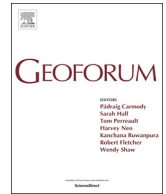




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Who is the community? Governing territory through the making of ‘indigenous communities’ in Cambodia

Esther Leemann*

Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies, University of Zurich, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

For years, the Cambodian state has signed away indigenous peoples' land to large-scale plantations. At the same time, the state has set up an intricate titling process that would allow indigenous peoples to officially register their land and protect it against dispossession. The Bunong ethnic minority from Bu Sra in Northeast Cambodia started to engage in such a land titling process around ten years ago. When they tried to register as an ‘indigenous community’ with the Ministry of Interior, it became apparent that defining the boundaries of a community is a highly political matter. Bunong villagers, non-profit organization staff and state bureaucrats all engaged in politics of ‘community’ and space-making in this ongoing struggle over territory.

Arguing that the process of recognition of community and territory is strongly contested and involves contrasting ontologies of community, place and belonging, I focus on the incommensurability between Bunong notions of legitimate claimants/claims and actual titled communities and territories that legalization produced. I give ethnographic evidence of generational power dynamics, NGO involvement and fraught mapping processes by drawing on concepts of hegemony, consent and refusal. Problematizing the making of indigenous communities for the sake of titling, I discuss the practical and theoretical implications of this process of recognition.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of large-scale rubber plantations on indigenous customary agricultural land and forest in Cambodia has created a frenzy to register communities and their territories. Indigenous, human rights and United Nations organizations have encouraged communities to engage in the titling process in order to prevent them from losing their lands. When villagers of the Bunong ethnic minority in Bu Sra commune in Northeast Cambodia tried to register as indigenous communities in 2009, however, they were not able to do so on their own terms of social, political and spatial organization based on lineage affiliation. Instead, the categories available would require them to register as broader ‘indigenous communities’ for abstract spaces that did not align with the territories they claimed.

In Bu Sra, different layers of place-making characterize today's complex situation of land tenure and use: War, displacement, resettlement and dispossession played decisive roles and such “previous sedimentations remained consequential even as they became reworked” (Moore, 2005:3). Key to the Bunong people's notion of territory is a sense of place and belonging, which is reflected in the customary tenure system. For the Bunong, who were primarily swidden cultivators until

10 years ago, the word *bri* refers to land and a *bri taem* is a place of origin.¹ The primary unit of Bunong social organization is the descent group. The relation between a descent group's *bri taem* and the group itself is conceived as one of mutual belonging. A *bri taem* is a particular place where individuals from specific descent groups negotiate social relations and access to forests and swidden fields. Before the land titling process, villagers belonging to a specific *bri taem* did not claim an abstract space (Lefebvre, 1991) of ‘Bunong land’, understood as indigenous territory for indigenous people. But it was exactly this generic notion of land, as indigenous yet abstract space, which was suggested by organizations promoting collective land titling in Bu Sra. Moreover, given the important role of descent groups for the Bunongs' sense of place and belonging, one might assume that they were registered as communities, but as I will show, this was not the case. This article reveals how the process of community and boundary making for the sake of indigenous land titling disregarded the previous Bunong notion of a group of people who can legitimately lay claim to a particular area of land.

Using the example of titling indigenous land in Bu Sra commune, I explore the theoretical and practical implications of recognizing indigenous communities as so-called legal entities with collective rights

* Address: University of Zurich, ISEK – Social and Cultural Anthropology, Andreasstrasse 15, CH-8050 Zurich, Switzerland.

E-mail address: esther.leemann@uzh.ch.

¹ Literally, *bri* means ‘forest’ and *taem* means ‘original’.

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to land and resources by the Cambodian state. I show that the process of recognizing Bunong communities and titling territories is a highly contested one, which involves competition over the right to define such territories and the evocation of contrasting ontologies of space and community. A number of actors have been involved in this struggle: various state administrative entities, international donors and national NGOs, plantation companies, Bunong elders and young intermediaries. I explore incommensurable notions of what constitutes an indigenous community that can lay a legitimate claim to territory, and I show the struggle over who can define the boundaries of such a territory and what the indigenous space(s) of the Bunong should look like. I give ethnographic evidence of how the Bunong navigated and contested unfavorable titling and fraught mapping processes by drawing on concepts of hegemony, consent and refusal. I argue against using indigeneity simply as a means for securing land rights when its application is not in line with the beliefs and understandings of indigenous peoples.

The paper draws from ethnographic research in Bu Sra between 2010 and 2014 and additional interviews with key informants in 2016.² The study focuses on the villagers of Bu Sra commune who experienced the challenge to form and register ‘communities’ for the collective titling process. The titling process started in 2009 and is still not complete at the time of writing. With research spanning 2010–2016, I could investigate the mid-term implications of early decisions on how to form communities. My data collection methods involved interviews and observations of informal village meetings, where villagers discussed among themselves how to proceed with challenges of the land titling process, as well as formal village meetings, where villagers, organizations and government authorities participated and formal decisions were taken.³ I then conducted a set of semi-structured interviews with experts and stakeholders who had been involved at the outset of the titling process in Bu Sra. In 2016, I conducted further interviews with key informants via internet calls about how the villagers tried to carry out the mapping of community territory.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, I discuss key terms and provide background information on community, place and belonging in Bu Sra commune. Second, I give an overview of the Cambodian adoption of the global policy agenda of recognizing indigenous rights to land and resources, covering the translation of the concept of indigenous communities into the Land Law from 2001. Third, I explore how villagers, organizations and bureaucrats all engaged in narratives and politics of community and territory. Fourth, I highlight the frictions between diverse notions of community and belonging that have been deployed in the ongoing struggle over territory. Finally, in light of villagers’ experiences of land titling, I discuss the practical and theoretical implications of the making of indigenous communities and territories for the sake of titling.

2. Community, territorialization, place and belonging

When thinking about community, questions arise about membership, shared meanings, identity and imagination (Watts, 2004). Many scholars have worked to rupture assumptions about mythical ideas of communities as small spatial units, socially homogeneous and harmonious, with shared understandings, common interests and common identification (e.g. Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Li, 2002; Watts, 2004). Yet this myth of community is stubborn. Such simplifications may have strategic value in the policy arena (Li, 1996, 2002). However, they

² As I am not fluent in Khmer and Bunong, I used translation services during field work.

³ My position is as an independent researcher. In agreement with my Bunong interlocutors, I do not specify which organizations took on what specific tasks during the titling process. I never collaborated with any of the organizations involved.

ignore the multiple interests and actors within communities and how they shape decision-making processes (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Moreover, shared understandings do not remain static. Introduced changes take place yet are contested, their meanings transformed by the communities (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Communities are not a static essence, but “the (provisional) result of community-forming processes” (Li, 2002: 276) as they engage with state (and as I would add non-state) programs, procedures and personnel (Tsing, 1993, 1999).

Exploring Bunong perspectives on territory and legitimate claimants gives an opportunity to point out intergenerational differences and ontological divides within the community, as well as shifts in terms of knowledge and power. During the land titling process, villagers realized that the answer to ‘who is the community’ is not only closely linked to ‘old’ knowledge of specific descent groups who can rightfully claim particular areas, but also to ‘new’ knowledge of how to best fit the ‘indigenous slot’ (Li, 2000) defined by ‘national and legal imaginary’ (Povinelli, 2002). Young Bunong ‘intermediaries’ (Engle, 2010) seeking recognition of Bunong claims from the state challenged the elder generation’s understanding of belonging and sought to redefine how a Bunong territory should look. These young intermediaries felt much more comfortable in meetings and negotiations with authorities and organizations on boundary making than members from the older generation and thus emerged as spokespersons for all of the Bunong villagers.

The production of legally-designated communities as part of the titling process in Cambodia involves the ‘translation’ (Tsing, 2005; Latour, 1996; Mosse, 2005) of internationally promoted concepts and policies into recognized indigenous peoples’ rights to territory. The notions held by rights advocates concerning indigenous communities and territories have been shown to draw from their own powerful fictions (e.g. Li, 2000, Engle, 2010, Anthias and Radcliffe, 2015). And also state bureaucrats have their own ideas how indigenous communities should look (Milne, 2013). The story of delimiting communities and demarcating territory is a story about competing ontologies and knowledges, which mediate the access to and hence organize the way individuals and groups view indigenous claimants and space. As Gramsci (1995) reminds us, certain concepts gain purchase in a society while others are marginalized, creating a high-stakes contest over which knowledges become hegemonic. An analysis of the ways in which hegemony is established involves the ideological practices that shape individuals’ beliefs and actions (Gramsci, 1995, Ekers and Loftus, 2008).

