Indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia facing the ecological challenge and conservation authorities

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Proposition

From the beginning of the twentieth century, the creation of national parks has been one of the cornerstones of international conservation strategies in developing countries. The expansion of the network of these national parks and protected areas during colonial times allowed the maintenance of biodiversity and habitats, but the acquisition of large areas in the park system was often carried out at the expense of the indigenous peoples, without any prior verification, often considered unable to understand and manage their territories. There are many testimonies attesting that the local resident communities, forcibly displaced, were exposed to multiple risks of impoverishment, hence their animosity towards the institutionalization of the parks, access to which would become reserved for luxury tourism.

With the ecological threat hanging over the whole world, the desire to increase green areas, devoid of human presence, has made its way. Many rely on international institutions such as WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature), IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), Unesco or other major ecological organizations such as WCS (Wildlife Conservation Society) and CI (Conservation International) to minimize the harmful consequences of the Anthropocene. But are we sure that these champions of modern ecology - and this will be one of the very first questions of this collective book - fulfil the mission they claim to pursue? What is their commitment based on with local societies? Persuasion and cooperation or manipulation, storytelling, and militancy?

Still under the impetus of these international organizations pursuing the myth of an Eden devoid of any human presence, many African, Asian and South American populations are still today dislodged from spaces they used to frequent, or prohibited from practicing their traditional activities such as hunting and gathering. This vision of an intact and uninhabited space, inherited from the colonial period, is fraught with human consequences. In Africa, for example, more than a million people were expelled during the 20th century to make way for animals, forests or savannas. As the environmental historian Guillaume Blanc points out, "the archives do not lie. At the end of the 19th century, the colonists who set out for Africa left behind them a Europe in full transformation. The landscapes of the Old Continent perished under the blows of urbanization and the industrial revolution, and Europeans were then persuaded to find in Africa the nature they had lost at home. Thus were born the first hunting reserves which became national parks in the 1930s. And in each of them, from Albert Park in Congo to Kruger in South Africa, settlers are evicting Africans or at least depriving them of the right to land".[1]

Ironically, the expelled people are most often indigenous peoples who have long contributed to the enrichment of the ecological environment with whom they most often live in symbiosis, or at least in relative balance. This state of affairs, attested to by numerous anthropological, geographical and historical researches, remains largely ignored, if not blindly disputed, by the vast majority of contemporary thuriferous of an immaculate environment believing that the indigenous populations are too numerous, ignorant and incompetent in the management of natural resources. Such a trend is not exclusive to Africa: Frédéric Thomas in his thesis on colonial forestry in South East Asia shows that French colonization was in no way open to indigenous knowledge: it stigmatized local modes of exploitation for better divert resources to its advantage. Conservationist policies were ineffective in

[1] https://theconversation.com/debat-colonialisme-vert-une-verite-qui-derange-146966

slowing down the devastation of the forests because they were above all based on an imperialist discourse. And the author concludes that no preservationist concern was observable among the foresters and colonial administrators.

Certainly, the ecological doctrines of the 1990s advocating immaculate nature (wilderness) have evolved and currently intend to promote the inclusion of indigenous peoples in the thinking of the United Nations and other major institutions[2]. For example, civil society organizations in Karen state in Burma are participating in co-management programs offered by WCS. But these local "integrated park" initiatives, anxious with taking local practices into account, play into the hands of the governments of yesterday and today when faced with their indigenous populations, which have to be assessed - using imported categories – their ability and willingness to "rationally" manage their environment. This tension is real and deserves to be explained.

Such ideologically biased policies persist and are only getting more pronounced with the surge - fuelled and supported by Northern governments, international UN agencies and much of the conservation community - of what is agreed upon. call the green economy. In this time of ecological alarm, a new global environmental economic framework has emerged since 2005 with programs meant to mitigate global warming, pollution and forest depletion. Payment for Environmental Services (PES) is an integral part of the environmental agenda of both North and South countries. One of the current trends – on which this book would like to insist – stipulates that big polluters in the countries of the North can buy rights to pollute (as compensation) in order to commit themselves to protecting forests in the countries of the South. The incorporation of nature into this new green economy, technically advocated as a universal good practice, opens the way to new political and territorial reconfigurations aimed at reshaping international, national and local governance. Nature becomes an object of merchandise, material for speculation and the indigenous peoples, still implicitly considered as an annoyance, are asked to clear or to transform themselves into "guardians of the forests" (with all the ambiguity of this terminology) without being allowed to live in these forests or to draw on the natural resources on which their survival largely depends.

