

Violence and the making of land subalternity in Sihanoukville, Cambodia

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Abstract

This article examines the connections between violence and land exclusion in Sihanoukville, a small, though rapidly developing, secondary city in Cambodia. Our work begins with the observation that there have been few cross-sectional and historical analyses of the notion of violence within the study of how land resources are acquired and developed. Our approach is therefore to investigate—over the long term and at different spatial scales—the mechanisms of land violence and the processes of social oppression arising from it. This paper demonstrates that land violence is used in the creation of “land subalternity”, which we define as the systemic oppression of the poorest and most vulnerable inhabitants by using the instruments of invisibilization, criminalization and the constant informalization of their presence in the city.

Keywords: violence, exclusion, displacement, Global South, land

Résumé

Cet article propose d’analyser le rôle de la violence dans le déploiement des logiques d’exclusion foncière à Sihanoukville, une petite ville secondaire cambodgienne en transformation rapide. Partant du constat que la notion de violence a peu fait l’objet d’analyses transversales et historiques dans l’étude des modes d’appropriation et de développement des ressources foncières,

nous étudions, sur le temps long et à différentes échelles spatiales, des mécanismes de violence foncière et des processus d'oppressions sociales qui en découlent. L'article montre finalement que la violence participe plus largement de la fabrique d'une « subalternité foncière » que nous définissons comme une logique d'oppression systémique des citoyens les plus pauvres par leur invisibilisation, leur criminalisation et l'informalisation constante de leurs modes d'occupations de l'espace.

Mots-clés : violence, exclusion, éviction, Sud global, foncier

"As a Khmer saying goes: 'It is not the dog that eats the rice that gets punished, but the dog that lies in the debris.'" (Interview with a resident of Sihanoukville, February 2021)

Introduction

Since the mid-2010s, the city of Sihanoukville in Cambodia, the country's main port and a small seaside resort, has undergone a process of rapid urban development, driven by the construction of new transport infrastructures and logistical zones, casinos (more than 150 new casinos since 2015), as well as the construction of mega real estate projects for tourists. An inevitable result of all of these activities is an increase in rampant land speculation. These territorial changes are notably the product of technical, political and economic cooperation between Cambodia and China, under the Belt and Road Initiative, China's new global foreign policy launched in 2013 by Xi Jinping. For the Cambodian government, over the next decade Sihanoukville and its region are to become the country's second largest economic, logistical and industrial platform, behind the capital Phnom Penh (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2015). This very rapid urban development has led to a concomitant change in the systems of land exchange and valorisation. As the international press frequently highlights, it leads to significant, often violent conflicts over land, of which the first victims are the poorest inhabitants.

The aim of this research is to understand the position and role of violence in the spread of land exclusion mechanisms in Sihanoukville. To quote Fernand Braudel (2013 [1963]), while these land conflicts seem to occur "suddenly," our research demonstrates that they are also among the "slow steps" involved in land relations and in the production of urban territories. Under these

conditions, land tensions arise within different timeframes and scales, and this insight helps us to consider, with heightened clarity, the role of violence in the production of space.

The processes of land exclusion in Cambodia belong to a particular historical trajectory. The genocide and urbicide¹ perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979, the abolition of private ownership between 1975 and 1989, and the very rapid liberalisation of the country's economy in the 1990s, set the scene for particularly conflictual land relations, both in the countryside and in the cities (Blot, 2013; Fauveaud, 2015; Loughlin and Milne, 2021). Thus, the appropriation, monopolisation and exploitation of land resources in Cambodia, and in Southeast Asia in general, coincide with significant "land violence," whether physical (displacements and repression), social (marginalisation of the poorest populations, social exclusion), political (criminalisation and dispossession of legal rights), or economic (dispossession of land and marginalisation).

