

Chapter I

Multiple Migrations, Displacements and Land Transfers at Ta Kream in Northwest Cambodia

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The Cambodian case examines migration, land tenure and land management, in a context of conflict and the use of force in land transfers since the time of the Khmer Rouge regime to the present, by studying five agro-ecological zones close to the Kamping Pouy irrigation system in Battambang Province. The study combines analysis of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of household use of land and labor with a historical and ethnographic review of conflict and institutional factors in successive land administrations. Continuing in-migration is reflected in population increases in Battambang and other provinces of Northwest Cambodia in conditions of limited land availability and landlordism, and conflict over expropriation of land by armed groups and business interests. Land transfers to a growing wealthy class of businessmen and government officials have contributed to the creation of a subclass of very poor, landless households whose livelihoods depend on agricultural wage labor, locally and in Thailand, and access to the commons. Access to land for a substantial proportion of the community depends on either tenancy, sharecropping or wage labor on the land of wealthier farmers. Three problematic processes that run counter to the Cambodian Constitution and Land Law are systemic: 1) the usurpation of land rights by locally operating armed groups; 2) legitimation of such land acquisition by military-business-government officials by corrupt officeholders and local government officials; and 3) the capture of rents or profits by agencies responsible for safeguarding natural resources.

Introduction: Migration contexts and history

In northwestern Cambodia, increasing population and agricultural frontier expansion from the central rice plain into forested uplands are creating new agrarian systems. A region that was the cradle of the Khmer Rouge uprising in the 1960s and the rear guard of their resistance against governmental forces in the eighties and nineties, is now the site of large-scale forest conversions, occurring over the last 10 years, into food and non-food cropping systems. Pioneer settlements in the peripheral uplands were associated with voluntary migration of groups from all across the country, although most came from the southeastern rice-growing provinces where, from the 1950s onwards, growing population density outstripped the capacity of farmers to maintain livelihoods. Peasant households acquired forestlands in the uplands of Northwest Cambodia mainly through unregulated or even illicit transfers. These population movements remained largely out of the control of State agencies, and might be seen, together with a movement into agricultural wage labor, as an expression of peasant household agency in responding to rural poverty (Diepart & Ly 2010).

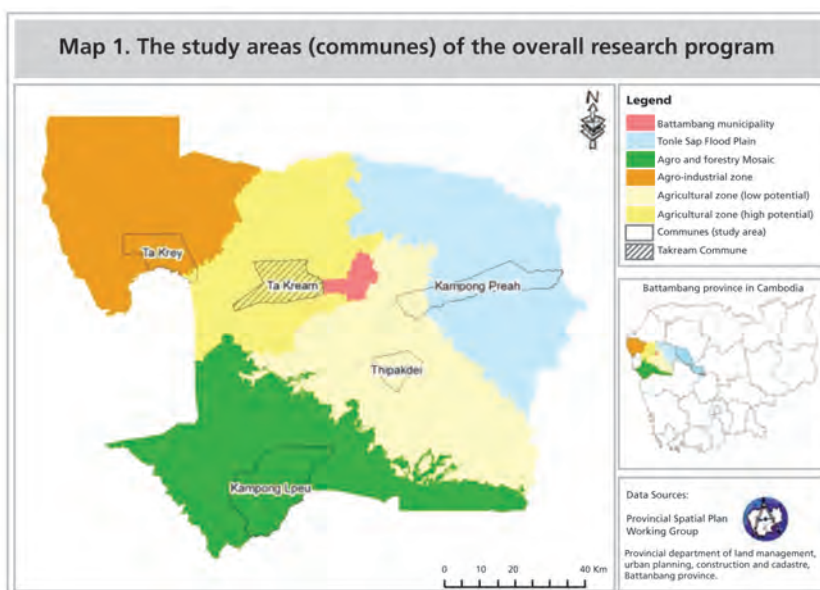
Regional migration has a complex history of obligatory and spontaneous population movements starting with the forced settlement under State driven agrarian development schemes in the 1950s (under the Sihanouk government) and the 1970s (under the Khmer Rouge regime) aiming to resettle farmers from the southwest to the northwest of the country. The development of the Khmer Rouge resistance and armed conflicts with governmental and Vietnamese armies were also associated with forced migrations, which were further complicated by the return of war refugees from Thai camps in the early 1990s. At the end of the nineties, the Cambodian Government's Khmer Rouge reintegration policy, hoping to build sustainable peace in the northwest, had designated new resettlement and administrative areas where Khmer Rouges ex-combatants, soldiers and followers had been farming large areas of land along the border with Thailand; most in western Battambang were allowed to resettle. Some former senior Khmer Rouge officials are now members of provincial governments responsible for land policy management, including continued responsibility for land allocation formalized in the 1993 Constitution and then in the 2001 Land Law. Our research examines how land acquisition and transfers in resettlement villages following the 1991 Peace Accord have occurred and how they relate to the differing agro-ecological situation and history of the villages and what this has meant for rural people. Sometimes land acquisition and transfers occurred under threat of force by ex-military groups still under arms, seizing and transferring land in collusion with local administrations and business interests; or, in the context of rising values of land and crop prices (especially irrigated land), wealthy urban and government interests also engaged in land speculation.

This chapter explores migration, land tenure and land use management in the context of differing institutional and agro-ecological characteristics of villages in one commune, Ta Kream, in the vicinity of the Kamping Pouy irrigation system, where these processes of conflict and the use of force in land transfers have continued. Our research examines how peasant households and communities fared in relation to land acquisition, in managing livelihood diversification, and in coping strategies. It has also explored how armed force structured the new institutional frameworks in agrarian development through the legitimation of transfers of public or peasant lands by military units to officials and business interests. The research examines ways in which multiple resettlement linked to land administration by successive regimes has led to the formation of new agrarian classes, a process observed in other contexts in Southeast Asia (Li 2010). Against this background, we explore how households manage cyclical movements of labor and natural resources in strategies to maintain and diversify livelihoods and to cope with shocks inherent in land shortages or landlessness.