International negotiations aimed at reducing global warming by preserving the forests of the South pursue the same logic of exclusion as green colonial policies: forest populations are categorized as "forest eaters" who need to be controlled through – if necessary – physical violence, expulsion, discrimination. Even if ecological policies grant a semblance of participation to local populations, we are entitled to question the share of innovation they have and, even more, the legitimacy granted to them.
Following the IUCN World Conservation Congress held from September 3 to 11, 2021 in Marseille, predicting a significant increase in national parks worldwide (from 15% currently to 30% of land and marine areas in 2030), it is to be feared that indigenous peoples will be once again seriously threatened with territorial dispossession, as well as restriction of access to an environment that they have often shaped in its social and biological diversity. The relay is already assured, with substantial funding. These forms of ecological interference are, it seems, readily adopted in countries of the South, which use them to thwart the appropriation of territories by ethnic minorities. In Vietnam as in Cambodia, the "national settler" becomes the former colonized who applies historically justified rules, even if recently revisited, by his former colonizer.

Perspective of the book

These new ecological guidelines raise several questions from the informed scientific community and this collective book plans to review them. First, because a system of governance of nature controlled by accountants, bankers, economists, businessmen and hard-core technicians deserves, one suspects, a

[2] https://www.iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/305-books/2657-indigenous-peoples-and-protected-areas-in-south-and-southeast-asia-from-principles-to-practice.html

rigorous examination of its sincerity, feasibility, viability and national/local acceptability. Second, because everything is to be feared that the legacies of the past, with their aberrations relating to an alleged protection of nature which is done to the detriment of the forest societies who live there and have produced it, will be repeated among the supporters of an ecology, still convinced that indigenous people hardly have any place to manage themselves their own destiny.

Why bring up the notion of green colonialism again? Because we are talking about ideology, efficiency and profitability. Modern ecology claims to bring the truth and reality of representations and modes of exploitation of the "rational" environment to social groups who do so with their own categories. That said, the fact remains that the issue of newcomers remains crucial in several Southeast Asian countries. The first occupant of a space often retains a right of inspection, and this knowledge is up to a certain point notified, respected. This knowledge defines (tacit) rights and a certain power over the environment (spirits, diseases, knowledge of dangers, sources, etc.). In Thailand, for example, the knowledge of the Moken sea-nomads was documented and used (water sources, dangers, currents, etc.) then a reconfigured maritime territory was granted to them, provided they comply with environmental instructions. There is a great risk that the indigenous populations will then become locked into a new kind of exoticism, that of “local know-how”, themselves consigned to a mode of preservation of nature, mostly devoid of innovation.

The object of the collective work aims, through case studies in the countries of the South, to make visible the significance of such orientations (from the conventional or specific ecological policies to a country, to the underlying directives involving a new commodification of nature), by revealing the socio-cultural mechanisms that underlie them, while showing - when this is the case - some forms of resistance and/or contestation adopted by indigenous peoples vis-à-vis these ecological policies which only accentuate their marginalization, if not their decline.

At the same time, the book remains open to conservation policies (in the broad sense) that have – or are in the process - demonstrated that they are truly and sincerely attentive to populations by proposing projects liable to articulate local knowledge, human well-being and an ecological vision combining man and nature (different from the one which has been artificially and arbitrarily separated in the modern ecology). The book also hopes to welcome testimonials showing unprecedented cases implemented in appropriate consultation with local populations.

The book intends to cover the countries of Southeast Asia (Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines) and South Asia (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh).

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In order to contribute to the preparation and structuring of the book, interested authors are requested to provide their contact details and send a summary (half a page) to fredericbourdier11@gmail.com and patrick.kulesza@wanadoo.fr . We appreciate to receive this first presentation form before June 2022.

Once receiving the abstract, a notice will be sent. Author contributions are then expected, at the latest, by the end of 2022. English and French are accepted.

Each contribution, with a maximum of 8,000 words (including references) - will be evaluated by a reading committee (two people for each book chapter). The publication of the book, which will appear in the “indigenous questions” collection of the publishing house l’Harmattan (Paris), is scheduled for the second half of 2023.