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Place Attachment and Community Resistance: Evidence from the Cheay Areng and Lower Sesan 2 Dams in Cambodia

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Introduction

Hydropower in Cambodia is an important means for achieving the government's electrification target of connecting 70 percent of the population to the grid by 2030, reducing electricity costs, and preventing frequent outages. Much of Cambodia's hydropower potential is as of yet unexploited and lies in poor rural areas, which are often inhabited by ethnic minorities. Many of these are increasingly resistant to the government's hydropower plans, finding help for their fight in international and domestic NGOs, media outlets, and domestic activists (Yasuda, 2015; Kirchherr et al., 2017).

Resistance by ethnic minorities and indigenous groups brings to the foreground issues of identity and competing visions of development. The chapter explores these issues drawing on Swyngedouw's concept of hydro-social scales and the literature on place attachment.

The case studies are the conflicts around the planned Cheay Areng dam in Koh Kong Province and the almost completed Lower Sesan 2 dam in Stung Treng Province.

The chapter illustrates how hydropower dam development not only disintegrates a local community's ability to manage their surrounding natural resources, but also highlights how attitudes towards dams and the emergence of resistance are connected to people's identity in relation to place. This is not to say that communities are homogenous. Indeed, community members may agree with the necessity of a hydropower dam and largely support the developmental aims, while others vigorously oppose it. The chapter explores how resistance and identity may be linked and therefore are important aspects to consider for governments when planning dams particularly in areas of ethnic and indigenous communities. It analyses such dynamics by looking at processes and agents of resistance. This resistance can manifest in various ways, ranging from petitions and peaceful demonstrations to, at times, violence.

River Basins as Competing Hydro-Social Scales

River basins are human-made waterscapes reflecting specific political, social and natural relationships at certain points in time (Swyngedouw, 2009, 2014; Molle et al., 2009). These waterscapes are contested as they are populated by a range of actors within and across different geographical scales who use water for different purposes. This produces overlapping hydro-social scales consisting of competing networks of interest (Swyngedouw, 2007).

The construction of hydropower dams is an example of such competing networks as they include national and local governments, multinational corporations and transnationally operating financiers, transnational and domestic NGOs, and local communities. The introduction of such a range of actors restructures existing socio-ecological relationships and actor networks into new hierarchies often to the detriment of local communities, affecting their economic, social and spiritual relationship with the natural environment (Rigg, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2014; Duarte-Abadía et al., 2015).

Areas of hydropower production are therefore laden with meaning for actors with diverse interests. For some, particularly for national and local governments envisaging economic development, but also for companies looking for new investment destinations, they are areas for investment to exploit abundant natural resources and to drag a rural population out of their perceived isolation and poverty. For many communities living in these areas, however, and particularly for indigenous ethnic communities, such areas often embody specific livelihood-cum-religious practices, which are deeply connected to the specific place. This place, it can be argued, is likewise created and imagined.

Such places where resources lie seemingly unproductive and unmobilised have been termed resource frontiers (Lagerqvist, 2013). These are places ‘shaped by flows of capital and contingent socio-economic conditions’ (Woodworth, 2017: 133; Nuttall, 2012). In the course of development interventions, they also see considerable changes in property rights and livelihood practices (Barney, 2009: 146).

Place Attachment and Hydropower Dams

Following Tuan's (1974) seminal study, place attachment has been discussed in diverse and often contested ways. On a most fundamental level place attachment denotes an emotional bond, which attaches groups or individuals to places (Low and Altman, 1992). Proshansky et al. (1983: 2) argued that place identity goes beyond emotional attachments as the term denotes a cognitive structure. Low (1992) meanwhile argues that place attachment goes beyond emotional and cognitive experiences and includes cultural beliefs and practices.

