

The Peasants in Turmoil: State Formation, Power and the Control of Land in the Northwest Cambodia

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Introduction

Over the past fifteen years the Cambodian Northwest has been a theatre of dramatic agrarian expansion from the central rice plain towards the peripheral uplands. This movement has led to massive deforestation associated with the creation of a new agrarian system based upon subsistence and commercial crop production (Pilgrim, Ngin, and Diepart 2012; Chheang and Dulioust 2012; Dupuis 2008).

Land pioneering into peripheral uplands has been associated with voluntary migrations of a very large population from all across the country. This migrant population comes particularly from the rice plain provinces where the growing population density has outstripped the capacity of farmers to secure livelihoods solely from rice production. The forest land being cleared and cultivated is mainly by peasant households. It is not the result of agro-industrial economic land concessions granted to companies as is the case in other parts of Cambodia. This migration can be seen as an expression of peasant household's agency in responding to rural poverty (Pilgrim, Ngin, and Diepart 2012).

The mode of production in these new agricultural systems combine different types of commercial links between agro-industrial groups (provision of agricultural inputs and credit or via a guaranteed purchase of production) and the households who remain the owners of the land. These agrarian transformations reflect the integration of Cambodia's State and rural economy into supra-national agricultural markets dominated by agro-industrial groups. In a wider economic context, the setting for this transformation is the inclusion of the region in the "Ho Chi Minh-Bangkok" Greater Mekong Sub-region development corridors (Royal Government of Cambodia 2011).

As in other countries in Southeast Asia this agricultural expansion into marginal areas is built on the political will of the State to exercise his authority over its population and to position itself in regional and global markets vis-à-vis the neighbouring nations (Déry 1996; De Koninck 2006).

This research paper is part of an overall endeavour to understand the role and place of peasantry in the dynamics of agrarian expansion. In a context where, globally, capital and markets have become the organizing principle of the agrarian political economy (McMichael 2008) we are particularly interested in examining the nature of relations between peasantry and the Cambodian State. These relations are scrutinized through the processes of land control we see as strategies and practices that aim to fix, consolidate and legitimize the access to land and its resources (Peluso and Lund 2011).

We suggest that over the history of the Cambodian Northwest, control over the access to land was and continues to be an important element in the exercise of power by State institutions at different levels. Given the dialectical relations between access to land, power and authority (Sikor and Lund 2009), the examination of struggle and strategies of land control in which peasant and the State are engaged reveal a great deal about peasant mobilization processes and contemporary State formation.

As the region was the cradle of the Khmer Rouge uprising in the sixties and the rear base of their resistance against governmental forces in the eighties and nineties (Vickery 1984; Gottesman 2003), this contribution also aims to contribute to better understanding how neo-liberalism plays and how it restructures Peasant–State relations in this post-conflict agrarian context.

1 Shaping the Argument

Social and environmental processes occur over different scales. The study of society–environment relations can be improved by analyzing these cross scale structures and varying scalar configurations of interactions (Engel-Di Mauro 2009). We propose to outline a conceptual framework that allows a better understanding of those processes linking political institutions dynamics and their relation to land across temporal/spatial scales. First an historical perspective is taken to focus on the long term systemic character of people-environment relations and the organizing principles of agrarian political economy (Peemans 2010; McMichael 2008; Wallerstein 2006). Second we then take a more context-sensitive political ecology approach to highlight the diversity of recent and local land control processes.

A Genealogy of Power Systems and Land Control Strategies in the Northwest

Setting agricultural colonization in a longer time frame is crucial to understanding its origin and to capture the “historical personality” of the actors involved. This will help to describe the evolution of the current socio-economic processes. We address this genealogy at a supra-national level in order to describe how Northwestern Cambodian peasant trajectories were conditioned by the world history.

First, we describe the history of the systems of power within which the projects of structuring and controlling land of Cambodian North-western territories are situated. The analysis relies on the concept of governmentality developed by Michel Foucault (Foucault 2004) who differentiates between three main systems of power with distinct purposes, targets, knowledge base, strategies and instruments. These three are sovereignty, discipline and government. Sovereignty rests on the absolute authority detained and legitimised through juridico-legal techniques on a territory and consequently on the people who inhabit it. It is circular in that its purpose is the protection and the extension of the sovereign authority on its territory and subjects. Discipline does not necessarily challenge the order imposed by the sovereign, but it aims primarily at intensifying the instrument and means of coercion to normalize the functioning of society to that order (i.e. education, army, civilian administration, taxation, etc.). Discipline organizes, rationalizes and hierarchizes territories in components, which can be analysed, coordinated and managed according to specific mechanisms and administrative instruments (Foucault 2004). In contrast, Foucault argues that the authority exercised by a government is part of a radically different system of power. Its purpose is not merely the domination on a territory of a group of people but the improvement of the living conditions of an entire population, via instruments and mechanisms of security. Foucault does not see sovereignty-discipline-government as series of successive elements, the appearance of the government causing the earlier ones to disappear. But against the background of European state modernization, Foucault suggests that the line of force has constantly led towards the pre-eminence of government over sovereignty and discipline (Foucault 2004). However, as Tania Li suggests, governmentality allows examination of other geographical and historical conjunctures and how these practices of power have articulated elements of government, discipline and sovereignty (Li 2007).

Second, we need to describe the evolution of historical practises for controlling the access to land and its resources and how these practices have confronted the system of power, in which they are embedded. We frame access broadly and view it as all possible means by which a person is able to benefit from things (Ribot and Peluso L. 2005). It includes direct or indirect channels, legal or illicit ones; it obviously involves a diversity of state, market, military and corporate actors. To take this plurality into account, we examine three processes of “controlling the access” to land. First the fixing of land enclosure (control over land *per se*), second the levee of agricultural taxes (control over production and labour processes) and finally the commoditization of land and natural resources (control of the market).

Land Control Processes at Local Level

Power and land control practises translate locally into contextualized forms that structure the social relations of production involving peasantries with the State and other actors. They depend on the historical background, the socio-economic conditions of the communities as well as on the agro-ecology of their environment. This diversity encourages us to take into account the multiplicity of land control strategies at a local level. This research will examine the relationships between peasant and local state authorities contextualizing them along with class-based agents evolving in networks. These include government technical departments, market corporates and individuals, NGOs, development organizations, smugglers, poachers, army groups, etc.

In Cambodia, local political power rests up on a small network of elite actors who are closely connected to the representatives of the State at local level. Patronage is the norm and the fabric of power and decision making in Khmer villages (Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002). This offers a window to look at the political economy of a peasant society (Popkin 1980). In the context of the agricultural colonization, the role of local elite has been decisive in controlling land access for at least two reasons. First, they translate or control local interpretation of rules that govern the distribution of land. This ability to control the distribution of land is also the capacity to exclude or to limit the access to land to certain individuals or groups (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011). Social inclusions and exclusions are two sides of the same coin. The struggles between actors associated with this political subjectivity are everyday concerns in these pioneer frontiers. Second, given the significant area of land and the very large number of in-migrant families involved in opening the agricultural frontier, the local control over land distribution along this process determines mobilization of peasants and the making of new territories. To make these processes of peasant mobilization visible we try to illustrate the spatial dimension of these land control strategies via maps and to understand the context-specific practices of spatial domination associated with these strategies.

