

# Land grabbing, conflict and agrarian-environmental transformations: perspectives from East and Southeast Asia

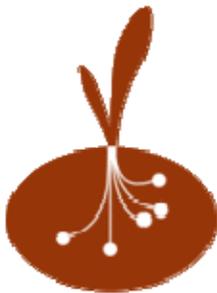
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### Landscapes of control and appropriation: the missing Indigenous woman

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## **Abstract**

A number of dramatic changes have adversely affected Cambodia's indigenous communities over the last decades subverting their social, cultural and resources rich systems, and reshaping women and men's role and status and gender relations. Such changes include, among others, the transition from shifting cultivation towards market oriented production, the increasing inflow of non-indigenous settlers and, more lately, the encroachment over indigenous people's territories by way of Economic Land Concessions (ELC) and individual titling. In July 2012 the Cambodian government issued Directive 01BB which suspended the granting of ELCs, calling for all competent authorities to monitor the implementation of ELCs, in particular with respect to the principle not to affect land belonging to 'indigenous minorities and citizens' way of life. However, through issuing individual land titles to IP community members, the Directive not only has captured their right to communal titling, but has also undermined their traditionally free and open access to natural resources with implications for their livelihood, system of beliefs and social fabric. Based on field work carried out in several communities in Ratanakiri province, this paper analyses the trajectory of land reform and changes in land tenure in Cambodia focusing on the implications of the seizure of land access and control on indigenous groups, gender relations and gender roles. This is not to suggest that gender is the one and only perspective from which changes in land tenure in Ratanakiri should be analyzed. Instead, the aim of the paper is to provide evidence and bring forward gender as one of the variables, which in interaction with other social differences, contribute to shaping these changes. Ultimately the paper aims to make indigenous women visible, re-centering them at the core of the transformations occurring in their societies and of the instances of resistance that such changes have provoked.

## Introduction

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Based on field work carried out in several communities in Ratanakiri province, this paper analyses the trajectory of land reform and changes in land tenure in Cambodia focusing on the implications of the seizure of land access and control on indigenous groups, gender relations and gender roles. This is not to suggest that gender is the one and only perspective from which changes in land tenure in Ratanakiri should be analyzed. Instead, the aim of the paper is to provide evidence and bring forward gender as one of the variables, which in interaction with other social differences, contribute to shaping these changes.

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## Ratanakiri from frontier to crossroad province

Ratanakiri, the furthest northeastern province of Cambodia bordering Vietnam and Lao PDR, is home to the majority of the country's Indigenous People (IP) together with the provinces of Mondulkiri, Kratie, and Strung Treng (Vize and Hornung, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Fuelled by migratory influxes from other provinces, at 4.65 per cent annually, Ratanakiri has registered a high population growth rate going from less than 100,000 people in 1998 to 150,466 in 2008. However, the population density is relatively low at 14 people per sq. km (NIS, 2008).

The indigenous groups found in Ratanakiri share common cultural practices, social organization, systems of beliefs and livelihood practices (Baird, 2006, 2009, n.d.). Though they have adapted over time and cash crops such as cashew nuts introduced, indigenous traditional livelihood has relied mainly on swidden agriculture and forest resources. Most groups still live without running water or grid electricity and rely almost entirely on agriculture for their livelihoods, albeit the use of mobile phones, motorcycles and DVDs has increased connection and exchanges with the outside world.

Since the mid-nineties, with the establishment of peace and transition to an open market economy, the improvement in infrastructure has made this frontier province rich in natural resources more accessible to agricultural investments, particularly rubber (Vize & Hornung 2013, 5). The land rush

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<sup>1</sup> In the country there are 23 indigenous groups scattered over 13 provinces, comprising about 1.34 per cent of the national population (Indigenous People NGO Network, 2010). The populations of Ratanakiri now identified as "indigenous" belongs to a number of distinct ethnic groups: the Brao, with the subgroups Kavet, Lun and Kreung, the Tampuan, and the Kachak all belonging to the Austra-asiatic language family; the Jarai, located along the east side of the province bordering Viet Nam, belonging to the Austronesian language family. Their population account to 96,166 individuals according to the last estimations (Bourdier, 2014).

has brought into the province companies, land speculators, middlemen, cash crops planters and adventures (Maffii, 2009), whereas rubber plantations and gold mining activities have attracted labourers from other provinces (NIS, 2008) at a pace “overwhelming for indigenous people” (Maffii, 2009: 129). Of 98 Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) granted by the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry between 1995-2009, 10 were located in Ratanakiri (Saing et al., 2012: 49–50). As of 2012, the number of ELCs in the province had grown to 22, 18 of which with rubber as the main or sole investment crop (Human Rights Council, 2012: 112–116). Large-scale investments in agriculture which entail clearance of forests upon which IPs depend for hunting and collection non-forest timber products (NTFP) for food and sale can endanger their livelihoods. Furthermore, increasing encroachment over IP areas by way of ELCs and individualization and formalization of land tenure arrangements are putting strains on their system of swidden agriculture by reducing the land available for rotation. ELCs have been awarded in areas where people had legitimate tenure rights and land titles largely issued in areas not affected or earmarked for ELCs (Dwyer, 2013).

