CHAPTER III

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMETN IN NORTHEASTERN CAMBODIA

This chapter reviews the historical profile of highland development projects in Northeastern Cambodia, implemented during the French colonization period until 2003. This chapter explains how each regime influenced ethnic politics, the socio-economic context in the ethnic minority communities, and natural resource management. I progressively discuss the representations of ethnic minority peoples, the ways the government has constructed representations and attempted to assimilate ethnic minorities into mainstream society. I also address the transformation of ethnic minority communities in terms of these changes to natural resource management systems. Finally, I turn to the development programs of ethnic minority communities the 1990s, and the ways the government has increasingly excluded them from management of or access to local natural resources.

3.1 Images of Ethnic Minorities

Northeastern Cambodia is comprised of the four provinces of Kratie, Mondolkiri, Stung Treng and Ratanakiri. These provinces are home to 17 ethnic minority groups, with some groups widely spread through the region (Table 3.1).

All ethnic minority groups in Northeastern Cambodia except the Jarai are classified as Proto-Indochinese. They speak the Austroasiatic language of the Western Bahnaric branch of Mon-Khmer. Jarai people are considered a Malayo-Polynesian sub-group of the Chamic. These ethnic minorities do not have a written script, traditional education systems and experiences are transferred to younger generations through story telling, songs, and other cultural practices. Thus, learning proceeds through observation and practice (White 1996).

Table 3.1: Ethnic Minority Groups in the Northeastern Provinces

Kratie		**Mondulkiri**		**Stung Treng**		**Ratanakiri**	
Phnong	8,306	Phnong	20,163	Phnong	N/A	Phnong	121
Kroal	2,389	Brao	4	Brao	N/A	Brao	8,051
Kuy	5,216	Jarai	564	Jarai	N/A	Jarai	15,794
Knoung	544	Tampuan	145	Tampuan	N/A	Tampuan	23,765
Mel	2,496	Kreung	33	Kreung	N/A	Kreung	16,052
Stieng	3,31	Kroal	557	Kachok	N/A	Kachok	2,645
Thmaun	669	Rhade	156	Kavet	N/A	Kavet	1,893
		Roong	253	Lun	N/A	Lun	136
		Stieng	665	Kleung	N/A		
		Thmaun	152	Kuy	N/A		
Total	22,931		22,692		N/A		68,457

Sources: Kent Helmers and Pia Vallgren (2002:5-6), and the Department of Culture Mondolkiri 2003

During the Prince Norodom Sihanouk era in the 1960s, changing political and socio-economic factors (see Section 3.3) led some small ethnic minority groups to join larger ethnic groups. The Brao and Kavet who lived in Taveng and Veunsai Districts, for example, have effectively adopted cultural identity of the Kreung in order to gain more socio-economic security that might be offered by a bigger ethnic group with greater power in the area (Mastra-Troubetzkoy 1983 cited Ironside et al. 2003). Historically, the Brao sub-group lived in areas dominated by various species of bamboo, called '*Bree Pharv Brao*' (Brao bamboo forest) in the mountainous areas near the Lao border. In terms of spatial arrangements of community, the Kavet lived in small traditional nuclear family units spread far from each other, while the Brao lived together in large groups. The Lun in Ratanakiri and Stung Treng consider themselves a sub-group of the Brao that has historically lived adjacent to the confluence of rivers in lowland areas. During the Cambodian civil war in the 1970s, many Brao and Kavet families escaped to Laos and Vietnam, with the remaining Brao and Kavet population joining the Kreung (Bird et al., 1996, Ironside et al., 2003).

Ethnic minorities in Cambodia are generally referred to by various terms, such as, hill tribes, highlanders, ethnic minorities, *Khmer Leu*, indigenous peoples and

Phnong. In general, 'Phnong' is the name of one ethnic minority group, but the term 'Phnong' in the Cambodian context also means to *Choncheat Phiek Tech* (ethnic minority peoples). The use of the term Phnong implies that the ethnic minority groups are wild, savage, uncivilized and ignorant (Aymonier 1895 cited in Ironside et al., 2003). This is similar to the situation for ethnic minority groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, whom the Vietnamese call 'Moi', and the French originally referred to as 'sauvages'. After the Second World War, these ethnic minority groups were called 'Montagnards' (Salemink 2003, Bourdier 1997:2). In the case of Thailand, ethnic minorities have often been categorized as 'hill tribes', (*chao khao*), jungle people (*chao pa*), uncivilized and non-Thai. In particular, in the case of the Karen, they have a long historical relationship with the dominant Thai. Through such classification as 'hill tribe', the state attempted to construct an image of the Karen as 'benign', 'docile' and 'idle'. However, in the late nineteenth century, the Karen had been referred to as 'guardians of the frontiers' when the modern concept of borders was introduced by the state of Siam (Pinkaew 2003:22).

In the case of Cambodia, the Kreung are referred to as *Phnong Kantuy Svar* (Phnong with the tail of a monkey). This term originates from the way Kreung men use loincloth with a short piece of cloth hanging behind, after tucking it in (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Kreung Elder Wearing a Traditional Loincloth

Source: CIDSE, Ratanakiri 2003

In contrast, the Kreung people identify themselves as 'forest and mountain people', which refers to their myth of origin. A Kreung elder narrated during his break from weeding in the cashew farm that:

> After Angkor was built in the 13th century, the Khmer and the Kreung went to pray at Angkor temple. While the Khmer took chicken blood to offer the deity, the Kreung took dust to spread over the holy stone. Then the deity was angry, which caused the Kreung to have only forest, land and mountain. Thus, Kreung are associated with the mountains, forests, wild animals and shifting cultivation.
>
> (A Kreung Elder in Yak Kaol community, December 25, 2003)

In addition, elders in Krola explained that their wider community was founded by a traditional leader named Yak Kaol:

> During the war in the older times, the Yak Kaol and his ten children escaped from the enemy and along the way seven of his children died. At that time, Yak Kaol also had several cattle. The journey reached upland areas, which is known as the Yak Kaol community these days. Yak Kaol rested for a time and looked for a pasture area for his cattle to graze. Days later, Yak Kaol found an area with a wealth of streams, forests and mountains where his cattle could graze, as well as plenty of wild fruit and plants. Thus the Yak Kaol family decided to settle down and stay in this area forever.
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> (An elder in Krola in the Yak Kaol community, December 25, 2003)