Methodology

Study area

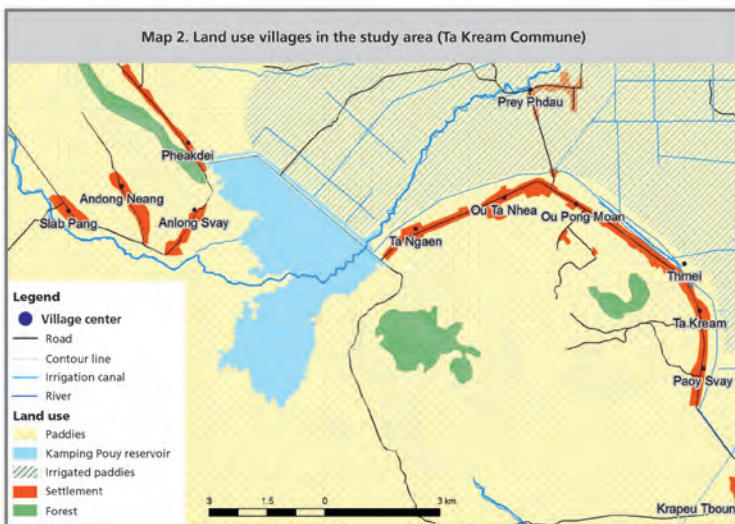
This study was conducted in five communes throughout Battambang Province, chosen for their typicality in respect of differing agro-ecological systems (Map 1). These agro-ecosystems range from the seasonally flooded Tonle Sap plain (fishing and floating rice-growing areas), to the rice growing areas of the central lowlands, to forested uplands typified now by cash crop production, and in the northwest of the Province, forest clearance and industrial cash crop plantations.



Ta Kream commune is within the intensive flood-fed and irrigated rice production zone, with scattered forest adjoining irrigated rice production in the Kamping Pouy irrigation system, giving way to rain-fed rice areas to the west in the catchment areas in and around its reservoir. The commune is located in Banan District, Battambang Province, about 36 km northwest of Battambang Town.

The area features an important reservoir (Kamping Pouy Lake), which can irrigate about 13,500 hectares (ha) (Thuon 2010). The research is based on studies of four villages in the commune of Ta Kream: Thmei village (the administrative center of the commune) and Ta Ngaen village (at the junction of the road with the retaining dike), which have land within the command area of the irrigation system, and Andong Neang and Slab Pang, which are located in the non-irrigated catchment areas to the west of the reservoir (Map 2).

The villages lie along an access road, which follows successive westward in-migration and settlements. It is marked by the development, post-Khmer Rouge, of relatively intensive administration and services at Thmei and other villages lying within the irrigation project, with diminishing commerce and administrative presence in the more recently settled and less closely administered villages of Andong Neang and Slab Pang. Settlements differed from one village to the other by date of settlement and type of land acquisition. East to west migration and settlement processes at Ta Kream should also be seen in the context of the historical change of land ownership patterns and natural resource use in the Tonle Sap Basin over a period of half a century. A predominantly rice-based economy and peasant use of localized forest resources gave way to large-scale exploitation of forested areas on the eastern and western uplands and to both peasant and commercial production of rain-fed food and oil crops, reflecting different kinds of migration and land reform and differences in access to resources and services, including differences in forest administration.



Scope and methods

The research reviews four different data sets:

- An analysis of land use change based on different time-series satellite images and aerial photographs of the area from 1993, 1997, 2002, 2006 and 2008. Input data for the study area were available at the Provincial Department of Land Management (Battambang Provincial Spatial Plan Sub-Working Group 2009).
- The 2008 demographic census data allowed for a detailed description and analysis of population dynamics in the area, including permanent migrations (Royal Government of Cambodia 2009).
- A quantitative agro-economic household survey was conducted in March 2009 using a statistically representative sample of households in each village. A total of 190 households were studied.
- An ethnographic/institutional analysis of multiple migrations and agrarian change was conducted in 2010 in the area, using qualitative research methods.

The research design aimed to identify the diversity of land transfers, migratory history and household production systems and understand the dynamic of socioeconomic differentiation among them.

Agrarian development and settlement in the Kamping Pouy reservoir area: Complexity and continuity in agrarian politics

A characteristic of military conflict during the nineties in Northwest Cambodia was the way in which conflicting forces asserted control over lands, their allocation and thus over populations. Land has emerged as a nexus of conflict between migrating populations and the military forces. From 2000 onwards, land access and control were further modified through the implementation of modern neoliberal land tenure regimes promoting private property rights, land titles, access to land by market transactions, land zoning and other land use planning instruments. The introduction of these modern tools is consistent with the increased commoditization of land and labor, and with increased administrative control. But coupled with the threat of force initially employed by the military for territorial acquisition and control in warfare, this cumulative process of administrative control has become institutionally problematic because land acquisition and transfers brought about by force are later legitimized by local government agencies and directed to private interests (Pilgrim 2010). The complexity and sequence of programs and settlement plans is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Chronology of agrarian development and migration: 1971 to 2009

1971-1975 Khmer Rouge occupation and southeastern Cambodia migrations to Battambang to obtain land.
1977-1978 Khmer Rouge Construction of Kamping Pouy Reservoir and Main Channel.
1979-1989 Eviction of farmers in two waves: Eviction by the Vietnamese-backed regime from land allocated by the Khmer Rouge and expulsion or voluntary movement of around 200,000 people to refugee camps in Thailand or to camps under Khmer Rouge protection along Thai border. Eviction of families from central areas of the province to the Thai border arising from continued conflicts among National, Vietnamese and Khmer Rouges armies.
1985-1989 Vietnamese administration of Krom Samaki (solidarity group) land distribution.
1991 Paris Peace Accord leads to cease fire and absorption of Khmer Rouge into administration.
1992-1993 UNCTAD Government of Reconciliation's return resettlement of Khmer Rouge refugees from Thailand to be settled at Anlong Svay and in new villages around the reservoir.
1993 Cambodian Constitution establishes land ownership on the basis of private property determined through existing occupation and use, the free market and contracts.
1993-1997 Founding of Andong Neang and Slab Pang villages, progressive clearance of forest and development of rain-fed rice lands, with substantial areas experiencing ex-military assertions of ownership and sales to big men.
2001 Land Law codifies individual land ownership and protection on the basis of existing occupation and use, provides legal measures against expropriation and malpractice or public sector involuntary acquisition of private land, and creates a national and provincial land dispute resolution structure through Provincial Cadastral Commissions and the National Agency for Land Dispute Resolution.
2007-2009 Global increases in crop and land prices are reflected in large-scale land acquisitions, especially of irrigated rice land, by businessmen and administrators.