As a result of this mobilisation process, the peasants are not politically passive; they take their stand on local power and land control rules. This can take various forms and comprises a diversity of postures and attitudes, which Kerkvliet clusters under four headings: support, compliance, evasions and resistance (Kerkvliet 2009). These forms of “everyday politics” involve two opposite types of relations between the peasants and the authority. The process of supporting or complying with norms and rules regarding the allocation of resources works to legitimize, those with the authority to implement the rules (Sikor and Lund 2009). In contrast, the process of evading or resisting these rules tends to discredit and weaken those with the authority in charge of these rules.

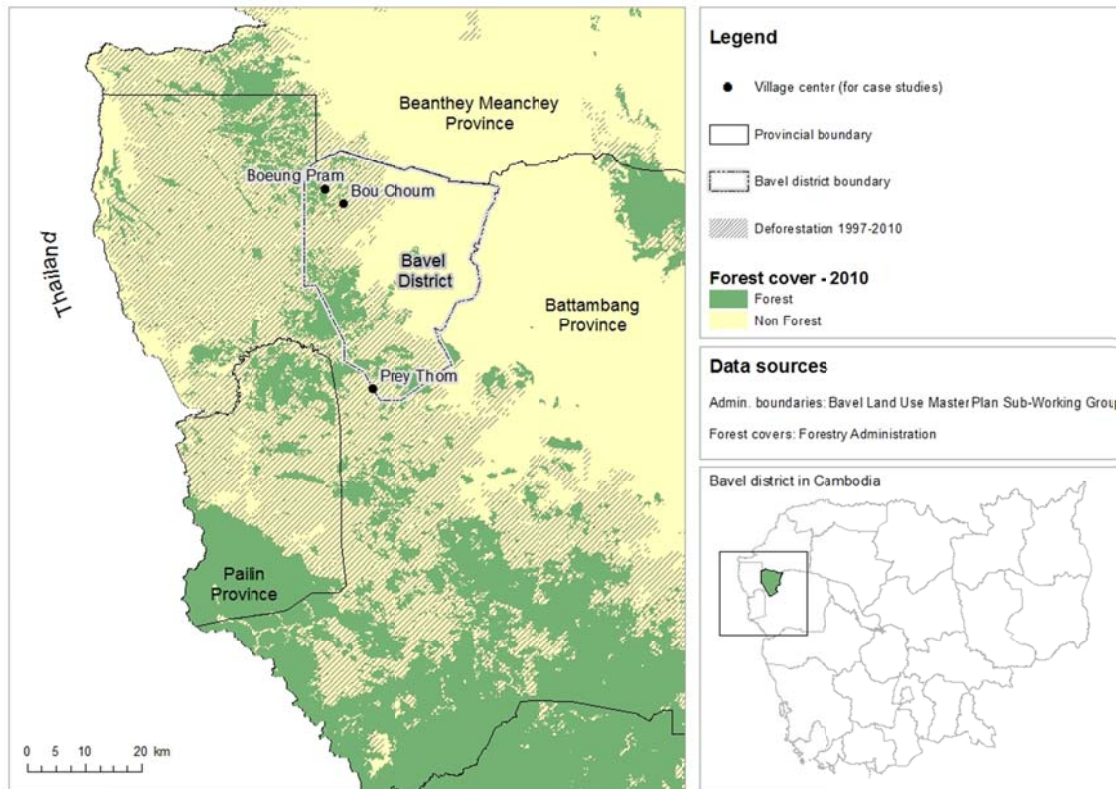
We situate the mechanisms of State formation within the confrontation and/or negotiation between both of these contradictory processes.

2 Research Methods

This research draws on two research methods. In addition to the review of a rich literature on the Cambodian history, the section on the genealogy of power systems draws on various sources of primary documents such as the forest archives of Cambodia that include a large range of old administrative documents, forest management regulations, old maps and travel stories of French explorers. A range of documents from the *French Protectorate* (1863-1954), *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (1955-1970), *People's Republic of Kampuchea* (1979-1989) and *Royal Government of Cambodia* (1993-now) were examined as well as the doctorate dissertations of Khmer Rouges leaders.

The analysis of local land control is based upon fieldwork in three villages in Bavel District (map 1), located in the province of Battambang near the border with Thailand. It covers an area size of 986 km² and comprises a population of 100,000 people according to the 2008 population census (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2009). The three villages were selected because they are located on the deforestation frontier (map 1) in regions with different agro-ecological and historical backgrounds. Ethnographic methods consisted of qualitative household surveys, in-depth interviews with key local

actors and participatory mapping exercises. Spatial planning activities were carried out in the area by the provincial and district spatial planning working group supported by the German International Cooperation (GIZ). In this context, field survey and mapping processes have provided first-hand information about the patterns of land use and ownership.



Map 1: Recent deforestation in the Northwest and in the study area (Bavel district)

3 A Genealogy of Power Systems and Land Control Strategies

3.1 Sovereignty in the Pre-Colonial Period

Between the Angkorian period and the arrival of the French in Cambodia, the Sovereign King held absolute political and administrative power. He embodies the State in the name of *deva-rajā* (God-King), a cosmological vision that makes King the guardian of peace, the protector of land and of the harmony between people and divinities (Greve 1993). However, the actual exercise of power is closely linked to the *Okyas* (high-ranking officials) who are personally assigned by the king. The most influential amongst these *Okyas* are the five King Ministers and the *chovay srok* – provincial or district governors. The *chovay srok* rarely acted collectively but as individuals, responding to local interest and dyadic arrangements. Their prerogatives were not based on well-defined administrative functions but were exercised in unspecified ways for the governance of a single territory. The territoriality of their power is reinforced by the patrimonial and economic patronage that each minister exercised upon a group of several *srok* (*district*); known as *dei* (earth) (Chandler 1998).

Across the country, territories were organized into three zones: the center (*Kampong*), the rice hinterlands (*srae*) and the forest (*prey*) (Chandler 1998). Placed under the control of the *Chovay Srok*, the *kampong* is this place in the territory where administrative political and economic powers merge within the patronal elite. The rice hinterlands (*srae*) are comprised of villages connected to the *Kampong* for the commercial exchanges, the collect of rice taxes, religious festivals and by officials looking for military recruits. Rice-growing villages are arranged irregularly with houses scattered

randomly reflecting the loose social structuring of Khmer villages at that time. Ebihara has indeed argued that there was very little collective or communitarian entities organizing rural communities in 16th and 17th century Cambodia (Ebihara 1984). In pre-colonial time no strong local power could actually develop in the rice-growing villages (Thion 1993).. Villages hidden in the *prey* had little contact with the *kampong* but were very important for the exploitation of forest resources, for grazing and as reserves of agricultural land. They were frequently raided for slaves (Chandler 1998).