In the nineteenth century, Cambodian borders were threatened by neighboring countries, and many ethnic minority communities, mainly the Kreung, Tampuon and Brao, come to be known as the 'guardians of remote frontiers' (Colm 1996). Later, all ethnic minority groups in Northeastern Cambodia came to be referred to as *Choncheat*, in the 1960s. In the 1990s, ethnic minorities were called 'highland compatriots' in statements made by His Majesty the King (see Section 6.3). However, ethnic minority peoples generally prefer to call themselves Khmer Leu, as they feel that this term represents the adoption of a modern lifestyle and Khmerization, and acceptance into mainstream society. In the same decade, NGOs and international organizations (IOs) working in Northeastern Cambodia have classified ethnic minority groups 'Indigenous People'. This term appears prominently in documents of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank and International Labor Organization (ILO). Considering this diversity, then, the terms referring to ethnic minority peoples or indigenous peoples have various meanings for different groups and people (see Dareth 1996, IMC1 Policy 1997, White 1995, Bourdier 1996, Ironside et al., 2003, and ADB 1999). Even if the various

[1] Inter-Ministerial Committee for Ethnic Minority Development Program

terminologies hold different meanings, ethnic minority people possess the same rights as other Cambodian citizens. Yet Bourdier (1996) argues that ethnic minorities should be recognized with a special status of citizenship, and acknowledged as long term inhabitants of historically-occupied who have developed specific cultural values, knowledge, identity and livelihoods association with their local environments and landscapes.

3.2 The French Period (1863-1953): Influence on Highland Development Policy

Ethnic minority peoples in Northeastern Cambodia have long had contact with the Khmer and Cham empires, which were active in highland areas during the early eleventh century. This activity was largely due to the fact that Northeastern Cambodia has very important rivers, such as, the Sesan and Srepok, which connect to the Mekong River and act as the waterways for trade and communication between the ethnic minority communities and other provinces of Cambodia.

Trade developed in forest goods, such as, ivory, hides, feathers, wood, wild species and herbs. These goods were exchanged for salt, metal, tobacco, ceramic wine jars and bronze gongs by traders from the lowlands and Central Highlands of Vietnam. In addition, the increasing demands for these goods may have necessitated a collaborative trading relationship with local forest-dwelling villagers, their expertise being sought after for the successful gathering of these resources. There are also instances of slaves traded within these areas (Chayan et al., 1997:4, White 1995:86).

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, territorial expansion by the Vietnamese from the East and Lao from the North had pushed back Cham and Khmer settlements from Stung Treng to the central regions of Cambodia. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as Siamese conquered parts of Northern Cambodia and Southern Laos, ethnic minority communities were taxed heavily in gold by their new rulers and the slave trade thrived. Ethnic minority groups responded with several small uprisings, most of which were unsuccessful. In 1849, the French established the Kontum Mission across the Sesan and Srepok basins and pushed the Siamese back, to West of the Mekong River. In 1863, King Norodom (the grandfather of the present King) was forced to make Cambodia a protectorate of France, and then in 1884 Cambodia was changed from being a protectorate to a

French colony (Colm 2000:33). Natural resources, including timber products, land and minerals had been exploited in order to compensate with the French protectorate of the country (Chandler 1985). Additionally, under the French protectorate, Cambodia was free from invasion by neighboring countries, Vietnam and Thailand, since the end of the nineteenth century (ibid.).

In 1895, Cambodia lost the areas of Attopeu, Siampang and Stung Treng, first to Cochinchina, and then to Laos. Arbitrarily-drawn boundaries cut through the homelands of ethnic minorities, with the border between Cambodia and Annam splitting Jarai territory and the Cambodia-Laos frontier separating the Brao and Kavet in Strung Treng from their communities across the border (Colm 2000). In September 1895, the French authorities organized an annual poll tax requiring every Khmer to pay the equivalent of 1.20 francs in money, rice, wax or other goods. All citizens were also required to perform fifteen days of public service per year. In addition, the French increased trade and exploited the resources from upland areas in Northeastern Cambodia, while military posts were established to enforce the ban on the slave trade (Maitre 1912 cited in Ironside et al., 2003).

In response, ethnic minority groups, such as, the Brao in Veunsai and Sedang and Jarai in the Pleiku province of the Central Highlands of Vietnam resisted French rule and attacked colonial outposts. French colonial administrators quickly built a road from Stung Treng to Pleiku via Borkeo (Borkeo District, Ratanakiri) and established military outposts, primary schools, and some health care centers (Ironside et al., 2003). At the same time, the French developed huge rubber plantations in Labansiek, often worked by Vietnamese laborers. As an elder in Krola village recounted a story of these times during my visiting his home:

> The French requested land from us equal to the size of a buffalo skin. Many ethnic communities of Tampuan, Kreung and Brao were moved out. This work was enforced by the commune chief, who was scared that the French ruler might block the rivers, leading to flood. Soldiers were recruited as workers as the French thought we had no need for fighters at all, the *Tahan Kadam Cham Eang* (black-headed soldiers who take care of the people) and *Tahan Kadeng Cham Arng* (red-headed soldiers who take care of us). The red-headed soldiers had to work for *Barang* in the rubber plantations while black-headed soldiers served in the military on the front line in order to protect the people.
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> (An elder from Yak Kaol community, January 5, 2004)

The history of Northeastern Cambodia, then, has revolved around the attempts of colonial powers to gain political control and exploit natural resources. The French pursued the cooperation of local authorities in development projects. Further, the French colonial policy on natural resources allowed local officials and noble people to legally lay claim to communal or public lands, which had once been available to the ethnic minority people. However, communal land is no longer belonging to the ethnic minority communities in Northeastern Cambodia, which it turned to the rubber plantation of state enterprise. At the same time, the French brought Vietnamese into the highland areas working in rubber plantations and ethnic minority peoples were also motivated. Within this context, some members of ethnic minority communities, however, had educational opportunities within Ratanakiri, and some were able to continue their studies in Kratie province during the late period of French colonization.

