism of a future life. Crucially, moreover, this narrative of destiny is not only forward looking, but also backwards oriented – a retrospective justification of present conditions. Statements such as “I feel hopeless … this is my destiny … I was born in a difficult situation” (Chanrith and Leakhana, family who sold land, 16 November 2017) – which are commonly heard and very much a part of the discourse of the downtrodden in Cambodia – suggest not only resignation, but also an immobilising acceptance of present circumstances, which may quell workers’ urge to resist.

Certainly, statements by workers appear to demonstrate a perceived lack not only of agency, but more specifically motility: the ability to choose and shape one’s own mobility. Those who find themselves at the mercy of a “bad” owner bemoan that “we never thought [about which kiln to choose], we went to work by depending on destiny” (Srey Pov, 28 February 2018) and fatalistic narratives like this are constantly reinforced by religious figures, who emphasise the fault workers carry with them for their circumstances. Speaking of those who suffer accidents while working in brick kilns, for example, the head monk of a sending village’s pagoda explained that:

According to Buddha, we believe in karma. Why does it only happen to them while the rest of the workers are okay? We reap what we sow; it’s like if you grow a mango tree, you will get mango fruits. If we do good deeds, we get good results. If we come to the pagoda to pray and send offerings, we will also get good fortune in our next life. (Chamroeun, head monk, 15 February 2018)

In this way, figures of religious authority do much of the work of legitimising the conditions in which workers find themselves. The question of why one person’s lot is worse than another’s – that most political of questions – is answered through recourse to the consequentialist logic of karma, as it is articulated in Cambodian brick kilns. Bad circumstances, in other words, are predicated on past bad deeds. That those who are suffering by definition deserve to be so is a truism endlessly repeated not only by religious figures, but by factory workers and the indebted also. Even among the worst-off, it is a narrative so internalised as to appear ubiquitous:

I follow the Buddha’s principles. You reap what you sow. If you do good deeds, you will get a good life. If you don’t do it, you will gain nothing. That’s why I work and pray at the same time to have a better life in my next life. According to Buddha, if you do bad deeds, you will go to hell and become hungry ghosts [spirits similar to neak ta but with much less material power and influence], depending on how serious your mistake is. If you do good things, you will be rewarded. (Sokhom, 8 March 2018)

Nevertheless, despite the repetitious nature of core mantras, to view the concepts of destiny and karma as universal is misleading. The geographical literature has long noted that religion and politics are closely intertwined in both aims and construction (e.g., Buttimer, 2006), yet this recognition is applied with far less clarity to religion in its less formal, everyday
incarnations than it is to the upper echelons of organised religion (Holloway, 2006). Instead, there is a sense at this scale that religion is discursively produced and co-constituted: the product of idiosyncratic and often practical negotiations with modernity (Kong, 2010), rather than mediating or reflecting the power-laden nature of resource distribution in and beyond sites of labour.

Yet, in Cambodia's brick kilns, the manner in which religious visitation is controlled by kiln owners highlights the central role of mobility in linking narratives of labour and mobility. Monks report that “the workers can only come to visit home during [religious] festivals or their relative's wedding. Then they have to go back to work” (head monk, 1 March 2018). Workers, similarly, report that “the brick factory owner at Siem Reap always provided transportation for all workers to go to pagoda on holy days” (brick worker focus group 1 March 2018). Thus, in contrast to the schemes of religious mobility explored elsewhere in the literature, wherein agency over movement and self-affirmation are fundamentally intertwined (e.g., Kitiarsa, 2010; Maddrell & Terry, 2016; Wigley, 2018), participating in formal religious practice entails for brick workers both a surrender of agency and of motility, acquisicing to a scheme of mobility put in place by the owners of their kiln.

However, this does not render such visitations mundane or unimportant. Rather, in the world of the brick kilns, this is a privilege of mobility unheard of at other times. Not only are religious festivals the only times at which travel outside the kilns is actively encouraged, but such ceremonies are one of the few times when brick workers are reliably allowed to return home at all. Spiritual mobility in this context therefore provides a carefully curated reprieve from the physical conditions of the kilns, while also strengthening the spiritual conditions within them. As a second worker stated, “I visit [home] for one or two days at a time. [But] if there is no ceremony then the owner won't allow us to visit somewhere” (brick worker focus group, 6 November 2017). The practice of formal religion is therefore intimately tied to agency, mobility, and power within the kilns.