The aim of this article is therefore to provide a transversal evaluation of the violence associated with land issues. While the notion of violence is widely present in the academic literature on processes of land exclusion in Southeast Asia (Hall, Hirsch et Li, 2011; Harms, 2016) or, more generally, in the Global South (Peluso and Lund, 2011; Zoomers, 2010), apart from one or two exceptions (on Cambodia, see notably Springer, 2015) there are few studies that make it a central component to their analyses. Moreover, studies of violence often rest on fragmented theoretical foundations. They remain very divided between: 1) studies focusing on the role of the state and systems of regulation (notably economic regulation) in the spread of land violence (Hall, 2011; Springer, 2013); 2) politico-economic analyses of the forms of dispossession linked with modes of land privatisation, with capital ownership and accumulation, sometimes as part of a historical analysis of colonial and postcolonial societies (see, for example, Rhoads, 2018); 3) approaches in which violence is seen as a strategy or instrument used in the creation of land monopolies and the repression of social movements (see, for example, Leitner and Sheppard, 2018); 4) more ontological analyses that explore the bodily, emotional and identitarian (e.g. gender) processes that underpin land violence

1. It should be recalled that the Khmer Rouge, when they came to power, emptied Cambodia's cities of their inhabitants and deported them to forced labour camps. The term "urbicide" refers to this attempt to eradicate cities and city-dwellers.

or lie at the root of social movements (see, for example, Brickell, 2014; Schoenberger and Beban, 2018).

Despite the diversity of these approaches, the notion of violence remains primarily associated with processes of land dispossession, and is analysed on a short timescale confined to the specific moment of eviction. In this article, by contrast, we follow Marina Kolovou Kouri *et al.* (2021) in advocating a multidimensional approach to land violence analysed within varied temporal and spatial scales. This kind of transversality seems essential to acquiring an improved understanding of the different forces that contribute to the construction of land violence and exclusion. Indeed, while land conflicts are characterised by different forms of violence, those conflicts are not necessarily the cause of it and are also determined by the social, economic and political conditions that shape them. These forms of violence are thus associated with the different relations of domination that structure social relationships in general (Bourdieu, 2018 [1972]), all while representing a form of oppression *suu generis* that contributes to long-term social inequalities and injustices (Young, 2011).

In this article, therefore, we see how varied forms of violence lend structure to the power relations instantiated in the appropriation and exploitation of land resources, as well as in the regulation of land relations. We demonstrate that this violence acts not only as an instrument of oppression against certain social groups deemed to be “undesirable,” but also that it maintains them in a state of what we call “land subalternity.” Drawing inspiration on the writings of Chakravorty Spivak Gayatri (2005) and Ananya Roy (2011), we define this state as the establishment, over a long period and through violence, of systemic oppression perpetrated against the poorest city-dwellers by constant invisibilization, criminalization and informalization of the ways in which they occupy space. In this sense, land subalternity represents a form of oppression within which violence is one of the central mechanisms.

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville between 2019 and 2021. The research involved significant periods of observation, collection and analysis of official documents, drafting of technical reports, press articles and political speeches, as well as nearly 70 semi-structured interviews (mainly conducted in Khmer, sometimes in Mandarin, and transcribed into English) with inhabitants of Sihanoukville, local territorial representatives, experts and members of criminal groups. In this text, the interviews are coded as follows: “OF” refers to public employees, “EX” to

experts with special knowledge of the subject, "RE" to residents in precarious housing zones, and "F" to members of criminal groups. The number that follows the letter is random and is used to identify the people who responded to the survey; it is followed by the year in which the interview was conducted. Many interviews with local people were group interviews.