Since the French policy opened for the private ownership to land, forest and fish in order to extract revenue for financing the colonial administration, it created different social classes in the country. The French rulers had absolute control over all land and water of Cambodia. Large numbers of farmers were badly treated and exploited (Chandler 1985, 1995). In particular, ethnic minority people were been living in fear and suppression under the French rulers took the Vietnamese into their ancestral domain. These forms of exploitation led to farmer's uprisings against the French colonial Regime almost everywhere in the country. Cambodia became independent from French colonial Administration in 1953.

3.3 The Prince Norodom Sihanouk Era (1954-1969): Assimilation of Ethnic Minorities into Modern Society

After independence in 1953 from French rule, the Cambodian country came under the rule of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and this period is often referred to as the *Sangkum Reast Niyum* (Peoples' Socialist Community) era. This period was marked by political stability, democracy and considerable economic advancement as Cambodia prospered from taxes levied on exports of rice and rubber. Mabbett and Chandler (1995) explain that the taxes gained from exports, supplemented by foreign aid, paid Cambodia' bills and improved its infrastructure, including education and public health, as well as being used towards building of often ostentatious public works. Broadly speaking, the King Sihanouk in his speeches and writing stressed

Cambodia's past greatness, its high status in the developing world, and his own indispensability. His voice, photographs and writing blanketed the Cambodian media. Emphasizing the importance of education and self-reliance, he probably increased the self-confidence of thousands of his subjects, inured by centuries to defer to their superiors (Mabbett and Chandler 1995). *Sangkum Reast Niyum* is thus marked by 'Sihanouk's volatile, patriotic, narcissistic personality' (ibid.).

During this period in 1959, the Royal Government initiated highland development projects and divided Stung Treng into two provinces, Ratanakiri and Stung Treng. A year later they also established the province of Mondolkiri. The projects carried out their focused not only the improvement of rural infrastructure but also the protection of the national border from invasion by neighboring countries (Meyer 1979 cited in Ironside et al., 2003).

The Royal Government attempted to provide better access to public services and to improve the communication between remote villages and development agencies. Schools and health care centers were built in the Lumphat District of Ratanakiri, and rural roads were improved. Colm (2000:33), however, found that the development agenda of the Royal Government was primarily used to reign in the ethnic minorities and to cut off contacts with Lao, Vietnamese and Cambodian insurgents. As part of these projects, the Brao and Kavet were relocated to live in concentrated groups along the Sesan River in the early 1960s.

In the mid-1960s, the Royal Government followed the French model of commercialization and the development, and quickly reestablished a large rubber plantation near the military post in Labansiek (the present day provincial town of Banlung), to the edge of the O'Chum District. This rubber plantation covered over 8,000 hectares of traditional lands. In 1968, the rubber plantations were expanded by more than 500 hectares near Yeak Loam Lake in the Eastern Banlung District. The plantations provided many with lowland migrants employment rather then ethnic minority peoples who were living in the area. However, this project were unsuccessful, partly due to the fact that the Royal Government became increasingly unstable with some ethnic minority communities resisted the authorities' efforts to develop rubber plantations.

This situation flared up in 1968 when the Brao, Tampuan and Kreung resisted plantation encroachment on their lands. At that time, villagers were brutally suppressed by government forces and many ethnic minorities fled to the forest, where they joined the Khmer Rouge rebels (*Neak Torsur*). In the North of Veunsai District, the Khmer Rouge organized villagers to demonstrate against excessive taxation. In the O'Yadao District to the East, Jarai were recruited to join with *Neak Torsur* as an alternative to taking short-term employment as plantation laborers (Colm 2000:33).

All these development strategies of the Royal Government aimed to establish sovereignty over the remote frontier terrain. The idea was to introduce the process of development to ethnic minority groups, which were considered to be backward. Thus ethnic minorities became the subjects in need of assistance and civilization, being taught how to speak, to write, to read, as well as how to dress. It was thought that ethnic minorities could then be considered as successfully integrated into modern society. Many researchers (see Colm 1996, Ironside et al., 2003) have argued that the Royal Government attempted to assimilate ethnic minorities into the mainstream society. However, at the same time, the Royal Government strengthened some ethnic minority groups to better understand the government administration system used to restrict and contain ethnic minority communities. Some of these people were able to change their ways of life in order to survive and negotiate the state's administrative rules and promote their distinctive community rights (Sugiariti 1997:20, Colm 1996, Bourdier 1996, White 1995).

Despite these changes in ethnic minority communities, most ethnic minority groups still had some access to required natural resources surrounding the villages. The abundance of forest areas within their communities allowed for the collection of plants and materials for house construction. Large trees, bamboo and wildlife were widely available. As an elder in Krola village told while I was visiting his cashew farm:

> No one dared to hunt big animals like gaur, tiger, elephant, deer and wild buffalo, which villagers believed belonged to the spirits. Only small wild animals like barking deer, wild pig, rodent, and squirrel were hunted to supplement their diets. There were also rich sources of fish such as eel, *Trey Kranj* (climbing perch) *Trey Roh* (Chamastriata), *Trey Ksaan* (golden tank goby) and cat fish that people could easily obtain for consumption purposes only.
>
> (An elder in Yak Kaol community, January 15, 2004)

During the Prince Norodom Sihanouk period, Northeastern Cambodia was considered to be sparsely populated, with the need for resources very low (Phat et al., 2001). In the villages, customary practices guided restricted resource use. Villagers often mentioned, "If they did not respect local taboos, the tiger would eat them and the spirit would cause illness" (Krola villagers April 30, 2003). Natural resources were abundant, but the Royal Government enforced resettlements of ethnic communities and encouraged lowlanders to live in the highlands of Northeastern Cambodia. During this time, Royal Government policy was primarily centered on the assimilation of ethnic minority groups into modern society. Such assimilation has been introduced through out that state's education system by teaching them to dress like the majority of people (Khmer), farm perennial crops, and involve with market economy. Even though this regime has also protected of the remote frontier, rather than the exploitation of resources. Several hundred of thousand peoples were peaceful life and prosperity in *Sangkum Reast Niyum* era that was placed in the social memory of Cambodian peoples. However, the Cambodian politics were unstable due to the flow of the wind between the United States and Soviet block during the period of Cold War. In effect, the King's decision, which met his own short-term political requirements, put an end of royalty in Cambodia (Mabbett and Chandler 1995).