Lefebvre (1991) was among the first scholars to explore the spatialization of hegemony. He called the type of space made hegemonic by capitalism the ‘abstract space’ of commodity production and state control. Gordillo (2002) stressed that the forms of contention, which hegemonic fields generate are also active forces in the production of places. He explored the values that inform struggles to define the contours of a locality, showing that people’s everyday, spatially inscribed productive practices create values alternative and counter to those inculcated by hegemonic discourses.

Further forms of contention could be understood to be the ‘experienced landscape’ highlighted by Hirsch (1995) that is continually constituted and constitutive of social processes. People’s practical engagement with their ‘natural’ surroundings—which are in fact “inhabited and deeply culturalized landscapes” (Dominy, 2001:3)—is as much involved in place-making processes as are the stories told about it. As Gow (1995) showed for native Amazonians, knowledge of places comes partly from moving through it, seeing the traces of other people’s agency and partly through what older people tell about it. Tsing (1993, 2005) describes the complex social-natural landscapes that swidden cultivators create over time. For swiddeners, the forests they use are like a patchwork of fallow fields that are not only rich sites for resources, but also for stories and life histories. Condominas (1994 [1957]) showed in his ethnography on Bunong in Vietnam (called the Mhong Gar) that people put meaning in a certain space and make it

their place by turning forest into swidden fields.

I understand contested versions of sense of place and belonging to lie at the heart of the problem of boundary making in Bu Sra. I understand place to be a physical space “invested with cultural meaning, a site of intense cultural activity and imagination – of memory, of affectivity, of work, of sociality, of identity” (Dominy, 2001:3). Places are thus not inert physical entities but constructed through practice, social relations, fields of power, and in connection to other places (Massey, 1994, Lefebvre, 1991, Harvey, 1996, Gordillo, 2002). The territory is the concept of space as political category, which is bordered, mapped, calculated, owned and controlled (Elden, 2007). Scholars stressed that the idea of a reified territoriality should be replaced by a focus on processes of territorialization (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, Hirsch, 1995, Malkki, 1992). This implies a shift of analysis towards power relations and social contexts in which territoriality is produced (Kent, 2008), and to the ways spaces and places are made, imagined, contested, and enforced (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). Tsing et al. (2005) raised the central question of whose idea of community is mapped in mapping processes. Scholars pointed out that external encroachment and the struggles of indigenous groups to maintain or regain control of their land not only produces changes in that territory, but also in their conceptions of what a territory is (Peluso, 1995). As Kent (2008) highlighted, the indigenous sense of territoriality often changes considerable in the encounter with state territorial conceptions: e.g. indigenous understanding of heterogeneous spaces and flexible limits were transformed into homogeneous territories with fixed boundaries. Moreover, strategic claims were being made over neighboring territories (Kent, 2008).

Building on this literature, I show that Bunong people had to deal with impossible demands placed on them as part of the land titling process (Povinelli, 2002). For the sake of a swift land mapping process, they were supposed to claim territory they do not actually consider to be theirs. This marked a decisive moment where the majority of villagers decided to reject territory on these terms, rather refusing the whole titling process. By refusing, Bunong people denied the presumed authority of state and organizations and remade their own ignored narratives (Simpson, 2014). They made no strategic claims, asserted no strategic belonging, and did not play along; rather, they ‘turned away’ (Coulthard, 2014) “to instead struggle ... on their own terms and in accordance with their own values” (Coulthard, 2014: 43). As this struggle over territory reveals, it is possible to resist governmentality, its territorializing logic and rationalities at least to some extent (see also Anthias and Hoffmann, this issue).

3. Turning Bunong forests and swidden fields into plantations

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Cambodian Government has pursued a resolute policy of granting economic land concessions to large-scale land investments for rubber, sugar or oil palm plantation companies. As a result, 57 economic land concessionaires already controlled a full 943,000 ha in Cambodia at the end of 2006 (Barney, 2007). After a record year of government-issued licensing in 2011, economic land concessions for agro-industrial plantations covered 2 million hectares – equivalent to 53% of Cambodia’s arable land – affecting more than half a million Cambodians. This enormous area was granted exclusively to 227 agro-industrial companies (LICADHO and Cambodia Daily, 2012). By then, as in other countries of mainland Southeast Asia, the ‘rubber boom’ had reached the previously peripheral and remote parts of Cambodia, converting vast amounts of forests into large-scale monocultures at a rapid pace: In northeastern upland Monduliri province, 94,731 ha had been granted as concessions for rubber plantations (FIDH, 2011). Monduliri province is home to the Bunong, one of the 23 ethnic minorities recognized by the Cambodian

state.⁴ Land and forest resources formed the basis for the livelihoods of the Bunong as swidden cultivators. A rough estimate suggests that in 2011, the rubber plantations impacted around a third of the total Bunong population (around 13,500 people in 26 villages). The concession areas frequently conflicted with what villagers considered to be their swidden sites, cattle grounds, forest resources, sacred places, burial grounds, former settlement areas and – although rarely – their current settlement areas.

In 2008, three plantation companies started to bulldoze within government-issued concession areas and affected the majority of the 850 Bunong families living in Bu Sra commune (see Fig. 1). A group of villagers contacted human and indigenous rights organizations and UN organizations and bodies (ILO and OHCHR). They informed national media and complained to local and district authorities, as well as to company staff. The government’s land concession policy had frequently caused local impoverishment, social conflicts and even direct use of violence (NGO Forum, 2005; LICADHO, 2005; OHCHR, 2007). As a result, various organizations decided to support villagers and embarked on a strategy of pursuing collective land titles for the 850 indigenous families. The organizations’ hopes were pinned on the Cambodian Land Law from 2001, which provides a legal framework to protect indigenous peoples’ right to collective ownership. It opened a space to secure the rights of villagers from Bu Sra to land threatened by concession policies and rubber plantations. The hope was that the land titling, even if only in response to the concessions, could still protect villagers’ lands because considerable parts were outside the concession areas. Hope also remained that the titling could protect at least parts of the villagers’ lands inside the concessions.⁵ Workshops were held to inform the villagers about the legal framework, concepts of indigeneity (which they had been unaware of), and the formal steps required to start the land titling process. Shocked by the expanding rubber plantations, the great majority of the villagers eagerly agreed to participate in the process. They pursued the first steps of the highly intricate collective titling procedure: They identified themselves as an indigenous community, produced required document for self-identification, and made a formal request to the Department of Ethnic Minorities’ Development of the Ministry of Rural Development, which is endowed with the authority to verify the claiming community’s indigeneity. However, it soon became clear that the process of boundary making was highly political and the making of indigenous communities for land titling was very difficult. The various stakeholders involved had fundamentally different notions of how communities and indigenous territories should look. Furthermore, the process increasingly revealed that the political will in Cambodia to safeguard indigenous rights to land was minimal (see also Milnes, 2013, Baird, 2013).

4. Indigenous land titling in Cambodia

After the Peace Accord of 1991, Western donors, development banks and UN organizations supported the war-torn country in drafting laws and regulations. The international community operated under growing awareness for the recognition and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples and influenced the indigenous community land rights sections of the Land Law of 2001, as did community representatives and NGOs (Simbolon, 2002; Ironside et al., 2017). Only after a long and tedious process of negotiation and consultation

⁴ While Monduliri’s population has nearly doubled from 1998 to 2008, the percentage of the Bunong population in Monduliri decreased from 80% to 50%. The 2009 census identified 28,850 people as native Bunong (or Phnong) speakers.

⁵ When plantations are created, not all of the granted concession area is developed. The huge concessions areas are developed in several stages, which means that some land is not used for many years or remains completely unused. Thus, hope remains that concessions will be suspended or cancelled, which does indeed happen.