In response to rising criticism from civil society and the international community, in May 2012 the government announced a moratorium on ELCs and in July it issued Directive 01BB on the Measures Reinforcing and Increasing the Efficiency of the Management of Economic Land Concessions (LICADHO, 2014). The Directive urged the competent authorities to monitor the implementation of ELCs and ensure compliance with the principle to respect land belonging to ‘indigenous minorities and citizens’ way of life’ (Directive 01BB in Rabe, 2013). Under the Directive, the Prime Minister also launched a land registration and titling campaign, aimed at increasing people’s land tenure security.

Thousands of student volunteers trained in basic cadastral skills went to rural areas to measure the land in conflict between communities, especially IP ones, and companies and issue individual private titles (Rabe, 2013; Woods and Bopha, 2012). In about six months, more than 100,000 private land titles were distributed nationwide (Woods and Bopha, 2012). However, cases of misinformation, lack of transparency and coercion during the process were reported by affected indigenous communities (Rabe, 2013: 6), some of which lost access to communal titling after individual titles were granted.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the stated objectives, the program avoided areas where conflicts were ongoing and where ELCs had been granted on previously occupied land. Furthermore, the directive did not recognize the rights of indigenous communities to a communal land title. As a result indigenous communities were pushed to accept individual land titles, without much time for consultation or consideration. A number of irregularities, and in some cases pressure exerted by local authorities to force communities to accept private land titles, have been documented by researches and evaluations conducted after the process (Oldenburg and Neef, 2014). In response to an increasing number of complaints filed on the grounds of misinformation, at the time of the writing the government was exploring procedures for members of indigenous communities to revert back to communal tenure if they wish to do so (Park, 2015).

Kanat village in Andong Meas District, Ratanakiri Province, is one of the IP villages affected by Directive 01BB. According to the community leader, the volunteers measured almost everybody’s farmland, with the exception of those who were not in the village at the time or whose lands were too

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<sup>2</sup> Article 23 of the Land Law recognizes indigenous communities’ right to continue to manage and use the land according to their customs; Article 26 ratifies their right to collective ownership of land. Sub-decree No. 83 on the Procedures of Registration of Land of Indigenous Communities, issued only in 2009, sets out the procedure for indigenous land titling and registration. Unless registered under a communal title, land used by indigenous communities is generally considered State land, and thus at risk of being given out as ELCs (Cambodia Center for Human Rights, 2013: 13). In the period 2001-2009, before the issuance of Sub-Decree No. 83, more than 610,000 hectares of land were granted to private companies in the form of ELCs (LICADHO, n.d.). As of November 2014, only 8 communities have received a collective land use and ownership right (Müller et al., 2014).

far away to walk to. After only two weeks households received the provisional copy of the land title and about 2 or 3 months later, the original certificate of title. Married couples received joint titles. The amount of land titled – 1-2 hectares on average - differed depending on how much land each household was cultivating at the time of the measurement (Park, 2015).

Because they feared losing land to private investors, almost people thought that they did not have another choice but to accept the title so they agreed in spite of not understanding what the process entailed (Ibid). As of 2013, in the district there were 7 agribusinesses, mostly engaged in rubber, covering a land area of 34,610 hectares (Human Rights Council, 2012: 112–113). The villagers realized only too late that in the process they had lost the opportunity to get a communal land title,<sup>3</sup> as well as access to spirit forest, burial land and communal land for swidden cultivation. The community leader felt they had been misinformed about the process and was planning to get support from NGOs to file a complaint (Park, 2015).

The implementation of Directive 01BB, coupled with the reduced availability of land, has created divisions in Kanat, just like it happened in other villages (Rabe, 2013: 24). Family members have fights over land and do not want to share the land with relatives who have lost land to the company. The number of cross-village disputes due to the unclear borders near the concession has also increased. Likewise, social relations of reciprocity and equality are threatened by the privatization and individualization of access to land and the social stratification created by the titling exercise whereby some households now own more land and some less. Women, youth and the more vulnerable members of the community are likely to be disproportionately affected by these changes, as position and standing within the community will increasingly be linked to factors such literacy, and thus access to information, availability of resources and economic power. To that extent, having a joint title may be of little help to these women who are for the most part illiterate (Park, 2015).

Moreover, new evidence from the IP villages that have obtained the communal land title - a total of 8 since 2003 - shows that the system is inadequate in protecting communities from external threats and land seizures, which cause important breaks into villages' solidarity and cohesion (Pen and Chea, 2015). The process of acquiring the communal land title, filled with technicalities and intricacies, has left behind part of the communities involved who did not grasp fully its complexity or were not sufficiently involved in consultations and discussions. At the same time the 2001 Land Law, while providing the ground for the recognition of indigenous entitlement, has also fixed this right into a rigid frame where indigenous identity and practices are set as immutable facts (Baird, 2013). Not surprisingly the enforcement of such frame is not straightforward in the context of a continuously and rapidly evolving reality where the agricultural and environment landscape is subverted by land alienation and ancestral practices are overthrown by the irruption of the market economy.

