

CHAPTER 3

THE VIETNAMESE FISHING COMMUNITY: ECOLOGICAL AND ADAPTED STRATEGIES

This chapter analyses the specific case of Phat Sanday community at the operational level. First, since the focus of my study is the Vietnamese community, it is appropriate for me to outline the history of the study population (a place-based Vietnamese village) and its movements – as caused by war and changes to political regimes. It also examines ethnic policy and how the villagers have faced-up to a series of challenges while living in Cambodia, and particularly around Tonle Sap Lake. However, it goes beyond my scope of study and interest to give a detailed history of the geo-politics that have taken place between Vietnam and Cambodia, presenting the context in order to explore contemporary realities. General information will be provided about the community and its socio-economic situation, plus I will describe the specific composition of the local community before and since the war period, which resulted in the displacement of the great majority of villagers. These dynamics have had an effect on the social relations of resource use in the area. Third, it shows in brief the traditional ecological knowledge related to fish catch trends, fish behavior and seasonal catch patterns, with each month represented based on a seasonal calendar. This history has resulted in years of practical experience dealing with the local ecology among local fishers and more importantly, reflects the fact that the incorporation of local knowledge has proven to be useful in the management of a sustainable management system in the study area.

3.1 Politics of Ethnicity and the Historical Development of the Vietnamese Community

The political history of Cambodia has been depicted as a tragedy, as it has experienced local violence, external control and severe isolation over recent centuries and decades. The advent of French colonialism between 1863 and 1953 led to a transformation of the social and political context in Cambodia; however, the French

helped prevent Cambodia from falling under the control of its two powerful rivals, Vietnam and Thailand, who had expanded their political power into Khmer territory over a number of centuries. These episodes included the presence of the Vietnamese, who played a significant role in Cambodian political affairs, both in the distant and recent past. Largely for this reason, the flow of Vietnamese on the ground has been a part of such historical developments, and particularly during the French Protectorate and State of Cambodia's (SOC) political authority periods (1979-1989).

The Khmer population constitutes approximately 90% of the total population of Cambodia, while the remaining 10% includes the Vietnamese, Chinese, Muslim Cham and highlanders. The Vietnamese migrated quite recently and are not recognized as a 'nationality' as such; they are instead classified as an 'immigrant group', while the Cham and ethnic highlanders are considered 'ethnic national minorities'. This distinct differentiation can be traced back to the historical perspective discussed here.

The flow of Vietnamese into Cambodia can be divided into three different migration waves, and two of the most distinct aspects of the Vietnamese communities are their geographical and historical distinctiveness. First, the Vietnamese resided for an extended period during the pre-war time under Prince Norodom Sihanouk (1953-70), and this group claims that its members' ancestors resided there well before the arrival of the French. The period following the Sihanouk era was a time of war, as led by General Lon Nol (1970-75) and then the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime (1975-79). These last two regimes took the same ethnic cleansing approach towards the ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. By the time the Lon Nol regime came to power in 1970, the Vietnamese were thought by some to number more than 500,000 people, while other estimates suggest a figure of 300,000 (MRG 1995: 20). During the Lon Nol period, more than 4,000 Vietnamese were killed (Chou Meng Tarr, 1992), while other estimates report death tolls of around 10,000. An estimated 200,000 Vietnamese civilians were forcibly repatriated to South Vietnam during the Lon Nol massacres, and during the second phase, the remaining 150,000 Vietnamese, those who had not fled or been expelled during the Lon Nol period, were sent to Vietnam after the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh over a four month period (Ovesen and Trankell, 2004 and MRG, 1995:21). Prior to 1970, they had comprised a significant

proportion of the population (there was an estimated 300,000 Vietnamese; six or seven percent of the total population (Chou Meng Tarr, 1992) and had been quite well integrated into Cambodian society. However, this had gradually been eroded due to anti-Vietnamese policies introduced during the early 1970s, after Lon Nol staged a coup and seized power from King Sihanouk. In the end, they were completely removed from the country after the Khmer Rouge came to power, as most of them were either expelled back to Vietnam or killed.

The second migration wave took place after the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 due to the invasion of Vietnamese troops. After this, a large amount of inward migration took place during the ten-year Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia (1979-89). The Vietnamese backed government, the so-called State of Cambodia (SOC-1979-89), was installed, and did not have anti-Vietnamese policies, in fact it welcomed back those Vietnamese who had fled during the 1970s returned, who settled down and resumed their normal lives in Cambodia. Although such policies supported previous Vietnamese residents in particular, newcomers arrived, in particular the relatives and friends of those Vietnamese, plus Vietnamese soldiers who failed to return to Vietnam after the Vietnamese withdrew in 1989.

Recent inward migration by the Vietnamese has accelerated due to Cambodia's participation in the free market economy and its election (in 1993), and due to its implementation of privatization policies in the late 1980s. Most of these migrants moved to urban areas, as they migrated mainly for economic reasons, such as to become construction workers, sex workers, mechanics and small business owners. This group now constitutes a key part of the migrant labor force and can speak the Cambodian language to a basic level, but retains a distinct identity. As a result of all these factors, this group is discriminated against by Khmer people.