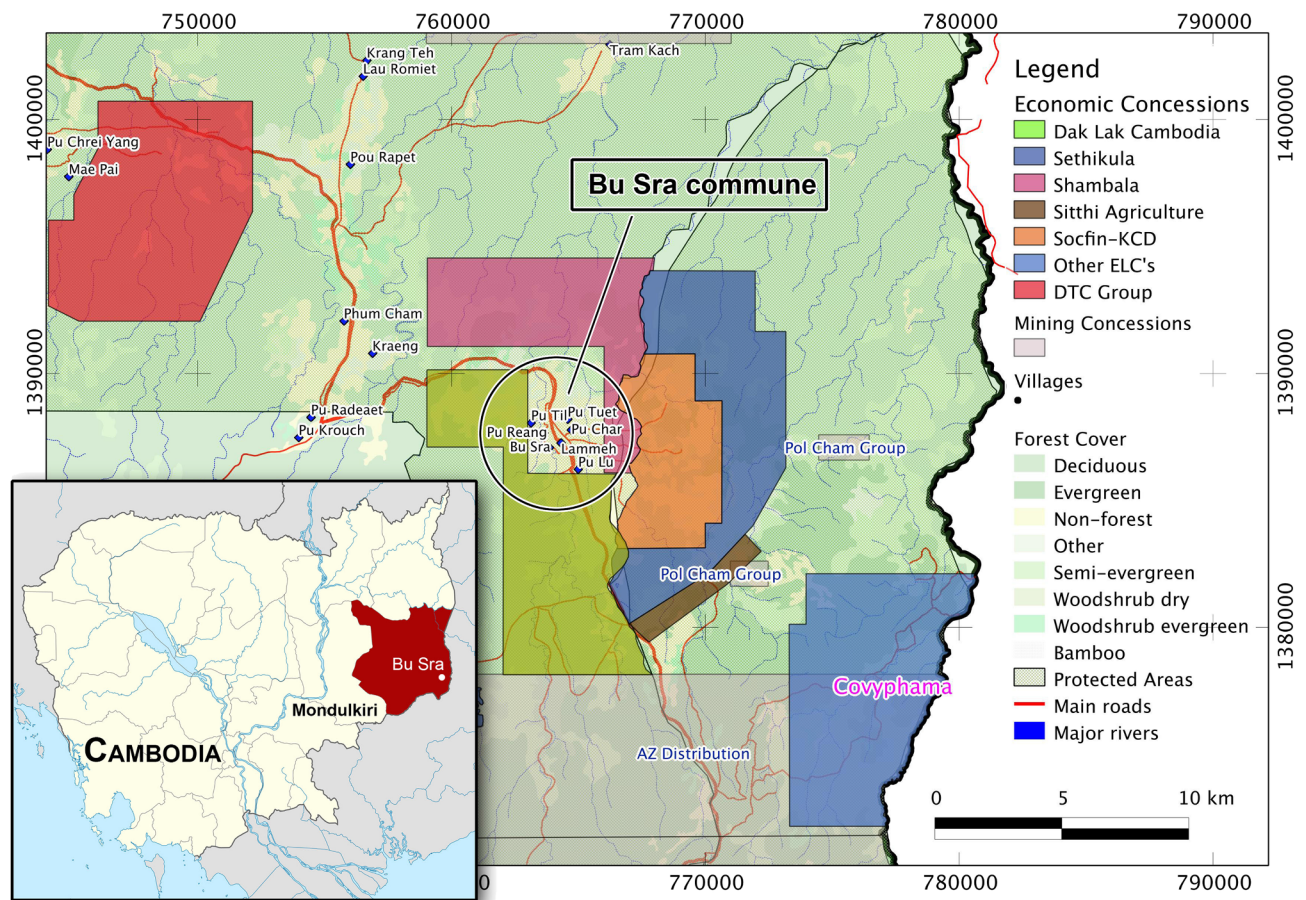


Fig. 1. Dispossession in Bu Sra Commune in Mondul Kiri Province: Bunong villagers are surrounded by various ‘economic land concessions’ granted to three different rubber companies. Source: Forestry Administration, Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning, Construction and Open Development Cambodia (ODC).

between the government, international financial institutions and civil society organizations, the donor-backed Land Law finally provided recognition of indigenous rights to land (Simbolon, 2002). Subsequently, the government would systematically limit the scope of the relevant provisions for the registration of indigenous land, delay its implementation, fail to enforce it, and even violate the legal framework (Milne, 2013, FIDH, 2011).

4.1. Communities and legal entities

As much as the inclusion of land rights of indigenous communities in the formal land law marked a great stride in protecting indigenous peoples’ rights in Cambodia, it was equally “a legitimization of state law hegemony over the indigenous minorities” (Simbolon, 2002:22), allowing government authorities to register communities and thus to decide who is indigenous. In fact, the 2001 Land Law requires the legal construction of an indigenous community acceptable to the state, which is then formally registered as a legal entity. In this section, I explore the two articles of the Land Law,⁶ which are relevant to the questions of what constitutes an indigenous community and which territory a community can legitimately claim. These articles reflect hegemonic notions about indigenous peoples in Cambodia and reveal potential limitations of their recognition.

Article 23 of the Land Law defines an indigenous community as “a group of people that resides in the territory of the Kingdom of Cambodia whose members manifest ethnic, social and cultural and economic unity and

who practice a traditional lifestyle, and who cultivate the lands in their possessions according to customary rules of collective use”. The Land Law depicts indigenous communities as traditionalist, collectivist communities, rather than recognizing them as historically self-determined actors with distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions. Moreover, the definition verifies concerns raised in the 1990s by indigenous rights movements observers: that coupling the rights of indigenous peoples to land and natural resources would be strategically linked to the conservation of these resources. The observers warned that if indigenous groups used the resources to develop and transform their economies and societies, their rights might be disputed (Wilder, 1997, see also Anthias and Radcliffe, 2015, Cattellino, 2010). I will show that this is exactly what happened during the registration process, when the governmental authorities threatened to apply a very strict interpretation of ‘traditional lifestyle’ and to refuse recognition of the supposedly too ‘modern’ Bunong.

Article 23 – and even more the relevant sub-decree⁷ adopted later – reflects public discourse in Cambodia and state authorities’ conceptions of indigenous people as disadvantaged, poor, backward and unable to deal with modernity, as an earlier stage of Khmer civilization rather than culturally distinct people. Based on this view, temporary, provisional protection is desirable to enable integration in the modern, developed mainstream society, while a permanent recognition of the distinctness of indigenous groups is not embraced. Although the Land Law corresponds to international indigenous rights norms in ostensibly recognizing indigenous territorial claims, Cambodia remains at the

⁶ Land Law NS/RKM/0801/14, 20 July 2001, Royal Government of Cambodia 2001.

⁷ Sub-Decree on Procedures of Registration of Land of Indigenous Communities. 83 ANK, BK, Royal Government of Cambodia 2009.

same time committed to consolidate a homogenized nation-state based on undifferentiated citizenship.

Article 25 of the Land Law posed yet another challenge for the people from Bu Sra commune. It states that “lands of indigenous communities are those lands where the said communities have established their residence and where they carry out traditional agriculture” (Article 25a). The stipulation requiring residence and agricultural activities on the land to be titled posed a conundrum to villagers. As will be shown in the next section, their history of place making was much more complex than had been thought of by law-makers, who neglected the impact of Cambodia’s difficult past on indigenous people, namely their displacement in the 1970s and post-conflict relocation in the 1980s.

5. Politics of community

5.1. Bunong social institutions *bu*, *bol* and *bon*: village, descent group and settlement

Bunong commonly introduce themselves by saying where and which descent group they are from. The ‘where’ not only indicates a certain place, but also reveals family and ancestor lineage. Bunong social organization is based on female descent groups, or matrilineal.⁸ Residence in Bunong society is uxorilocal, where married couples ideally live in the wife’s locality, in or very close to the wife’s mother’s house. The female members of a lineage all live in one village (*bu*) together with their husbands from other matrilineal, their married daughters and their unmarried sons. (Upon marriage, the sons move to their wives’ respective villages.) A traditional Bunong village, therefore, roughly corresponds to a descent group (*bol*). The term ‘*bu*’ in place names like Bu Murr, Bu Nam, Bu Gieng, etc., not only refers to ‘village’, but equally to ‘people’ – people from Murr, Nam, Gieng, and so on.

The affiliation to a village determines essential aspects of life ranging from whom one can marry to the kind of territory one gets access to. The right to access village land and forest passes from mothers to their daughters. Until ten years ago, when there was still plenty of land, villagers practiced rotational agriculture on village territory: families cultivated upland rice, maize and vegetables in swidden fields (*mirr*) and then fallowed the fields for up to fifteen years. The fields were perceived to belong to a family both when cultivated and when fallowed. But when asked for permission, a family usually allowed another family to use a fallow field.