A large body of literature has investigated the relationship between people's place attachment and environmental attitudes (Devine-Wright and Howes, 2010; Fernando and Cooley, 2016). Exploring the relationship between place attachment and local protective environmental action, Devine-Wright (2009) argued that place attachment can generate local resistance against place disruptive projects. This is so because individuals go through stages of psychological responses including becoming aware of the project, interpreting the implications for the place, evaluating whether the change will be positive or negative, coping by considering responses, and finally acting.¹ Whether action will take place in the end, however, depends on a variety of factors, including – but not limited to – the belief in personal political efficacy or the presence of cohesive, stable social networks.

Vorkinn and Riese (2001) found that strong place attachment could produce negative attitudes towards proposed hydropower projects. Similarly, Bonaiuto et al. (1996 cited in

¹ See Brown and Perkins (1992) for a similar framework.

Carrus et al. 2005: 241) showed how local identification prevents negative attitudes towards the environmental conditions of a place where such negative attitudes are held by outsiders. However, a group of insiders might be positively positioned towards a transformative project, also based on their attachment to the place (Twigger-Ross et al., 2003).

The literature on place attachment has therefore problematized the concept of community. For instance, Manzo (2005) pointed out that identity and feelings of belonging to a place are connected to gender, race, ethnicity and class. Indeed, in urban areas the same neighbourhood can have diverse meanings for different social groups (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). Attachment intensity to a specific place thus varies between different groups of people (Wynveen et al., 2011).

Looking specifically at religion and ritual, Mazumdar and Mazumdar (1993) analyze how ritual can connect people to places. Exploring place attachment in the Niobrara National Scenic River in Nebraska, Davenport and Anderson (2005) discovered a ‘web of river meanings’ as different people and groups have different forms of attachment to the river, which can also change over time.

For hydropower, meanings of rivers and spiritual and emotional wellbeing join where dam-induced resettlement threatens local populations holding specific religious beliefs. Problems are not necessarily clear-cut, however. Whether or not the dam presents a positive development is often viewed differently within and between communities, conditioning the

responses to the project (Siciliano et al., 2015). The following cases explore the role of religious and other cultural practices in relation to the surrounding natural environment as well as on communities' perception of their identity and power relationships with dam proponents.

The Cheay Areng dam

If built, the 108 megawatt Cheay Areng dam would be located in the Areng Valley, a biodiversity rich area in the protected Cardamom Mountains. The area is mostly inhabited by ethnic Chong, but also Khmer. The dam would displace 1500 people, most of them Chong who are rotational farmers, fishers, and collect forest products. The project is currently suspended, pending further government decisions.

The project was first taken on by China Southern Power Grid in 2006, who tasked Cambodia's Sawac to conduct an environmental impact assessment (EIA), completed in 2008. While international criticism mounted, China Southern Power Grid withdrew from the project, giving no reasons. In 2010 China Guodian took over but withdrew citing problems with the project's financial viability. In January 2014, Sinohydro acquired the concession (Quinlan and Phak, 2013; Pye, 2014a; Yeophantong, 2014).

Following Sinohydro's engagement, the planning process gained pace, but so did community resistance. On 28 January 2014, Sinohydro signed a contract with construction company Cambodia Lancangjiang. In February 2014 the Ministry of Energy and Mines authorized drilling and geological surveys for the feasibility study. Following this,

representatives from Sinohydro, the Ministry of Energy and Mines and officials from Thma Baing district visited the site to prepare the construction of an access road to bring in heavy machinery (Chhay and Pye, 2014).

Sinohydro then tasked Sawac with the EIA and SBK Research and Development with the resettlement plan. In March 2014, the provincial government informed commune authorities that Sawac would conduct the EIA in the area. In March 2014 SBK Research and Development submitted the resettlement plan for governmental review, following asset surveys that had began in December 2013. Khnhel Bora, SBK's director, Pich Siyun, director of the Koh Kong provincial branch of the Ministry of Energy and Mines, and Tou Savuth, governor of Thma Baing district argued that consultations with local communities had been conducted as part of the resettlement plan (Chhay and Pye, 2014; International Rivers, 2015: 21, 27-28).