The Vietnamese can also be grouped into three based on their economic roles and place of residence, these being: 1) rice farmers in the southeast border area of Cambodia, 2) fishers on Tonle Sap Lake and along the Mekong River, and 3) migrant workers in urban areas. However, some authors divide them into four groups through the addition of one more: rubber plantation workers – as the French used the Vietnamese as rubber plantation workers in Cambodia during the French colonial era.

The first wave of Vietnamese to arrive included rice farmers, and this migration took place during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Vietnamese emperors were able to carry out a policy of colonization in Cambodia, as the border was not defined formally until the French imposed the concept of a border in 1903. By the 1960s, many Vietnamese lived among the rice lands of the border provinces of Prey Veng and Svay Rieng in Cambodia. The second wave included the Vietnamese plantation workers brought by the French to work on the large rubber estates in eastern Cambodia, near the Vietnamese border. The third wave included the fishing communities, those which play an economic role along the Mekong River and on Tonle Sap Lake. In the case of Tonle Sap Lake, the Vietnamese came with the first and second migration wave, and now see themselves as fairly well integrated into Cambodian society. The most recent migrants are the urban Vietnamese working as laborers in the service sector, as the Khmers tend to be less skilled than them.

As can be seen above, during the 1970s, two regimes launched a similar murderous campaign against the Vietnamese communities in Cambodia - the Lon Nol regime, which tried to destroy the (Vietnamese) communist forces, and Pol Pot (the Khmer Rouge), who echoed these sentiments and sought to reclaim the Mekong delta lost to Vietnam during the seventeenth century. These two campaigns led to the death of thousands of Vietnamese living in Cambodia; however, after the SOC came to power (1979-89), dominated by Vietnam, it declared that those Vietnamese who had lived in Cambodia prior to the 1970s, and been victims of the former repatriation programs, could return and settle down in Cambodia, and the state even assisted them with starting a new life in Cambodian society. Although this approach favored those who had lived in the country before 1970, a flow of newcomers began which the state was not able to control at that time. By mid-1983, an estimated 56,000 Vietnamese are estimated to have returned, and this figure does not include the approximately 150,000 to 200,000 Vietnamese troops (MRG: 1995:22).

The presence of Vietnamese nationals (Vietnamese occupation) caused disagreement at the 1989 Paris Peace Conference, as the Khmer Rouge charged Vietnamese forces of preventing Cambodia from becoming independent. As a result, the UN agreed to remove all foreign forces from Cambodia, to restore political independence and organizes the first elections, with the support and recognition of the

international community. This move was designed to prevent civil war and instill stability in Cambodia, but as a result, 20,000 UN personnel arrived in the country, though in 1991 the Cambodian peace treaty was finally signed. However, the Khmer Rouge alleged repeatedly that there were remaining Vietnamese settlers, and tended to exaggerate the exact number of Vietnamese living in Cambodia. Under these unsafe conditions, in 1993 a total of around 30,000 Vietnamese, mostly from fishing communities, was escorted by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in large boat convoys, from the Tonle Sap down to the Mekong and Bassac rivers; to the Vietnamese border, where the Vietnamese government then refused to accept them (MRG:1995). The remnants of this group, those unable to bribe their way back into Cambodia, remained stranded at the border, living-off food provided by UN agencies.

After the Khmer Rouge had been integrated into the government and had agreed to disarm by the end of 1997, the Vietnamese were no longer in danger. The economic boom at this time also made Cambodia a more attractive place to live. Nowadays, the Vietnamese community lives mostly peacefully, as they are no longer attacked by Khmer Rouge soldiers, although the issue of the Vietnamese in Cambodia as a whole remains to be discussed. For instance, the opposition party continues to raise the issue of the Vietnam-Cambodia border in parliamentary meetings and has asked PM Hun Sen to clarify and explain the history behind Cambodian territory in this area.

However, propaganda against the Vietnamese still exists today, particularly in relation to the historical loss of territory, as reinforced by the opposition parties and Khmer elites who live overseas (most specifically in France, Australia and the USA). It would be fair to say that the purpose of this falls into two main categories; to stimulate nationalism among Cambodians, to put pressure on the ruling party to take action against the Vietnamese living in Cambodia, and to capitalize on racist ideology, as happened when Prince Norodom Sihanouk was ousted by Lon Nol. For instance, the dominant Cambodian People's Party (CPP) is being accused of not taking any action on the border issue with Vietnam; however, PM Hun Sen has declared it impossible to raise such problems with the Vietnamese, and has challenged

the opposition to oust him from power, as happened in the past (Eighth Parliament Meeting, 2012).

The influx of the Vietnamese people to Tonle Sap Lake was noticeable during the first and second migration waves, but they also arrived more recently during the 1980s, with the support of the socialist SOC, and as a result, all these Vietnamese returned to Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge regime fell. With the gratitude afforded to Vietnam for having ended the regime, many Vietnamese were granted 'residency rights' and settled down in Cambodia, undoubtedly developing a degree of autonomy and also language rights. However, they also had weaker cultural rights and less of a claim to be granted citizenship. No Cambodian state has forced them to integrate into mainstream society, so any integration has been voluntarily. For their part, they have tended to assimilate in order to avoid trouble and to gain social and economic benefits.