With the expansion of rubber plantations and the arrival of settlers, land has become scarce. Bunong swidden cultivators have adapted by shortening the fallow period or changing to permanent agriculture, thereby demonstrating to outsiders their claim to fields, which otherwise would have been overgrown and, for unknowledgeable eyes, look like unused forest (Leemann and Nikles, 2017). People address this recent process towards propertization and privatization of lineage land in statements like the following: “We do rotational farming, we use some parts, and then leave it fallow for some years. And within our village, we can use other people’s fallow land. We share ... we didn’t own the land individually, it all belonged to our village.” The point is that villagers apply two concurrent concepts of land tenure side by side: (1) Land is considered the collective property of a lineage – non-villagers are excluded from its use; and (2) Families can temporarily establish quasi-private tenure for swidden fields – and other villagers need their permission to use the land.

Land and forest surrounding a village is owned by the descent group who lives there. People put meaning in this space and make it their place by turning forest into swidden fields. As already mentioned, the relation between people and place is one of belonging: The place

belongs to the people and people belong to the place. “Here’s my ancestor land, it’s my place of origin (*bri taem*)” and “This place is my place of origin, since the creation of the world. My ancestors are here”, is the way people express their relatedness to their *bri taem*. Land is always understood in conjunction with ancestors and the spirits who are known to live there. An old man from Krang Tes (a village from neighboring district) explained villagers’ relation to the spirits as follows: “In the past [before the rubber plantations came], the spirits of Krang Tes were very famous. Everybody prayed to these spirits and wished for good luck. Whatever they wished, the spirits made it become true. (...) During Pol Pot [Khmer Rouge regime], we wished from these spirits to be safe, and that is why all of us were safe.” Humans share a common history with the ancestors and spirits from their place. Villagers feel deeply connected to their *bri taem* as meaningful places invested with social, cultural and religious activities and imaginings (see also Basso, 1996).

Given the fundamental role of descent groups for important aspects of Bunong life, namely for the strong connection to a *bri taem*, one would expect that the various descent groups were registered as indigenous communities. But this was not the case. Instead, seven settlements, which had formed state administrative units since the 1980s, were registered as communities. Ironically, the making of indigenous communities for the sake of land titling disregarded the notions of those who would be given the right to register as indigenous. In the following section, I will highlight the different layers of Bunong place making in Bu Sra, as these sedimentations remain consequential (Moore, 2005). They contribute to the peculiar selection of current settlements as those socio-spatial entities, which seemed reasonable for non-governmental organizations and state authorities to register as indigenous communities.

5.1.1. Displacement in the 1970s and post-conflict relocation in the 1980s

Until the early 1970s, the various descent groups – 22 in the case of Bu Sra commune – lived on their *bri taem* (see Fig. 2). With the arrival of the Khmer Rouge guerillas in 1971/72, the life of Bunong villagers changed drastically. The great majority was displaced by the Khmer Rouge and forced to live in camps in the Kao Neaek district. A minority of the matrilineal – those living close to the Vietnamese border – could escape to war-torn Vietnam, where they ended up in refugee camps and strategic hamlets established by the Americans for ‘hill tribe’ people fighting the communist forces.

The time of displacement in Kao Neaek and the longing for their home is remembered vividly by elderly Bunong. In the words of the old man from Krang Tes:

“As Pol Pot [Khmer Rouge] forced us to go we did the ceremony for the spirits of Krang Tes ... and asked them to protect us until we would come back safely. ... many people were crying on the way, they did not want to leave their place of origin (*bri taem*). Only me, I did not cry. ... We walked day and night, then we arrived in Koh Neaek. When we were there, we missed our place of origin a lot. Not only us, also the animals missed their place of origin and some animals run back to the village. And the dogs were always screaming, because they missed the village. And we always hoped to come back to our village.”

It took more than ten years before the villagers could return.

“We walked back from Koh Neaek after the liberation. We were free to stay in Koh Neaek if we wanted. Koh Neaek is not a bad place, and some people say that it is an even better place than this one, it is easy to get rice and you easily get fish to eat. But we did not want to stay there, because we wanted to return back to our own place, to our place of origin.”

When the families from the various descent groups returned in the 1980s, state authorities told them to resettle in relative proximity to each other in order to be closer to government facilities and safe from remaining Khmer Rouge guerilla groups (see Fig. 2).

⁸ In a matrilineal descent system, an individual is considered to belong to the same descent group as her or his mother. I use the terms descent group, matriline and lineage synonymously for the purposes of this paper.

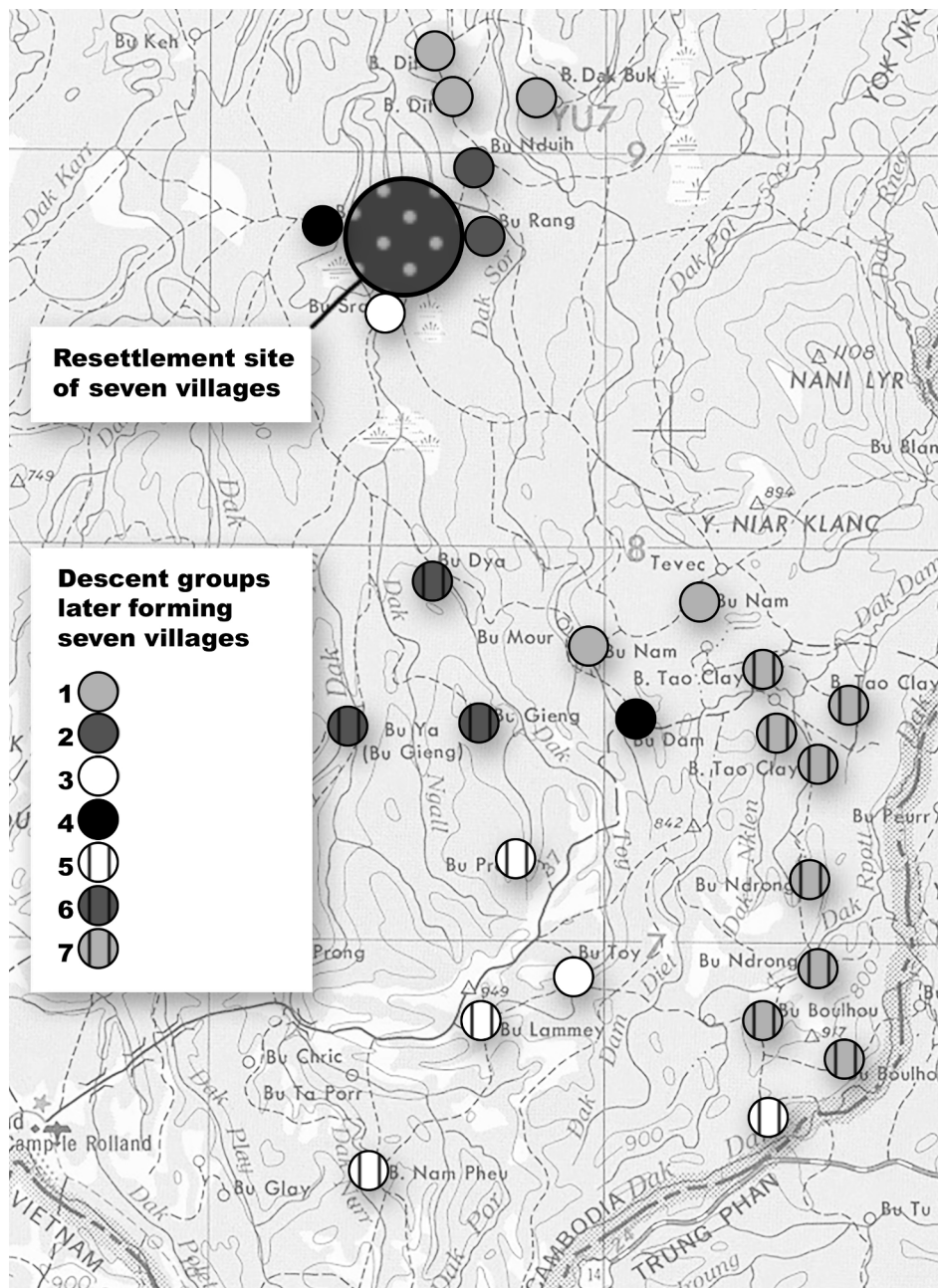


Fig. 2. Post-conflict relocation of descent groups: Before the 1970s, the descent groups lived on their *bri taem*, which were dispersed over a large area (small dots). In the 1980, the descent groups were relocated in seven villages close to each other (large dot). Source: Own data and US Army Map Service, Washington D.C., ND48-16, Series L509, 2nd edition (first printing 1962).