Dynamics of Community Resistance

Community resistance to the dam was persistent and strong, although resistance mostly emerged from the Chong community. This was supported by a network of dissident monks organized in the Independent Monks Network for Social Justice, the Cambodian Youth Network, and domestic and international NGOs (Phak and Woodside, 2014; Yeophantong, 2014; Khuon, 2014b).

While protests intensified after Sinohydro's engagement, the project had attracted criticism before. In February 2012, opposition politician Son Chhay wrote to Prime Minister Hun

Sen voicing concerns about the environmental impacts. In a reply, Hun Sen stated that the dam would go ahead and that Sawac's 2008 EIA study had outlined mitigation of all environmental impacts. Further, all 263 families that would lose their land would be compensated fairly (Phnom Penh Post, 2012).

In 2013, the Chong community began to reach out to a wider audience by launching a petition on [www.change.org](https://www.change.org/p/his-excellency-prime-minister-hun-sen-stop-the-construction-of-the-stung-cheay-areng-dam) (<https://www.change.org/p/his-excellency-prime-minister-hun-sen-stop-the-construction-of-the-stung-cheay-areng-dam>). In the same year, a group of dissident monks organized in the Independent Monks Network and led by But Buntenh travelled from Phnom Penh to the dam site to conduct tree ordination ceremonies, watched closely by armed police (Quinlan and Phak, 2013; Phak and Pye, 2014a).

Following Sinohydro's takeover, resistance became more robust. When spotting Sinohydro personnel trying to enter the dam area in March 2014, around 150 Chong villagers – with Ven Vorn of Chumnap village in Thmor Baing district as one of the protest leaders – worked in rotating shifts of 30-40 people over the following three days to block Sinohydro from moving heavy machinery into the dam site to conduct the feasibility study. During the weekend of 15-16 March 2014, Sinohydro personnel who had been surrounded by villagers in a Sinohydro office at the dam site, had to be escorted out of the dam area by military police. Following the incident, the government asked Sinohydro and Sawac to stay out of the dam area until the situation had calmed down (Phak and Pye, 2014a; Phak and Pye, 2014b).

The community managed to maintain the road block until September 2014, when soldiers removed it and replaced it with an army outpost (Peter and Khuon, 2015). This, however, did not result in less resistance. In December 2014 when Sawac representatives attempted to enter the dam site, villagers blocked their access (Pye, 2014b). Confirming the determination of the Chong community, Vana Savoeurn, a villager participating in the blockade, said when the blockade began: ‘We will use tractors, motorbikes and fell ... trees on the road to block them’ (Pye and Phak, 2014).

In response to the resistance, the army created a new 30-solider platoon in Thma Baing district in June 2014 one day before a compensation meeting was to take place between villagers and the government’s dam working group, which consisted of local and national energy officials and Sinohydro representatives. Compensation proposals included ‘new homes for each family on 1,000-square-meter plots, giving them five hectares of farmland each’ but the families rejected the proposals on the grounds that it would flood ancestral lands, sacred forests and burial sites (Khuon, 2014a). In October 2014, SBK stated that the resettlement study was not yet complete as a new relocation site needed to be identified (Pye and Cuddy, 2014).

In February 2015, Hun Sen announced that the current government would not continue with plans for the Cheay Areng dam and that any decision for its eventual construction would be made until after the next national elections, to be held in 2018 (Khan, 2015).

Spiritual and Cultural Issues

The key point of contention from the perspective of the Chong has been their connection to the surrounding natural environment, which provides them with traditional livelihoods and spiritual wellbeing. Indeed, the rejection of the above compensation proposals occurred at least partly due to a neglect of these questions.