Early history

Sequential migration to the region often began with voluntary migration by land-poor farm families from the country's southwest, who undertook the trek to join the Khmer Rouge, mainly seeking land and an escape from the Sihanouk rice-land tax. It was then marked by forced displacement and resettlement, beginning with the villages settled in the 1970s and 1980s in and around the Kamping Pouy irrigation system. Later, some 200,000 people who had followed the Khmer Rouge to the northwest were expelled or fled to United Nations (UN) camps across the border in Thailand or went to camps and villages along the Cambodian side of the border to areas under Khmer Rouge administration after the intervention of the Vietnamese army and frontline fighting at Ta Kream in 1992-1993. These people most often returned to landlessness or to dispossession at the hands of military groups still under arms and non-official command.

Migrating populations expected that Battambang would provide abundant land for them to acquire through clearance and which would be a permanent basis of their livelihoods. This mainly unrealized expectation was common among Khmer Rouge adherents, as well as post-Khmer Rouge in-migrants. In-migrants to Ta Kream moving in after the Peace Settlement from other districts of Battambang and from neighboring provinces also hoped to acquire land by forest clearance but found themselves employed by Army or ex-Khmer Rouge military groups still engaged in opening up these “pioneer frontier” areas for cash crop production (Map 3). This in-migrating population, faced with enforced landlessness, became tenants, squatted on vacant land or purchased house plots and engaged in local seasonal wage labor, and circular migration to agro-industrial plantations or to construction, fishing or factory work in Thailand. They also relied on access to the commons for fish and forest products. The emergence of a landless wage-laboring class is seen throughout Northwest Cambodia.

Differing aspects of the character of land acquisition and transfers, which can be discerned from the research areas, are the changing and differential penetration and observance of national land law and of related administrative systems, and the related presence and imposition of armed force as a factor in land acquisition and land transfers. In a number of ways, these can be seen as being at odds with the Constitution and the 2001 Land Law, which detailed the specific land and fixed-property laws that theoretically gave Khmer citizens the rights to the land they occupied and used, and protected them from land expropriation unless for the public good and with fair compensation. This presupposed good governance of the land rights of the rural population as basic to the rural economy and social system. Though the Khmer Rouge regime period is described historically as a period of turmoil, our research revealed that prior to 1993, land allocations were more or less formally and equitably administered by successive military regimes although certainly not without forced migration, expulsions and refugees. This historical process is reflected in the continued occupation and ownership of land by the reservoir by households who came as Khmer Rouge adherents to Anlong Svay. The relative wellbeing of households in this area reflects both their relative stability prior to the Peace Accord and return of refugees, immersion in stable market systems and administration, and current high market prices for crops. With Vietnamese intervention in the late 1980s, the Khmer Rouge’s administration of relatively equitable land rights, which was common in the research area, was destroyed.

Land dynamics after 1993, however, reveal a story of arbitrary and forced land expropriation by military factions asserting governmental authority in land distributions and control over land institutions and allocations under the new civil administration, using this institutional power for financial gain from transfers to officials and wealthy businessmen.

1992 and beyond

Migration and settlement that took place around the creation of new small villages around and to the west of the reservoir, on marginal upland and forest, was initially mainly refugees resettled by the Provincial Government and UN in 1992-1993, by people moving in from the Thai border, and since about 1995, augmented by settlers from elsewhere in Battambang Province. There are repeated cases of violence and forced seizure of land at this time, both between armed military units and villagers, and between neighboring villages. In some cases, ex-military remained as landlords or sold land they had seized to businessmen or government officials, legitimized by the issue of land certificates at commune or provincial levels of local government. One result of this pattern of land acquisition is that a high proportion of farm households now have access to rain-fed rice farms by tenancy, renting or sharecropping. Tenancy income is supplemented by diversified sources of livelihoods, including agricultural wage labor and dependency on natural resource extraction of forest products and firewood, both for consumption and for sale. Income from farming under tenancy was severely affected by increases in land prices and rents in 2008-2009, and is reflected in the demand of landowners for cash payment rather than sharecropping (Table 1).

The agrarian situation of the villages was severely distorted by two periods of commercial land transfers following the 1991 Peace Settlement and the return of Khmer Rouge refugees and their resettlement in the Kamping Pouy reservoir area. First, continuing to the present time, former military groups of both parties to the conflict acquired land by forest clearance and the use of force to remove peasant settlements and agriculture in the villages where (in 1993 to 1995) returning refugees were resettled. There were also major land purchases by local government officeholders and business interests, often from military or former military groups, in the irrigated areas during periods of high crop prices. This process was especially acute in the area of irrigated rice land inside the Kamping Pouy system, and resulted in some two-thirds of village lands being transferred to three urban owners at Ta Ngaen. This process is widely seen elsewhere in the province, related also to property prices in the Cambodia land and housing market in the wake of global market surges, continuing up to the time of the research in 2009 and 2010.

The effects of these externally governed transfers on peasant household livelihoods have been seen in increased dependency on tenancy for rice production and on the growth of agricultural wage labor as a source of income, including that of wage migration to industrial crop plantations in Northeastern Battambang and to Thailand. Both the impact of military and business interests on landholding—often coupled with investments by officeholders in the provincial government—and the impact of landlessness in the growth

of agricultural wage labor, including migrant wage labor, are seen in our wider research as being generalized throughout Battambang and appear uniform throughout Northwest Cambodia. An associated factor is that of reliance on acquisition of house plots by purchase, subject to allocation and certification by village and commune authorities, as a basis of legitimate residence and community membership, marked by possession of a family book and access to services. These marks of “citizenship” and social rights were not necessarily shared by all migrants.