3.4 The General Lon Nol Period (1970-1975): Ethnic Minorities in the Indochina War

The coup d'état in March 1970 was led by General Lon Nol and captured the throne of Prince Norodom Sihanouk while the prince was out of the country. General Lon Nol established a new regime known as *Sathear Ranakrat Khmer,* 'the Khmer Republic'. However, during this period, there was a peasant uprising against General Lon Nol demanding the return of the *Sangkum Reast Niyum* (Kiernan B. et al., 1982). The uprising was led by the Khmer Rouge rebels that were based in many provinces, including Takeo, Kampot, Kompong Cham, Kompong Thom and other Northeastern provinces. In particular, the Khmer Rouge seized the North of Ratanakiri province and the Siam Pang District of Stung Treng province, while General Lon Nol's government rushed to build roads in these areas to expand their power in those regions (Colm 1996).

During this period, government staff and retired soldiers were sent to live in Ratanakiri. The government gave them a three-year salary advance, 2,400 m^2 of land for housing and five hectares of farmland. This enabled 300 families to construct their houses around the military base at Banlung. Some families made an effort to farm in O'Chum, Borkeo, Lumphat and Koun Mom Districts. They also started family rubber plantations and grew various cash crops. The rubber plantation model was unsuccessful, though, as local people lacked relevant skills to maintain it (Colm 1996).

Through out this period, the General Lon Nol regime had gained a bad reputation with the people. Some high-ranking officers become timber merchants, and violated existing of local community's regulations and extracted the finest trees out of the forest. Wild animals, such as, deer, and *Kou Prey* (wild ox) were hunted as food for soldiers. Some ethnic communities were resettled, some possessions confiscated, and some young girls were also raped (Zweers et al., 2003:8).

In 1970, the United States army started massive bombing in the Northeastern region along the Cambodia-Vietnam border, which destroyed both local communities and natural resources. Ethnic minority communities moved their villages to live deep in the forest and escape the bombings. Some local people were also communicating with the *Neak Torsur* who had hidden themselves in the jungle, creating an alliance with the North Vietnamese in order to oppose the General Lon Nol regime, whose government was backed by the United States.

The General Lon Nol government gradually lost its power to control the highlanders in the Northeastern region. *Neak Torsur* gained substantial territory and recruited ethnic minorities into their military forces, increasing their support base among local populations. This was especially true for the Brao who lived in Taveng District, who had joined the *Neak Torsur*. After the bombings stopped in August 1973, General Lon Nol's army withdrew from Northeastern Cambodia and the *Neak Torsur* took over power.

3.5 The Pol Pot Period (1975- 1979): Banning of Traditional Cultural Practices

Pol Pot (Political Potential Patriot) was the name given to the Khmer Rouge leader, Saloth Sar, who defeated the military regime of General Lon Nol. In mid-

1975, the Khmer Rouge rebel liberated the country and formed a new government known as *Brochea Thepatai Kampuchea* (Democratic Kampuchea). At the same time, the new government abolished all existing infrastructure and institutions. The new ideology of Democratic Kampuchea introduced agrarian reform in the rural areas, which forced the majority of the population to be evacuated and put to work in the agriculture sector. This state of affairs completely changed the ethnic minorities' ways of life. Ethnic minority communities were again removed from their ancestral domains and forced to settle in lowland areas near the Srepok and Sesan Rivers. The upland agricultural systems effectively ceased to exist and no land was allowed to be cleared for shifting cultivation in highland areas. Ethnic minorities were forced to live in *Sahakor* (cooperatives).

Further, ethnic minority people were separated into small groups according to labor requirements rather than skills, with elders, children, husband and men, women and youth assigned various jobs. Elders had duties to look after communal livestock, to grow vegetables, and to fish for the communal kitchen. Some elder women worked in the communal kitchen, pounded rice and looked after the children. Younger people had to work as a mobile group for the wetland rice fields to build irrigation schemes. The government's agrarian reform system, however, did not improve well-being, but heavily contributed to starvation and ill-health, causing many deaths.

Ethnic minorities were not allowed to wear traditional dress or to speak their dialect in public during this period. Indeed, all cultural practices were prohibited. Sugiariti (1997:22) states that the Khmer Rouge confiscated 12,231 rice wine jars and 12,245 gongs, while Zweers et al. (2003:8) note that the gongs which elders used for traditional ceremonies that played a central role in cultural life were destroyed. The sacred stones of many Jarai villages were thrown away. However, it is difficult to specify what was lost as different communities were affected in many different ways. In some villages, buffalo sacrificing performed as part of healing practice for health reasons was stopped, while there was increased use of modern medicine from China (White 1995).

Beyond this, various local institutions were banned, greatly affecting traditions and notion of cultural identity. Traditional leaders played only a small role under the new administrative control unit known as *Angka Samaki* (solidarity organization). The special rights of traditional leaders were removed, and their position was

considered the same as any other citizen. In addition, many traditional dances, music and spiritual ceremonies were abandoned, with villagers often forgoing traditional cultural practices. During this period of time, murder rates, starvation and other health problems increased in the villages.

Overall, the general policy during the Khmer Rouge period was directed towards agricultural development, particularly irrigated rice production. Practices of shifting cultivation and customary law were neglected. Ethnic minorities suffered and rural infrastructure was destroyed. Therefore, the situation in the highlands deteriorated and several ethnic minority groups, especially those who stayed close to the border such as Kavet and Tampuan from Veunsai District, some Kreung and Brao from Taveng District and Lao and Jarai from Andong Meas District, escaped to Vietnam. After the Khmer Rouge regime ended in 1979, many of these people returned to their homelands.

3.6 The Heng Samrin Regime (1980s): Natural Resource Depletion

In 1979, Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia and systematically installed a new socialist government (Kiernan et al., 1982), known as the *People's Republic of Kampuchea*. After new government of Cambodian formed while Vietnamese troops were still presenting in Cambodia from 1979 until 1987. This new government was governed by Heng Samrin, who was subsequently given name of the Samdech Heng Samrin by King Norodom Sihanouk after Cambodia's first election in 1993.