The 22 matrilineal groups of Bu Sra formed a total of seven settlements close to each other. For the Bunong, it was evident that these settlements were not replacing *bol* (descent group) and *bu* (village) as the basic social units. In their thinking, the seven settlements each consisted of several lineages which continued to be fundamental for kinship relations and land tenure. The Bunong referred to the seven new settlements as *bon*, a term that refers to a human settlement, as opposed to *bri* (forest, land in a wider sense). For the Khmer authorities, however, the newly formed settlements were considered villages and became the basic administrative units. From then on, the Cambodian state dealt with the Bunong population in Bu Sra commune through these seven new villages, which were numbered consecutively and named accordingly (Village no. 1, Village no. 2 etc.).

While resettlement left basic Bunong social organization intact, it posed a fundamental challenge in terms of customary land tenure: The

villagers had to figure out a way of organizing access in line with customary tenure to land surrounding the new sites. Only five lineages had already resided in or close to the seven resettlement sites before the war. The *bri taem* of most descent groups were too far away for cultivation. According to customary land tenure, their members were not entitled to use another matrilineal *bri taem* close to the new settlements. The lineages solved the problem by holding so-called 'joining ceremonies',⁹ where matrilineal groups with no land in proximity to the resettlement sites formally joined with a lineage with *bri taem* close by. From then on, members of descent groups who had joined were entitled to ask for permission to use the other lineage's land, but ownership remained unchanged: Each descent group still owned and belonged to its

⁹ 'arr(ang) lab ngong perr ndram teak'

bri taem. The joining ceremony only expanded a use right to members of those lineages who had formally joined, but access was dependent on the permission of the owners of the *bri taem*.

In sum, Bunong from Bu Sra commune had experienced massive changes since the 1970s: years of hardship in camps separated from home and the relocation to resettlement sites upon their return, which could have undermined the fundamental role of the descent groups and the relation of belonging to their *bri taem*. But I argue that people strove to rebuilt their lives and livelihoods without reconfiguring the basic social organization and territorial system, giving them a sense of continuity.

As I show, the different layers of place making in Bu Sra commune, namely the relocation in seven settlements which became basic state administrative units, contributed to the fact that basic Bunong social organization was disregarded during the process of community registration starting in 2009. But the registration of the seven *bon* and the subsequent demarcation of community land was by no means undisputed. Especially older Bunong people strongly favored the descent groups' *bri taem* to be titled, although their voices went unheard during the titling process by fault of government authorities and non-profit organizations alike.

5.2. Governing access and exclusion: state bureaucrats and the registration of indigenous communities

Government officials at province and district levels disapproved the whole idea of indigenous land titling altogether. As the following statement of an official from the provincial Department of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction (MLMUPC) in May 2011 exemplifies, they refused to recognize today's Bunong as indigenous people: "*The Bunong are not indigenous anymore. They dress like Khmer, live like Khmer, drive motorbikes like Khmer, use cellphones like Khmer.*" At the same time, state authorities criticized that the formal recognition of indigeneity would hinder the Bunong to become 'developed'. As a provincial officer from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) expressed in May 2011: "*The Bunong are still very backward, their agricultural system of swidden cultivation is very inefficient and harmful for nature. They should switch from rotational agriculture to permanent agriculture. But they don't want to develop.*" Bunong are thus confronted with what Povinelli (2002) called an 'impossible demand', an aporia, where on the one hand they are accused of "You are becoming (just) another ethnic group" or 'You are becoming a type of ethnic group whose defining difference is the failure to have maintained the traditions that define your difference'" (Povinelli, 2002: 55). On the other hand, the continued existence of traditional swidden agriculture – vital to the proof of indigenous land rights in Cambodia – is considered harmful, backward and in need of modernization.

The government officials disapproved the idea of special indigenous rights to land, claiming that the Bunong should not be entitled to more than 5 ha, just like any other Cambodian rural citizen.¹⁰ In fact, they told the villagers that 5 ha was already too much, as the Bunong anyway would not cultivate more than 2 or 3 ha. Government officials thus found Bunong unworthy for social entitlements to valuable land. As in other cases, indigenous claims are only recognized as long as economic resources are not at stake (Povinelli, 2002). The generally negative stereotypes of Khmer government officials towards the Bunong, their supposed need to develop and conform to 'normal' forms of cultivation, and the prevailing ideal of a nation-state based on undifferentiated citizenship are important to understand the context of the land titling endeavor of non-profit organizations.

¹⁰ An amendment to the Constitution in April 1989 grants usufruct rights to state-owned land of plots less than 5 ha (See Simbolon 2009).

5.3. Non-profit organizations' role in the making of indigenous communities

5.3.1. Axiomatic boundaries and saving what is left

In light of the fast and extensive loss of indigenous peoples' land to large-scale plantations and the unrelenting granting of economic land concessions by the government, non-profit organizations pushed forward indigenous land titling. Because the intricate titling process set up by the government was prone to obstruction (Baird, 2013, Milne, 2013), non-profit organizations assisted communities to overcome administrative hurdles. They focused on speeding up a process susceptible to delay to smooth collaboration with reluctant political and administrative authorities at communal and provincial levels and cope with the technical aspects of the whole process.

"Land registration is the only measure that can help the [indigenous] villagers to keep their land. But it is a very slow process. However, in Bu Sra it is going relatively fast. The MRD (Ministry of Rural Development) signed already for three villages: Village 1, Village 4, Village 7. The MoI (Ministry of Interior) started to evaluate the status of the communities. The MoI request from the villagers to demarcate their land. To do the measurement with the MLMUPC (Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction) is very complicated."

Others were more sensitive toward the labeling of the villages to be registered and used place names. However, they also did not focus on political problems of boundary making and identification of social entities meaningful to the Bunong. Rather, they consented to and perpetuated hegemonic state administrative conceptualizations when they tried to overcome bureaucratic hurdles and speed up the titling process to save remaining land. An officer at the Cambodian Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in June 2011 explained:

"I know that we are late with the land registration process, but we hope to protect the remaining land. First, communities need an IP (Indigenous Peoples) identification, a legal entity registration, approved by the MRD (Ministry of Rural Development). After they can register with the MoI (Ministry of Interior). Then community needs to map the area, get the stamp by the commune and submit it for approval to the MLMUPC (Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction). (...) We managed to get the by-law appraisal for three villages, Pu Lu, Pu Til, Pu Tüet. MoI encourages the IP to mark their land. (...) If communities get the appraisal by the MoI, it means that this is a temporary protection measure. So, local authorities cannot sell the land, they have to listen to the ministries. This means with the registration with the MoI the land is protected and cannot be sold or signed off."

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) coordinated the registration process of communities as so-called legal entities with local NGOs and government authorities. Back in 2007, the organizations involved in community registration in Cambodia had to decide how to proceed with the boundary making. Key to understanding the making of indigenous communities for the sake of land titling was that the national coordinator of the ILO Project 'Promoting Indigenous Peoples' Rights to Land, and Natural Resources in Cambodia' opted for existing settlements to be registered as indigenous communities (personal communication, 2013). The registration of existing villages (settlements) seemed to be a sensible thing to do: It was a unit with a reasonable size, known and recognized by the governmental administration. It may have reflected the social organization of the indigenous population in many settings, but not in Bu Sra commune, where settlements were the result of post-war relocation where different descent groups had been brought together. This challenge is also known from other places (Graeme Brown, personal communication, 2013).

The pragmatic approach to start the titling process with existing villages (settlements) as axiomatic units forestalled the very process of indigenous community formation independent of the Cambodian State.