Interviewed by the Phnom Penh Post, a young Chong community member named Lucky spoke about the Chong's “connection to their homeland” and the good quality of life’ as the forests and the river provides plenty of food. Yung Pun, a 57-year old Chong member, said she does not ‘want to move. ... We’ll lose our animals, forest ... the house. ... The new site that the government is moving people to is very difficult to live in. It’s a damp forest and has lots of mean wildlife like tigers and elephants, and has no rice fields.’ In addition, Yung Pun pointed out that the new site lacks schools, does not have access to water and fish and is far away from sources of income (Quinlan and Phak, 2013).

Ven Vorn, one of the protest leaders, said that Chong villagers had not been consulted or even officially told about the dam. He argued: ‘We can’t accept to relocate to the new place, because we might get only land to build a house, but not cultivatable land and especially because this is our ancestors’ spirit place’ (Chhay and Pye, 2014). Altars to the spirit forest are used to pray every year for good harvest in the coming season, or if a relative falls sick, or if an animal gets lost. Has Porn, a Chong member, said: ‘If the spirit forest floods, it will be like my own body is drowned.’ Hun Sen, however, argued that there would be no impact on Chong culture and that villagers could find work on the construction site and could work as guides as the area would be developed into an ecotourism

destination. In response, Hoeng Pov, a member of Mother Nature, argued that ‘[i]t’s like they have the money and want to pay us to destroy our homes ... The government can give us jobs, but it can’t pay us for our culture and our forests’ (Peter and Khuon, 2015).

The Lower Sesan 2 Dam

The 400 megawatt Lower Sesan 2 dam was approved by the Council of Ministers in November 2012 following completion of the EIA by Key Consultants Cambodia in October 2008 and completion of the feasibility study by Power Engineering Consulting Joint Stock Company No. 1 (PECC1). Clearing of the reservoir area began in March 2013. The resettlement and compensation plan was published in January 2014. Construction began in February 2014. Production of electricity is planned for 2017.

Originally the dam was a joint venture between Electricity of Vietnam’s (EVN) subsidiary EVN International Joint Stock Company and Cambodia’s Royal Group . Following the withdrawal of EVN as main partner, the project developer is Hydropower Lower Sesan 2, a joint venture between Royal Group and Hydrolancang who together own 90 percent of the stakes. EVN International Joint Stock Company owns the remaining 10 percent (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2013; Khouth et al., 2013).

Lower Sesan 2 is located near the confluence of the Sesan and Srepok rivers, part of the 3S River System. Lower Sesan 2 is projected to have a major detrimental impact on the Tonle Sap, the Mekong Delta, and downstream food security as it will lead to a 9.3 percent drop in fish stocks across the basin (Ziv et al., 2012).

According to the EIA the dam will lead to the resettlement of 4785 villagers into six resettlement sites (Mekong Watch and 3S Rivers Protection Network, 2013). The inhabitants are indigenous and ethnic minorities with livelihoods including farming, fishing, livestock herding, and collecting non-timber forest products. The environmental management plan provides for compensation of US\$127 million for lost assets including rice fields, trees, gardens, houses, and fisheries and stipulates the provision of land for relocation (Grimsditch, 2012: 30). This, however, has turned out to be insufficient.

Dynamics of Community Resistance

As part of the EIA process, Key Consultants held public consultations in February 2008 with people who would be most affected by the project. 85 percent of those attending disagreed with the project and were especially dissatisfied with the compensation and relocation provisions (Grimsditch, 2012: 33; Baird, 2009).

The compensation policy for Lower Sesan 2 changed several times. The original policy was announced by EVN in 2011 (Ham et al., 2013: 52). An improved policy was published by the Cambodian government in 2013, setting out better economic terms and asking people to self-select their resettlement location (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2013; Ham et al., 2013: 52, 55). Still lacking, however, were consideration of the cultural impacts.

The improved offer, however, split Kbal Romeas, one of the villages to be flooded and home to the Pu Nong indigenous community, into three groups: One group accepted the

offer; a second group argued they would accept the offer pending a new EIA and after they receiving the promised compensation; a third group rejected the offer entirely (Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, 2015: 2).