## **Agrarian transformations and the indigenous farming system**

The indigenous people living in Ratanakiri have practiced swidden agriculture “as far as their memory can go back in time” (Bourdier, 2014: 9). Land is prepared for cultivation by cutting (not uprooting) and burning trees and bushes to get rid of weeds and seeds; then rice and a great variety of vegetables are planted with the arrival of the first rains (Matras-Troubetzkoy, 1983). After a number of years, determined by the soil and environment conditions, grass and weeds become too difficult to manage and lands are left fallow and cultivations moved to other plots. Swidden agriculture in forest uplands does not simply represent an adapted agricultural practice for IPs: it constitutes their cultural, spatial and ritual environment, from which they derive their community cultural coherence and meaning (Bourdier, 1997). The forest and the natural environment surrounding the villages, including

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<sup>3</sup> The village had already been recognised as a legal entity by the Ministry of Interior.

flora and fauna, is not subjugated once and forever by humans, but represents instead a cultural landscape dominated by powerful spirits with whom communities have to interact with reverence in order to gain the right to use, not own, these resources. Rituals entrenched in the indigenous system of beliefs drive swidden farming and contribute to preserve the natural habitat and create an agricultural system based on a sophisticated knowledge of the forest environment, and which is extremely sustainable, bio-diverse and efficient.

Swidden agriculture has been particularly targeted by policies and development practices aimed at “sedentarising” indigenous farmers all over the world, on account that such practices are not sustainable and detrimental to the environment. However, what makes swidden agriculture not viable is its incompatibility with land commoditization and intensive exploitation of natural resources through logging, plantations, or cash crops (Fox, 2009). In fact, until Ratanakiri was prevalently inhabited by indigenous communities practicing swidden agriculture, the forest cover extended to the entire province, whereas deforestation started with the introduction of non-indigenous practices of natural resources exploitation.

The changes occurred in Ratanakiri during the last decades have impacted severely indigenous people’s farming system and interactions with the environment, as well as the social, cultural and ritual aspects of their life (Bourdier, 2014). The landscape has changed radically and, with the exception of few areas, forests have been replaced by commercial crops and monoculture plantations mainly run by large agribusinesses. The inflow of non-indigenous settlers has nearly doubled the population of the province, which continues to increase, creating the conditions for indigenous people to become a minority in their own territories.

The inflow of non-indigenous settlers within indigenous communities is problematic under many aspects: social practices, cultural values and rules concerning resources management are different and often conflicting. For example indigenous customs establish that it is up to the farmers to protect their cultivations by fencing their fields, while animals are left free to graze. In contrast, Khmer customs leave to animals’ owners the responsibility to control them while fields are left without fences.<sup>4</sup> This can easily create serious conflicts. A number of tasks in indigenous communities are performed collectively. Religious practices entail regulated community participation and respect of taboos. Very often settlers disregard these customary practices. New settlers compete for access to and control of resources such as water, wood for construction, fisheries and wild animals, and have different, often less sustainable practices in exploiting these resources. Khmer farmers are often richer and well connected with authorities and disputes tend to end up in their favor, increasing the sense of marginalization and injustice perceived by indigenous villagers.

Social stability has also been affected. The community leader of Kanat village highlighted that before people from the lowlands started to migrate, they could leave the rice sacks in the huts they have on the rice fields but this is no longer the case because of the increasing number of thefts (Park, 2015). Indigenous women face particular problems in dealing with new comers, as they are at the intersection of ethnic and gender related prejudices, which add up and contribute to weaken their status. Sexual harassment and assaults, until recently not mentioned by indigenous as societal problems, are becoming more frequent as a result of this migratory inflow.

Finally, large areas of forestland have been classified as protected areas (Virachey in the North, Lumphat in the South of the province) and become inaccessible to indigenous communities without prior consultation, while exploitation and destruction operated by loggers and mining companies continues unabated (Baird and Dearden, 2003; Bourdier, 2014).

Forced by land grabbing, land scarcity and the destruction of natural resources, many indigenous communities have shifted partially or entirely from swidden agriculture toward permanent commercial

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon Paderson, 2014, personal communication.

crops (Maffii, 2015). Each community has coped differently with these combined challenges, depending on the extent of threats faced and the strength of the community in dealing with them. In Kanat village, people used to be self-sufficient, combining the cultivation of bananas, corn, chili for their own consumption and cassava and cashew nuts for sale to local and Vietnamese traders, with swidden cultivation of upland rice, collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), fishing and hunting. With the expansion of ELCs, rubber plantations have replaced most forests in the area and the land available to them has decreased dramatically (Park, 2015). Indigenous women, for their prominent role in swidden agriculture as key depositaries of knowledge and skills related to uplands cultivation, have found themselves at core of these changes.