The Heng Samrin government reestablished governance in Ratanakiri in 1980, and Banlung became the new provincial town. The government imposed a basic administrative structure modeled on the Vietnamese system, which introduced an administrative unit called the '*Krom Samaki*' (solidarity group). The government had a strong interest in agricultural development, similar to the Pol Pot regime, and encouraged local people to increase agricultural production. Local people were supplied with draft animals, agricultural equipment (hoes, knives, and ploughshares), fruit trees and seeds. In addition, ethnic minorities began to use Khmer dress, western medicines, and children started attending state schools. The government also improved rural infrastructure facilities, such as, schools, health care centers and roads, while ethnic minority communities were relocated to live closer to urban areas along main roads and rivers in order to avoid disturbance from the Khmer Rouge rebels.

The Northeastern region, however, particularly Ratanakiri, had largely been cut off from central Cambodia. It was isolated due to security problems and poor accessible roads. Zweers et al. (2003) found that the isolation of ethnic minorities somewhat limited the outside impacts on their traditional ways of life during this time. In the late 1980s, however, a Vietnamese logging company built a road from the Vietnam border to the town of Banlung and cut valuable trees, such as, *Cheutiel* (Dipterocarpus alatus) *and Koki* (Hopea), which were transported across the border to Vietnam. This logging not only affected the availability of plants, but also wildlife habitat, driving many animals from the highland areas.

The monetary value of wildlife started to rise as entrepreneurs came to the highlands from Vietnam to buy local wildlife. Vietnamese soldiers also used guns to hunt wildlife within the bounds of ethnic minority villages. In addition, many local Khmer traders started coming to the villages to buy animals. Villagers themselves became increasingly involved in this trade. Further, many guns and explosives were left behind in the villages after the civil war, which were increasingly being used to hunt wildlife for sale, rather than for consumption in local communities.

The development projects of this era, then, seemed to fall in to the same traps of previous governments, which had promoted assimilation and influenced ethnic minorities to adopt the lowland Khmer culture. Colm (1996) argues that the highland culture was subjected to brutal suppression under the Heng Samrin regime, which was both more anarchic and more conservative than the Khmer Rouge's radical Maoism.

During this period, high-ranking military officials and local elites occupied dozens of hectares of lands located along the highland national roadway, particularly in Banlung, O'Chum and Borkeo Districts. Some of these lands were sold, and some were used to grow coffee, and/or pepper. These elites who had seized land also distributed some plots to their relatives. A villager in Yeak Laom community commented during the interview that:

> The big people confiscated our shifting cultivation plots during this period (1980s) and they said that land belonged to the government. The government needed this land to distribute to the soldiers. However, we did not know what to do, the only way was to go to the jungle to clear new shifting cultivation plots. So we are afraid local authorities, and we tried to avoid conflict.
>
> (An elder in Yeak Loam community June 25, 2003)

During development in the 1980s, the government also intervened in the life of highlanders, marginalizing traditional systems of natural resource management and seriously impacting upon cultural traditions. The government attitudes were still grounded in a view of ethnic minorities as inferior, inhabiting the wild jungles, and being nomadic peoples without culture. Even though, many ethnic minority groups tried to maintain their ways of life, community rights and customary practices were often sidelined by government intervention. At that time, ethnic minority peoples had little familiarity with national laws, acts and/or development policies, but had to follow the orders from the Central Committee of Phnom Penh which was enforced by the military power.

3.7 The Royal Government of Cambodia (1990s): Fighting Poverty in the Remote Frontier

After the Peace Accord in Paris in October 23, 1991, Cambodia started to turn towards a market economy. Cambodia joined international trade and applied policies supporting a market economy to the whole country. The United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia (UNTAC) supported democratic national elections in 1993. Since then, Cambodia has increased its national stability, and the accessibility of many parts of the country. Cambodians thus increased their involvement in market activities, and traveled more frequently between rural areas and cities.

In the mid-1990s, the government implemented a Highland Development Plan in the Northeastern region, through the above-mentioned the Seila Program supported by UNDP/CARERE (see Chapter IV). The dramatic increase of national and international development organizations in the area was accompanied by a flood of people, was moving from the lowland to the Northeastern region. In Ratanakiri, the population increased by 41% between 1992 and 1998 and in the provincial town (Banlung), the population increased by 82%. The largest numbers of migrants were mostly landless Khmer, Cham and Vietnamese moving from more densely-populated provinces (Sugiariti 1997, McAndrew 2001).

During the performance of a community forest ceremony in December 29, 2003, several villagers in Yak Kaol community and Khmer Leu association members

expressed their concern about the land conflicts and forest resources depletion that resulted from this influx. The Yak Kaol community representatives stated that:

> Our communities in upland areas have significant problems with land conflicts, because lowland migrants came to take our land, and big companies cut down the trees and used the land for growing cash crops. Now, we are worrying about our lives and livelihoods, with no forest resources to be harvested and no land for farming our traditional rice. We need land and forests, not money. The forest is our market, our lives, and the place where we worship.
>
> (Yak Kaol community representatives, December 29, 2003)

With the increased highland population, then, there was increased pressure on local resources from new migrants who needed to build houses and clear farmland. Ethnic minorities, gradually adjusting to the prevalent 'Khmer way of life' also began to build wooden houses and increasingly moved from shifting cultivation to growing perennial crops and farming wetland rice (White 1996:1). However, the largest pressure was placed on local resources by illegal loggers, often powerful businessmen and companies that were given logging concessions. Ancestral lands and forests were lost to such concessions, as well as land grab, illegal logging, land speculation and encroachment. This led to much conflict between ethnic minority communities and new migrants. The new migrants often built fences along the village boundaries and then applied for land certificates to legitimize their claims.

The government considered Ratanakiri a primary source of revenue and provided licenses to companies for logging and land concessions without any consultation with the ethnic minorities who had been living for centuries in the highland areas. The government promoted large-scale agri-businesses and commercial investments from both Cambodian and foreign investors in oil palm, rubber, coffee, pepper, and cassava. As this kind of conventional economic development proceeded in Ratanakiri, local peoples' access to land and forest decreased, thus affecting the ability of ethnic minority populations to maintain security for their communities and livelihoods. This was particularly true for communities in Banlung, O'Chum, Koun Mom, Borkeo, O'Yadao and Andong Meas Districts.