Likewise, at my chosen research site of Phat Sanday community and probably elsewhere around Tonle Sap Lake, I found the attitude of the Khmers toward the Vietnamese to be less discriminatory, in the sense that both sides are more concerned with their livelihoods, and also because the Vietnamese are fairly well integrated into Cambodian society. The Vietnamese mostly perceive themselves the same as Cambodian, but pointed out to me difference between the races. For many of the Vietnamese I interviewed, the reasons why they returned to Cambodia were due to it being their place of birth, plus that they regard Tonle Sap Lake as their homeland. Also, their descendants were buried in the area and they are strongly connected to fishing. As one old Vietnamese told me, "after fleeing to Vietnam in 1975, I lived in Vietnam for a long period, but sometimes missed Cambodia and felt nostalgia for the place I used to live. Now if anyone asks me to move to Vietnam, I say it will be due to the legal framework here and the lack of support/everyday struggles." Thus, their place of birth, and their living and daily resource use activities resonate with their social memories, those derived from the experiences and meanings constructed by them. That is one reason why some of them decided to migrate back to Cambodia, even though they knew they would face a series of challenges there, such as the Khmer Rouge attacks in the early 1980s and early 1993, and opposition parties continually raising their presence in the country.

Being distinct descriptively, they are conscious of being outsiders in Khmer society, where Khmer people perceive them as a ‘security problem’ or as ‘land poachers’ - a threat to geographical, social and national security, and that this is still prevalent in Cambodian society. There is no other case which more clearly exemplifies this than in the Mekong Delta, as this was ceded to Vietnam and is a starting point for the development of new perceptions and social relations among Cambodians in relation to the Vietnamese. However, at the grassroots level, which includes mostly less educated people, this sentiment is less strong, especially in the case of Tonle Sap Lake.

Now, the Cambodian government rarely raises the issue of the Vietnamese living in Cambodia, and this is seen by some as avoiding a sensitive issue. The presence of the Vietnamese is often raised by opponents of the ruling party, and it is important to note that the SOC government and the current ruling party have the same leader (Hun Sen), so it is for this reason that the ruling party is accused of being a “puppet government”, as it never takes any actions toward the Vietnamese. It is also believed some Vietnamese vote for the ruling party.

This negative perception of the Vietnamese is still prevalent among well-educated people and opponents, but is less common at the grassroots level and in particular in fishing villages. Historically speaking, political attacks against the Vietnamese tend to be conducted by cadres, not Cambodian civilians, despite the fact that history somehow continues to color people’s perceptions of the Vietnamese. In fact, there is a little evidence that the Vietnamese dominate economic life in Cambodia and its mainstream institutions, because Cambodian society prevents them diversifying their livelihoods. In addition, most are believed to have a very low level of education - one thing preventing them from accumulating economically.

3.2 Characteristics of the Study Fishing Community

Phat Sanday commune is a floating or ‘water-based community’ covering a total area of 33,143.89 ha, and is located approximately 95 km south-west of the provincial town of Kampong Thom. It belongs to Kampong Svay district, in Kampong Thom province, and borders Peam Bang and Samproch communes to the west, and Sankor and Kampong Ko communes to the north. Phlov Touk commune is

located to the east. The floating community of Chhnok Trou commune, in Kampong Chhnang province, borders Phat Sanday in the south. Although it belongs to Kampong Thom province, it is closer physically to Kampong Chhnang province, which is about five kilometers to the north of Chhnok Trou commune, a floating community. It has a total of population 918 (see Table 3.1) and the commune consists of five villages: Phat Sanday, Kampong Chamlorng, Neang Sav, Tuol Neang Sav and Koh Ta Pov (a Vietnamese village), and is located alongside the Stung Sen River, which stretches towards the provincial center of Kampong Thom province.

Table 3.1 Family Households in Phat Sanday Commune

Village Name	No. of Households	No. of Women	No. of Men	Total Population
Koh Ta Pov	205 (149 Vietnamese)	519	497	1016
Phat Sanday	159	345	302	647
Kampong Chamlorng	193	599	487	1086
Neang Sav	202	500	451	951
Tuol Neang Sav	159	366	325	691
Total	918	2329	2062	4391

Source: Phat Sanday commune report

The floating houses in the village move periodically, based on the floodwater level. A collection of floating houses stretches along and mainly on the edge of the Stung Sen River, at the confluence of Tonle Sap Lake, which has a basin area of 16,344 km² (ADB 2006). Due to its water-based geography, it is not always easy to find which household belongs to which village, as physically they tend to mix together.

Approximately 95 percent of the total population is directly engaged in fishing, while the remaining two percent is involved in non-fishing activities, such as petty trade, fish trading and so forth. Primary employment activities can be classified into four groups: 1) fish trading, 2) petty trade, 3) medium-scale fishing, and 4) small-scale fishing (see Table 3.2). This table summarizes the nature of these classification with wealth mobility and reasons behind occupations,

Table 3.2 Wealth Mobility Status based on Occupations

Classification	Wealth Mobility	Characteristics/ Reasons
Fish Trading	Upward	Businesses have been improved; profits are stable. Play an influential role - providing loans to fishers in return for fish.
Petty Trade	Upward	Level of income the same, as more goods sold. Provide foodstuffs and material loans. Less influential role in marginal fishers' lives.
Medium-scale Fishing	Stable/in decline	Fishing with risks; business is up and down
Small-scale Fishing	Stable/in decline	Fishing and depend heavily on food, plus material and cash loans.