In July 2015, then, people from other villages who already had accepted relocation changed their minds. In a letter to Hydropower Lower Sesan 2 they requested that they be given enough time to store enough food in advance of moving, pointing to problems with the fertility of the new land. Houses were not well built and inadequate to keep cattle, villagers were asked to move in the middle of the farming season, and the relocation of the spirit forests where the ancestral burial grounds are located was still not resolved (May, 2015). In response, representatives from Hydropower Lower Sesan 2, Ith Prang of the Ministry of Energy and Mines, and deputy governor of Stung Treng Dourng Pov pledged to properly relocate the graves, to provide 20 kilograms of rice per person per year (although it was not reported for how many years), to take on responsibility for the maintenance of the houses for four years (a pledge made by Hydropower Lower Sesan 2), and not to use force.

Spiritual and Cultural Issues

The village of Kbal Romeas illustrates well the cultural issues involved in the dispute. Part of the dispute around compensation in Srekor Commune was that compensation documents made no mention of ancestral burial grounds that will be flooded (Kuch, 2014). The community's relationship with their ancestors and guardian spirits of villages, rivers and forests 'form a key part of the community's cultural identity and sense of wellbeing. The local forests contain important sites where local people pray to these spirits, invoking their

help in maintaining the spiritual and physical health of the community’ (Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, 2015: 1-2; Moul and Seng, 2012: 5), and in producing good harvests (Ham et al., 2013: 55).

Economic, social, environmental and spiritual aspects of life are thus intertwined as a basis for wellbeing and play an important role in establishing customary law and social norms (White, 1996: 335-366 and 350-358 cited in Chhim, 2005: 21). For example, ancestral burial grounds ‘are extremely important spiritual sites. The families of the dead frequently pay their respects to the dead in order to attract good luck, and make offerings of food, and burn incense for them. ... It is believed that the ancestors will be angry and curse them with sickness or other problems if they fail to conduct these rituals’ (Ham et al., 2013: 55).

To resolve the issues of the burial sites, village elders proposed to abandon the sites or move them to a new location. In both of these cases, however, ‘spiritual and traditional rituals will have to be performed, and so do the moves of other spirits ... Moreover, in seeking out a new place to live, local people must first ask the spirit of the land guardian (*neakta*) for permission by praying and through rituals’ (Ham et al., 2013: 55).

Traditional beliefs also form part of the inventory of local resistance. In March 2015, villagers from Lao and Pu Nong ethnicities paid tribute to the local deity *neakta krahom kor*, guardian spirit of the river, asking it to protect them from harm and ‘curse the officials and investors behind the dam’ (Aun, 2015). Villagers set up effigies – representing Minister for Mines and Energy Suy Sem, company owner Chip Mong, as well as officials from

Hydrolancang and local authorities – stabbed them with needles and burnt them, ritually killing their live targets. This provoked a reaction from Doung Pov, who argued that the ceremony had violated the rights of the investor (Aun, 2015).

Conclusion

The above cases show that traditional compensation policies in resettlement – typically targeting assets that can be expressed in monetary terms – have limitations when cultural aspects are involved. The Cheay Areng and Lower Sesan 2 dams present several problems for Cambodia’s dam planning. At the core of it are problems of identity. The dam areas are the home of the ethnic and indigenous communities, many of which view the area not only as their ancestral homeland but also as an area of spiritual meaning and wellbeing. Life is therefore deeply connected to a spiritual environment, which faces disruption.

The cases of Cheay Areng and Lower Sesan 2 show that place attachment and the recognition of livelihoods and wellbeing are important factors in dam planning. Ignoring them means to risk significant resistance to projects. Spiritual and cultural factors are also difficult to compensate via traditional compensation mechanisms in resettlement projects and therefore require specific attention if dams are to be built and if they are to benefit not only populations in urban centres but importantly also local communities that otherwise risk losing their livelihoods and cultures.

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