The traditional land tenure code (*kram*) stipulates that the King is the Owner of the land and that possession rights on land (*paukeas*) are given to peasants according to an acquisition-by-the-plough principle (Guillou 2006). The limited population pressure on agricultural land, combined with limited social cohesion and the absence of fixed territories allowed for free access to land and confer to peasant a considerable freedom of movement on the territory (Greve 1993; Aymonier 1904).

In order to place rice production and labour under the effective control of the State, a royal tax of 10% was levied on rice production. The *chovay srok* were authorized to collect tax from their *srok*; they could also mobilize labor for warfare or public works. Access to manpower and rice meant that in practice the *chovay srok* controlled the balance of power in the kingdom (Rungswasdisab 1995; Chandler 1998).

3.2 Pre-Colonial Sovereignty in the Context of Southeast Asian World-Economy

In the post Angkorian era, the king sovereignty and *chovay srok* patronage were not the only references to power in Cambodia. Well before the arrival of French, Cambodia was under foreign economic influence. The relocation in the 14th century of the kingdom capital from Siem Reap to the confluence between Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers is above all associated with the expansion of Chinese maritime trade in the whole Southeast Asian region (Vickery 1977; Delaporte and Garnier 1998).

In full reconstruction after the war with the Birmanians, the kingdom of Siam developed a political and economic hegemony over the resources in the region (Rungswasdisab 1995). This resulted in the development of large commercial trade routes across Lower Mekong Basin and in the recruitment of labor in neighboring countries to reinforce its army and to enhance the development of commercial export-oriented cash crops. The intervention of Siam in Cambodia at that time is part of that dynamic. Commercial routes in Cambodia allowed access to a large diversity of export products such as cardamom (*Amomum krervanh*), high value timber, resin, of *Dipterocarpaceae* trees, wax, ivory, etc. that Siam then sold to China and Europe.

However, Siamese expansionism alone does not fully account for Siam domination in the Cambodian Northwest during 18th and 19th centuries. Indeed, the economic and territorial control over the Northwestern regions of Cambodia was possible due to two internal weaknesses in the then system of power. Given the power they detained through rice taxation, certain *chovay srok* became very powerful and relatively independent of Phnom Penh power (Chandler 1998), particularly in regions with a high economic development potential like the Northwest. Taking advantage of these rivalries, Siamese power reinforced the antagonisms between Northwestern provinces and the central power in Phnom Penh. In 1771-1772, the entire Northwest (Battambang - Siem Reap - Pursat - Kampong Svay) is then put under the control and protection of Siam. Northwestern *chovay srok* granted to Siam the right to exploit forest resources in the northwest and the labor force to work on agro-industrial plantations in Siam against its military protection (Rungswasdisab 1995). Rungswadisab argues that, since 18th century, the northwestern territories have become a zone of refuge for the political dissidents opposed to Phnom Penh power (Rungswasdisab 1995).

3.3 The Discipline of the Colonial Power

French intervention in Cambodia will materialize in a gradual modernization of administrative mechanisms, particularly in the forestry and rice sectors, the center of its colonial project.

In 1899, the French army provided Cambodia with a rudimentary forest administration, placed under the forest service of Cochinchina. The French army corps, a large consumer of timber at the time, commands and organizes the first exploitation of timber (*Tectona grandis*). The colony wanted to enrich its treasury by granting logging licenses and levying sales taxes (Thomas 1999). The very liberal model of forest management was not well controlled and resulted very quickly on massive forest degradation (Gouvernement Général d'Indochine 1905). In a move to sustain colonial rent over forests, the French administration put in place a system of forest reserves, which was completely at odds with the rules of traditional land access. Forest reserves were State enclosures where logging activities are regulated according to agreement signed between companies and the forest administration. Access to these forests was denied for people and their grazing herds (Gouvernement Général d'Indochine 1910).

The rules and coercive measures that accompanied the organization of these reserves have two sides. First, they give responsibilities to peasants and local authorities for the control and patrol of forests, and second they also make any person or group who engages in illegal logging personally accountable (and not the person holding the license). Peasants chose passive resistance to these rules and tried to evade them by turning to smuggling routes controlled by village authorities and Thai traders (Thomas 1999).

In order to stimulate rice production, the French introduce land titles (Guillou 2006). In liberalizing land markets and favoring access to land for French and urban investors in the *Kampong*, the administration tries to increase the exchange value of land, in order to transfer it to the most productive farmers. A new tax system is instituted, which obliged the peasant to pay a certain percentage of their production in cash. Henceforth, peasants are obliged to engage the market economy by selling part of their production. This h cash economy will also create usury credit systems (usurers get preferential conditions at very low interest rate in the bank of the Kampong) and will result in the indebtedness of a large number of peasants (Thion 1993). Combined with the development of land markets, indebtedness will lead to land dispossession by mortgage or sale and the emergence of landlessness, land lease and the creation of agricultural wage labor (Kiernan and Boua 1982).

The establishment of forest reserves and the expansion of large land enclosures by urban investors who secure their land through the cadastral system established by the French, has now considerably reduced the possibility of land expansion. In fact, land access and land concentration associated with agrarian class formation were already serious issues in Battambang in the early 20th century. These agrarian dynamics are central in the analyses made by future Khmer Rouge leaders in their doctoral dissertations (Hou 1955; Khieu 1959; Hu 1965).

In 1907, the restitution of Battambang to Cambodia by Thailand, will initiate waves of migration from *Kampuchea Krom* (Cambodian provinces under Vietnamese control) and from south-west Cambodia where demographic pressure on land was already very important (Ministère de l'Information 1965). From the early 20th century, immigrations to the Northwest, will exacerbate the pressure on land and in the context of the rural economy will reinforce land inequality. The Northwestern countryside is gripped by a strong feeling of injustice and insecurity and neither the French nor the royalty administrations are able to remedy it. Banditry and looting of resources are rampant, investment in education and medical services is nonexistent and any agricultural modernization only benefits the elite. The situation eventually reinforces the patronage power of the *chovaysroks* and their connections with Thailand.

Peasant protest will be crystallized in agriculture development and forest management issues. This protest is first organized by progressive members of Buddhist clergy (Kiernan 2004) and will later be echoed by the « *Khmer Issarak* » (Free Khmers), an anti-colonialist movement managed by Son Ngoc

Thanh and largely supported by Thailand. In the Northwest, the *Issarak* follows on strong economic and political patronage networks and will bring the Thai to the heart of power system in the region¹.

3.4 From the Emergence to the Re-integration of the Khmer Rouge Sovereignty

Sihanouk politics will not challenge land and forest tenure arrangements established earlier by the French. Concession enclosures remain the principal forest management tools and the land titling of settlement and agricultural land is pursued. Land markets are still promoted and the investments by urban dwellers in the agricultural sectors are encouraged. In the fifties, the support provided by the royal government to develop the fertile land of Battambang is an important incentive for the migration of a large number of families coming from South-West region (Ministère de l'Information 1965). These migrations provide the continuity of the migratory movements initiated in the early 20th century between both regions.

In the 1960's, indebtedness of peasants and their dependency to usurers are generalized (Kiernan 2004). In reality the socio-economic conditions of peasants at the end of the 1960's are not essentially any different from those that prevailed in the 1920- 30's (Prud'homme 1969).