On the ground, it impacted the dynamic of community formation purely for practical reasons: In order to inform the local population about the communal land titling process, the NGOs called the inhabitants of existing settlements together. Hence, these administrative units – even though they do not reflect indigenous social organizations as in the case of Bu Sra commune’s relocation settlements – were not questioned, but rather perpetuated. The focus of non-profit organizations was not on the question of ‘who is the community’, but rather on mastering the many technical problems that laid ahead and had to be solved as quickly as possible in order to speed and scale up the titling process in the whole country. A ‘one size fits all’ definition was applied, and existing settlements were to become the indigenous communities for the sake of land titling. In fact, ILO in collaboration with various NGOs¹¹ achieved legal recognition of 95 indigenous communities from the Cambodian Government within a relatively short time. In Bu Sra, seven communities received formal identity recognition by the Ministry of Rural Development in 2011 and were registered as legal entities in May 2012, by the Ministry of Interior.

5.4. Frictions between diverse notions of community: practical and theoretical implications

The implications of the creation of an indigenous community fit for registration, which disregarded Bunong social organization, were fully revealed when Villages 1–7 were mapped in 2013. It became clear that organizations and authorities did not intend to map the collective land of registered communities according to Bunong territorial understandings.

As each registered community was made up of several descent groups, the land of each community was composed of several *bri taem* scattered over a vast area between or within the land of other communities, some very far away from the claimants’ settlements (see Fig. 3). However, the official mapping process favored clear boundaries that could be quickly identified and demarcated, with community land close to claimants’ settlements.

5.4.1. Indigenous community and land as generic categories: Saving land by cutting roots

The organizations’ approach can best be characterized as accepting all state procedures’ requirements and limitations to save whatever land is left. The important thing was to protect as much indigenous land as possible within the given legal framework, which meant essentially that the seven communities together would claim all remaining ‘Bunong land’: The individual communities would not necessarily make a claim to their original land, but instead, they would register an area, which stretched out from their current settlement (*bon*) in a certain direction – like a piece of cake seen from the center of the cake (Fig. 4). And as all seven communities would claim a piece, the communities together would claim the whole cake, in effect all remaining indigenous land. The notion of indigenous land as a generic, unspecific, abstract category prevailed. Considerations regarding peoples belonging to a specific place endowed with history, meaning and affection were neglected. Complicated territorial systems rooted in specific places simply had no place.

The local population was undecided about such an approach. Younger people, namely those working closely together with non-profit organizations and therefore familiar with the abstract idea of ‘indigenous land’, were in favor of this approach. An intermediary and local contact person for NGOs in his thirties describes:

“It is better to be united and not separated. The important thing is now to protect our land from being taken by outsiders. It is better to

claim all land together and then, in the future, we can always divide it if we want. Because if we divide it now and follow the villages [descent groups], the people will start to divide. They will say, but Bu Lu has more land now and Bu Sra, Bu Murr and Bu Rang, who lost a lot of land will say, but you have your rice field and your house in our place, and so there will be a lot of internal conflicts. It’s better, we make it like this, every community claims a piece of land for now, and then, when we get the communal land title, people can discuss among themselves and sort things out.”

But many people, especially elders and the older generation in general, were dismayed. For them, claiming not their own but other descent groups’ *bri taem* was inconceivable. Until the titling process, the concept of *bri taem* was the common understanding villagers shared, passed down over generations. However, the older generation’s voice was silenced in the formal meetings. A participant described the dynamic at such a meeting as follows:

“During the meeting, where the land titling was explained, the old people didn’t talk a lot, because of the official people from the NGO and from the [governmental] authorities. It’s been more the young people who talked and discussed, like Chon and Sen [local contact persons for NGOs], those who have knowledge. And then the old people, like N’Gleng [traditional elder], said: ‘Ok, we let the young people make the decision for now, because they have more knowledge, new knowledge.’ But the old forgot that they have knowledge on *bri taem*. They most probably had to respect the young because the young had more knowledge on official matters, on regulatory affairs.”

Local participants had different concepts of community territory. The young people are more knowledgeable of the rhetoric and practices of official meetings; they have more experience in dealing with Khmer staff and are more comfortable with legal procedures. They are more fluent in Khmer and have adopted the juridical language of regulations, whereas these terms and this manner of speaking are foreign to older people. Young people were presumed to have ‘new’ and more valuable knowledge on how territory shall be conceptualized for the purpose of titling and hence protecting indigenous land. Though the meeting aimed at informing and consulting all sectors of Bunong society, the elders felt uncomfortable speaking up, lacking confidence that their knowledge of land was valuable in this context. They felt they could not convince the others, so they seemed to agree with the approach. The young people emerged as spokespersons for all Bunong villagers. The knowledge, experience and opinion of elders was clearly under-represented. From the two competing notions, only one was voiced at the meeting: The idea of a united but abstract Bunong territory. The Bunong notion of *bri taem* was silenced (see Campbell’s (2015) similar observations on community meetings in the Brazilian context). It was agreed at the meeting that claiming other descent groups’ land was a feasible first step to enable the land titling process.

This was the second time where in the course of the land titling process a central Bunong notion was disregarded and replaced by another concept: Besides being newly established as seven indigenous communities, villagers were expected to reconceptualize their connections to territory and land tenure system – or at least formally agree and sort details out informally later. However, discussions among the Bunong continued, and it became apparent that the cake logic was too strange an idea for the majority to put into practice. The concept could not be reconciled with peoples’ common-sense understandings of place and belonging. The notions towards territory, which the younger local contact persons of NGOs presented as good for Bunong society as whole, rather unsuccessfully challenged the ‘old’ ideas: Not enough people could be convinced that the new notions were valid and therefore could not become the new common sense. Still, villagers had consented to adopting the cake logic in official meetings to be embodied in policies and institutions of collective land titling. To resolve the

¹¹ E.g. development and human rights organizations like ADHOC, CLEC, My Village; indigenous peoples rights organizations like CIPO, Highlander Association, ICISO; and conservation organizations like WCS, NTFP, SVC.