In 1995, the government granted 1.4 million hectares of forested area between the Sesan and Srepok Rivers (the area where 70% of the province's population lives) including the Virachey National Park to Macro-Panin, to an Indonesian company for a period of 30 years (Colm 2000). In the same year, many companies were granted the

rights to export tens of thousands of cubic meters of valuable timber to Vietnam in exchange for building a road network and financing a small hydropower project. The Pheapimex Fuchan Cambodia Company was also granted a concession for 350,000 hectares of forest in Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces. The Pheapimex concession includes most of the proposed buffer zones for Virachey National Park, inhabited by more than 10,000 ethnic minorities (Colm 2000:37).

In late 1995, the government authorized land concessions comprising 20,000 hectares of oil palms in O'Yadao District. This investment project cost US$ 20.36 million as a joint venture between two Cambodian Companies, Rama Khmer International and Mittapheap-Men Sarun, and a Malaysian partner, Globaltec Sdn. Bhd. The project immediately affected the livelihoods of 4,500 people, mostly Jarai, living within the six communes of the concession area. The oil palm plantation provided only 400 jobs for ethnic minority people living in the plantation area, and several villagers subsequently became wage laborers in rubber plantations and cashew nut farms (McAndrew 2001). Some villagers in Soam Thom, Pak Nyai and Ya Tung of O'Yadao District complained:

> They had concerned about a lack of consultation from the company, loss of farmland and cattle grazing areas. It is also possible loss of ancestral burial grounds by clearing of land for the plantation. Additionally, they had been intimidated by armed plantation guards, who have shot and eaten some of villagers' cattle. It is difficulty to obtain compensation for work, they have done for the company.
>
> (Sarom and Vanthon 1996:11)

In 1996, the left bank of the Sesan River in Veunsai and Taveng Districts was zoned for incorporation into *Virachey* National Park. The right bank of Srepok River in Lumphat District was zoned as a wildlife sanctuary, and 11 other provincial protected areas were also so designated. The World Bank and WWF collaborated with Cambodian Ministry of Environment staff to 'preserve' the national park and all the protected areas, where local people had been living for hundreds of years. Some villagers were relocated from the national park to live close the administration center in Veunsai District.

The local authorities described how problematic it was when Kavet people were living freely:

> We could not govern them. It took three to four nights to get there. So the state and the Royal Government tried to call them down, so that it would be easy to govern them. If people live in the forest, they are considered to be outsiders of society, I don't want them to live in the forest, because then they are not part of our population.
>
> (Hasselskog et al., 2000:20)

In 1996, several hydropower projects were proposed to provide electricity to Banlung. These reservoirs displaced two villages from their traditional lands and submerged valuable paddy fields when they were built near the towns of O'Chum and Banlung. Other major projects on the Sesan and Srepok Rivers and their tributaries also displace highlanders from their ancestral lands along the riverbanks near the Laos border. The government has further plans for six dam sites along various rivers in Northeastern Cambodia. One of the prospective sites would generate 260 Mega Watts (MW) in Sesan River Dam 3, but was projected to flood areas extending from Veunsai town across the whole of Ratanakiri and Stung Treng. However, this project has not yet been implemented, because of pressure from local people and international development agencies.

In mid-1996, another international hydropower development project generating 720 MW the Yali Falls Dam was constructed upstream of the Sesan River in Vietnam. This had devastating ecological and social impacts on ethnic minority communities living downstream in Cambodia's Ratanakiri and Stung Treng. Sporadic and unannounced releases of large amounts of water in Vietnam caused 30 deaths from drowning in Cambodia. It also destroyed agricultural fields, fisheries, fishing equipment and boats, and caused the deterioration of water quality, and injury to livestock and domestic animals (Colm 2000:38, Berg 2000:44, McAndrew 2001:3-4). A local villager commented that:

> The Yali Falls Dam caused suffering in our lives and for our animals. We are living in hunger conditions. What else we can do? We worry about our lives in the future, because now forest resources are ruined, and land is occupied by outsiders. We often cried out for our government to help, but never got an answer.
>
> (A Kachok villager in the Andong Meas District, January 30, 2003)

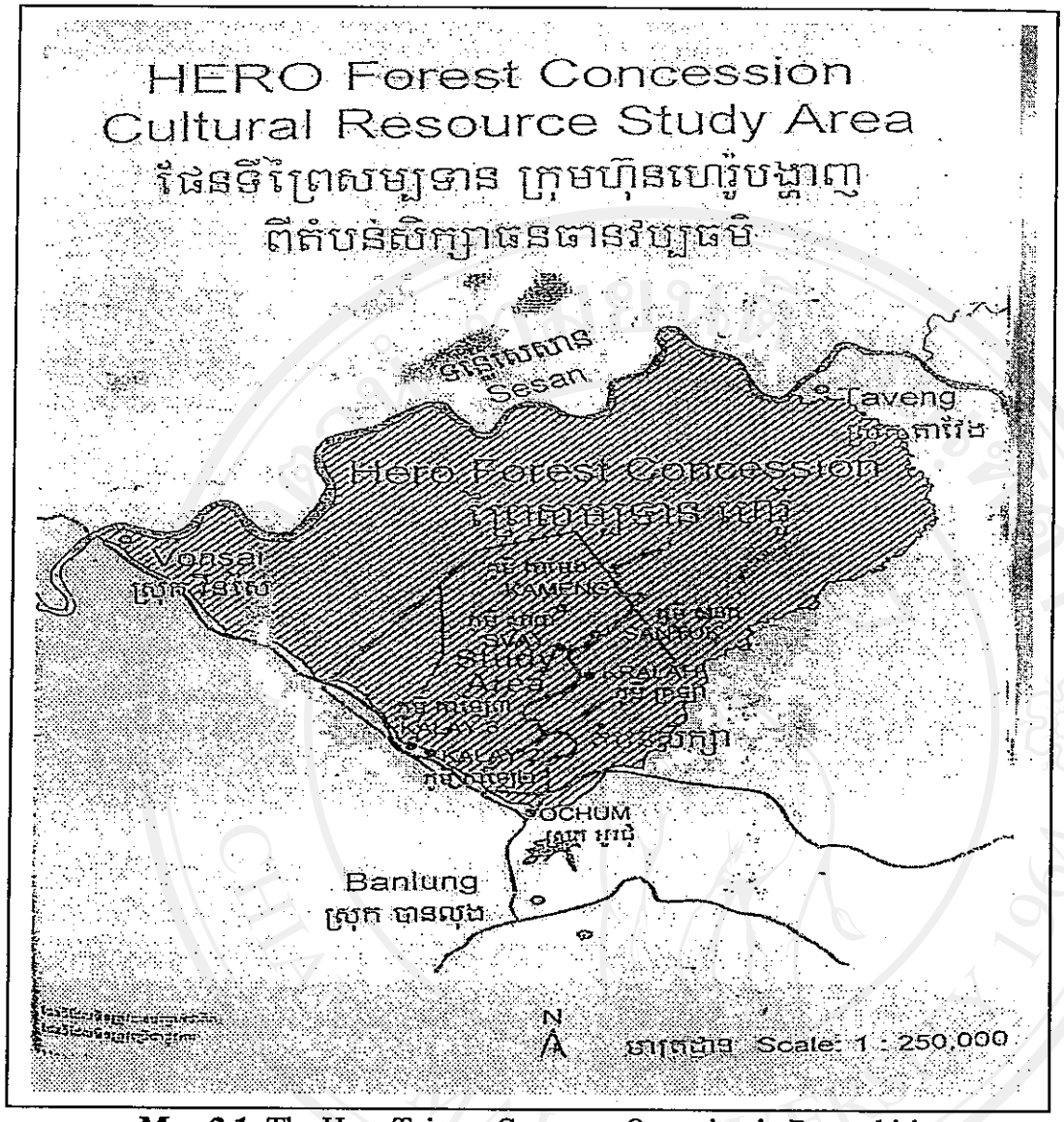
Other highland development projects created industrial plantations that have further marginalized ethnic minority communities. There is evidence that in 1997 the Ratanakiri Land Title Office received applications for more than a dozen concession projects in the province, ranging from 100 to 20,000 hectares, mostly for growing oil palm, coffee and cashew nuts. Most of these were near the market center of Banlung, the Borkeo District and in the Southern parts of the O'Chum and the O'Yadao Districts (McAndrew 2001).