This control over religious practice does not appear, moreover, to be a merely incidental relationship, but rather one actively articulated by brick kiln owners in a manner that underscores the legitimacy of stasis in the kilns. In the words of one brick kiln owner: to control workers, “we rely on the dharma, telling them that as sinners they will suffer from their bad actions” (Chea, brick kiln owner 13 October 2017). At the same time, the specific act of escape is repeatedly painted in binary and starkly moral terms by kiln owners, who make frequent and direct comparisons between long-term immobility in the kilns and the “merit currency” of karma and rebirth (Schlieter, 2013, p. 464):

The main problem [with this industry] is the workers. If they owe a lot of debt, like 4,000 USD or 5,000 USD, they escape. Those workers who are honest work here for a long time: more than 10 years. Whereas dishonest workers stay only around 2 or 3 years. It depends on whether they are good or bad. If they are bad, they are always ready to escape. (Chanmony, female brick kiln owner, 14 November 2017)

The intertwinement here of (im)mobility, morality, and karma is key. Destiny – both forward and backward looking – is presented in the kilns as embodied and tangible; a contingent component of mobility decisions, rather than an idea. This interweaves the imagined circumstances of the next life with the actual conditions of the current one, as highlighted by Sokhom, a worker, who outlines how his own religious mobility constitutes a specific investment in his own future life:

Some people are hopeless and helpless. They work just to make ends meet. When they get some money, they waste it on alcohol … They don't think about the next life; I'm not sure [what they think about]. For me, when I have enough money, I go to the pagoda to pray for a better life in the next life. Only a few people wish not to have debts again in their next life, and that is all they wish for. (Sokhom 8 March 2018)

What Sokhom's account highlights above all is the rooting, in the brick kilns, of present mobility decisions in circumstances associated with future as well as present lives. From the perspective of long-term mobility, Sokhom and his “hopeless and helpless” counterparts are in reality in a similar position: neither expects to leave the kilns during their healthy life. Yet from his position they are entirely distinct. His attention to prayer and the better life he hopes this will bring in his next incarnation distinguishes him from those rooted in carnal pleasures. “Moral” and “immoral” mobility out of brick work are thus distinguished and categorised in terms of the rewards they bring to those who practice them, engendering a transcendental discourse of immobility, which reinforces and legitimates workers' ongoing stasis in the kilns.
6 | THE COMPLICITY OF THE SPIRITS: LEGITIMATING WORKING CONDITIONS THROUGH THE AGENCY OF “LIVELY MATTER”

As brick worker testimonies highlight, the manifestation of non-material futures feature as a contingent extension of present circumstances in mobility decisions, in which one part explains and justifies the other. However, their arrangement in this respect is not direct: a communication between material, inert space, and non-material futures, but is rather linked via the interlocutor of animist agency manifested in the material world. As the chief of one sender village outlined, for example, Karmic destiny and animist agency are part of a coherent spiritual worldview, within which mutual interaction is possible:

Let us say that if we do good, then we receive good [in return]. For example, Buddha was defeated in revenge by his enemies, because he did wrong thing in his ex-life. [Consequently], I told my family not to avenge each other after I die [and similarly], when the brick kiln owners meet problems, they call a fortune teller to prepare a ceremony [to appease the local spirits]. (Boran, village chief, 1 November 2017)

This complex interrelationship is crucial, but not unique to the kilns. Animism is deeply rooted in Cambodia and is intertwined with formal Buddhist practice in the sense that the two comfortably co-exist (Kouy, 2013). Nevertheless, this does not mean that they occupy the same spiritual space. Rather, the animist spirits associated with the land and its natural features – neak ta – are formerly powerful and protective people reborn as guardian spirits of the land. Having once been human, they retain many human characteristics. They are vulnerable, temperamental, and dependent on the actions of people (Arensen, 2012), so that a failure to account for their needs is not a question of credit in the cosmic reckoning of destiny, but of revenge and misfortune enacted as between people and communities. As a fortune teller and traditional healer explained, for example:

In general, Khmer people always come [when they are sick] to ask about the wrath of their ancestors and spiritual beliefs. Sometimes, I prepare offerings and rituals for them, and they get well. (Dara, fortune teller, 1 March 2018)

The spirits, thus envisaged, are powerful entities. Appeasing them is essential to health and well-being and a failure to do so is not only a personally but also a socially irresponsible act. Yet as a result of the relative difference in financial resources, brick workers are dependent on kiln owners for spiritual as well as physical well-being to an unusual extent. Workers maimed in a machine are not necessarily personally at fault, but victims speak instead of the spiritual negligence of their employers, who have failed to pay sufficient heed to the spiritual geography of the kilns and have thus provoked the ire of the local spirits on their workers. Indeed, as the village chief of a major brick-producing site elaborated:

One of the kilns at southern side [of the village] often had accidents. Previously a machine [there] pulled in a worker who came from Kampong Chhnang … I have no idea [why that kiln had so many problems, but] I heard that when kiln was built, the owner did not ask the ancestor spirit over there [for permission] … [Normally] before building something we prepare a stone dropping ceremony and pray to the spirit of land. If we do the wrong thing in praying and worship that place will meet problems. (Leap, village chief 24 November 2017)