Recent observations from several communities indicate that significant changes have occurred in the division of labour between men and women. According to many women, now men participate much more in cash crop production and share most of the tasks with women compared to some years ago, when cash crops were firstly introduced (Maffii, 2015). This shift may be the result of lack of work opportunities for indigenous men, apart from wage labor on plantations - a work that indigenous people are not willing to perform.<sup>5</sup> Another reason for men to refocus on farming may be the income generated by cash crops, which makes agricultural work competitive vis-à-vis other temporary jobs. Compared to cashew nut, predominant as cash crop in indigenous areas a decade ago, cassava, beans or peanuts are more profitable and allow significant monetary gains. Mechanization may also constitute an appeal for men to engage in farming: machines ownership facilitates the work but also provide prestige and have a symbolic value. Most of the tasks performed by women remain instead labor intensive. Indigenous men seem to maintain a predominant role in marketing products, due to their mobility (motorbikes are widespread and prevalently used by men) and fluency in Khmer language.

The attitude toward monetary income has changed too. Commercial crops represent a renewable source of cash and are seen as an important way to catch up with societal and economic changes. The naivety in handling money that was widespread years ago has now disappeared. The domestic conflicts, which very common in previous years when men rushed to spend money in leisure or goods of scarce utility, are less frequent now. The gains coming from cash crops are now used for investments, machinery, and children's education and less on leisure or goods that do not contribute to farm productivity or family wellbeing. Women and men seem to have reached a consensus on such choices.

*Before it was easy to cheat us, we didn't know the value of land; but now we learned, we have more knowledge and more understanding, and we know better how to handle money. We are a little bit richer now, we can grow cash crops, we have machines to pond rice, to labour fields, we still grow rice, but we plant also cassava, cashew, and soya beans; before it was only rice. We use money to repair or build houses, to buy machines for farming or motorbikes.*

Testimonies gathered in a Jarai village in Oyadao district, 2014

The success of indigenous farmers in growing cash crops, with little inputs and support, low or no infrastructures, scarce marketing experiences or access to networks, can be seen as the result of women's long standing experience and well rooted skills as agriculturalists, together with their efforts and full engagement in such productions.

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<sup>5</sup> Work in rubber plantations is particularly despised for the time constraints and the strict control it entails, and is perceived as unhealthy because of the chemicals usually utilised. This aversion, which is very strong and shared by all communities, goes back the colonial era and Sihanouk regime, when indigenous were displaced and forced to work in rubber plantations.

*Men do not know all what women know about farming, or seeds varieties. We are in charge of the seeds and made decision on what has to be planted.*

Testimonies collected in a Tampouan village in Andong Meas district, 2014

However, this newly found independence and balance are now threatened by the joint effects of the expansion of ELCs and titling which are restricting indigenous people's access to land and resources. Despite the investment in labor, assets and technologies by the communities that are now practicing commercial farming, their resources - primarily land - are not secured. Infringements of communities' boundaries, appropriation of land, including cultivated plots, and large land seizures continue all over the province. The village of Kres, in Poy commune, O'chum district, one of the areas in the province where communities succeeded in protecting large areas of forests, is now threatened by a land concession. While on paper Directive 01BB sought to reduce conflicts and promote tenure security in areas where indigenous minorities are living, by rendering legible frontier areas and traditionally autarchic enclaves of power, the exercise rather suggests the intent to create 'landscapes of control and appropriation' (Scott, 2012: 34 cited in Park, 2015). By defining and restricting the areas under IPs' control and management, the government has de facto made it easier for land concessionaries to legally grab and plunder these territories. Additionally, it has multiplied opportunities for company and state appropriation by casting a lethal spell on IP's system of beliefs, way of living and interacting with nature, and ultimately on their capacity to endure and resist (Park, 2015).

How the ongoing agrarian transformations will reshape, once again, gender relations, it is difficult to foresee. It is well demonstrated that the shift from self-subsistence production to commercial agriculture entails an important loss of status for women farmers (Razavi, 2009). It may become quite difficult for women to maintain control, access and ownership over resources and knowledge as the increasing integration into mainstream society engenders patriarchal norms and prejudices. In the long run indigenous women risk being further marginalized, cut off from decision making processes, expropriated of their knowledge and skills and confined in less valued and more labor-intensive activities.