In 1997, a high-ranking military general obtained 1,250 hectares of land covering three villages in the Borkeo District. To achieve this, the military and district officials arranged for the Jarai and Tampuan villagers (most of them non-Khmer speakers) to place their thumbprints on two sets of documents. The first set of documents registered individual ownership for five hectares of land that enabled officials to bypass approval at the provincial level. The second set of documents, the sales agreement, handed over title to the military general. In return, each family received two kilograms of salt, the district officials received US$ 35,000 for their participation in the land deal, and the commune chief received a motorcycle (Khmer Leu Association interviewed, December 14, 2003).

In January 1998, the government authorized a 25-year forest concession for the Hero Taiwan Company to operate a logging concession for 60,150 hectares across the districts of O'Chum, Taveng and Veunsai (Figure 3.1). The committee members of the Yak Kaol community commented during taking me to visit Romal Khal forest that:

> The forests and spirit forests were rapidly disappearing when the Hero Taiwan Company operated there. The big trees, plants and wildlife also started to disappear. At the same time, we had difficulty collecting plants and hunting wildlife. There were often no large trees left to support the growth of vegetables and plants. The logging company made us poorer.
>
> (The committee member of Yak Kaol Community April 29, 2003)

Logging operations commenced in May 1999, and in the same year, the Department of Forestry approved an annual licensing agreement for the Hero Taiwan Company. Unfortunately they could not operate again because of opposition from local people living in surrounding areas.



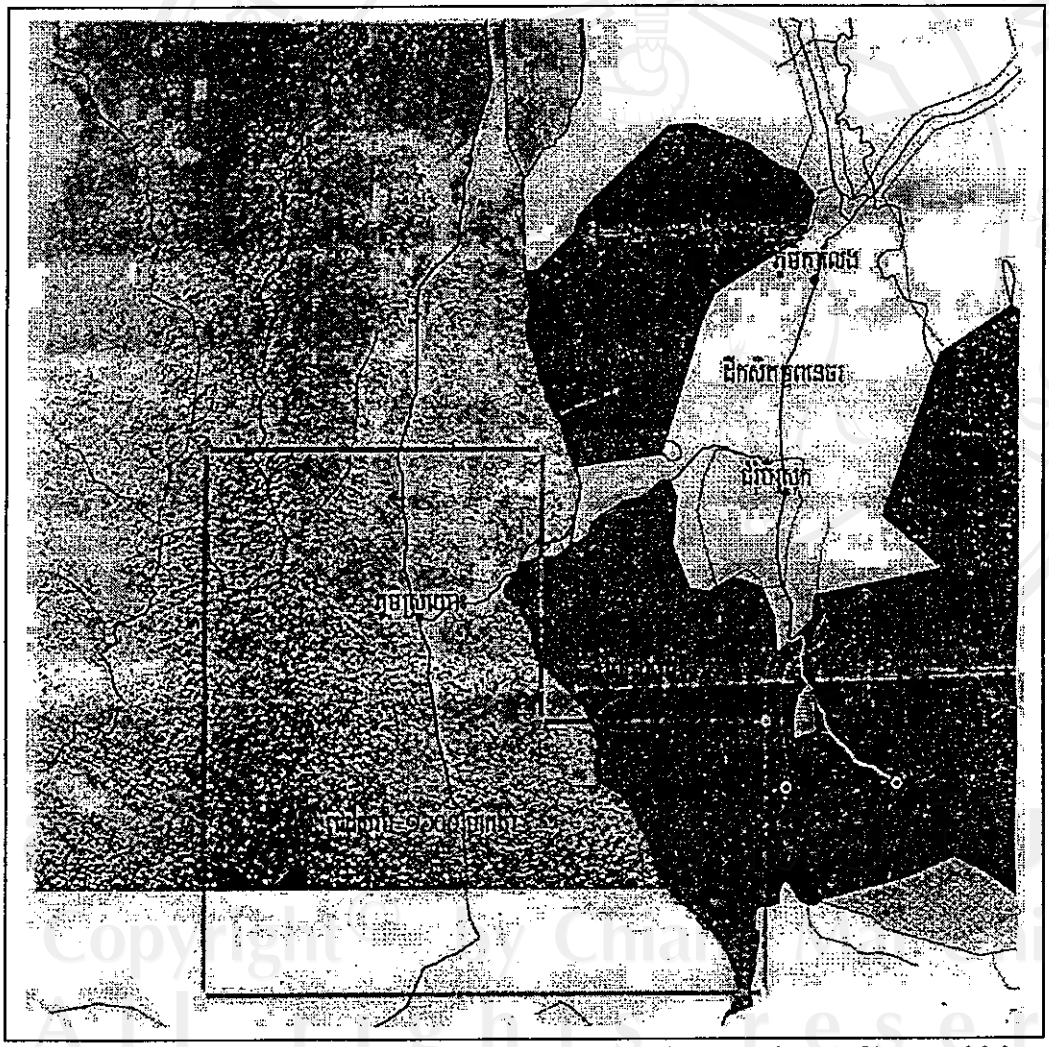
Map 3.1: The Hero Taiwan Company Operating in Ratanakiri