Three themes run through these developments, which are at odds with the Constitution and the Land Law:

- Usurpation of land rights by locally-operating armed groups.
- Legitimation of this land acquisition and the transfer of such holdings to military-business-government officials by colluding officeholders and local government officials.
- Taking of rents or profits in the exercise of office by agencies responsible for safeguarding natural resources.

Demographic change

An analysis of the 2008 demographic census data for the four villages studied illustrates high levels of in-migration. The number of migrants is especially important in Andong Neang and Slab Pang, which emerged with the return of Khmer Rouge refugees in 1993. By comparison, the villages located in the eastern part of the commune, which are more “time-rooted” settlements (Thmei and Ta Ngaen), have fewer migrants. These different migratory dynamics are shown in Table 2.

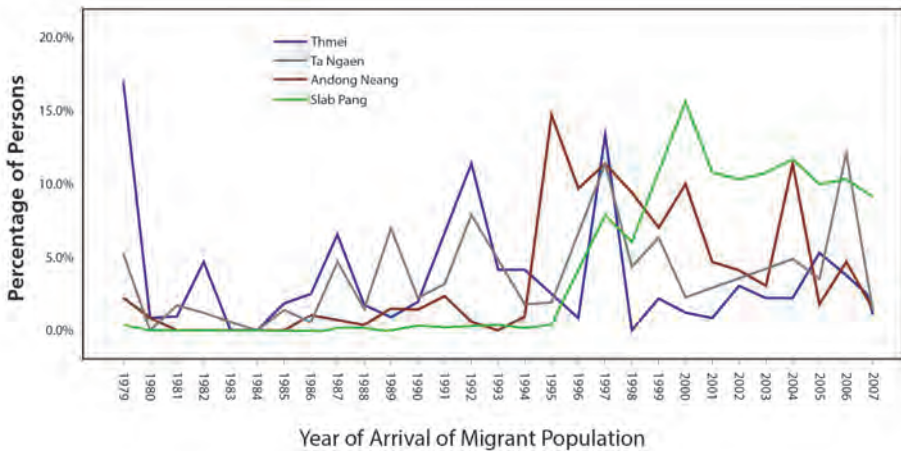
Table 2. Proportion of migrants in total population

	Total number of individuals	Administrative Divisions	
		Non-Migrant	Migrant
Thmei	2244	92.5%	7.5%
Ta Ngaen	3873	80.1%	19.9%
Andong Neang	644	41.5%	58.5%
Slab Pang	1427	26.3%	73.7%

Data source: 2008 demographic census.

The demographic census database allows the visualization of the differing patterns of migration into the four villages (Figure 1). In Thmei and Ta Ngaen, the villages located to the east of the commune adjoining the irrigated areas of the Kamping Pouy system, migrations took place earlier, with one peak in 1979 at the end of the Khmer Rouge, another peak in 1987 after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese army, and again in 1993, with the return of refugees from Thailand. The more west one goes, into the forested area of the reservoir catchment, the more recent are in-migrations, mainly to the villages of Andong Neang and Slab Pang. There, the peaks are clearly visible in 1997 (during re-integration of ex-Khmer Rouge army in Andong Neang) and even later in 2001-2002 in Slab Pang (a satellite village still in the process of settlement, land clearance and allocations in 2010). The linkage of this migratory movement with deforestation can be seen in Map 3 in comparing forest cover in the successive photographic record from 1997 to 2008, which we discuss later in the paper.

Figure 1. Temporal dynamics of migration in the study area



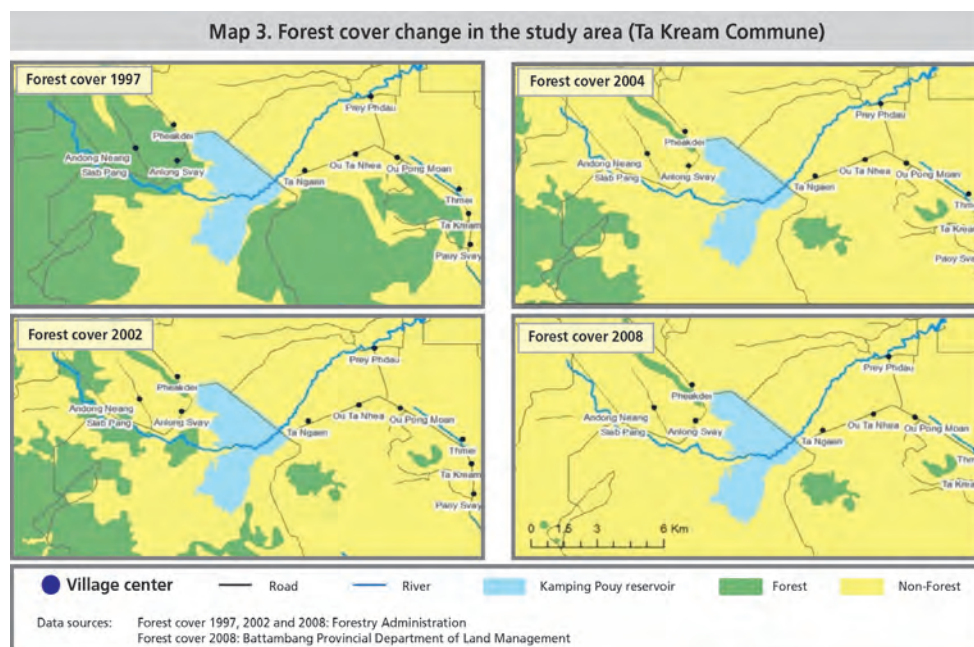
Data source: 2008 demographic census.

Migration in land-cover change

The process of land use change can also be seen in Map 3, showing successive deforestation occurring particularly in the areas of Andong Neang and Slab Pang in the areas to the west of the reservoir where post-1992 resettlement of returned refugees and later in-migration occurred.