Table 3.3 Livelihood Diversification in Phat Sanday Commune

Activities	No. of Households	Area/Size
Fishing	714	
Rice farming	50	Total land area of 50 ha
Fish cages	95	Total number of 95 fish cages
House repairs	01	
Farming	34	Total land area of 136 ha
Petty trade	20	
Fish processing	50	
Battery charging	04	
Boat repairs	08	
Mechanics	03	
Wage laborers	30	
Fish trading	17	
Boat driving services	03	
Karaoke	01	
Firewood cutting for sale	04	

Source: Phat Sanday commune report (2007)

It is important to note that this is a convenient snapshot of livelihood of activities in the community, so there may be more than four groupings in reality, as pointed out in Table 3.3. However, my classification helps give a general picture, since each of these employment groups play a prominent role in the community.

Table 3.3 shows that livelihood activities do not distinguish between primary, secondary, and tertiary employment among household members, but describes the general livelihood activities in the study area - as an entire commune. However, the wealth statuses of the households can be divided into four: rich, medium-income, poor and poorest families. The rich families usually carry out non-fishing activities, such as fish trading, money lending and fish processing, while the medium-income families are involved in the use of large-scale fishing-gear operations, such as the use of bamboo fence traps and gillnets. The poor families are associated with small-scale fishing operations, using nets and hook lines, fishing traps and also providing labor. These smaller types of fishing gear are also used by the poorest families.

The name of the community also reflects the abundance of fish in the area; the word 'Phat' means 'disperse' and 'Sanday' is the local name of a fish (in English the 'great white sheatfish'). An old Khmer fisherman told me there was no need for him to recall the long history of resource abundance around the Tonle Sap, as just after the fall of the Khmer Rouge the lake was still full of fish. He said that at the back of his house, alongside the river was an inundated forest, and when the water level receded many fish would be trapped in small holes in the swamp. As a result, there was no need to go fishing at all.

Like villages elsewhere around the lake and within the country as a whole, the collapse of the Khmer Rouge rendered massive displacement, with many displaced and/or disabled persons suffering from poverty. Some returned to their place of origin, while many others could not return to their homes as they had lost ownership of their properties, having had to abandon them during the Khmer Rouge period. Due to widespread famine, harvest failures, and the presence of poor agricultural land, plus poverty, some people were induced to move to Tonle Sap Lake. The Vietnamese population living around the lake today is the result of the first and second migration wave, and includes a handful of Vietnamese soldiers who didn't return to Vietnam during the Vietnamese military withdrawal in 1989. This means their population

consists of original and new residents. In fact, some of the residents I spoke to were originally from farming communities. In short, demographic change in post-war Cambodia has resulted in the establishment of three types of village: 'old', 'new' and 'mixed' villages, across the country. Phat Sanday commune consists of all three types as a whole. First, Phat Sanday can be regarded as an 'old village, as it existed before 1970 during King Sihanouk's rule. At that time, there was only Phat Sanday village within Phat Sanday commune, with a Buddhist temple representing social organization in the village. There was no sub-division into five villages at that time i.e. Phat Sanday, Kampong Chamlong, Neang Sav, Tuol Neang Sav and Koh Ta Pov villages – for such a division has occurred due to 'new' villages having been built in the 1980s, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. These new villages were initially populated by large groups of displaced people, refugees and returnees, including Vietnamese and Khmers from land-based communities in others parts of the country.

Prior to 1985, the populated areas of the country had been able to rebuild, whereas some remote areas remained in the hands of Khmer Rouge cadres. In Phat Sanday, fighting between the Khmer Rouge and government soldiers continued at this time, so it was still a war zone; however, after 1985, the Khmer Rouge lost its power and disappeared because government soldiers came to expel the group. It was at this time that poorer people from land-based communities came to fish and settle down in the area. For instance, Tuol Neang Sav village was built over the period 1985 to 1988, and nearly all its initial residents were poor people displaced from farming communities in Kampong Thom province, who migrated to the lake and set up an official floating village. This pattern of migration constitutes a form of 'permanent migration', as compared to the two other patterns of migration around the Tonle Sap: 'temporary migration' and 'seasonal migration'. The third group of villages included the 'mixed' villages, which were comprised of 'old' residents who had lived in the community prior to 1970, plus 'newcomers', - refugees, returnees or displaced people. As a result, Phat Sanday commune can be considered a 'mixed village'.

Since 1982, there has been a steady flow of Khmer people into Phat Sanday; however, it is also noticeable that since 1993 and Cambodia's integration into the market economy, those displaced and poor people from the farming communities and impoverished areas have sought to fish and practice illegal fishing as a way of earning

a livelihood in the area. The main motives for these movements have been economics, landlessness and the poor quality of agricultural land. Most of these inward migrants came from Kampong Cham, Battambang, Kampong Thom and Prey Veng provinces, representing a form of 'temporary migration'. It is clear now that a few distinct groups of households reside unofficially in certain locations near the official five villages in Phat Sanday, such as the three unofficial villages of Psot (about 32 households), Praek Toal (25 households) and Ta Som (67 households). Lastly, there are many land-based communities who move seasonally to the lake especially during the off-farm season, and this form of movement can be classified as 'seasonal migration'. Thus, it is obvious that the composition of the population in the study area has not been homogenous since the war, and that an increasing number of people have become dependent on fishing, contributing to the failure of the collective fishing communities system.