From 1966, the *Sangkum* establishes a new form of agricultural tax (*le ramassage du paddy*); a mandatory contribution, which imposes the peasant to sell a part of their harvest to the government. To ensure production does not escape on smuggling routes, the collection of this new tax is supervised and enforced by the army especially in regions with high agricultural potential like Battambang. Social unrest is sparked by the arrival of new settlers and especially by the acquisition of land already in use. Manipulating the local officials and army officers the newcomers assign themselves land titles which had recently been cleared by local peasants. They claimed their titles invalidated customary possession by occupation (Thion 1993). In 1967 a peasant uprising occurs in the district of *Samlaut* (Battambang) against government officials and the military. The *Samlaut* episode strongly reinforces peasants support of the anti-establishment movement against corruption of local government (Kiernan 1982). It is in this context that the Khmer Rouge (KR) revolutionary and political movement will come to power.

Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)

The modernization project of Democratic Kampuchea was based on the construction of a nation-state and its implementation between 1975 and 1979 was radical. The priority for national development is primitive accumulation in the rice sector. The *Angkar* abolished the right of individual possession of land, nationalized the entire agricultural domain and collectivized all means of production. Labor is structured and organized within the collective production groups in which the individuals are recruited. The urban population living in the *kampong* is forced to the country side. Forest concessions are cancelled and the access to forest is forbidden for the population, which is now enrolled in collective farming. These new forms of appropriations of space and the underlying social relations radically transform rural territories (Tyner 2008).

The KR cadres in the Nord-West were more like members of a guerrilla movement involved in timber trade with Thailand rather than skilled and disciplined administrators of an revolutionary administration (Vickery 1984). Out of the control of central KR authority, there were viewed quickly by the *Angkar* as dissidents against the KR establishment. Between 1975 and 1978, migration campaigns aiming to “purify” the Northwest are undertaken to replace the northwestern KR cadres and military by those of the South-west region who are more obedient to Pol Pot (Kiernan 1996; Vickery 1984). Though justified by political reasons, these migrations reinforce and perpetuate the already existing links between both regions.

¹ A man called *Keo*, a Sino-Khmer assigned by the Thai at the position of *Samraong district chief* (in the Northwest), was an important trade figure between Cambodia, Thailand and China in the 19th century. His grand-child, Kao Tak, trader between Cambodia and Thailand and also an ally of the Thai will become a close collaborator of Son Ngoc Thanh in the entire Northwest (Kiernan 2004).

Khmer Rouge Resistance and Re-integration (1979-1999)

In 1979, the country is liberated but the Khmer Rouges are entrenched in the Northwest and have become a resistance movement against government troops and their Vietnamese allies. Massive uncontrolled migratory movements will take place across the entire country in the chaos that followed the arrival of Vietnamese army and the Khmer Rouge rush to the Northwest (Vickery 1984). In the Northwest, an important group of migrants gathered in refugee's camps (along the Thai border) from where international aid will be organized. These camps had key geopolitical influence in the region as they provided support (food aid, civil and military logistics) to political bodies opposed to the Hanoi-backed Phnom Penh power (i.e. the Khmer Rouge). This support is significant and will contribute to giving legitimacy to KR power. Vickery points out that KR leaders are even encouraged by the UNTAC to present candidates for the 1993 general elections as part of a multipartite peace agreement for Cambodia (Vickery 2007).

As early as 1979, agreements of forest exploitation are made between Khmer Rouges leaders and the Thai military in the Northwest. The deal is clear, in exchange of forest exploitation rights, the Thai military give the Khmer Rouges access to food aid in the camps and protect their refugees (Le Billon 2000; Hibou 2004). Approximately fifteen Thai companies who are under a logging ban in Thailand will get access to large forest areas in the northwestern territories controlled by the Khmer Rouge (Gottesman 2003). The profits derived from these agreements are tremendous and allow the KR to finance their resistance war against governmental and Vietnamese troops. But these concessions also provide benefit to the government via taxes and royalties. A paradoxical logic of cooperation between the (KR and the national army will lead these players to maintain a minimum level of conflict and instability in order maintain the access to forest rent (Le Billon 2000). This deal has considerably reinforced the relations between Khmer Rouge leaders, some political factions of the government, the Thai military as well as business and politicians on both sides of the border (Hibou 2004). This deal will further reinforce the legitimacy of Khmer Rouge power in the Northwest.

It is on the basis of these first "joint-ventures" that forest concessions will be [re]established in the mid-1980's, one hundred years after they were first introduced in Cambodia by the French (Le Billon 2000; Hibou 2004). Without really questioning its rationality, the international community encouraged the "rationalization" of forest concessions with the objective to promote public/private partnerships between State and private enterprises and to generate revenues and finance post-war reconstruction efforts (Hibou 2004). But in the Northwest, these public-private partnerships were integrated in the prevailing post-war political economy and so contributed to reinforce KR power.

The 1993 elections bring to power a coalition of two parties: the Cambodian People Party (politically opposed to the Khmers Rouge), and the FUNCINPEC lead by Norodom Rannaridh who attempts to integrate the Khmer Rouge into the government as a manoeuver to weaken CPP within their coalition (Vickery 2007). The reconstruction of patronage networks to control the country will generate violent political struggles between both parties. The need for both parties to generate revenue will intensify the recourse to forest concessions. In only just a few years, the private-public partnership ideal imagined by international community to assist reconstruction has resulted in a generalized and uncontrolled privatization of State forests to serve the interests of political and military leaders (Global Witness 2007).

The development of concessionaire economy will support two important processes in the Northwest. First, in a move to offer alternative livelihood solutions for demobilized soldiers, both co-prime ministers will allocate land to the army. In seven provinces, in July 1994, five percent of the Cambodian territory was allocated to the military (Hibou 2004; Global Witness 2007). This will strengthen the militarization of natural resources management. Second, the power will progressively be centralized and controlled by Hun Sen at the expense of opposition leaders and even rivals within the CPP. The army and police are progressively put under his control this results in a fusion between economic, political, military, judicial and even religious power at all levels (Marchal 2004).

After the 1998 general election that strengthens Hun Sen's hold on power, the question of the demobilization of governmental and KR soldiers, in the Northwest will be tackled. The strategy was a

political and territorial reintegration (*Samaharenkam*). Khmers Rouge leaders obtained key positions within provincial and district administrations. The share of the territory between the royal army and the Khmers Rouge allowed, in a region still under KR control, to put land distribution and management in their hands. This *carte blanche* given to the militaries in the Northwest will not only end conflicts but will also renew the legitimacy of KR power and political economy. This reintegration marks the opening of the agricultural frontier and creates another incentive for migrations. Peasants in need of land come from all parts of the country but mostly from neighboring districts and from the southwest, where KR cadres are originally from (Diepart and Dupuis 2012).