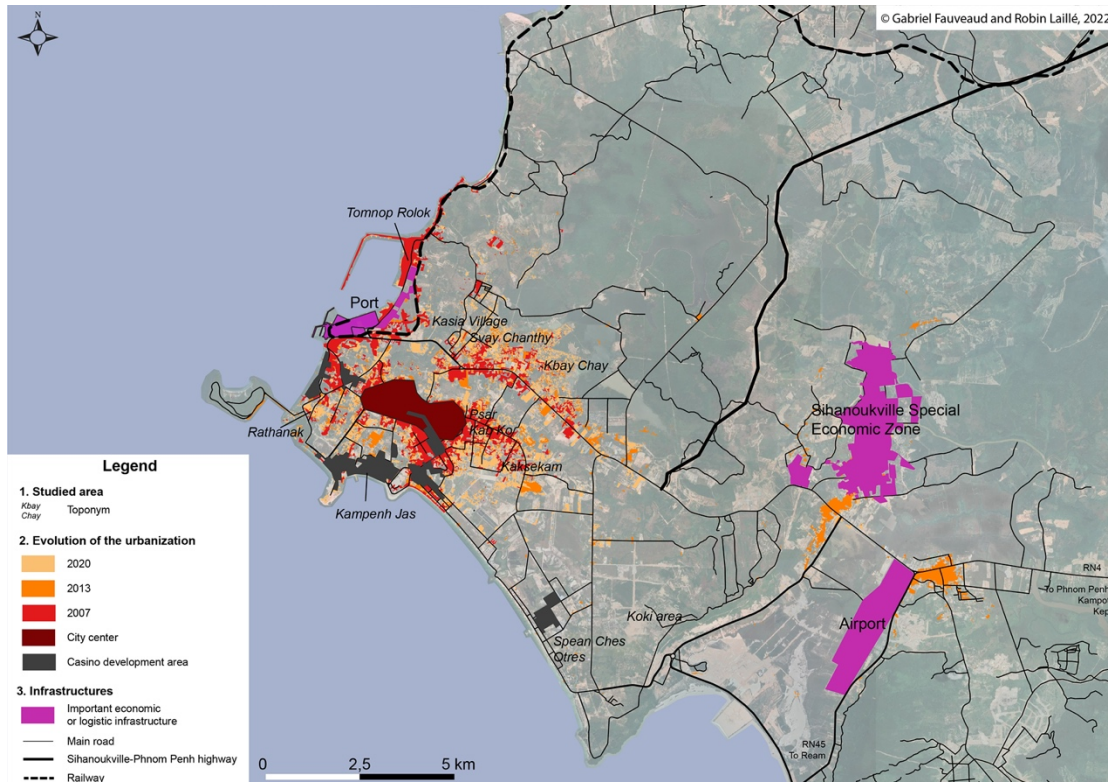


Figure 1: Dynamics of urban development in Sihanouville and survey areas
 Base map: Google Earth (2022 images: TerraMetrics, CNES/Airbus, Maxar Technologies)

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Institutionalisation and normalisation of land exclusion

Stages of land violence: step-by-step reappropriation of land between the 1980s and 2000s

Land exclusion in Sihanouville is a long-term process and is conditional on urban conditions characterised by a high level of social violence, reflecting the development of activities in the city. Like all Cambodia's cities, Sihanouville was emptied of its population in 1975. With the fall of the Khmer Rouge after

the intervention of the Vietnamese army, the repopulation of the city was largely dictated, as in Phnom Penh (see Carrier, 2019), by matters of security. Indeed, the presence of pockets of Khmer Rouge resistance around the city obliged people to move into safe areas within the city and to coastal fishing zones near the city centre (RE10_2021).

Since the reopening of the city in 1979 until into the 1980s, the process of land acquisition has followed four logics. First, between 1979 and the beginning of the 1980s, many inhabitants established spontaneous settlements: “we could take land as much as we wanted to” (RE18_2021). These newcomers assumed that most of the former inhabitants had died under the Khmer Rouge and that their houses were abandoned (RE18_2021; RE20_2021). As a result, people tended to cluster in specific parts of the city, in order to stay close together, sharing land plots in fear of ghosts (RE18_2021; RE20_2021). Subsequently, a number of administrations provided land to their employees and former soldiers without officially certifying the change in ownership. Slowly but surely, these initial settlements generated subsequent arrivals by family members, friends or people from the same village. In many cases, the original plots were divided and rented or exchanged with the newcomers (OF7_2021). Finally, at a time when private property had not yet been reintroduced, a small-scale real estate market gradually developed. It was possible, for example, to buy plots of land for a few grams of gold, jewellery or foreign currency, in particular, Thai baht (RE2_2021). During the 1980s, therefore, the city was slowly repopulated. People’s movements were mainly motivated by administrative activities related to the port, the presence of a few factories, fisheries and the development of the farming sector. The repopulation process gradually densified the downtown area around government offices and a few centres of population along the coast and around the port (OF7_2021).

The arrival of the Australian, Belgian and French contingents of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC)² between 1992 and 1993 stimulated the resumption of hospitality activities and services, including hotels, restaurants and karaoke bars (which were also important centres of prostitution). Beginning in the second half of the 1990s, resort activities grew and the city began to attract a growing number of international tourists and to gradually evolve into a seaside resort. The tourism industry also prompted an acceleration in migrations from the provinces, notably peasants

2. UNTAC was the international transition authority attached to the United Nations responsible for organising the first free elections since the Khmer Rouge takeover.

and poor workers hoping to take advantage of the local economic boom. These new settlements led to the expansion of informal housing areas.