Not only changing patterns in terms of the village itself but also changing social relations can be found in Phat Sanday. As Marston (2011) reflects on the work of May Ebihara, who uses a number of archetypes, social relations among Khmer villages were severely impacted by the wars, especially the massive destruction wrought during the Khmer Rouge era, changes further intensified by the free market economy and informal social patterns of interaction that go beyond the family or village levels. However, she also points out how certain kinds of social relations have been retained and can still be found in Khmer villages - as they had been during the pre-war period - such as reciprocity and kin relations. Ebihara's work concludes that the degree to which contradictory perspectives exist has no one explanation, as these perspectives are subject to the different contexts that exist in Cambodian society. In fact, each community has its own particular set of social relations, and these differences in character have existed (varying slightly) along a continuum, based on these ideas.

I found that the older residents often don't respect the newcomers who were displaced and are poor, and this seems to reflect the divided relations that still exist between the old and new residents, as they tend to distinguish themselves from each other. Another important reason is that the newcomers tend to move to the area and compete over resource access. As a result, the composition of and complex social

relations to be found in the fishing community, and the nature of the community itself, may lead us to understand why common-property resource institutions, and in particular fisheries resource management institutions around the Tonle Sap Lake, failed and led to the depletion of natural resources.

To sum up, civil war-induced poverty and internal migrations destroyed the old formal economy that once existed. My research also found that the population of Phat Sanday community is not homogenous, and contains people who have undergone, or continue to undergo three different types of migration; permanent, temporary and seasonal migration – as a reflection of their cultural roots. As Vandergeest (2006) states, the classic conception of the community and in particular the Asian rural community, usually involves migrant communities in which people have been mobile or displaced, and who often have weak property rights. Thus, the space around Tonle Sap Lake, for the poor or poorest households, is being revived after the economic crises caused by civil war and the later transitional period in Cambodia.

The richness of the fisheries in the area has attracted not only poor and landless Khmer people from the land-based communities, but also ethnic groups such as the Vietnamese and Muslim Cham. The perceptions of the poor are that fishing does not require land ownership and will enable them to make a viable living with little capital investment (just a small rowing boat and traditional fishing gear). At least for those who have no other choice, the lake is expected to be livable, and; therefore, fishing is the last resort for the poor and so has attracted many people over the years who have no other means of subsisting. In addition, seasonal migrants depend on rice cultivation and exchange rice for fish, but now during the off-season migrate to the lake temporarily in order to fish and sell (previously an exchange system was used in which fish were caught by the fishers and then exchanged for rice with those from farming communities, and especially fishing-cum-farming communities). The exchange system no longer exists, as the market has brought an end to this traditional system, meaning the market economy has become much more important in the everyday lives of local people in the study fishing villages, as well as elsewhere.

Although there is no reliable documentation giving an estimate of the total number of Vietnamese dwelling on the water around the lake, there is a significant

number. Koh Ta Pov is home to 149 Vietnamese households out of a total of 918. Physically, the Vietnamese part of the village is separated from the Khmer village, but is also located along the river. This physical division occurred as a result of political attacks by the Khmer Rouge in the early 1980s, and the Vietnamese also prefer living in their own community. Most of them are long-term residents, with the older Vietnamese saying that their parents were born in the village or in other farming communities in Cambodia, though their grandparents migrated to Cambodia during the SOC regime. In short, they are at least the second or even fourth generation in the area; from among the first or second wave of migrants.

The Vietnamese are relatively small-scale fishers who depend heavily on fishing for their survival and have no landholdings; however, the Vietnamese households around Tonle Sap Lake are not as homogenous as at my research site. One older Vietnamese villager estimated that the socio-economic statuses in Koh Ta Pov village can broadly be classified into three. First, approximately 60 percent are poor, but not destitute, and people in this group face food insufficiency issues every day, while the remaining 40 percent can be regarded as poor, though they have enough food to eat, but little or no property. There are also three or four non-fishing households who are better-off, and they are fish traders and run merchandise shops. The well-being of each group remains unclear, but there is no doubt that food insufficiency is still a major problem in the community. Also, nearly all in these groups have no schooling and cannot read Khmer; some have even had only a little schooling in the Vietnamese language.