3.5 Neo-liberalism and the Pervasiveness of Sovereign Power

In early 2000, the forest concession system is at an impasse (Independent Forest Sector Review 2004). In 2002, under pressure from the international organizations who promoted it the system is progressively reformed and a moratorium on timber exploitation is declared. This decision does not mark the end of the concession system. Led by the government and the forestry administration in particular the forest concessions system is gradually transformed in an agro-industrial land concessions system. The regional context of these transformations has changed: the emergence of Greater Mekong Sub-region development corridors and an increased global interest for large scale investment in land and in agriculture prevail (Deininger et al. 2011). Yet, the socio-political framework for these new forms of agricultural production remains intact; the extractive agrarian political economy based on historical networks developed by KR and Thai actors.

The rapid advance of the pioneer frontier is stimulated by international agro-industrial markets based in neighboring countries (Thailand, but also Vietnam, China and South Korea). In Thailand, the figurehead of this development is the agro-industrial group CP (*Charoen Pokhaphand*), a world leader in the production of livestock feed. The control over agricultural commodity chains is operated upstream and downstream of production, by providing credit for seeds, fertilizers and pesticides and through the purchase of agricultural production. The land, distributed by KR strong men as part of the reintegration policy, remains the possession of those families. However, the externalities of this development (environmental degradation, investment in and management of hydraulic infrastructures, transport, and climatic risks during production) are entirely borne by peasants.

The neoliberal modernization of State institutions that provide a framework for the agricultural colonization comprise a plethora of new legal instruments. The 2001 land law foresees the establishment of private land title and the development of markets towards pro-poor objectives. The recent land titling process (prime minister titling) follows the directive 01 in a move to secure land rights for the poor follows on the same logic (Müller and Zülsdorf 2013). The forest concession system is gradually replaced by economic land concession for agro-industrial development to bring growth and employment in rural areas. Land reform also aims to bring more responsibilities to rural communities in forest management through the community-based forest management. Social land concessions (co-managed by the state and the communities) are established to address the need of land for the rural poor. This institutional context, supposedly new, follows in reality on the French jurisdictions and land tenure regimes introduced during the protectorate. These new neoliberal governance instruments carry a message of political decentralization, administrative de-concentration and resources co-management are undoubtedly instruments of a “government” in the sense of Foucault (Foucault 2004). But given the history and practice of the agrarian political economy in the region, this devolution of power serves the interest of central power, the agro-industrial lobby and the elite within the rural communities (Diepart 2011). Our assertion that decentralized control over land responds to a centralized logic of power is aligned with Springer’s argument that in the context of neo-liberalization the interpretation of laws by elites has become the main element in the perpetuation of sovereign power (Springer 2011).

4 A Diversity of Land Control Strategies at the Local Level

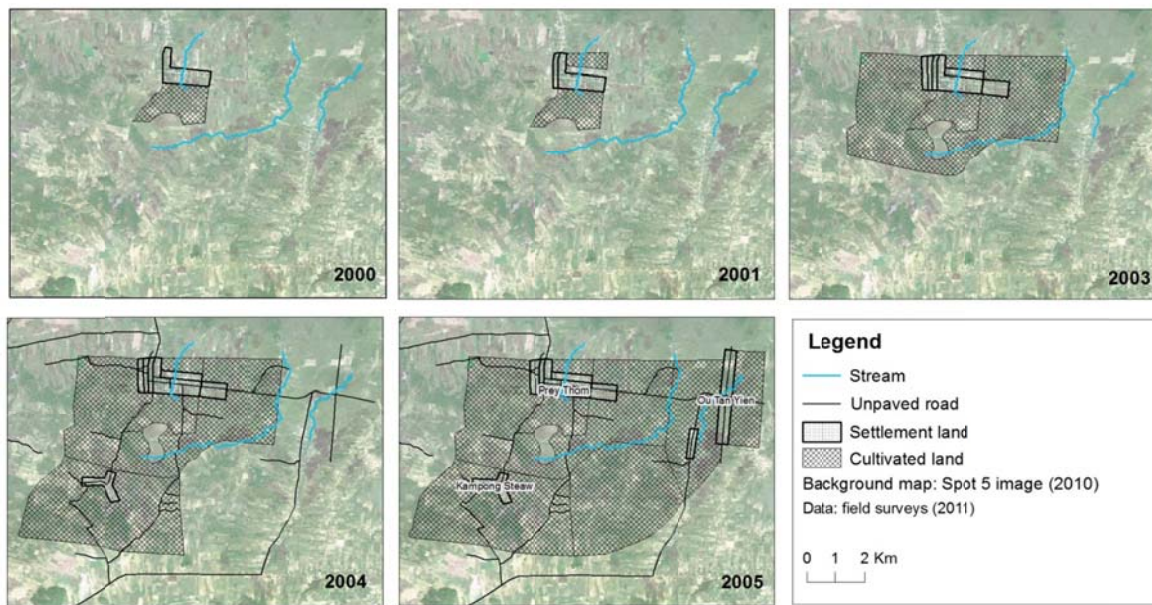
At the local level, land control strategies that confront power and authority, are embedded in a long history. But given the highly opportunistic nature of the current agricultural colonization one should pay attention to the multiplicity of situations on the ground. Based on field work in Bavel district we set forth three case studies that highlight a diversity of local land control practises. Each case accounts for a specific process of peasant mobilisation reflecting different socio-economic functions within rural societies.

4.1 Land Access, Migration and Social Differentiation in Prey Thom

The village of Prey Thom is located on the fertile uplands in the south of Bavel district. This area was quickly colonized by farmers after the armed conflict and therefore experienced major landscape transformations. The agricultural colonisation was shaped through territorial patronage of Khmer Rouge warlords who were in the region at the end of the armed conflicts with the government army. They planned and supervised the distribution of land to the migrants arriving in the area; in the early phase of the distribution, the rule was to allocate five hectares of forested land to each family. The first migrants who arrived after the war (circa 1999) were a mix of demobilized soldiers (from both the Khmer Rouge army and regular army) and natives of the area who had fled the war. By appropriating the best quality land, these first migrants monopolized the land rent. It allowed them to engage in profitable cash crops production activities (maize, soy, cassava, sesame and mung beans) controlled by *Charoen Pokhaphand (CP)*. The current land elite of Prey Thom comes from this pioneer group of people who benefit from larger land areas and have accumulated important operating capital (mostly mechanical equipment). By controlling the agricultural means of production, they have had a key role in determining the relations of production of peasant communities.

These pioneers were followed by a group of farmers from various origins that settled according to the same rules of land access. They were often linked to the first migrants by family or acquaintance networks. These new migrants colonized land located more and more at the periphery of earlier settler landholdings. They also bring an important labour force, as the labour demand for forest clearing and removing tree stumps quickly increased. In fact agricultural colonization and migration are two processes that mutually reinforcing.

In 2004 agricultural expansion and the progressive saturation of land led to the creation of two satellite villages, Ou Tan Yien and Kampo Steaw, where a family could receive no more than three hectares of poorer quality low-land. As one moves towards the edge of the expanding village the quality of land decreases and rice becomes the main cultivated crop. This keeps the peasant out of the profits of cash crop production. Map 2 shows the evolution of land occupation in area.