## **Gender equality and women's role in indigenous communities**

Overall Indigenous groups in Ratanakiri are characterized by a high degree of complementarity of women's and men's roles (Matras-Troubetzkoy, 1983). Traditionally men are predominantly in charge of the heaviest tasks such as cutting trees to prepare swidden plots or building fences around the new farms, as well as hunting deep inside the forest or selecting new forest areas for swidden farms. Other men's tasks include collecting the materials, predominantly bamboo, necessary for the crafting of houses and tools for everyday life, such as back-baskets for transporting goods. Women are in charge of activities that demand continuous work such as taking care of cultivations or collecting products in forests areas not far from the village - all tasks that can be performed while carrying babies or small children. However, many activities require the joint effort of the whole family including burning the plots, sowing and harvesting rice, and it is common to see women and men cooperating and performing these tasks together. In addition, women are the sole responsible for reproductive tasks such as children's care and household's nourishment, which includes provision of water and firewood, food processing and cooking and the preparation of rice wine, which is part of all community rituals. Before the introduction of commercial cloths, women used to grow, process and weave cotton and produce sarongs, blankets and other fabrics. Some of handicrafts were considered extremely valuable,

and accorded to women weavers prestige and status.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, women and men have developed very specific knowledge and skills. Men have a sophisticated knowledge of the forest environment, including soils, vegetables and animal species, and the handicraft work required to ensure households equipment (Baird, 2000). Women have knowledge and skills related to farming, processing or collecting non-timber forest products. Indigenous women can easily manage more than 50 different vegetable species on the same farm; they decide what and where to plant, and are the sole responsible for seeds selection and care (Maffii, 2006). Their knowledge as collectors includes medicinal plants, dying plants, all kind of edible wild vegetables, fruits, roots, and small animals.

*Men clear the forest, burn the trees and make the fence. Women help them, then we sow the rice together, men with the sticks make holes, women follow and put the seeds in the holes. Then women take care of farms. We plant eggplants, chilly, gourds, banana, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, cucumbers, beans, morning glory and kind of spinaches, and many other condiments herbs; we plant fruit trees all along the fence. And rice we plant many different varieties, including sticky rice; more than ten. Rice planting is a job for women; the old women tell to the others what to do, which variety should be planted here and there, and how to divide the field. We keep our fields for two years and then we move. But sometime is one year, sometime more than two, it depends from the quality of the soil and the weeds.*

Testimony collected in a Kreung village in O'chum, 2006

Gender relations within communities rely on this complementarity, which is based on a lowly hierarchical structure where women and men enjoy very similar duties and rights. This is reinforced by the community structure, conceived more as a self-governing entity where decision-making power is shared and exerted through consultation and discussion (Bourdier, 2006). Agricultural work includes a number of tasks that can only be managed collectively strengthening solidarity links and cooperation within and among families. Animist beliefs, which position humans within the natural world as co-host and not as rulers, do not bear misogynist values and women are traditionally depositaries of knowledge and practices crucial for rituals related to the agricultural cycle (Maffii, 2010). Behavioral codes do not target specifically women's behavior or reproduction. Girls enjoy a certain freedom before marriage, which is supposed to allow them to choose the best spouse. Instead marriage is protected by specific customary laws, which strongly discourage spousal abandonment or adultery. Sexual violence is rare and severely sanctioned. While women do not have a clear statutory role among the village elders, they are not excluded from decision-making processes, which would be void without their participation.

*Whatever decision is made we are the ones who will implement it, so we must be involved.  
How they can decide without us?*

Testimonies collected in a Kreung village in O'chum district, 2006

## **Indigenous women in Ratanakiri at the core of changes and challenges**

The changes that have affected indigenous groups in recent years have had a differential impact on women and men's roles, and this has contributed to reshape gender relations and introduce new forms

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<sup>6</sup> Personal communication with indigenous women weavers in Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri, 2006

of gender hierarchies (CARE, 2013; Maffii, 2009). The destruction of the natural habitat, the massive arrival of new commodities, the monetarization of the village economy and the new cultural influences brought in by non-indigenous newcomers contribute to weaken women's status. The complementarity in livelihood activities tends to become more skewed, increasing women's workload while facilitating men's activities. The shift from rotational swidden farms to permanent fields, which occurred in most areas in the province due to land scarcity, reduces men's heavy and risky work of cutting trees and preparing upland farms, but tends to increase the tasks of women, in particular weeding. When upland farms, normally rotated every few years, become permanent and are used for vegetables cultivation, the time women spend on weeding increases substantially due to the unmanageable growth of weeds and the reduced soil fertility. In Laos in a similar context, the work of women has increased by 600% (Chamberlain, 2008). Women's traditional role as food providers and processors tends to increase their work burden and stretch their daily activities over longer hours, as access to land and resources decreases. Traditionally in charge of complementing staple food with vegetables collected in the forest, women have to spend more time and walk longer distance to find NTPFs such as bamboo shoots, rattan shoots, leaves, roots or small animals, as well as firewood.

At the same time, while availability of tools, materials and technologies has reduced men's handicraft work and freed up their time, fewer technologies are made available to facilitate the work of women. As a result women's free time, participation in social life and mobility are reduced. Furthermore, changes in agricultural systems (in particular from swidden to permanent farms) determine women's loss of control over rituals, which contributes to lower their status. The cumulative impact of these changes can be significant, leaving women with an extra burden of "traditional tasks", often performed without the support of tools or machineries, and of engaging in new income generating activities under the pressure to meet daily demand for food and income.