This close connection between the dangerous physicality of life in the kilns and the invisible spiritual agency that underpins its operation is crucial to understanding the brick industry. Many brick kilns are fitted with alcoves in which small shrines are placed to please spirits related directly to specific machines (Figure 1), but appeasing the spirits of the land more generally is also key to avoiding physical harm. Each area of land is associated with its own neak ta and showing sufficient respect and deference to these forces is key to avoiding the misfortune that these entities can wreak on those who displease them. Crucially, this revenge is not itself spiritual, but viscerally embodied: spirits are “said to grip and twist the stomach and send illness, often malaria or seizures” (Arensen, 2012, p. 162). As one kiln owner explained:

From my perspective, asking the local guardian spirit [neak ta] is necessary … because [previously] people here didn’t ask the local spirit for doing something to avoid any accident [and were hurt]. (Maly, female brick worker, 3 November 2017)
Moreover, the obverse is also true. While – unlike the cay spirits characteristic of the Cham minority elsewhere in Cambodia (Trankell, 2003) – neak ta are not known for their independent healing powers (Arensen, 2012), the attribution of illnesses to their malfeasance means that they retain the ability to undo their own work. Thus, for the many who suffer debilitating pain – either from their labours in the brick factories or elsewhere, spiritual remedies are often the most logical course of action. Fortune tellers are therefore a key influence in the kilns, as workers seek to consult the immaterial realm for insight into their physical conditions in this life and the next. Avoiding harm requires careful consultation, so that if workers “want to buy a car or construct a building, we will go to check with a fortune teller for finding a best day to buy or construct [it]” (Dara, 28 February 2018). Moreover, for those already unwell, a spiritual remedy is often the preferred course of action. As one brick worker explained of her mother’s illness:

She was elderly and lost her mind; occasionally, she did not recognise us for two or three months. According to religious belief, this is caused by a dark spirit [but] she often had physical pain [too] … She took both modern medicine and traditional medicine [but still] she often lost her mind for two or three days at a time … She [also] had severe intestinal problems.

I took her to check with a traditional healer for mental illness. I did not take her to hospital. My mother had symptoms such as being unable to walk, falling unconscious and uncontrollable defecation. The fortune teller told [me] that The Eight Heads Evil [spirit] controlled my mother, because of a mistake [related to] a dark spirit’s magic. (Bopha, 8 March 2018)

As Bopha’s account shows, the metaphysical discourse of the kilns seeks to explain fortune and misfortune by collapsing the physical and spiritual worlds. The common thread that links the Buddhist and animist dimensions of misfortune in the brick industry is their shared intentionalism and emphasis of the consequences of actions often – though not always – undertaken by the suffer themselves. Weakness, illness, and death are thus all attributed not directly to conditions of living and working, but to the agency of the spirits who manipulate the physical environment, drawing responsibility away from the brick kiln owner, towards the non-material realm.

Indeed, even those tasked with communicating with the spiritual world are explicit in articulating linkages between structural conditions and workers’ attribution of animist agency to their environment. As one fortune teller related, for example, “it’s inevitable to fall sick when you work in the brick factory” and spirituality is often rooted in these harsh physical conditions, which bring systems of belief cheek to cheek with the body itself. As he went on to explain: “From what I notice, it’s the combination of their hard work and Khmer superstition. They work hard for a long time per day and only rest at 9–10 p.m. And they start working again at 2–3 a.m. so their sleep is not sufficient to stay healthy; that’s why their health is weak. And when they are healed because of the rituals and offerings, they continue to believe in it” (fortune teller, 1 March 2018). Indeed, as the same fortune teller continued, there is a clear distinction between the abstract and ethereal spiritual services sought by better-off visitors from outside the kilns and the earthbound, fleshy nature of brick workers’ visits:

Normally, people with debts don’t come to ask about the debts. They only ask about their illness. Same as people with no debts. For middle class and rich people, they believe in horoscopes and bad omens. If I foresee that they will have bad luck according to their birth year, then I help by removing the bad luck from them. But poor people only come to ask about illness. (Dara, fortune teller, 1 March 2018)

This fortune teller’s account highlights the contrast between the closeness with which brick workers associate spiritual concerns and physical well-being, and the more distant, economic lens employed by wealthier “middle class and rich” people outside. This tangible spirituality acts not as an ally in resistance, as outlined in other settings in Cambodia and elsewhere, but rather as a scapegoat at which workers are inclined to attribute responsibility for physical suffering. Although kiln bosses may be held responsible for such events in one respect – via their failure to prepare the requisite ceremonies, as outlined above, for example – their responsibility is a degree removed from circumstances. Their failure is not in managing the environment in which workers live and work, but in failing to tame the agency of an internal threat.