Map 2: The evolution of land occupation in Prey Thom

From 2004-2005 the acquisition of land is market driven, a new modality, legitimized by the 2001 Land Law. Given the value of land and the important profit derived from cash crop production, a land market develops rapidly and reinforces land concentration within the village. Land concentration occurs by the casualization of indebted peasants forced to sell and rent out land and by the growth of more virtuous and accumulating farmers. In response to this concentration, agricultural wage labor develops in the village and leads to the formation of a class of land-poor peasants who rely on agricultural wage labor as a necessary source of income.

The steady influx of new migrants increases the pressure on land and reinforces the wage labor pool. When the wage labor opportunities in the village decrease, the more precarious peasant families are forced to migrate to the border districts or to Thailand, where demand for labor remains very high. The social differentiation briefly sketched at Prey Thom develops “center – periphery” dynamics that includes the control of rent by the first migrants, the progressive “peripherization” of immigrants and later the marginalization of landless agricultural laborers. The process reflects on the polarization of households in relation to the control of means of agricultural production.

These different modes of access to land are derived from power directly inherited from the Khmer Rouge reintegration process. The designation of the village chief before the first communal elections of 2002, brought to power a man convinced about the redistribution model imposed by the Khmer Rouge landlords. This has led to the institutionalization of Khmer Rouge power in the new governance structure. The rules of land appropriation by the KR warlord have now become legitimate in the eyes of the elite having the authority to implement the new land law. This is key as the village chief has the authority to determine whether a piece of land has been occupied peacefully and continuously for 5 years. According to the 2001 land law this is the basis on which the land administration will deliver land ownership rights (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2001).

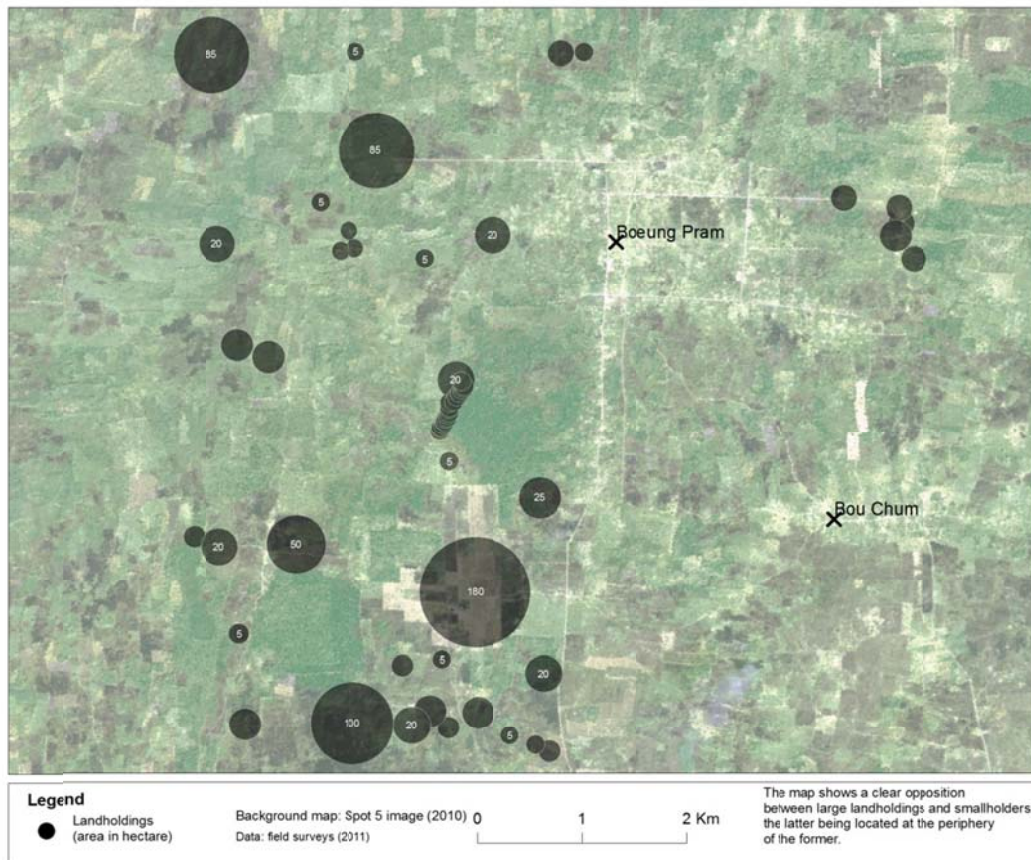
All stakeholders accept the relationship between the local authority and the land access rules imposed by the Khmer Rouge elite. Even if this situation is a source of frustration and tension, no one really questions privileges of reintegration. In fact, the very young rural community of Prey Thom is poorly equipped to organize a challenge to them. The acceptance of this special relationship between power and land access has guided the construction of the Prey Thom territory and deeply influences socio-

economics of the rural society. The economic opportunism and the social marginalization in Prey Thom are at odds with the social ideals that once allowed the Khmer Rouge to take power.

4.2 Land Domains and Domination of the Peasantry at Boeung Pram

Boeung Pram is a village in the Northwest of Bavel district with a very complex land history. It is located in region recently cleared for rain-fed food crop production. This area was administered as a military Khmer Rouge camp by four senior officers who together controlled an area of 80,000 hectares in Northwest. According to many discussions we have had with demobilized soldiers, the appropriation of territories occupied by the Khmer Rouge seems to have taken place as early as in 1979. Military leaders personally appropriated some of these lands and redistributed the rest to Khmer Rouge soldiers close to warlords (who may have later sold their land to private individuals) and to demobilized soldiers of the government army who stayed in the area.

In areas where military becomes landlord (sometimes with landholdings of up to 180 ha), a particular form of land control will emerge. At the periphery of these large landholdings, they allocated five hectares of land to migrant peasant families with usufruct rights. After five years of continuous occupation of the land the deal foresees that the peasant family will gain more solid possession right on one hectare. On that basis the family commits to work for the landlord by supporting the clearance of his land and by providing free labor at the rice harvest peak season. The strategy of these landowners is to increase the number of indirect beneficiaries of the land redistribution in order to strengthen a peasant pool of “supporters” so to enhance their agricultural entrepreneurship. It is worth noting that the deal made between the landlord and the peasant is purely informal and completely at odds with the legal framework. Map 3 illustrates the spatial structure that emerges from this form of peasant mobilization.