*All work is done by women, and men go around. We have much more work than before, and no help from men! What men do? They drink! Modernity has changed men's work, they do not have to produce tools, or repair the house like before, they have less work to do, they do not go into the forest very much; they do not hunt, cut wood or bamboo like before. Some men want to do business, look for money and want to buy things. I say to my husband: "If you don't like this life, go back to your house, to live with your parents. I don't know why I married you; you are not useful, you do nothing!" But my husband doesn't listen to me. Why men drink more than before? Because now they are angry and also have money! The rich like to drink, and the poor drink all the money they have, and even the money they don't have.*

Testimonies collected in Jarai village in Oyadao District, 2008

Moreover, the cultural model created by the increased contact with non-indigenous settlers, and further strengthened by the more relevant presence of the state power and governance structures, as a result of the decentralization reform, is embedded with strong patriarchal values (CARE, 2013). Men's predominant role in the economic, social and governance spheres contributes to marginalize women, impairing their access to social and cultural life. At the same time their productive role in supporting households' livelihood, which tends to be conceived as an extension of housework, remains invisible, not valued and not resourced. "*Because we are illiterate, we feel inferior*", remarked one woman in Kanat (Park, 2015: 16). Indigenous men have more opportunities, time and means to integrate in the new non-indigenous social and cultural context. Women instead find themselves confined in their villages, limited in the exchanges by their scarce knowledge of the Khmer language, with less time due to their daily work in the farms, surrounded by a new cultural and social patriarchal environment.

*There is a lot of work to do, men do the hard and big work, women help them, like doing the fence, or cutting the branches of the trees, but all the rest of the work is done by women. We do not have rest now, only few days a year, and not time. Before men use to work more, now they have more free time; some of the men drink and are lazy. They have motorbikes and they go to buy things like salt, MSG and sugar in the district town. There is a karaoke in town and some of them spend all the money there. We are angry and we don't know what to do.*

Testimonies collected in Tampouan villages near Banlung, 2006

Outside influences and values tend to pervade indigenous communities and transform the traditional complementarity of gender roles into a more stratified hierarchy.

*... the breaking point of sexual equality is when female and male prestige systems undergo a mutation of meaning. It is when males have access to consumer goods, markets, and class associated symbols, that male honor becomes a more pervasive symbol of power than female honor. The power of possession may make men more powerful than females who become seemingly more illiterate as they fail to acquire the language and symbols of industrialized modernity” (Klein Hutheesing, 1995).*

Coupled with the dismissal of traditional practices, such as those in swidden agriculture where women played important material and symbolic roles, this subverts indigenous gender roles and complementarity and further marginalizes indigenous women.

If indigenous people are often perceived by mainstream societies as “problematic” based on a system of values that relies on income, possession of goods or integration into modern development, when such changes occur, it is the indigenous women who become a *problem in the problem* (Radcliffe, 2013). They are portrayed as backward, lacking education and skills, or victims of violence and discriminated in their own communities. The dichotomy between tradition and modernity merges with gender categories and creates a new subject, the indigenous woman, which becomes the paradigm of what is wrong in “indigeneity”. This is reassuring for indigenous men, who by comparison achieve a higher status in the new cultural and societal scale of modernity. But also, and for the same reasons, for non-indigenous women and men, even if the former are much more discriminated in the mainstream society than indigenous women in their own, and the latter are much more macho and sexist than indigenous men.

## **Indigenous women and land: a narrative of reliance**

Indigenous women have played and continue to play an important role in the process of resistance, adaptation and resilience of their communities. With the dramatic reduction of resources such as land and forests, indigenous communities have reacted by intensifying their farming system and trying to increase the productivity of the land they could still access. The abrupt irruption of the market economy and the commoditization of exchanges have contributed to shifting farming systems from self-subsistence to commercialization, igniting a process of social differentiation and stratification within and among indigenous communities.

The transition to cash crops started years ago, with the introduction of cashew nuts plantations. Indigenous communities utilized cashew plantations strategically to protect territories and swidden farms, while getting the benefits of cash cropping. The advantages of cashew plantations rest in the

relative little labor and investment they require and the stability of the market price of cashew nuts over the years. The cash crops that have been introduced more recently, especially cassava, peanuts and beans, are more labor intensive. Land needs to be worked and prepared for planting; grass and weeds have to be uprooted all along the production cycle. In the case of cassava, harvest and post-harvest processes are also labor intensive (Maffii, 2015). Changes in workload are substantial. Traditional upland farms require intensive but also concentrated efforts, leaving time for leisure and other activities. Cash crops require protracted and often overlapping labor calendars, with tasks often performed under pressure due to time constraints. More time to find wood and wild vegetables is also required due to the rarefaction of forests. Farms are farther away, forcing women to walk hours before reaching their fields. In addition, farms are kept for longer intervals, cutting down the fallow time, which reduces soil fertility and multiplies weed growth and thus labor.

At the beginning of the transition, nearly a decade ago, indigenous women used to complain about their workload and the little support they received from men.

