

ENDANGERED CAMBODIAN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: LAND DISPOSSESSION AND CULTURAL GENOCIDE

Frédéric Bourdier

Cambodia is home to 24 different indigenous peoples, whose members constitute 2.5% of the 17 million countrywide population. While government diktats sturdily impose structural changes in the name of 'economic growth for all' – a rhetoric shockingly adopted by many national and international development NGOs whose trend is to 'pacify' ethnic minorities more than to align with the goals of the social groups they pretend to support – independent scientific investigations confirm human rights groups' reports of a total contempt by the national authorities and their allies towards indigenous expressions of well-being.

This refusal to consider alternative values and identities (including the preservation of local languages) is aggravated by the physical and social accessibility of their ancestral territorial settings. The once-remote indigenous areas located in the borderland regions of the country are nowadays at the epicentre of colossal international development masterplans.

Indigenous peoples who previously lived in the forests have become a human obstacle for local private enterprises and transnational corporate ventures involved in resource extraction/conversion (timber, minerals, hydro and agribusiness). Immediate economic benefits are expected, without anything being offered to indigenous peoples besides underpaid and precarious daily-wage employment. For those who manage to keep small

portions of land, an aggressive political discourse tainted with disdain for traditional livelihoods has contributed to the progressive abandonment of swidden agriculture in favour of monocrop plantations, thereby transforming the peasants of the forest into market-dependent producers.

This does not mean that indigenous peoples are averse to changes and interactions. They have never lived in isolation. Historical testimonies have amply demonstrated their aptitude for overcoming, rejecting or welcoming additional cultural and material influences. Territorial conflicts, adoption of new crops, interethnic trade, barter, slavery, allegiance strategies and inter-matrimonial alliances existed long before French dominion. Interference from the outside world intensified with the failed postcolonial attempt at Khmer assimilation, launched during the Sihanouk era (1950s–1960s). Geopolitical turmoil during the Vietnam War and its extension to Cambodia drastically challenged the indigenous territorial socioecological configuration through the US air bombardments (starting in the mid-1960s and intensifying in the early 1970s during the Lon Nol era), followed by the ongoing civil war and the genocide of the Pol Pot regime (April 1975–December 1978).

After a remission period during the Vietnamese occupation, the government adopted a straightforward neoliberal policy leading to the granting of Economic Land

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Gathering of Tampuan lineage headmen dedicating the rice wine jar to the spirits of the village before starting the collective drinking at the occasion of a post-harvest ceremony in Ratanakiri Province. Source: Frédéric Bourdier



Concessions to national/international investors in the late 1990s. In the absence of any institutional system with responsibility for securing collective and individual land ownerships, many of the fertile and forested areas usually occupied by indigenous peoples started being coveted by agribusiness companies, multinational consortia and wealthy politicians for monoculture exploitation.

In the meantime, most of the bilateral/multilateral aid for vulnerable segments of society has been captured by a sociopolitical elite. Insufficient allocation and redistribution to the general population and the feebleness of public services have reinforced social and economic inequalities. Furthermore, the 2001 Land Law, with additional legislation sanctioned in 2005, has offered legal tools for granting vast portions of land (up to 10,000 hectares) to national/international companies, despite the fact that Article 29 of the Land Law states that 'no authority outside the community may acquire rights to immovable properties belonging to indigenous communities'.

Simultaneously, land concentration has generated landlessness throughout the country. Dispossessed families (Khmer and Cham from the central valley, Lao, Sino-Cambodians and Vietnamese from the north) had little choice – beyond heading for the slums of the major cities – but to migrate to what were ambiguously called the 'last borders': the imagined vast forested territories where indigenous peoples lived. Consequently, nearly all provinces previously inhabited by indigenous communities are nowadays demographically dominated by new settlers from the overcrowded central and south-eastern Cambodian provinces.

National laws exist to protect forests, limit the size of land concessions and regulate territorial transactions. They require consultation with local communities over land use. But they are rarely enforced. For instance, much traditionally used land is misleadingly labelled as wasteland and considered underdeveloped, untapped or abandoned. Indigenous villagers, lacking official land titles, are therefore considered 'illegal occupants'. Local authorities can expel them without adequate compensation and steal portions of their inherited agricultural land. Such is the violence of the law: land concessions are issued on private state land where farmers have no legal claim by virtue of the 2001 Land Law, which states that possession must be established beforehand. Put simply, any householders who cleared land after 2001 are deemed to be 'illegitimate dwellers', even if the land in question is just fallow land awaiting forest regeneration.

Occupying people's land means depriving villagers of land tenure, but more fundamentally it treats with disdain a socio-territorial order, negotiated rules and social fabric, all historically constructed, on which a local citizenship relies to regulate access to land. Agriculture remains the main occupation and an indigenous man without land loses his self-esteem. He becomes a 'dead man walking'. This notion, deeply rooted in the indigenous culture and its cosmic visions, continues to be neglected and misunderstood, not only by the public authorities, but also by some national/international NGOs who perpetuate a logic of colonialism by attempting to tell the 'ignorant and uneducated' villagers what to do, rather than letting them

propose and guide their own destiny and objectives. In this way, ethnocide is at work, percolating every corner of minor societies and disregarding indigenous peoples' dignity.

Leading developers and national decision-makers continue to argue that indigenous peoples have to adapt to the contemporary economic world: there is no time to listen to their grievances – Cambodia has to be competitive, and must attract foreign direct investment for development funding. Under these considerations, the principal adversaries of indigenous territorial and land claims are the protagonists of this poorly debated (at least in Cambodia) neoliberal economic model that has impoverished and dispossessed major sectors of rural societies, blocked the improvement of locally based production (subsistence and commercial agriculture), and promoted capitalist expansion by excluding local populations.

Mega agro-industrial projects constitute the skeleton of Cambodia's ideology of modernity. Facing these threats, indigenous people are nowadays more aware than ever of the need to cope with innovative institutional mechanisms, and this is why some groups have begun to make connections with transnational movements, bearing in mind that one of the major challenges they face concerns their ability to access and control natural resources. Forest

dwellers face increasing difficulty in monitoring natural resources and maintaining a system of land replacement for cultivation, as they did previously. They are theoretically protected by specific provisions of the Land Law and have a legal claim to their customary land. But the political reality is different. Even the right of indigenous communities to self-determination, included in the United Nations' 2014 Declaration on the Rights of

Indigenous Peoples, signed by Cambodia, remains an envisioned project with no single concrete effect. Nearly everywhere in the Kingdom, ancestral territories have shrunk, forests have been devastated and natural resources decimated. Even landlessness is becoming common among indigenous groups. Existing safeguards are not implemented to protect their basic rights. The fragile equilibrium between society and nature is disrupted, not by choice and avidity but because of external pressures. In response, social movements with extended ramifications are silently organising and emerging.

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