Source: Cultural Resource Study, January 2000

In 2000, the government reached an agreement with the neighboring countries of Laos and Vietnam to initiate the Triangle Development Plan. The Cambodian government aimed to alleviate the poverty of local people in the region by promoting tourism, agriculture and industry. The government proposed the construction of an airport, national roads for the import and export of agricultural products and goods, and the purchase of electricity from Vietnam. The government assumed that this plan would give ethnic minorities better access to public services and better living conditions. In contrast, ethnic minorities considered the Triangle Development Plan as yet another way to increase pressure on their local community land. In fact, in 2003 the PLG Ratanakiri office indicated that the Triangle Development Plan had

adversely affected the areas, causing a flood of migration from the lowlands, making land for habitation and subsistence scarce and expensive, and contributing heavily to land and forest degradation.

Further, in 2003, the government granted a land concession of 10,000 hectares for the Heng Company to plant teak trees in Ngang commune, Andong Meas District, close to the Vietnam border. In another case in late 2003, the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy made an agreement with SEOUL DIGEM Korean Company to make available 1,600 hectares for gemstone mining in Lumphat District, South of Ratanakiri (Figure 3.2).



Map 3.2: Gem Mining Areas in Lumphat District, Southern of Ratanakiri
Sources: Ministry of Energy and Mining, 2003 dated December 15, 2003

This project has not yet begun operation, however, ethnic minorities are worried about potential impacts on their local communities. In another case, the Tay Seng

Company forced ethnic minorities to sell their land at US$ 250 per hectare inside the proposed rubber plantation areas, where they had lived for several decades. This case is ongoing, and being negotiated between ethnic minority communities and the Tay Seng company, and mediated by the provincial authority.

According to Zweers et al. (2003), bamboo is one of the natural resources that seem to have remained untouched by commercialization in the region throughout most of the last four decades. It has mainly been used for local consumption (house construction and baskets). In many villages, the availability of bamboo started to decrease only in the early 1990s, due to land clearing for cashew farms and other cash crops.

Some government authorities have conceded that problem stemming from development and commercial resource use has affected local communities, because ethnic minorities had previously practiced shifting cultivation and moved freely in the forest areas. At the same time, it was also thought that ethnic minorities hunted, collected and fished without considering future needs. Some government officers accept the destruction of the forest as necessary stating that always thinking about the impacts on ethnic minority communities might decrease possible negative opportunities for national and international investment and disadvantage all the people of Cambodia (A government official from Department of Agriculture Ratanakiri interviewed, December 14, 2003).

Other government officers have suggested that ethnic minorities could enjoy a better standard of living if they replaced shifting cultivation with cash crops or wetland rice production or even were employed on industrial plantation. These mechanisms have not worked well in terms of securing local livelihoods. As mentioned above, the oil palm plantation in O'Yadao offered only 450 jobs for a population of more than 4,000 ethnic minorities living within the plantation's boundaries. The people living within the plantation were thus left with no *Chamkar* and no jobs.

The confiscation of forestland by private commercial interest has already made great inroads into Northeastern Cambodia. The government of Phnom Penh granted land and forest concessions in which are the majorities of cases without any consultation with ethnic minority peoples. Even today, ethnic minority communities

are not clearly informed about their rights or given adequate opportunity to secure their livelihoods and traditional cultures.

It can be seen that the legal system of Cambodia does not support the traditional management systems of the ethnic minority communities. Constitutional law states that all forests belong to the government, while the government-authorized logging and land concessions have neglected the rights of ethnic minorities, with various NGOs lobbying provincial authorities since 1995 to promote local resources rights.

3.8 Summary

The above review provides an overview of highland development strategies in Northeastern Cambodia from the mid 1800s until the present day. Colonial rulers and political regimes worked to improve rural infrastructure facilities and provide better access to public services for all people. Most often this meant that natural resources were considered to be profitable and easily extracted. With successive governments increasing administrative control at the local level, and introducing the dominant Khmer culture through the education system, ethnic minorities have passed through many difficult phases of development that have been heightened by changes in political regimes and political instability. The exploitation of natural resources greatly affected traditional cultures and changed ethnic minority peoples' ways of life.

During the 1960s and 1970s, government policy was centered on the assimilation of ethnic minorities into modern society rather than the exploitation of resources, and so protected the remote frontier. Significantly, the practice of traditional culture was banned for ethnic minorities during the Democratic Kampuchea period, and they were removed from their ancestral communities. During this time, communities lived under a new administrative rule where elders had no administrative role and all their rights to land and culture were abolished. In the late 1980s, the Vietnamese extracted natural resources from the Northeastern provinces by hunting wildlife and harvesting timber, exporting both to Vietnam. This has directly affected many spirit forests and led to environmental degradation.

With displacement from traditional community areas, many ethnic minority groups have been forced to adapt to new life-styles. Local people were forced to provide intensive labor in the process of agrarian change brought about by the Pol Pot

regime in the 1970s and the new market economy in 1990s. In addition, education systems have changed the behaviors and perspectives of local people and hindered the building or reconstruction of cultural identity and livelihoods. Finally, ethnic minorities have faced suppression under different regimes, losing local community rights to control and manage their lands, leading in some cases to the impoverishment of the cultural practices.