In this way, the formal religious strand of spirituality intersects with animist agency in legitimating and explaining the working environment of the kilns. The fatalism of the Buddhist doctrine as it is espoused by kiln bosses and monks is counterbalanced by the capricious and earthly passions of the neak ta, whose power to wreak revenge is more immediate and visceral than the cosmic debt embodied through karma, but whose management is left to the behest of kiln owners. As
a result, workers' viewpoints of both resistance and escape is negotiated through a spiritual politics grounded in both the articulation of formal religion and the co-option of animist agency.

These twin strands of spirituality play a key role in immobilising workers. Faced with a lifetime of immobility – indeed, multiple lifetimes in the case of intergenerational indenture – it would appear logical to flee sites which, despite scrutiny and the logistical challenges presented by family members' presence, nevertheless present ample opportunity for illicit departure. That few do so is testament not to spirituality in a culturally general sense, but to an actively articulated spiritual discourse that is fostered and encouraged by kiln bosses and religious figures. Both the role of formal religion in framing mobility across present and future lives, and the role of animist agency in drawing responsibility for illness and accidents away from present conditions.

In essence, the spiritual realm is presented as evidence and prospect of mobility, where the present offers none. The manner in which such beliefs are actively encouraged by kiln owners, through loans, moral norms, and the facilitation of mobility, cannot therefore be viewed independently of the power relations in the kilns. This is an actively mediated discourse, a key tool with which to restrict the mobility of workers on a lifelong or even intergenerational basis.

Above all, though, it is a spirituality rooted in the context and everyday politics of debt-bonded work. Although shaped and articulated by authority figures, it is at the same time resisted, responded to, and reconstructed by workers themselves. The fatalism of the Buddhist doctrine espoused by kiln bosses and monks is counterbalanced by the capricious and earthly passions of the neak ta, whose power to wreak revenge is more immediate and visceral than the cosmic debt embodied through karma, but whose management is left to the behest of kiln owners. In Cambodia's brick kilns, therefore, immobility is therefore negotiated through a spiritual politics grounded in both the articulation of formal religion and the co-option of animist agency.

7 | CONCLUSION

Many of those who enter brick work in Cambodia do so knowing they may never emerge from it. Many more come to this realisation later, as their debts fail to decline, or as their children follow them into bondage. And yet they rarely leave, remaining subject instead to an unending, physically draining, and potentially lethal industry for as long as their bodies will withstand it. Seeking to understand why brick workers behave in this way – and to illuminate by extension the cases of a myriad other workers ensconced in the worst forms of labour – this paper has examined how brick workers' subjugation to the fearsome regime in which they labour is framed, narrated, and immobilised.

Overarchingly, it has argued that brick workers' immobility is shaped, in part, by a combination of spiritual agency and formal religious discourse, both of which are subject to influence by the owners of the kiln. Articulated and reinforced by bosses and religious figures in the local area, two spiritual influences – the animation of matter and the transposition of mobility aspirations from present to future lives – play a role in shaping brick workers' physical mobility in the present. Mobility, viewed thus, is played out in conversation with animist and non-material interlocutors in a manner known and utilised to manage the behaviour of workers.

Although the context here constitutes an extreme example, its wider significance as to the influence of spirituality and religion on the management of labour extends further. First, it demonstrates the need for a clearer appreciation of how the places in which mobility occurs may extend into non-material realms shaped by articulated religious beliefs. Second, in exemplifying “the dynamic and fluid nature of contemporary spirituality” (Wigley, 2018, p. 412), it confounds traditional accounts of labour agency by highlighting the role of animist agency as a participant in shaping everyday ontologies of the workplace.

From this standpoint, this paper argues for greater attention to the theoretical nexus of labour geography and spiritual geographies on the grounds that both labour agency and the coercion of labour are rooted in agentive interpretations of space extending beyond the material. In doing so, the paper has sought finally to provide a counterpoint to predominant accounts of spirituality in the workplace, which have overwhelmingly viewed animist agency as a voice of resistance against the incursion or abuses of capitalist practice. Contrasting these narratives, it highlights instead how the agency of non-human spiritual actors may also be articulated, alongside formal religious doctrine, as a tool of labour management through which workers may be immobilised to endure greater physical hardship than they would otherwise be able or willing to accept. Thus, the evidence of this paper highlights the need for greater scholarly attention to the normative neutrality of spiritual agency and its potential for articulation as a tool of control as well as resistance.
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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
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ENDNOTES
1 In our project we do not identify the specific brick kilns and villages we worked in to ensure that participants cannot be traced. Our geographical specificity refers to the province and acknowledgement that we undertook our fieldwork in the hub of the brick industry in Cambodia.
2 We use pseudonyms for participants’ names to respect anonymity.
3 The spelling of neak ta has been amended from the original for consistency.
4 Dharma refers to the practice of Buddha's teachings to protect oneself from suffering.

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