Results from the time-series for land-cover change over the last 15 years (Map 3), combined with the dynamic of migration in the area (Figure 1 and Table 2), clearly

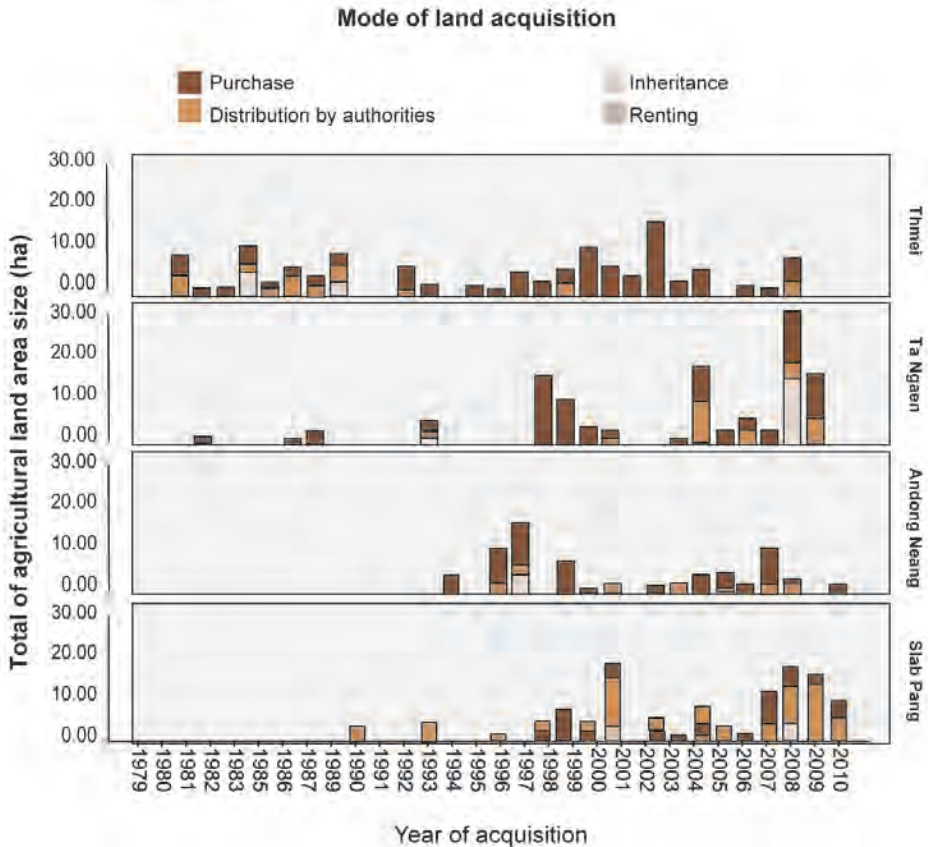
indicate pioneer deforestation from the eastern part of the commune toward the west; deforestation fuelled by the resettlement of returned refugees, sustained migrations of people in need of agricultural land and by the land and commercial interests of ex-military groups.



Processes of land acquisition

Figure 2 shows the process of land acquisition in the four villages, by year and by mode of acquisition. It is worth noting that the process of land acquisition in each village follows the migration profiles identified above quite well. Our sample survey data correlate with the census data. Figure 2 confirms the finding that land in Ta Ngaen and Thmei villages was distributed earlier than in the other two villages. It also shows that this land was mainly acquired through redistribution by authorities, including by successive armed units of the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese-dominated regime and the post-settlement Government. The purchase of land came into play in a second stage of the land acquisition process, starting at the end of the 1990s, and peaking in 2008 with major land acquisitions.

Figure 2. Mode of land acquisition by village



Data source: Household survey, 2009.

Effect of land transfers on household land endowments

In order to identify the linkage between landholding and status, we have broken down land acquisition and tenure by four agrarian classes: landless, land leaser, landowner and landlord. The distribution of landholding area sizes per household is very unequal in all four villages (Table 3). Values for standard deviation and Gini indexes of land distribution are high in the four villages. The classification of households reflects the different types of access to land and reveals that the incidence of landlessness is very high for all villages (Table 3). At the same time, the number of households who do not actually possess land but rent land from others is also significant in most villages. Landlordism contributes to the high level of land concentration (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of agricultural landholding per household in the study area

Village	Total number of investigated households	Agricultural landlessness					Distribution of households per type of land access (agrarian classes)			
		Mean (ha)	Median (ha)	Max.	Standard deviation	Gini Index	Landless wage worker	Land tenant	Land possessor	Landlord
Thmei	39	2.93	2.0	22.0	4.40	0.62	23.1%	0.0%	64.1%	12.8%
Ta Ngaen	43	1.69	0.0	10.0	2.82	0.74	32.6%	25.6%	27.9%	14.0%
AndongNeang	45	1.15	0.0	7.5	1.86	0.74	46.7%	8.9%	35.6%	8.9%
Slab Pang	63	1.16	0.1	6.0	1.57	0.67	34.9%	14.3%	47.6%	3.2%

Data source: Household survey, 2009.