Faced with such a difficult situation, a savings group was established at the end of 2011, and members contribute voluntarily to save money - 300, 500 or 1,000 Riel per month. The total amount of money collected is then used to support and help the Vietnamese, regardless of whether they are members or non-members, and in particular those who need money urgently such as for funerals, medical treatment and so on

Throughout the year, the floating houses move up and down at least twice to accommodate the changing water levels and to move into sheltered locations. Thus, the form of the village is not static, but is based on the changing flood levels. The village normally gathers together during the wet season, while during the dry season,

it disperses into smaller units. Since the village is located on the edge of a river which connects to Tonle Sap Lake, in July/August, when the water starts rising, they tow their houses toward the Stung Sen River, where it is safe and sheltered from the swell. When the water starts receding back to Tonle Sap Lake, they tow their houses out, extending them into the lake or creeks of the Stung Sen River, using the flooded forests as protection from storms. However, not all floating houses move; some Khmer have their houses in the right position all-year-round and just adjust them up and down based on the flood level, but do not tow them away from the previous location. This moving requires help from family members or nearby villagers. However, the floating houses are not free moving; they have their own space and maintain this space while moving back and forth. I was told by one Vietnamese that they only occasionally have small quarrels with the Khmers over overlapping space for the floating houses, while fishing conflicts rarely happen since they are small-scale fishers when compared to the Khmer households.

The life histories of the Vietnamese can hardly be described as stable and harmonious, as they have faced frequent political attacks over the years. Like the Vietnamese elsewhere in Cambodia, during the rise of the Khmer Rouge, all of them were expelled back to Vietnam, and some were even killed. The Vietnamese in Phat Sanday fled and moved out of the Tonle Sap area using small rowing boats along the Stung Sen River. They stopped at a landing site of a prefecture in Kampong Thom province, and then walked for approximately one month across Kampong Cham province towards the border provinces. During their trip, they begged for food from local people along the way. In order to cross the border, they had to report on the situation inside Cambodia at the border checkpoint, so the border guards on the Vietnamese side issued them a letter to show their identity and allowed them to enter Vietnam. With this letter, they were able to register to become village members. Most settled down within provinces near the border with Cambodia, such as Tay Ninh, Dong Thap, Long An and Long Ben provinces, but it was not unusual for them to move far from the border, as they were poor. Adults were sent to study Vietnamese language in illiteracy classes, while young people were sent to study in formal schools. The Vietnam government also provided them with shelter and farmland - to make a living. However, some abandoned their land since it was not fertile enough to

grow rice, vegetables or potatoes. Also, they had difficulty accessing clean water, as water from the open wells had a sour taste. Instead, they resorted to wage labor work during the on- and off-farm seasons, while some continued fishing, as they had at Tonle Sap Lake. During that time, life was hard, as Vietnam was also not at peace, so they had to endure civil war and bombing.

After the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, some who survived decided to settle down in Vietnam and some returned to the lake between 1981 and 1985, rowing their boats over several months along the Mekong River. It was easy to cross the border at that time as there were no border checks on the Cambodian side. They were granted residency rights and the socialist SOC issued them with identity cards and family booklets authorized by the Cambodian authorities. A handful of them, those who used to be soldiers, kept the Khmer Rouge guerillas under surveillance and spied on their site when the Vietnamese troops came to destroy their cover. Now, they still hold the ID cards given to them during that time. Most of the Vietnamese in Phat Sanday were born in Cambodia but do not have Khmer nationality, though some told me they have applied for citizenship.

I will use the case studies of two Vietnamese families to illustrate their varying life histories, as one family succeeded in their business and moved from being very poor to quite well-off in the village, mainly by changing their occupations.

Case 1: Mr. Thy was born in Cambodia and resided around Tonle Sap during the 1950s (Prince Sihanouk's rule). With the arrival of the Khmer Rouge in 1975, like other Vietnamese his parents fled to Vietnam when he was still only seventeen years-old. In Vietnam, he was sent to study Vietnamese at a formal school, but he later dropped-out of school during the sixth grade. He then got married, as his wife came from Cambodia as well, and the Vietnamese government provided them with a small piece of land in order to cultivate rice. After the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, his family decided to abandon the land and return to Cambodia, using a wooden rowing boat and travelling along the Mekong River. Unfortunately, he was prohibited by the Vietnamese border guards from entering Cambodia, as it was not safe at that time. He tried crossing the border three times, and the first two times the guards arrested him and sent him back; threatening to arrest him again if he tried to cross the river border again. On the last and third time, he was able to cross the border, then he

and his wife paddled their small boat along the Mekong River and finally arrived at Tonle Sap Lake about one month later. He said, “we used to live here so we wanted to come back”. There was no place as comfortable for us as Tonle Sap Lake, as there were plenty of fish to eat.”

Now his family is relatively well-off in the village because he shifted from fishing to petty trade activities, such as repairing boats, selling vegetables and selling desserts. In the past his family was very poor, as he owned only a small houseboat with a leaky thatched roof. He had no money at all, but risked borrowing money from a government agent whose office was located close to the village, setting up a large-scale fishing operation (not a fishing lot owner, but a medium-scale fishing operation as defined by the Fisheries Law) and running fish cages. It is not common for poor people like him to receive a large loan, but it happened because he is trustworthy, so was able to get a loan while paying interest. However, he was forced into bankruptcy because the profit from fishing did not cover the interest. Later on, he tried to pay his debts back in installments and shifted to repairing boats, with the support of his sons. He had never learned how to fix boats before, but just looked at what others did, then tried to fix villagers broken boats. Because this job was heavy and difficult and his health was not so good, he gave up the job and moved into vegetable growing/selling, while his wife started making and selling desserts in the village, which she does to this day.