Map 3: Peasants and land lords in the Boeung Pram area

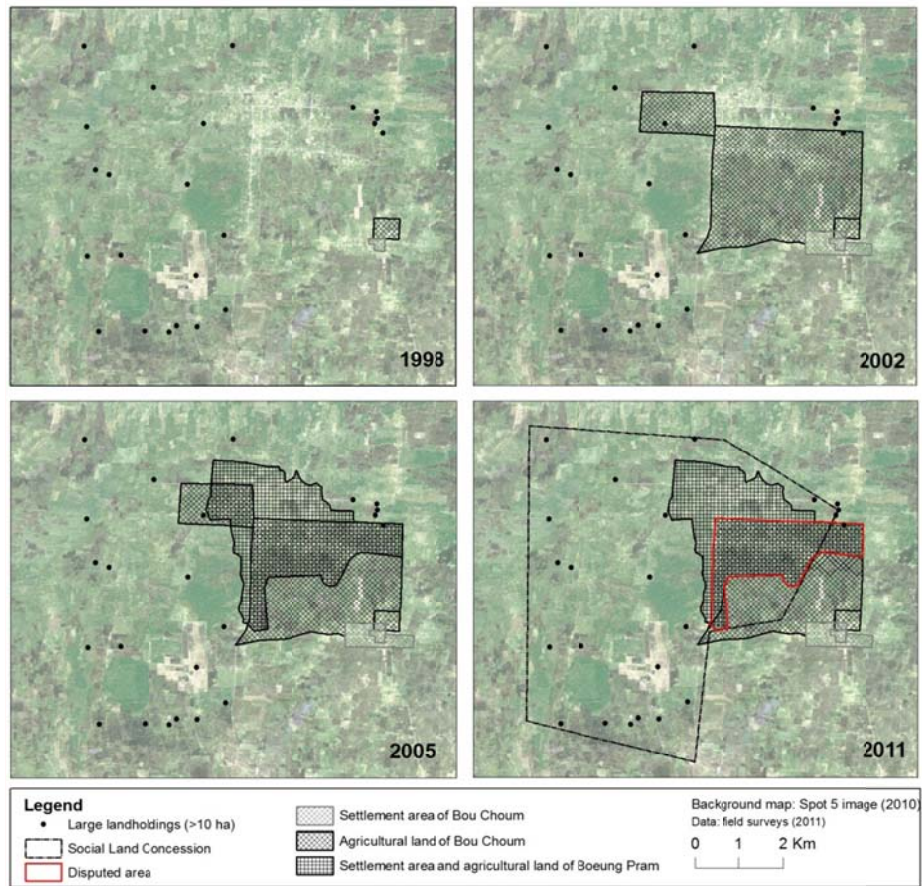
The peasants primarily form protective barriers around these large landholdings. And by supporting the forest clearance, they support the actual implementation of these large landholdings that became agricultural enterprises. Finally, by accepting the domination of the owner, they legitimize and support a way of land access that is deeply unequal. Indeed, these patron-client relations are highly asymmetric and similar to the enslavement of a part of the peasantry to a sovereign power. Yet, they have certain rationality for the actors operating in this territorial context.

The relations between the peasants and the power are clearly based on the support of a Khmer Rouge control on land; it implies more than simple acceptance. Even if, on the side of the peasants, this support is justified by difficult access to land rather than political affinities, it strengthens a political and economic patronage and legitimizes land control practices. This points the contradiction between government KR reintegration policy and the current forest management policies of the same government.

4.3 Resistance and Peasant Struggles in Boeung Pram and Bou Choum

Boeung Pram and Bou Choum are two villages in Bavel District involved in land conflict. The site of current village of Bou Choum was controlled by a Khmer Rouge military commander (Deng Yang), who managed the land distribution at the end of the nineties. This included the redistribution of large landholdings to close dignitaries (often according to their rank in the army), land sale to businessmen and investors in the region and redistribution of small plots to demobilized soldiers or landless peasants (according to the KR rule of allocation five hectares per family). In 1998, the first households to settle in Bou Choum are recipients of land distributed by Deng Yang. The first inhabitants of the current village of Boeung Pram arrived in the area in 2005 at a time when the land, even though unoccupied, was redistributed to military commanders or sold to private individuals. These newcomers (demobilized soldiers of the government army, then Khmer Rouge army soldiers) quickly organized around a charismatic leader (Chea Ney) to secure these territories for their owners. This social unrest and mobilization of peasants is strong. Chea Ney, and e hundreds of peasant families, settled by force in the area. Populations from Bou Choum and Boeung Pram mobilize to take over land from the large landowners. Their goal is to extend farmland for a growing immigrant rural population in desperate need of agricultural land.

The expansion of cultivated domain is limited by the presence of landlords in the area who do not permit the encroachment of their landholding. But these communities do not recognize the legitimacy of these landlords and the encroachment of a warlord landholding (Srey Poun) eventually occurs. The conflict escalates and leads to the arrest of Chea Ney who is charged with illegal deforestation and illegal sale of agricultural land. Benefiting from the weakening of Boeung Pram community, Bou Choum famers then decide to ally with Srey Poun; the deal was that they would get back the agricultural land they originally received from Deng Yang if they help to evict the few families of Boeung Pram who are still living on the land. This opportunistic maneuver of Bou Choum people to secure their land rights will not succeed as Chea Ney remained very active in his jail cell. He managed to mobilize a network of actors to stand up for his cause: influential members of local CPP bureau, the district and provincial administration, the forestry and land administrations, local NGOs and even human rights lobby groups. On his way out of prison, Chea Ney and his folks will form a small guerilla army and will reoccupy, at gun point, the land re-occupy by Bou Choum. But he went further and managed to have the Provincial State land management to recognize the contested land as private State land. Eventually, the land has been integrated in a social land concession program, which scrupulously excludes the Bou Choum residents. The development of the conflict is depicted on map 4.



Map 4: The evolution of land occupation in the Bou Choum and Boeung Pram area

This conflict reflects the opposition between two forces of land control: the sovereign Khmer Rouge power, which result in land control that subordinate the peasantry to warlords and second the power exercised by State authorities using the instruments of neo-liberal governance. This conflict shows the opposition between the mobilizations of peasants in relation to two opposite forms of land control: those for whom KR patronage provides a legitimate form of power and access to land (Bou Choum) and those who refuse subordination to land inequalities inherited from the reintegration process (Boeung Pram). The latter form of peasant mobilization is best understood as a process that seeks to deny a sovereign power over land and challenges it via the legal instruments neoliberal government power. This peasant mobilization engineered a new type of State-Peasant historical “contract” but also lead to peasant exclusion (i.e. Bou Choum residents).

5 The Peasants and the State along the Northwest Agricultural Frontier

The history of power and land control strategies and the examination of local practices of control inform current agricultural colonization, and in particular processes of peasant mobilization and their relation with the State.

In the pre-colonial era, access to land was spatially and functionally adapted to the demands of Royal power whose objectives were to place the agricultural production and labor force under the effective control of the State through a tax system. Later, in the context of the development of the European world-economy, The French intervene in Cambodia to extract land and forest rent. Access to land becomes highly militarized and the market-driven modernization of land tenure regimes (forest enclosures and land titling) initiated or reinforced social differentiation and exclusions processes

within the peasantry. The Khmer Rouge State nationalized land resources and strictly controlled its access, so to force a primitive agrarian accumulation. In the post-conflict reconstruction period, high-ranking government officials became the central actors in controlling forest enclosures and timber market. Under the current neo-liberal modernization, the access to land is adapted to the institutions of global food marketing.