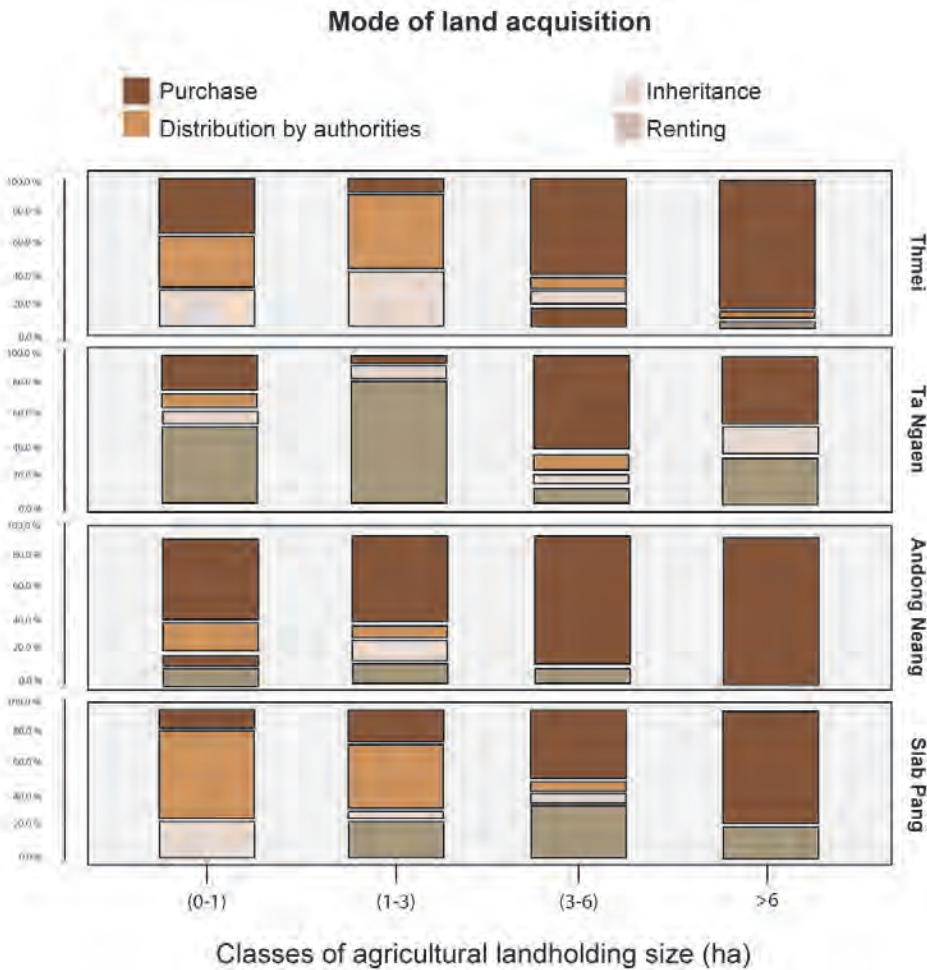
The database allows for analyses that link the land endowment per household and their mode of land acquisition (Figure 3). Households with large landholdings are the most involved in land purchasing. This observation supports the finding that land concentration is aggravated by access to land from the market, a phenomenon that emerged in the early 1990s (Figure 2).

The data support the qualitative research finding that most recent land conveyances were to commercial interests or to wealthier farmers from poorer farmers. The research sheds further light on the census data in showing that in Ta Ngaen a major part of village lands were transferred to absentee owners. Average land sizes mask the very large farm sizes of absentee and of some local farmers and the displacement and movement out of landholding of a substantial proportion of the community.

The ethnographic and historical data that accompany this analysis indicate that displacement and failure of land acquisition by much of the population were a result of military conflict and military management of land allocation in 1) the regulated administration of reservoir and irrigation development, forest clearance and land allocations by Khmer Rouge and succeeding regimes; and 2) illicit land acquisition by force or the threat of force exercised by armed ex-military groups, leading to commercial land transfers to business or local government interests and to large-scale tenancy of peasant farmers. The data in Table 4 and Figure 3 illustrate the extent to which these factors have given rise to differential landholding as between Thmei, Ta Ngaen and the two westernmost villages without irrigated rice lands, Andong Neang and Slab Pang, where resettlement of refugees took place from 1993 to 1995. Figures from a 2008 study in the same area (Thuon 2010) tally with the preliminary results of our 2009-2010 household data in demonstrating a widely seen association between landlessness

and dependency on labor migration (Table 4). Another feature of these households is the highly diversified income strategies that prevail in the lower-income echelons to optimize returns to their labor force in the face of inequitable access to natural and institutional services including Community Forests or Farmer Water User Communities, or access to a true market. These community structures form part of rural resource management and of programs for poverty reduction, and correlate with physical and social distance from the market and public sector institutions at the commune center at Thmei.

Figure 3. Classes of agricultural landholding size, by village and mode of land acquisition



Data source: Household survey, 2009.

Table 4. Landlessness and wage migration by village

Village	Total number of investigated households	Agricultural landlessness		Reliance on job migration	
		Number of households	Percentage	Number of households with job migrant	Percentage
Anglong Svay	405	63	15.55	66	16.29
O'Porng Morn	432	63	14.58	43	10.00
Thmei	373	100	26.80	105	28.15
Slab Pang	330	N/A	N/A	5	1.52
Prey Pdao	227	34	14.97	5	2.20
Ta Kream	281	43	15.30	58	20.64
Ta Ngaen	763	140	18.30	140	18.30
Angkot Thnung	233	32	13.73	10	4.29
O'TaNhea	275	38	13.81	13	4.72
Poy Svay	284	94	30.21	24	8.45
Total	3,471	607	17.49	469	13.51

Data Source: Thuon 2010.

Table 4 indicates that the impact of indebtedness and other pressures to sell in the face of massive land and crop price increases in 2007 to 2009 were felt mainly in the fertile areas of the irrigation systems with double cropping, notably in Thmei and Ta Ngaen, with 26.8% and 18% of households dependent on work migration, respectively.

In both agro-ecological zones, irrigated and non-irrigated, dependency on agricultural wage labor and wage migration, including illicit migration to Thailand, has become central to the livelihood strategies of landless households. Agrarian and economic change shifted labor resources and incomes out of family farms and into agricultural wage labor in local commercial crop production, or in labor migration to Thailand or into garment, construction or household management of labor, in temporary or seasonal work in Cambodia or internationally. This is graphically illustrated in the following transcript of a focus group discussion at Ta Ngaen (Figure 4):

Figure 4. Transcript from taped focus group discussion at Ta Ngaen, Ta Kream Commune

Young woman, married, 25 years old, seven months pregnant:

Life is difficult for me, because there is not enough paid work [in the village], and we have no land. My parents were living with my father's brothers, my uncles, so my parents moved here to find land, and then my father died. My husband does fishing in the reservoir: 1 to 2 kg per day. I work in the village as a farm laborer. I get R.5,000 to 6,000 per day, rice harvesting, planting, cassava planting and harvesting. Mainly I collect fuel wood, clearing the land for upland cash crop farms for people, working in a group of three to five people, sometimes with my husband, my mother, other relatives or neighbors.