Meanwhile, Sihanoukville also became a centre for illegal activities in Cambodia. The presence of international tourists, the porosity of national borders, as well as corruption combined to create an ideal environment for the growth and development of drug trade and money-laundering. These illegal activities were run by a wide range of often very unsavoury individuals (sometimes wanted criminals in their countries of origin or sought by Interpol), as well as by regional or international mafia groups, in particular Russian and Chinese. Although these factors lie outside the ambit of this article, it is important to note that these conditions exacerbated social violence at a local level from the 1990s to the present day and are partly responsible for the recent flourishing of gambling and international real estate investment sectors (see, in particular, Franceschini, 2020).

The arrival of the UNTAC contingents in 1992 also jumpstarted the real estate market. At the time, land registration was almost non-existent, despite the reintroduction of private land ownership in 1989, and the passing of a first law on land in 1992, which specified the methods of registering land (e.g. surveying, land registry, deeds of transfer). Under the authority of governor Ith Chethola (1998-2003), the dynamics of urban development operated on an ad hoc basis. The provincial authorities, the local regional representatives and the army (which has controlled a significant portion of land since 1979) organised land settlements and transfers to match the comings and goings of individuals, providing—for a fee—“residence agreements” that had no legal value (RE10_2021).

Between the second half of the 1980s and the 2000s, we have observed the ways in which the development of tourism and the acceleration in urban growth led to the expansion of spontaneous housing areas located primarily along the coast, in the outskirts of the city, and on public land. The inhabitants of these areas then repeatedly became victims of land grabs, expulsions and displacements, as well as forced relocation.

Systematisation of land violence against poor residents

From the departure of the Vietnamese army in 1986 and into the 1990s, several relocation operations were conducted by the local authorities. Although the reasons for these actions remain unclear, the aim was essentially to release

land that was considered strategic, such as the coastal areas near downtown (for example, Tomnop Rolok, Rathanak, Kampenh Jas) and the harbour zone, public land or land lying along the railway (OF7_2021; RE31_2021). The people impacted by these removals were shunted between different relocation sites or simply stripped of their land. Some plots set aside for them were located in places where it was impossible to live, such as forest areas 10 miles from the city, without water or electricity (RE10_2021) or exposed to frequent tiger and elephant attacks (OF7_2021). In other cases, the plots set aside for relocation were themselves seized by members of the territorial administration or by the military.

All this often forced the displaced families to return to their original communities. These moves often occurred with the agreement of the local territorial representative and a transfer of money (OF7_2021). Some households, mainly those living in the coastal areas, were therefore exposed to repeated expulsions (RE31_2021). Such experiences became, for a portion of the population, a probable or even certain outcome of settlement: “We bought this land with the knowledge that this land is at high risk for expulsion. We knew this before we bought the land” (RE4_2021). Over the years, therefore, land insecurity and violence became inherent features of the vulnerable social and economic situation experienced by a section of the Sihanoukville population. As a result, they became major determinants of the social condition of the poorest inhabitants.

When Say Hak became governor in 2003, large-scale land violence accelerated. Immediately upon assuming his new position, he annulled the majority of the residence permits issued to poor city-dwellers (RE10_2021). His first official speech was clear: “The police will arrest villagers involved in land disputes.” Say Hak instituted numerous legal proceedings and organised expulsions city-wide. Between 2004 and 2006 alone, almost 1,400 households were violently expelled from their homes (OF5_2021; RE10_2021; RE12_2021; RE13_2021; RE25_2021). Six years after the start of his term, he was removed from his position and openly criticised by Prime Minister Hun Sen, who blamed him for the rise in social protest, which the authorities saw as a threat. Despite this rejection, the Say Hak era legitimised and institutionalised land seizures and expulsions, thereby systematising land violence inflicted on the city’s poorest inhabitants.

The “illegal occupant” as a category of public policy for urban development

The normalisation of private property rights in Cambodia at the turn of the century led, in return, to an increase in the number of land expulsions justified by the increasing criminalisation of inhabitants who lacked formal property titles (Springer, 2013). In Sihanoukville, this dynamic of land exclusion was accentuated by planning policies supported by central government and international development agencies.