He has three daughters and four sons, all of whom did not go to school; they were taught Vietnamese at home. Now they are able to read and write Vietnamese to a very basic level, but are Khmer illiterate. All of them work to earn money and support the family, except his two youngest sons who are still small (seven years-old). Their three daughters sell desserts and porridge, while his wife is responsible for cooking. Each daughter makes a profit of around ten to fifteen US Dollars per day. This job gives a steady profit, while the profits from fishing are not regular but depend on seasonal variations in the fish catch and require rather a high investment, as well as the payment of fishing fees.

His eldest daughter is 28 years-old and she used to work in Phnom Penh at a garment factory; however, she worked less than one month and then decided to return to the village, because she was unfamiliar with the working conditions and living

environment, and because her salary was low when compared to her previous small business. Another two of his adult sons moved to Phnom Penh to stay with his relatives, in order to learn how to fix motorbikes, but now they have finished learning and have moved to Siem Reap, where they rent a small unit and run their business. He told me that most of the Vietnamese families are poor and are hardly able to make a living because they are too dependent on fishing as their main source of income and cannot shift to another occupation like his family did. More importantly, during the peak fishing season, the fishers earn more money but also spend a lot drinking, buying cigarettes and so forth. He said they are shortsighted and don't save any money, which is different to the Vietnamese in Vietnam who work hard and are good at saving money.

He taught his sons Vietnamese at home, and the other Vietnamese in the village asked him to allow their children to study with his sons, but he can earn money teaching in the village. The Vietnamese students have to pay him 300 to 500 Riel per person per day, based on which grade they are in; first, second or third grade. These fees are for teaching and to cover gasoline fees, since he has to fetch the students from their homes using his motorized boat every day. It is difficult for them to travel to school by themselves, since they don't have a boat – they put this aside for fishing. Moreover, the parents are not so interested in their children studying. Most of the Vietnamese children cannot speak Khmer because they rarely communicate with Khmer people, so studying in the village enables them to read and write Vietnamese, meaning they can do math to a very basic level, at least enough to sell their fish catches to the traders.

On occasion, his daughters visit Vietnam since he has some relatives there, and nowadays it is easy to move back and forth by taking a bus to Vietnam; it only takes half a day. He said that he does not need to use his passport because he crosses the border through the unofficial gate, calling his relatives on the Vietnamese side to pick him up at an agreed point, then when he returns to Cambodia he crosses back the same way. His father had a piece of land but abandoned it, and now land is very expensive because the Vietnamese government built a road across the land. He said if they had not returned to Cambodia, they would be living in a floating house.

Case 2: Mr. Vann Nov is 63 years-old and was born in Cambodia, and has resided around Tonle Sap Lake his whole life, except before the arrival of the Khmer Rouge period. He is currently retired but before he used to be a fisherman. He had a little schooling in the Khmer language at a pagoda during Prince Sihanouk's rule; therefore, is able to read and write Khmer. He also learned Vietnamese to the sixth grade in Phat Sanday.

Before the war in Cambodia he fled to Vietnam, in 1972, since he knew about the situation in Cambodia from his time transporting food for the government military. Many other Vietnamese had to flee to Vietnam later, in 1975. In Vietnam, he lived in Tay Ninh province, next to Mondul Kiri province in Cambodia, and while some Vietnamese who migrated still fish, the Vietnamese government provided his family with a plot of land on which to build a house, cultivate rice and plant potatoes. However, the soil was infertile and he was unfamiliar with the job, since he used to be fisherman.

At that time life in Vietnam was very difficult, as Vietnam was being bombed and he faced conscription to the Vietnamese army. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, he decided to return to Cambodia, in 1981, using a small rowing boat which he took along the Mekong River. Once again, in mid-1993, during the first national elections, he fled to Vietnam through Chrey Thom (name of a river border point located in Chrey Thom village, Koh Thom district in Kandal province) due to Khmer Rouge attacks, but then in 1994 returned to Phat Sanday and settled down there.

These two life stories offer a very detailed narrative of the Vietnamese migrants' life in Cambodia during the civil-war and their struggles living in Cambodia.

During the early 1980s, the Khmer Rouge carried sporadic attacks on a collection of Vietnamese floating houses, as well as the Khmer government office, burning houses, bombing and shooting civilians. The Vietnamese's makeshift houseboats tend to float near open waterways, and can be easily be dismantled and transported elsewhere, such as to Chhnouk Trou which is a crowded area. As a result, the village is still separated from the Khmer settlement. As one Vietnamese woman recalled about the presence of the Khmer Rouge cadres:

The Khmer Rouge sometimes shot gun fire across and came here very often. They attacked this village, which they could cross easily as it is located alongside the river. We ate rice early in the evening, before it got dark and rarely lit candles or went outside. We had to wait until we were sure the Khmer Rouge would not come and then go into the boathouse to sleep (Field notes, Feb. 2012).

Once again, before Cambodia's first election in 1993, the Khmer Rouge continued their sporadic attacks, and more specifically on 10th March 1993 attacked Chong Kneas floating community in Siem Reap province, the single most violent incident to occur during the UNTAC era as it killed 33 people, while 34 were wounded (Jordens 1996). My interviewees said that Phat Sanday was immediately emptied of its Vietnamese population, and the remaining three Vietnamese households would not flee their homes as they were too poor. Many fled by boat and bus to Vietnam or the Cambodian border, or other areas around Phnom Penh. This was not the kind of forced migration as happened in the 1970s, as UNTAC staff played a key role in escorting their boats, in large convoys, from the Tonle Sap down to the Mekong River and to the border. After the first national election in 1993, the situation got better and they gradually returned to Cambodia.