I will not move to any other place in the future. I will go on working for others. My husband might go to work in Thailand, as he was doing, but sometimes he is cheated by people there and gets nothing back. We are illiterate. What else can we do?

Male, 35, husband of young woman above:

There are many kinds of jobs in Thailand: construction, aquaculture, agricultural labor. The problem is the agent often cheats us by calling the police when pay is due, so we get no payment for our work. The Thai police put us into prison and then send us to the border, so we have to beg. When they arrest us, they take all our money but feed us in prison; then at the border, people beat us and do not feed us. We earned a little money by clearing grass at the station. The Thai police confiscate our money, but the Khmer police are worse, because they check through our belongings and take anything valuable.

I spent six months in prison in Thailand. As I was the first arrested, I had to wait until the Thai police had collected 100 illegal workers together to send them back to the border. During my time in prison, I could not contact anyone. My wife did not know what had happened to me.

My boss in Thailand cheated me. He did not give me money until after a few months, and then told the police to arrest me. So I told the police myself, so that at least I could have food to eat. The Thai police beat us, but they beat Burmese illegal immigrants terribly.

Source: Qualitative survey (RUPP 2010).

The number of households at Ta Ngaen without paddy, and that are dependent on migrant wage labor (140 households) reflects the heavy loss of rice land in the irrigated project area, which is related to land sales by villagers to provincial government officials during 2007 and 2008. They also illustrate that a factor in land sales is the availability of high wages in migrant agricultural labor on cash crops. From 2000 to 2010, this was notably from the commercial and small-farmer production of bio-fuel and animal feed crops such as cassava, for which there was an expanding world market, including marketing to China, and for which both prices and the market have increased dramatically from 2007 to 2010.

The massive transfer of land at Ta Ngaen—70% of the community's land—can partly be explained in this analysis by the intensive use of diminishing household land by those farmers who received land in allocations. This suggests that at a given point, farming becomes less attractive and profitable to households than capitalization of their land and the diversified use of their labor in local and migrant wage earning. Intervening mechanisms in land transfers involve the threat of armed expulsion of the kind that

had recently occurred at Anlong Svay and Andong Neang, diminishing farm sizes in the face of population pressure, and the indebtedness of farmers to merchants and wealthier farmer neighbors.

The rise of landlessness

The general failure to obtain land and the mortgaging and transfer of land or both is resulting in the emergence of an underclass of landless wage laborers as an increasing proportion of the population. This “proletarianization of the peasant” had three main points of origin in the specific history of Ta Kream, but which are widely present in the region. The first involves an early group of-migrant households that received or bought house plots but no agricultural land and who were dependent from the start on wage labor and gathering of natural resources from the commons, seen notably in the villages around the reservoir that were created or expanded by the resettlement of returned refugees from 1993 to 1995. Next were the growing numbers of farm households selling their irrigation paddy to absentee landlords in the command area of the Kamping Pouy irrigation system and elsewhere in the Tonle Sap basin where a combination of multiple cropping and access to roads offers high returns to irrigated rice land ownership. Third was the indebtedness of small farmers.

Most of the debt examined in this and related research in Cambodia from 2005 to 2010 is “distress” debt, to meet health or other crises, or simply to keep the household and the farm production system going, to repay earlier debt to others, or even to pay for the costs of wage migration of a household member. Debt to informal moneylenders, who are larger farmers or rice millers, is often linked to dependency on the lender for equipment or farm inputs, and is usually at exorbitant interest rates of 10% per month. Interest rates that assume that borrowing is for short-term production gain or for coping with an emergency have become a powerful instrument for land transfer when, as is frequently the case, they become long-term transfers of income. Local credit is as much about acquiring land and indentured sharecropping by creditors as it is for cash profit, and is a major driver in land transfers. Forced displacements of this kind were accompanied by migration and the emergence of agricultural wage laboring as the principal long-term source of livelihood of a growing landless rural population.

Migration, natural resources, forest institutions and degradation

As we have argued, multiple migration streams coupled to conditions of limited land availability and landlordism, and conflict over and continued expropriation of land by ex-military and business interests have contributed to the creation of a subclass of very poor, landless households dependent for their livelihoods primarily on wage labor and on access to the commons, especially on access to community forests.

While the Kamping Pouy irrigation system and the productivity obtained on rice land in the project area, plus the early development of land administration and infrastructure and services in the seven villages making up that section of the commune (studied at Thmei and Ta Ngaen in our research) appear to have led to early and relatively stable services and land management, the picture in the post-Peace Treaty settlement villages around and to the west of the reservoir differs. There, the history of settlement and land tenure and use is one of harassment of emergent village communities after initial settlement, conflict over land rights, with other villages or with military groups, and poor management of natural resources, notably of neighboring forest commons.

The process of settlement and deforestation involves the changing character of community forests, in terms of their resource make-up, administration and the access by adjacent communities. The level of depletion of marketable economic forest resources, such as building timber, bamboo and bamboo shoots, is a determining factor in how they are administered, as seen in the character and stability of government and community management of forests at Thmei, the long-settled commune center, and at the more distant Andong Neang. Both have participatory community forest management, introduced and sanctioned by the Forestry Administration Cantonment, but differing in the level of autonomy and in the resources they possess and the use made of them by neighboring villagers and others.

The Community Forest at Thmei is locally organized to manage all aspects of access to and use of the small adjoining forest, sanctioned by the Forestry Administration, and including all members of the village. It provides protection against the cutting of timber, and of other access to forest products by outsiders. It informally regulates the collection of fuel wood, basically brushwood and fallen timber. Other products that are collected, usually by small family groups or neighbors, are mainly mushrooms, berries and wild fruit, and vegetable leaves for soups and salads. The stability and ease of management of the Community Forest reflects the fact that the forest has, for the past decade, been depleted of building timber and of any other product that would be sold at market.