From the end of the 1990s, the Cambodian government, with financial aid from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and technical support from international development agencies, initiated a range of infrastructure regeneration projects (concerning roadways, the port, the railway, and construction of a special economic zone). These projects led to the implementation of a strategic development plan by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (Jica) in 2010, which made recommendations for dealing with “poor communities” that had spontaneously settled near the port and the railway, in particular at Tomnop Rolok. For the inhabitants affected by these development projects, with whom we were able to conduct interviews, Jica’s masterplan was initially perceived as promising a renewal of urban development (RE1_2021). That was also the claim made to justify the impacts of the projects (RE1_2021; OF7_2021). Initially well received by the local population, Jica’s plan generated a wave of enthusiasm for Japan at the start of the new millennium. All sorts of individuals started to learn Japanese, young people watched Japanese TV shows, older generations praised the versatility of the young and encouraged them to learn the language and the customs as quickly as possible.

Nonetheless, Jica’s involvement bolstered the repressive public policies pursued against vulnerable populations, despite the commitment to “good social practices” in urban regeneration touted by the organisation.³ The Japanese agency’s masterplan thus used the term “illegal occupants” and specified that “drastic measures” needed to be taken to evict the “illegal communities” living near the harbour zone, because they would endanger activities in that area (Jica and MLMUPC, 2010). Between 1998 and 2011, renovation of the infrastructures led to the eviction and displacement of some 140 families. Some of these inhabitants were relocated to the east of Tomnop Rolok (Kasia village and Svay Chanthy) and to the environmentally protected

3. This was not the first time that Jica had taken part in territorial development projects in Southeast Asia that entailed the forced eviction of populations (see Fauveaud, 2022).

zone of Kbay Chay. In the latter half of the one hundred or so families that were already living there were removed to make place for the newcomers. The promises made by Jica, by the ADB and the government were not kept. No new land was developed and most of the households did not obtain formal ownership, because in the end the local authorities failed to provide property titles as originally promised, and even made threats against those who requested them: "When we asked for that paper, we were accused of being from the opposition party. How would you feel if you got accused like that?" (RE12_2021). For this interviewee, the reality was bitter: "They're all useless" (RE12_2021). Many households we spoke to felt swindled and profoundly betrayed by Jica and the ADB.

This example demonstrates how public policies conducted in partnership with international organisations have contributed to the stigmatisation of subaltern populations. In order to justify their actions, the institutional players implemented public policies that altered the classification of people living in areas coveted for the development of the harbour city's most strategic infrastructures. In speeches and official documentation, these residents were no longer described by the local authorities as "poor." Rather, they became "illegal" occupants, identified by the way they occupied space (housing deemed makeshift) and by their "land occupancy status" (lack of official property title). This reality also serves to reveal how land subalternity is a consequence of public action in which classification forms part of a "population policy" (Desage, Morel Journal and Pala, 2019) that has normalised land violence perpetrated against subaltern groups.

Land violence as the product of multifaceted power relations

Significant land violence against inhabitants

Land subalternity and the social violence that shapes it are also governed by conflicts over land that have developed within precarious neighbourhoods, sometimes over a long period. The successive expulsions of the inhabitants of Kaksekam, a village area occupied since the early 1980s and located on the outskirts of the main city, near the Ministry of Agriculture, is an example of one such case. The inhabitants experienced a first expulsion in 1987, when the government decided to build rice barns around the Ministry. They were relocated in proximity to the Kab Ko market, an area not far from Kaksekam and

near the Ministry of Justice at that time, hence already partially occupied by ministry employees. In 1997, the government announced the creation of a new shopping centre in this zone, which required the displacement of a large proportion of the inhabitants.

Initially, the residents felt relatively unconcerned about the eviction plan. The civil service status of their neighbours delegated by the Ministry of Justice, which were also targets of the resettlement programme, reassured them. One of these civil servants, a judge also impacted by the threat of eviction, decided to take the matter to court in Phnom Penh along with some hundred other residents. The court in the capital dismissed the request for the eviction plan to be cancelled. Instead, it awarded compensation of \$ USD 400 to each family and allocated new land where they could re-settle, in the vicinity of the former village of Kaksekam. However, after the expulsion, only three families received financial compensation and the plots allocated to the inhabitants proved to be very small (6 m × 10 m). In addition, the allocation process was vague. Some people were allowed choose their new plots, while others had them assigned by lottery. This situation stirred up conflicts between the inhabitants themselves, sparking accusations that some were taking advantage of this situation to enrich themselves personally. Moreover, the new plots were not located near the former Ministry of Agriculture, which stood on a hill, but rather on floodplains below. As a result, particularly in the rainy season, the residents were obliged to move around by boat (RE27_2021, RE28_2021). In addition, access to drinking water and electricity was very difficult (RE28_2021). Around half the families left the relocation area in Kaksekam within the first year, and only some 50 families built houses there.