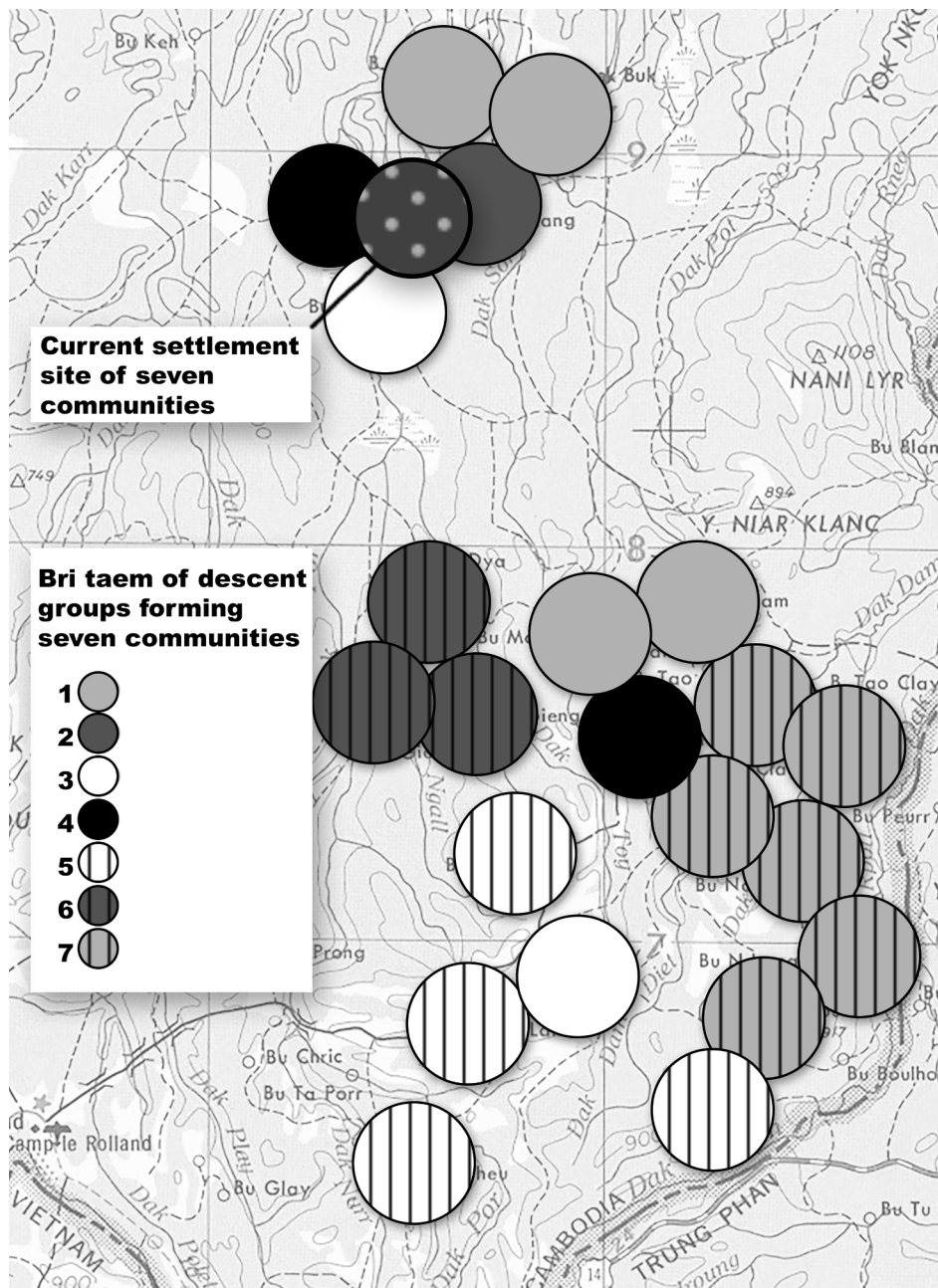


Fig. 3. *Bri taem* of the seven villages registered as communities: Community land composed of several *bri taem* lacks clear boundaries and is not adjacent to current settlement sites. Source: Own data and US Army Map Service, Washington D.C., ND48-16, Series L509, 2nd edition (first printing 1962).

problem of conflicting concepts and commitments, people came up with a plan to make two maps for every community: One would follow the cake logic for the settlement including close surrounding areas. The other map would be the ‘real’ community map according to all the *bri taem* of the descent groups of a community.

It is remarkable that in the case of communities, villagers had adopted the idea of registering settlements (*bon*) instead of descent groups (*bol*), while in the case of territory, the notion of abstract indigenous space could not replace the concept of *bri taem*. Villagers arguably agreed to register settlements because the descent groups forming today’s settlements continue to be the fundamental social units and legitimate owners of *bri taem*. Hence, communities do not replace lineages, but coexist with them. But the cake logic cannot smoothly coexist with *bri taem* because the cake pieces would replace *bri taem*. That is why villagers came up with the idea to follow both concepts and give each its own map.

At preparatory meetings, the organizations and governmental authorities first agreed, or at least seemed to agree, to a two-maps approach. During the next months, villagers set out to make the demarcations between the different *bri taem*. They walked along the borders, discussed and resolved all conflicts and agreed on the boundaries to be mapped. But when it came to official conducting the GPS (Global Positioning System) survey, the organizations and authorities told villagers that they could only make one map and that this had to be according to the cake logic. As one of the villagers involved in the GPS survey in 2013 explained:

“We wanted to follow our idea of two maps. For the community map, we wanted to map the *bri taem* according to the boundaries we had already demarcated and agreed upon among us. But they [non-profit organizations and authorities] said, no, you cannot do that. Just follow the idea [‘cake logic’] and get it done. If you don’t do it

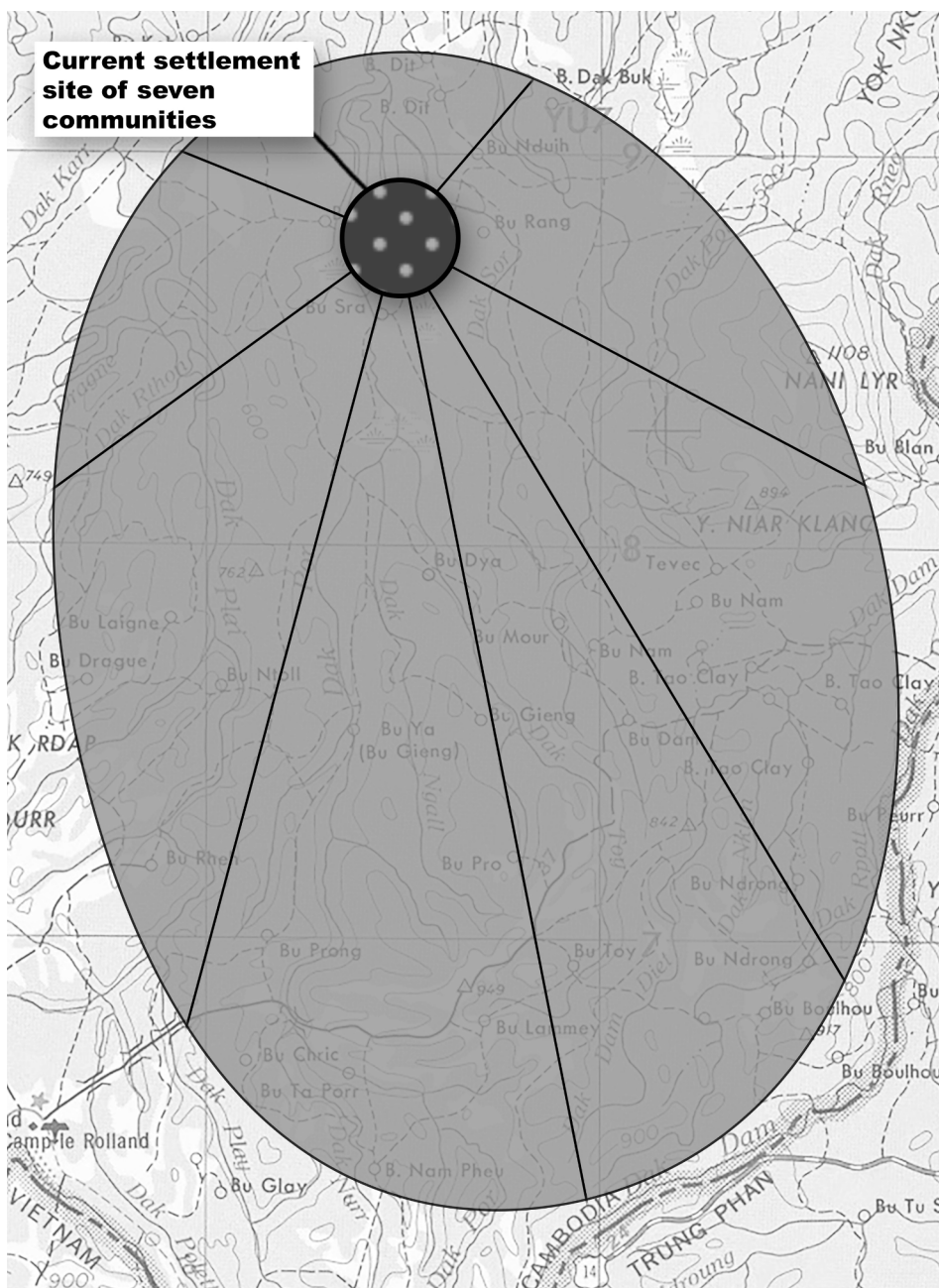


Fig. 4. The 'cake' territorial logic: Unspecific, yet indigenous space stretching out from current settlement sites replaces the notion of *bri team*, of people belonging to a specific place endowed with history, meaning and affection. Source: Own data and US Army Map Service, Washington D.C., ND48-16, Series L509, 2nd edition (first printing 1962).

like that, this will cause problems and it will be more complicated and then the process will be very delayed and then you cannot have the community land. So we went. And they asked us to go and take the GPS points in Nam Lier, and Luk Pran [name of two mountains]. But I didn't agree and I didn't even go near to Nam Lier. Why should I claim Nam Lier? This is not our land. So I just took some GPS points of some fields near the settlement and the cemetery here in the settlement. Then I gave the GPS to him [land management officer] ... because they didn't want us to take the boundaries we had demarcated anyway."

The suggestion that villagers should strategically apply the concept of abstract space to the demarcation of community territory and claim just one 'cake' piece of Bunong land failed miserably. The GPS survey from 2013 resulted in maps that displayed absurd territories not even

close to the suggested cake pieces, but rather random points lacking a coherent area. The maps, however, were never officially presented or handed over to the villagers.¹² They only became aware of the grossly erroneous maps in January 2014, when a community representative informally took photos of the maps in the office of the provincial Department of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction (LMUPC) and showed the pictures to other community representatives and elders.