The forest at Andong Neang and also adjacent to Anlong Svay, is formally administered by the Anlong Svay Community Forest group, but has an ongoing presence of Provincial Forest Administration personnel, and is a major source of building timber and fuel wood and charcoal, which are transported to district and highway sales points and small charcoal producers. Villagers regard the uniformed forestry patrol officers as primarily engaged in controlling and profiting from the removal of cut firewood and timber at exit points from the forest for small local commercial groups and farmers, at a standard charge of 3,000 Riels per cartload.

The attitudes of local people to the presence and role of forestry officers, illustrated in the following transcript of a focus group discussion on natural resource management at Andong Neang, are clear in recognizing that forest “management” is not primarily for purposes of the conservation of the forest, but rather for timber and fuel wood extraction. The transcript also indicated that, reflecting the uncertain reach and legitimacy of administration in these more remote villages, it is not even clear to the villagers whether the people collecting fees are forestry administration personnel, military or police militia.

Box

Before you get into the forest, have you ever asked for permission from the forestry officer?

No. If we get into the forest, they do not care. All we have to know is to pay.
 If we load more, we have to pay more. It depends on the size of the tree stem. If it is big, we have to pay more. It can be up 10,000 Riels per cart. On the other hand, the fee is fixed by the officers. I have no power to argue.
 We have to pay as much as we are asked, for we are just ordinary citizens. We don't dare to do anything with them.
 The other day, I had an argument with them. I told them that the wood on my cart was from my rice field. I have to clear my rice field to grow rice. The wood was not from the forest. But they did not listen to me. They replied that they asked for money once the wood was on the generator-pulled cart. So, how could I make a further claim with this kind of language?

Now, in your opinion, tell me about the roles of forestry officers.

I think they have their own professional skills.
 I think their role is to collect money from wood collectors.
 The forestry officer is there to arrest people and collect money from people.
 They wait for us outside the forest area and as soon as we are out of the forest, they ask for money. They never give any instruction not to cut any particular trees. The only thing they know is money from the collectors.
 We are not sure if they are forestry officers. All we know is that they have authorities collect our money. I usually find that they are in army uniform. They did not talk to us about anything else except asking for money when we are out of the forest.
 They usually wait for us at the village. They never arrest us in the forest area.
 The way that our authorities arrest people is different from Thai authorities. Thai authorities seek and arrest people in the forest, while our authorities arrest people in the village.
 Yes, they are afraid of monkeys in the forest, so they have to stay in the village.
 I am OK if they do not ask for money from the firewood collector, but this is not the case.
 They arrest all the carts and ask for money. If we pay, we can go. They keep doing like this until there is no more cart in the queue.

What are the advantages of forest management?

I do not think that we have forestry officers who manage our forest.
 We do not think that forestry officers manage our forest, for they have never been to the forest while they are in the village asking for money. Their office is not in the forest but on the road and they arrest people for money.

Two conclusions may be drawn from the data on forestry administration at Thmei and at Andong Neang in the context of migration and the settlement and management of community land and forest resources:

- First, that community-based natural resource management in the form of the Community Forest works effectively where forest use and degradation have led to a depletion of marketable commodities, and where forest products are largely for subsistence: fuel wood, berries, mushrooms and vegetable leaves. It is ineffective where marketable products, primarily timber, provide opportunity for exploitation by outsiders or by means of illicit charges.
- Where community forests are still stocked with accessible timber they are subject to control and appropriation by armed force and by commercial interests supported by armed force and by authorities closely linked to deforestation for purposes of land clearance and acquisition.

Conclusions

Our research shows several macro-processes:

1. Military meddling in land acquisition in the period immediately following the resettlement of refugee households in 1992 and 1993 continues sporadically into the present, and is more prevalent in Andong Neang and Slab Pang, the villages that are physically and institutionally remote from the commune center. These villages have taken the brunt of in-migration of returned Khmer Rouge refugees in 1992 and 1993 up to 2009 and 2010. These villages experienced forced expropriation of land by militias and then its commercial transfer to urban landlords, and later the transfer of state or village lands by purchase by new migrant farmers mainly from Battambang.
2. The impact of high crop and land prices has been felt more strongly in villages with irrigated land at the center of the commune. Double cropping, stable services and good road access have made the Kamping Pouy irrigation system attractive to business interests and government officials both for production and as a prime target for land speculation. A consequence was displacement of peasants, often linked to indebtedness, the rapid rise of landlessness and dependency on agricultural wage labor.

These processes are matched by deforestation for purposes of land acquisition, but also for timber and fuel wood extraction, in which the role of the military, using or threatening the use of force, is endemic, and is systemically linked to irregular action

(i) in the management of forests and (ii) in the transfer of deforested land from common to private ownership.

The repeated evidence of these phenomena in the qualitative research on land allocations and expropriations by military quasi-governmental administrations, conflict over land rights, and of dependency on seasonal cross-border wage migration, in often desperate household economic circumstances and at high risk demonstrate a linkage between migration, rural poverty and natural resource management that has arisen from specific factors of agro-ecologies, location and time. The rights and practicality of land acquisition and secure holding by peasant households, written into the 1993 Constitution, were tempered by accommodation, on the one hand with the immediate threat of armed force at the hands of ex-military, still present in the research area, and on the other with the land purchasing power of a wealthy urban and administrative elite. Access to land for a substantial part of the population has given way to access to agricultural wage laboring and migration as a more secure source of livelihoods.

It is probable that these findings, described here for research at Ta Kream, are true for most of Battambang and other border provinces and populations in Northwest Cambodia. The migratory flow of voluntary and forced migrations ended up producing landlessness and dependency on wage labor and on access to the commons for a major part of the rural population of the Cambodian Northwest.

A further dimension to this movement into poverty and into a stratified rural society is the extent to which the use of force or the threat of the use of force has become normalized and may have far-reaching effects on the agrarian system. In these circumstances, measures such as the support given to community-based natural resource management as an instrument for the reduction of rural poverty and the protection of natural resources are a palliative, and not necessarily an effective one, or may actively serve the interests of a process of elite capture of natural resources and of the authority to control them.

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