Moreover, the inhabitants realised that the shopping centre responsible for their displacement, and which was still under construction, did not, in fact, cover all the requisitioned plots. Furthermore, some of these plots had been allocated to officials with high-placed friends in the provincial government. They also discovered that the judge who had taken the case to court had ultimately kept his land. They therefore protested, accusing him of having pocketed much of the compensation intended for them and of having been "paid off" by the authorities (RE28_2021). Following these protests, each family was compensated 40 sheets of corrugated iron, enough to build a roof.

In other cases, land violence served the interests of opportunistic inhabitants who took advantage of the criminalisation of impoverished households. In the city centre, for example, a resident with some financial

resources informally occupied a plot of land at Kbay Chhay, near one of the relocation zones for people affected by the railway renovation plan. He then employed workers living there to build his house. The police arrested and jailed these workers, accusing them of building a house on illegally appropriated land, whereas the owner, whom everyone knew, was not bothered. The workers got out of prison after two years, once their family had paid the amount demanded by the local police: "If you cannot pay, you cannot leave" (RE12_2021).

These examples illustrate how land violence arises from complex power relations, in which people receive different treatment according to their social status, the existing balances of power and the assessment of specific situations by local authorities. Under these circumstances, the role of elites and the neo-patrimonial organisation of public institutions are also central determining factors in the emergence of land violence.⁴

Land sharing for the benefit of politico-economic elites

With respect to the city as a whole, land subalternity was also the product of strategies employed by politico-economic elites, who shared land resources among themselves to profit from rising land prices and speculation. The 1997 coup d'état and the re-centring of Cambodia's political forces around the Cambodian People's Party accentuated the grasp on land resources exercised by Cambodian political and economic elites. The Say Hak period epitomises the key role played by the neo-patrimonial organisation of the Cambodian state apparatus in these processes. Although land grabs perpetrated by the politico-economic elites remain obscure because there is rarely documentary proof, their scope was gradually revealed through the expulsions and conflicts they provoked. Beginning in the early 1990s, village chiefs and inhabitants observed how land was held by "powerful Oknhas⁵ who remained silent for a long time" (OF8_2021). We can hypothesise that certain economic and institutional elites were quick to perceive the strategic nature land appropriation in the country's main port city, even at a time when development remained merely embryonic. Moreover, the scale of the army's land holdings in Sihanoukville facilitated the

4. The notion of neo-patrimonialism is understood here as a process of state privatisation in which the institutions and resources of the state are usurped by individuals, clans and families for purposes of personal enrichment.

5. "Oknhas" is the term for individuals who have contributed significantly to the country's development, and on whom the Cambodian government has officially bestowed an honorific title. In everyday language, the term refers to political and economic figures who wield a great deal of power.

transfer of land control from the military elites to the economic or institutional elites, as was the case in many other parts of Cambodia.⁶

The conflicts that emerged in the south-eastern part of the Municipality, in the area of Spean Ches Otres Jas and the Koki zone, illustrate how the territorialisation of land violence was constructed over lengthy periods and at varying spatial scales, through high levels of neo-patrimonialism. This large area of land, consisting of coastal, forested and hilly zones, became home to a growing number of households from the late 1980s onwards. Members of the military and local territorial representatives transferred or sold plots to inhabitants. Among these land recipients, some bought permits from the local authorities to settle in the area, whereas others settled without formal agreement. While there were some expulsions in the late 1980s, new settlements took place in the 1990s, driven to a large extent by evictions in the city centre. Broadly speaking, people settled here with a relative sense of security because of the tacit authorisation of their presence by local territorial representatives and army members.

Between 1992 and 2000, however, numerous plots in the area were transferred to Cambodian political and economic bigwigs both by senior army officers and by the provincial authorities. Very often, the properties transferred in this way, either through leases or title acquisition, were not clearly delimited. Local people primarily discovered the existence of these transactions by word of mouth or from the presence of private guards on the plots, tasked with protecting them against spontaneous settlement. Thus, over time, the nature of landholding in the area became increasingly vague: de facto possession, with little formal certification; public ownership, managed by provincial authorities and the army; certified ownership or holdings (in the case of leases) by political and economic elites.