Throughout this history the balance of power between State and markets has evolved and with them the disciplinary instruments of land control (taxation, enclosures and markets). However, these mechanisms have always served a circular sovereign power and have contributed to subordinate peasantry to the State and/or market elites. Incarnated by the King, the Protectorate, the Khmer Rouge or the post-conflict political leaders, these sovereign systems of power are built on controlling forest and agriculture as well as of the people whose lives depend upon them. The emergence of government-like power and land control instruments (what we refer to as neoliberal tools) is naturally embedded in this historical context of violence. These tools are used by the army, political parties and the market. Pilgrim argues that when they are coupled with the threat of force, initially employed by the military for territorial acquisition and control in warfare, the neoliberal tools for land management and territorial development have become institutionally deviant in the sense that force is legitimized by government institution towards private citizens and interests (Pilgrim 2010).

However, peasants are not resigned to passivity in this exercise of power. The history of the region is also one of struggles and resistance. The dissidence of the Northwest to the central power of the government has favored the political and economic rapprochement between Thailand, local patronage networks and trade/smuggling of forest and agricultural products. Driven from Thailand, these networks form the basis on which the region penetrates the world agro-industrial markets. In this context, migrations are part of continuing process that brought important peasant population to the Northwest and also resulted in establishing historical continuity in the relations between regions (in particular southwest and northwest). These migrations are aligned with national policies but not controlled by government; the peasant household is the main locus of agency in the management of these migrations as part of strategies for managing vulnerability.

This history is not without its contradictions. Commercial networks between the Northwest *Chovaysroks*, Thailand and China that nourish social unrest and the resistance against the sovereign power of the king and the colony are now the vectors of the agricultural colonization which induce inequality within the peasantry.

The case studies focus on the ethnography of land acquisition and how it fosters a diversity of circumstances under which land control strategies occurs and their impact on the spatial as well as economic structure of the new territories.

At the local level, land control and power are undoubtedly twin forces. Local authorities and warlords that emerged after the KR reintegration were legitimized to control land distribution. Some general rules were established to frame the land distribution, but the local authority had a lot of discretion to implement them. The emerging spatial structure of these new territories is a mosaic of large and small land holdings. The large landholdings (considered as KR spoils of war) were usually passed on to businessmen through market land transfer (high ranking KR leaders were entrenched and not visible anymore). Smaller landholdings were redistributed to migrant households by a local authority (representative of the State) or directly by a warlord who acted in a rather Stateless institutional context.

The positioning of the peasant vis-à-vis this power is diverse and their attitudes in favor of one or another form of land control results in differentiated state formation processes. This case illustrates three forms of land control which in turn reflect three types of peasant mobilization: 1) in Prey Thom, the peasant accepted the control over the distribution of land by the ex-Khmer Rouge local authority and in particular the capture of the land rent by the elite and the socio-economic differentiation resulting from it - 2) in Boeung Pram, the peasants demonstrate their support to the KR legacy and to

the large land enclosures inherited from reintegration policy even if they remain out of State protection – 3) In the Boeung Pram/Bou Choum case, peasant resist to this KR legacy and mobilize to create new solutions to land distribution with State actors. These similarities and differences between these cases inform our understanding of State formation along the Northwest agricultural frontier.

The first two cases illustrate peasant acceptance or support to the rules under which they receive the land from village authority or KR landlord. The resulting peasant mobilization work to legitimate the land control practices of the elite; as if an agreement – elsewhere referred to as a contract (Sikor and Lund 2009) - would bind the elite and the peasant. Favoritism and exclusions are key components of the land distribution process but they are risks for the peasants.

In both cases, the choice of land control is not a deliberate political decision made by the peasants; it is an act of opportunism. The factors that influence peasant decision making are highly contingent on their livelihood circumstances and on the network that facilitates their migration. The migrations, which nourish agricultural colonization, are driven by the necessity to acquire land (push factor) and guided by the proximity or distant family-acquaintance networks (pull factors). The prevalence of migrants from the neighboring districts and from southwest region of Cambodia is significant and was quantified with the 2008 demographic census data (Diepart and Dupuis 2012). Opportunism is key and we suggest that the legitimacy of power and the attitude of peasant towards it are not fixed and absolute but rather dynamic and changing. In the first two cases, the agreement between a land recipient and the elite is negotiated individually between the elite and the household, without the interference of a community-based institution that would be a defendant of their rights. The absence of a solid community mediator tends to reinforce the unbalance between the elite and the peasants.

The outcomes of peasant mobilization regarding State formation are distinct. In Prey Thom (case 1) the KR reintegrated the national administration and they are recognized as legitimate authority by the Royal Government. In this context, the state develops through the institutionalization of asymmetric social relations of production (polarization wage labor/capital) which results from differential land control practices. In Boeung Pram (case 2), the process develops in a relatively State less institutional context. The Cambodian State does not condemn the large landholdings (this would contradict their own KR reintegration policy) but clearly do not approve of them and very likely will not prioritize any State projects in the area (social infrastructures, roads, etc.). In the end, peasants undergo a double marginalization.

Case 3 (conflict Boeung Pram – Bou Choum) informs a totally different form of State formation. The mobilization of peasant against the KR legacy is driven by a claim on a warlord landholding piece of land. The factors that made this protest possible have to do, first of all, with a strong leadership that can rally peasant voices. Leadership is a necessary but not sufficient condition. The peasantry also needs the support of State institutions (technical line agencies and territorial authority) to materialize their protest. The rationality of the State agencies in supporting the protest is to gain some legitimacy in these Stateless zones. This is a more effective way to “governmentalize the space” (Peluso and Lund 2011). But the State would not venture alone into these hostile lands. It is the convergence of interests into a coalition that makes it happen. The State develops through managing conflict and requires a technical and social approach that is functional vis-à-vis the neo-liberal policies of the government. It needs to be consistent with the new governance instruments (state land classification, social land concession, community forestry and fisheries etc.).

6 Conclusions

We have conceptualized State as a flow of relations between people (i.e. peasants) and the elite who govern them. Over history land control has been a recurrent process in the exercise of power in the Cambodian Northwest and a determinant factor in the relations between Peasants and the State. Violence associated with land control practices is inherent to the mechanisms of State formation. The acts of violence exercised to maintain order over a territory have always worked to subordinate

peasant to the State or to Markets. In neo-liberalizing Cambodia, the use of several forms of violence (military, political and economic) in land and natural resources management has contributed to centralizing State power at the national level.

The State being formed along the agricultural frontier in the Northwest is not homogenous and is not guided by one vision and rationality. We see the construction of several juxtaposed States each with a different historical legitimacy based upon different local power structures. This heterogeneity implies different types of peasant mobilization and the simultaneous construction of different forms of rural territories.

At the same time there is no obvious political will by the central government to identify the contradictions between these different local power structures and to integrate them in a more coherent State. Because they are embedded in a centralized agrarian political economy through dense patronage network, the fragmented diversity of power systems at local level serves the centralization of power.

In this context, many questions about the very future of peasants remain unanswered. We have pointed out the increase of agricultural wage labor as a direct consequence of land and capital concentration. The institutionalization of wage labor is the basis on which we can further describe the future of the Cambodian peasantry in the Northwest and the agency necessary to tackle the economic, social and environmental sustainability of their communities.

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