*It is a very hard work with 2 farms because we have to take care of both. We come back so late that sometime it is already dark. Farms are farer now, because there is no land available near the village. In the cashew nuts farms it is possible to plant other vegetables when trees are young, but we must control weeds and grass, and is very hard. When the trees grow and we start to collect the nuts we need to take care too: clean the grass before the harvest, get rid of leaves and branches in the dry season to avoid fires, and of course harvest the nuts. Before some work was men work, but now women do everything.*

*The work of the women is harder, because now with two farms you finish with one and you have to start the other one. Women have adapted and took responsibility for the work, but life is very difficult, we do a lot of work and when I ask my husband to help me he scold me. Husbands want to go out and drink.*

Testimonies collected in Jarai village in Oyadao District, 2006

In those years land speculation in Cambodia reached its peak (Baird, 2014). The price of land skyrocketed all over the country as well as in Ratanakiri. An army of brokers ran through the villages and tried to lure indigenous people into selling their land. The dormant provincial town of Banlung turned into a typical frontier center, attracting all kind of adventurers and predatory businesses, and equipped itself with restaurants, beer parlors and brothels.

The land transactions occurred in a very masculine environment. Deals were set at night, drowned by beers. Brokers targeted specifically indigenous men, based on sexist assumptions about decision making within families and communities which was perceived as essentially dominated by men.<sup>7</sup> Had brokers targeted indigenous women with promises of new schools, health centers, wells and tap water, latrines and other services, they could have been more successful. Instead with only few exceptions, indigenous women stood up against land sales, even when this triggered harsh conflicts within families and communities, and their opposition constituted a significant barrier to the sales. The life style mirrored by the new comers had little to offer to them, except new problems and a gender hierarchy unknown until then.

*We have a lot of conflicts now; some men feel that their wife is old and want to find young*

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that the history of colonization of indigenous peoples is constellated by similar mistakes and prejudices against women: in Maori Aotearoa, the colonisers lacked even the language terms to recognise women chiefs, and they simply ignored them (Smith T., 1999).

*prostitutes, and spend all money with them. When they finish all money they come back, more angry than before and they want to sell land to get more money. How we can sell our land? How we will live without land? Now we have lot of divorces, some wives decided to get away from husband but some still live with their husband who destroy all properties and become violent. The village chief for example has two wives.*

Testimonies collected in Tampouan villages near Banlung, 2006

Another aspect that contributed to foster women's opposition to land sales was the inflow of non-indigenous new comers, which created, among other problems, that of sexual harassment and violence against women. Many episodes have been reported, including a recent attempt of sexual violence on a widow<sup>8</sup> by a Khmer carpenter, who was allowed to settle in the village to help with house building. Risks of sexual assaults also come from plantation workers whose numbers increased exponentially during the last years. According to the community leader of Kanat village, because they (indigenous people) do not want to work on the Vietnamese plantations, companies were forced to bring in laborers from the lowlands and even from Vietnam (Park, 2015).

Women were not alone in this opposition to land sales. Indigenous traditional authorities, the elders' councils, were equally active in discouraging the giving away of land in exchange for money or ephemeral goods - the impact being directly associated with the destruction of communities' identity and unity. Traditional authorities find themselves weakened by land grabbing, which encompasses the annihilation of the cultural landscape of indigenous societies. The inflow of "modernity" as well as non-indigenous settlers, with different values and life styles, rendered traditional practices, knowledge and rituals obsolete and surpassed. Furthermore, the titling exercise conducted under Directive 01BB by individualizing property of land has opened the way to easier transactions whereby individual farmers can be lured into selling (Park, 2015).

## **Mobilization and resistance to land grabbing**

*We are not afraid to die. Our lands are our lives. So we are not afraid to risk our lives to get the land back.*

*If our lands are continuously lost, then there is no hope for the future generations.*

Vouch Lain, Kachak woman, 17 years old (first cited in Park, 2015)

The fate of the villages where land grabbing and land sales took place is sadly very well known, with communities along the majors communications axes, or nearest to the provincial and district towns, more subjected to such events. In many cases communities have fallen apart, experiencing increased internal tensions, disruption of cultural values and rituals, divisions and conflicts. Moreover, for many communities land sales and land grabbing have put at stake the process of acquiring the communal land title, which cannot be completed without the unanimous participation of the whole community that has to be recognized first as an indigenous entity - a very difficult process when new settlers come in with individual property titles. The communities affected by the implementation of Directive 01BB have also lost that opportunity by virtue of being given individual titles to land. As land is commoditized and property individualized, it becomes easier for companies to encroach on indigenous territories - a few people in Kanat were already interested in selling the land (Park, 2015). Conversely, the communities that were more successful in protecting their land and resources, located

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<sup>8</sup> Personal communication during a discussion in a village in O'chum, 2014

in the commune of Poy, in O' chum district, have become a sort of reference for other villages in the province. There the villagers managed the transition toward commercial crops with care, balancing food security deriving from swidden agriculture, with cash crops to generate income. Traditional authorities and rituals remain well alive, even though the young generation has now access to higher education in the provincial town or in the capital and the villages underwent a process of modernization that brought in new services and goods.