Expulsions in the city centre prompted further settlements in this area in 2004. However, the rising tourist activity and urban development made this an increasingly desirable place because of its coastal location and the beauty of its landscapes. The government and bigwigs upped the pressure applied to residents by initiating increasing legal action in the courts. A first mass eviction of 95 families took place in 2005, after the governor leased part of the land in Otres to an army general. Fences were built, dividing the fishing village in Otres in two, and preventing access to the sea. In addition, in 2007, 105 families were

6. See in particular the report of 27 June 2018 [Cambodia's Dirty Dozen, A Long History of Rights Abuses by Hun Sen's Generals](#) by Human Rights Watch (accessed on 25 November 2022).

expelled by more than 150 men from the army and police. Houses were burned, along with families' personal belongings (and with them any documents attesting to proof of ownership).⁷ Sporadic expulsions proliferated over the subsequent years, until the displacement of the last families in the fishing village of Otres in 2016, though this did not prevent the resumption of spontaneous repopulation of certain areas a few months later. Indeed, this process was tolerated by the local authorities in order to gain favour with the voters for the 2016 national elections and the 2017 municipal elections. Nonetheless, a large proportion of these families were once again violently expelled in 2019.

While these evictions did not affect all the inhabitants of the Koki-Otres area, those who were evicted were the poorest, the least well-informed and the least well connected with the local authorities (EX1_2019). In sum, for this area, the thirty or so big landowners or leaseholders that we were able to identify by name from the interviews, and the available documentation, include: the country's leading politicians and their children, high-ranking army officers, Cambodia's leading businessmen, ministers or former provincial governors, real estate professionals, people in strategic administrative positions in the provincial administration as well as, more recently, new Cambodian economic and political elites, who successfully enriched themselves over the last decade.

Relationships based on domination and ontological violence

These large-scale land grabs have gone hand-in-hand with the normalisation of day-to-day social violence. This in turn has served to maintain the subaltern position of the inhabitants of informal housing areas relative to powerful landowners:

"When some men came and destroyed our homes, they were hired by powerful or rich people. They told us when they leave, we can pick everything up and rebuild our homes and that he came just because somebody commanded him to do so [...] but for people like us, when you don't earn a lot of money it is very difficult to rebuild your house every six month." (RE14_2021)

In this scenario, land violence takes the form of continuous physical and psychological violence, akin to strategies of "domicide" (Porteous and Smith, 2001). These mechanisms of oppression act as a reminder of the temporary

7. See [Illegal Forced Eviction of 105 Families in Sihanoukville Fact Sheet](#), by the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (accessed on 28 November 2022).

nature of precarious settlements and maintain marginalised populations in a state of constant fear. The kind of everyday violence associated with the property of the powerful is also liable to explode at any moment. For example, in 2018, guards posted on a piece of land belonging to one of the most senior officers in the Cambodian army, launched a violent and unprovoked attack on a motorcyclist riding past the property and threatened to kill a witness to the incident.⁸

This violence can also assume even more extreme forms. In Koki, mentioned in the previous section, the government denied the murder of a villager by the police during an eviction in 2019 and claims that he still alive and merely disabled, despite the evidence of his death provided by the inhabitants and international organisations (EX1_2019). In the end, it was this death of a member of their community that allowed the inhabitants to continue to live there, at least temporarily: “If no one died we wouldn’t be able to live here. [...] He died for our sake” (RE14_2021). In other words, the ultimate horizon of violence, which in this specific case the political authorities chose to deny, can become a decisive factor in the settlement processes of impoverished inhabitants. As the interview extract above demonstrates, they are well aware of this: in order to obtain more stable—though undoubtedly temporary—housing conditions, it is necessary to experience extreme—even sacrificial—violence.

On the one hand, these interactions based on dominance are partially depersonalised and opaque. The government, the powerful and private companies form a single entity that cannot be trusted:

“They are developing something. They all belong to rich people and they don’t have time to talk to us [...]. All I heard was this land belongs to this and that company [...]. Once there was a car from the government. They said that they are from the Ministry of forestry, and we must leave. But the village did not believe them. Most of the time the company tricked us.” (RE14_2021)

On the other hand, the inhabitants are often able to name the owners or government representatives who order the eviction process, as well as the members of their families involved in land grabs. Between the anonymisation of violence and the personification of power, marginalised inhabitants arrive at a social analysis of the processes of domination that goes far beyond land

8. See note 6.

issues alone and demonstrates the role of ontological violence in shaping social inequalities in Cambodia:

“It is the habit of Khmer people. Not being respectful to those who work in inferior positions. They might say that we are not very highly educated [...] and that we are useless. But those who landed on high position in various ministries or departments even though they don’t work much or have much education they still get so much respect.” (OF7_2021)

Land violence exacerbated by booming urban development

Finally, the massive inflow of Chinese capital and the resulting real estate boom, exacerbated long established practices of land violence. In the second half of the 2010s, central plots in the city were bought by private developers to build hotels and casinos. Peri-urban areas, mainly to the east, therefore occupied an increasingly strategic position at the heart of a development corridor for coastal tourism linking Koh Kong, Sihanoukville, Ream, Kampot and Kep. As a result, huge land leases have been granted to private developers for large tourism projects. This rapid urban development has led to sharp growth in provincial, interprovincial and international migration, but also in residential demand. Spontaneous settlement by new inhabitants continues to happen as a result of the growing influx of precarious workers employed in construction and the tourist economy. It is less and less possible for these workers to find a place to live in the city centre, which has become too expensive.

Between July 2017 and December 2020, 1,552 construction permits were issued, while nominal land prices increased by an average of 117% between 2017 and 2020 in the central areas, and by an average of 53% in residential areas around the centre (CBRE, 2020). Between 2015 and 2019, the number of employees registered at the Ministry of Employment rose from 38,000 to 95,000, while the population of Chinese origin grew from 60,000 to 180,000 (F1_2021). Some Cambodian landlords have been creating homes for this growing working population. Precarious buildings are hastily erected, while many rooms in houses are being converted to dormitories. However, supply has not kept pace with demand. Moreover, many Cambodian landlords reserve their rental properties for Chinese workers, because “it’s more profitable.” Some casinos and hotels secure accommodation for their employees by renting entire buildings (OF8_2021). Finally, many Cambodian territorial representatives have taken advantage of this Chinese financial manna by imposing high informal taxes on Chinese tenants (RE3_2021). The combination of these factors is

therefore driving a general rise in residential rents, which have tripled or quadrupled since 2017 (RE11_2021), while the price of business leases has positively exploded, forcing less solid businesses to close or move (RE17_2021). As a result, Sihanoukville is experiencing a growth in income inequalities between people who own land or housing accommodation, and can take advantage of the increase in prices, and those who find it hard to put a roof over their heads or to pay their rent (OF7_2021). Access to housing for those among the most insecure of Cambodia's population is thus becoming increasingly expensive and challenging. This situation forces those with the fewest resources to settle in spontaneous housing zones, especially in the outskirts and protected natural areas (RE14_2021). It can be expected that this pressure in the real estate market, combined with the acceleration in the development of large urban projects, will exacerbate the forms of land violence analysed here, although the COVID-19 pandemic led to a drastic fall in the Chinese presence in Sihanoukville.

Conclusion

In this article, our aim has been to explore how violence influences the processes of exclusion associated with the modes of acquiring and exploiting land resources in Sihanoukville, a fast-changing secondary city in Southeast Asia. To do this, we endeavoured to perform a historical, multi-scalar (from city-level to neighbourhoods or specific locations), inter-category (considering different types of violence) study of the dynamics of land exclusion. By focusing on the violence visited on households occupying land coveted for the development of real estate projects and strategic infrastructures, we demonstrated that the social and spatial injustices experienced by many inhabitants are not the automatic consequence of the "informal" occupation of land, of poverty, or of socio-economic inequalities. They are, in fact, much more likely to be determined by a combination of different forms of violence, a result of multifaceted power relations, planning policies, modes of government and specific economic policies. Thus, violence is not simply an outcome or instrument of the exclusion of impoverished inhabitants: it is a central tenet to the strategies of appropriation, monopolisation and control of land resources implemented both by the state and its representatives, as well as by private land speculators.

In this context, we have revealed that violence is constructed across multiple overlapping timeframes, both over the long term and in the day-to-

day. This connection, between land violence and exclusion timelines, determines the construction and exercise of the mechanisms of oppression experienced by impoverished populations. Working together, these mechanisms are central to the formation of what we have called “land subalternity,” which we define as an urban condition common to the poorest inhabitants, within which they are victims of sustained and multifaceted land violence. This long-term perspective established the outlines of a “history of land violence” that we believe must be incorporated into analyses that explore contemporary processes of land exclusion.

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