¹² According to LMUPC, no map can officially be displayed as long as there are conflicting land claims. This is the case in Bu Sra, where land concessions for large-scale plantations have been granted on indigenous land.

5.4.2. Rearticulating sense of place and belonging

When the villagers saw the photos of the maps, they were shocked: “We refuse this map. If this is the community land we get, we don’t want it!” In the discussion, they rearticulated their sense of place and belonging to the *bri taem*, which the territorial logic proposed by government officials, non-profit organizations and young intermediaries had neglected.

One community representative expressed the refusal:

“It is important to have land, I agree. But community land is more than just land, it concerns what is defining us (nau kley), our history. (...) How can it be that people from other descent groups come to govern my place? Not just a small piece of my place but the whole place? As Bunong we know that before you can access other peoples’ land, you must do a proper ceremony, even if you want to use only a small part. But here, it would be the whole place. It makes no sense at all. Moreover, if you govern other peoples’ land, you have a very big responsibility. If you make a mistake, even if it is a small mistake, you will be blamed by the original people that you wouldn’t respect their place. So, no Bunong, nobody would take over the responsibility for another place.”

A descent group’s collective ownership is not only associated with rights but also with obligations characterized by guardianship towards *bri taem*. Elders and other representatives worried that there was too much at stake when formal titleholders are supposed to make claims to territory, organize protests against dispossession, conduct forest patrols and challenge encroachers, when in fact they are not legitimized to do so according to Bunong custom – neither are the customary owners legitimized to do so according to the state. In the face of this dilemma, it was agreed that villagers would ask to get the communal lands mapped once again and that they would rather renounce the whole titling process if their community territories were not the places they belonged to: “If we cannot map our place, our *bri taem*, we don’t want the collective land at all.” By refusing, Bunong representatives not only rejected the official maps and communal land and titles, but also denied the presumed authority of the state and organizations. As Simpson (2014) argues, refusal does not take authority as a given but denies its very legitimacy and insists on alternative rationalities and legitimacies. Representatives and elders insisted on and remade ignored narratives (Simpson, 2014) in an act of self-recognition (Coulthard, 2014).

It would take almost another two years until people from Bu Sra could convince the organizations and government authorities to remake the community maps according to *bri taem*. In November 2016, another attempt to map the collective land of the registered communities seemed likely to fail because government authorities and the NGO in charge of the mapping project still wanted to follow the cake logic. This time, the villagers insisted to either have the *bri taem* mapped or to refuse the maps and renounce their registration as indigenous communities altogether. It took the then-Khmer project leader and authorities one decisive meeting to realize that villagers perfectly understood the collective land titling and mapping procedure, but refused to get a title for land, which was not their *bri taem*. Finally, in 2017, under the guidance of a new project leader, the *bri taem* of the descent groups comprising the communities could be mapped, with a mosaic of several *bri taem* for each community.¹³ The villagers had finally achieved mapping their idea of how community territory should look. The seven community territories now mapped, although based on the *bri taem*, are, however, by no means viewed as seven new *bri taem*. Tellingly, the villagers call the territories “administrative land”. The group of people registered as a community – corresponding to the settlement (*bon*) – cannot lay claim to its administrative land as a whole. Each descent group continues to belong to and safeguard its *bri taem*.

In this encounter of new technologies of government with distinct

territorial practices, elders and community representatives had refused the geographical imaginaries and subjectivities proposed by supporting organizations, young intermediaries and government officials. They had insisted on distinct ontologies and reaffirmed their subjectivities as members of descent groups belonging to a specific *bri taem*. They had contested and resisted the titling scheme until their way of being in the world was co-constituting for what would be titled as community territories (see the introduction to this issue).

At the time of writing, communities still do not have officially approved maps and legal titles, due to further technical and administrative hurdles to overcome. Indigenous land titling schemes across countries have been shown to be ambivalent: They lead to multiple and sometimes unexpected outcomes, including further exclusions and enclosures. In Bu Sra, throughout the titling process, Bunong villagers and large-scale plantations struggled to create realities not (only) on maps, but with everyday practices on the ground. Rubber companies turned large areas of Bunong forests and swidden fields into plantations, attempting to dissolve all prior forms of place making. Bunong villagers contested this new layer of place making and prevented their most important spirit forests from being cut and covered with rubber trees by means of protests and formal complaints. They turned remaining old fallowed swidden fields into permanently cultivated plots, demonstrating ownership to their places to fight off further encroachment, namely from outsiders coming to Bu Sra in search of land (Leemann and Nikles, 2017). While permanent cultivation of fields does not prevent dispossession from companies holding an ELC, the Bunong can at least claim compensation for cultivated fields. These transactions and hence Bunong claims are recorded and might be of use some day.

Creating realities on maps on their terms and insisting on the *bri taem* has implications on protection of land. Although time was lost due to villagers’ refusal of the titling process, the *bri taem* based mapping helps make known where Bunong lands are. It may not protect them from dispossession right now, but it makes Bunong claims more visible. It reinforces indigenous values, meanings and practices of place and belonging and demonstrates that the imaginary of abstract indigenous space is not the only viable spatial unit for protecting villagers’ lands. It legitimizes indigenous community mapping based upon indigenous beliefs of belonging and practices of customary management of land.

6. Conclusions

The recognition of indigenous communities and titling of territories in Cambodia involves the translation of international indigenous rights norms that aim to ensure that rights to self-determination and decisions about territories and resources are respected and in accordance with indigenous cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems. The recognition of communities and titling of territories is highly contested when interrogating the land titling process in Bu Sra, involving competition over the right to define how such communities and territories should look and the evocation of contrasting ontologies. This paper highlighted whose understandings became hegemonic and whose ontologies were marginalized during the making of indigenous territories in Bu Sra. The process as it materialized disregarded Bunong social organization and territorial systems and threatened to disrupt people’s sense of place and belonging.

Against a background of loss of indigenous land to large-scale plantations and government officials’ disapproval of the whole idea of indigenous land titling, non-profit organizations focused on technical and bureaucratic aspects of the titling process rather than on the key political and social question: Who actually forms a group that according to Bunong culture can legitimately lay claim to a certain area of land? Instead, organizations and young intermediaries introduced the concept of community territories as abstract space, to be claimed by seven settlements which had been registered as indigenous communities. In this way, they hoped to protect as much Bunong territory as possible from being granted to non-indigenous large-scale investors and

¹³ The LMUPC has produced these maps but does not display them as long as there are unresolved conflicting land claims.

encroached by settlers. The newly formed indigenous communities could be accommodated in Bunong subjectivities, as they coexist with the basic social organization of *bu* (village) and *bol* (lineage). Instead, the new territorial logic ignored Bunong subjectivities and the complex history of place making in Bu Sra, including displacement and post-conflict relocation. It was detached from meaningful social relations and belonging of the descent groups, who were expected to continue, unofficially, being the ‘original’ and ‘true’ owners. In contrast, especially older Bunong people strongly favored the mapping and titling of the various *bri taem* of the descent groups forming a community. They insisted on previous ontologies and territorial practices where land has a history of place making and belonging and is understood in conjunction with ancestors and spirits. The proposed geographical imaginaries of one large indigenous territory to be claimed by Bunong people indiscriminate from descent groups eventually was refused and villagers reaffirmed their subjectivities as members of certain descent groups belonging to a specific *bri taem*. They had contested and resisted a titling scheme that was denying their way of being in the world and only agreed to community territories where their notions of belonging to land is co-constituting.

Contrary to other examples of indigenous territorialization processes where strategic claims and boundary making are at the fore or where own claims were inflated and expanded over others’ territory (Li, 2000, 2002; Kent, 2008), the claimants from Bu Sra renounced strategic claims towards an indigenous yet abstract space. The majority refused a strategic belonging to a place that it is not theirs but belongs to another Bunong descent group. The various *bri taem* are not reified places either: they are produced in everyday interactions, such as when new fields are cleared, resin is collected, or stories of sacred places are told. The proposed demarcation of community land for the sake of titling failed to match these experienced places. In Bu Sra, the demarcation of territory did not produce strategic indigenous space as was suggested by administrative procedures, Bunong intermediaries, organizations and state officials. The insistence on the *bri taem* as a mapping entity created counterhegemonic values: It denaturalized the idea, presented by the organizations, that the abstract indigenous space is the only viable spatial unit that will safeguard villagers’ land by rearticulating alternative values, meanings and practices of place and belonging.

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