Indigenous women have played a key role in mobilization and resistance (Asian Indigenous Women's Network, 2010). They have not only opposed land sales, but have also stood up fiercely against land grabbing and participated in actions and initiatives to reclaim land back or stop companies or individual tycoons from expropriation and encroachment. Among communities there is a strong belief that if women are involved, advocacy and negotiations may have better chances to achieve their aim. There is also the perception that the participation of women acts as a deterrent for companies in land disputes. In fact women's participation in mobilization appears as a natural fact for communities facing threats to their own survival. Communities engage in discussions, consultations and decide what to do, and women take an active role in these initiatives.

In Inn and Kanat villages, both concerned with huge land concessions, women are well aware of facts and issues. In Inn village all participants showed respect for the most outspoken lady and listened attentively while she provided details about the situation and the initiatives undertaken by the community.

*We have tried to stop the company with all the means, also cursing ceremonies! But Vietnamese owners are safe at home!!! We will not stop trying to get our land back! Women stand besides men, we are together, our life depend on land, both women and men know it! Now we hope that the advocacy initiative supported by the NGO can work. It is the only option left, because nobody cares about us.*

Testimony collected in Inn village, Andong Meas, district, 2014

Also in Kanat village women were very talkative and vehement in describing the events and the community's initiatives.

*First we fought with the company, we burned the company compound, then the authorities denounced 3 of our people, but ADHOC [Human Rights NGO] help us to solve the issue. At the border with Malik village 2 guards come threatening us with guns. After that we had other confrontations with the company, we took out the keys of their trucks to stop them. The company promised to distribute some rice to us but finally they gave us only once, then never again. We send a complain letter, we spoke with Radio Free Asia. We think that at this point the PM is informed too. Now we have networked with other villages to cooperate with each other, 17 villages now join for advocacy. We know that the World Bank has funded the investment made by the rubber companies and we will advocate to them to try to stop this plan. We are united; we share money to fund the committee, for people's travels to join meetings etc. Women and men, also young boys and girls, we feel really angry and afraid for our future.*

Testimony collected in Inn village, Andong Meas, district, 2014

At first all villagers in Kanat actively engaged in meetings and protests against the company, including pregnant women, children and teens actively. Pregnant and elderly women were at the forefront of these protests as a strategy to keep the level of violence and reactions from the military

down. However, now they are discouraged by the lack of results and especially on response from the government (Park, 2015).

These are just few recent cases, but indigenous women have participated in land rights claims all along, even if not all episodes have been reported or have left a written trace. A video documentary produced in 2010 in Kong Yuk, a village in Oyadao district, which has experienced an outrageous episode of land grabbing by powerful people, clearly shows the women outspoken, active and determined in getting their land back (Lanctot, 2011).

## Conclusions

Indigenous communities in Ratanakiri have been invested by massive agrarian transformation, alienating them from land and forests, both of which are key for their livelihoods. The pressure exerted by the processes of land privatisation and dispossession, by way of ELCs expansion and titling exercises have undermined IPs' livelihood, social fabric and system of beliefs including a traditional gender equal division of roles and responsibilities. The original structure of indigenous societies, characterised by bilateralism and a high degree of complementarity in the activities of women and men, has been questioned by the introduction of new gender models skewed in favor of men. Indigenous women have reacted to these changes by protecting their land and resources, adapting their activities and often shouldering an increase in workload. Remarkably they have engaged quite rapidly in new productions articulating their skills and knowledge as agriculturalists in the process.

However, the role of indigenous women in farming is still invisible and their expertise not yet fully recognised and supported. The introduction of commercial crops to substitute upland swidden farming has determined an increase in workload and a new gendered division of labour, whereby men are more advantaged by access to machineries, while women are relegated to more labour intensive tasks, with little access to technologies and substantial services, as well as a consequent loss of status within communities. This is happening in spite of the key role that indigenous women have played in the adaptation to cash cropping with their skills in agricultural production and multi-crops management. Indigenous women have played and continue to play an important role in processes of resistance, adaptation and resilience building in their communities. The testimonies collected in this paper show the strong link that ties indigenous women to land and their determination in protecting it.

Indigenous women are at the forefront of mobilization and resistance to land grabbing, for which they are valued and recognized by the communities. Women's participation is considered a prerequisite for engaging successfully in advocacy, mobilization over land rights. It is perhaps too early to tell if indigenous women are gaining voice in the process within and outside their communities, and are finding ways to counteract the changes that undermine their status and their roles. Women's resistance has often included a struggle against patriarchy (Agarwal, 1995). However, in history women's activism has not always translated into an advancement of women's interests (Agarwal, 1994; Molyneux, 1985). Yet in some cases there have been signs that it contributed to a renegotiation of gender relations and power hierarchies (as cited in Park, 2015 Morgan, 2011).

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