The Vietnamese are rather well integrated and their culture has become less and less visible. I found that the negative attitudes of the Khmer towards the Vietnamese in the study area are less common partly because the Vietnamese community here has existed for a long time and the relationships the people have endured, which is quite different from the recent migrants who retain a distinct identity. For example, there is intermarriage between Khmers and the Vietnamese, and though the Vietnamese speak their own language in the house. These older migrants mostly perceive themselves to be the same as Cambodians, the only difference being race. However, it is not necessarily true that the Khmer have the same perception. They treat the lake as their homeland, as a place where their descendants were buried, and they continue to engage in fishing. That is one reason why some of them decided to return, even though they faced a series of challenges in Cambodia, such as the Khmer Rouge's attacks in the early 1980s and early 1993 election period, and the opponents of the government continually raising the issue of their presence in Cambodia.

However, the Khmer people claim that the Vietnamese remain separate, although they have stayed for a long time in Cambodia, and that somehow they cannot be Khmer. This implies that it is hard for them to be accepted by Khmer people, although the Vietnamese have made cultural changes such as eating Khmer food, wearing Khmer clothes and speaking Khmer as part of developing a Khmer cultural identity. The less-than benevolent motives here show that gaps still exist between the Khmer and Vietnamese from the Khmer people's point of view.



Figure 3.1 Floating Houses along the Stung River in the Dry Season



Figure 3.2 Floating Houses in the Wet Season



Figure 3.3 Small-scale Fishing Gear: Multiple hook lines



Figure 3.4 Small-scale Fishermen Casting Gillnets

3.3 Fishing Adaptations to the Geographical and Ecological Settings

Empirical research over decades has led some scholars to oppose what Hardin (1968) ‘misunderstood’ as the “the tragedy of the commons”, and to re-frame it as “the tragedy of open access”. In contrast, ‘human ecology’ studies support the fact that humankind tends to adapt to and is entwined with the existing built-in environment and is not necessarily linked to the over-exploitation of natural resources (Berkes 1989). Currently; however, Hardin tragedy’s metaphor is well thought-of in the area of resource management, and especially with respect to fish resources, as these resources are susceptible to this phenomenon (Berkes 1985). The Tonle Sap is a case in point, as the destruction of fishing grounds has stemmed from complex external forces. The emergence of scientific knowledge has tended to disregard indigenous knowledge about natural resources as well as resource management systems, resulting quite often in the failure of resource management activities (Martin 2001). There is; therefore, a need to understand how local fishers in the study area

have maintained their livelihoods in terms of access to fish resources, as well as adapted their fishing gear and fishing activities as a result of the power relations, cultural and local knowledge and changing ecological systems in place around the Tonle Sap.

The fishing community has developed coping mechanisms to deal with floods and the level of access to natural resources as a part of its coping strategy. Thus, the life of most Vietnamese families goes on in cycles, as determined by the changing water flows and the ecosystem of the lake, reflecting a process of biological survival in which local people adapt to the ecology of the lake all-year-round, using a number of strategies to ensure that fish are caught - by knowing when and where to place particular fishing gear. Moving fishing gear around is important, in order to target seasonal changes. However, understanding the human ecology does not provide enough of an explanation, in the contemporary context, of Tonle Sap Lake, but it has been proven useful in traditional knowledge research based on fishers' points of view, and sometimes these bodies of knowledge may be handed down for generations, allowing one to understand the social, historic, economic and political factors influencing relations between the users and their environment. The seasonal calendar and variations in fish catches, and the ecological adaptations that take place, can be divided into four separate periods during the year: 1) July to September, 2) October to December, 3) January to March, and 4) April to June, as will be presented below:

July, August and September: This is a low fish catch period, as the wet season commences. Water flows from Tonle Sap Lake into the river and starts rising. The water at this time seems to be stagnant, and is almost black and smells bad for around two months in some fishing areas. At this time, the village settlement (floating houses) forms a collective unit, especially the weaker houseboats which are towed into sheltered locations to protect them from storms and heavy rain. During these months, the fish are poisoned by the dead leaves from submerged trees or the flooded forest, as well as trunks with roots and soft debris, and also grasses, all of which decay in the water, combined with the heavy rain. Due to such an ecology, fish normally migrate out to escape the poisoned water, and so it is difficult to fish and the fishers need to find clearer water. In general, the rise in water levels causes many fish to move out toward the floodplains; therefore, fish are not easy to catch, as most of

the migratory fish swim into the floodplain to feed and spawn. During this period, there are plenty of black fish (a local term meaning fish with a black skin) such as *chhdaur* (Giant snakehead), *krum* (Greater bony lipped barb) and *andeng* (Clarius). These kinds of fish fetch a fairly high value per unit of weight, because they are quite scarce. It is rare for the poor fishers, especially the Vietnamese, to fish far away from the village, because they have little available capital to cover any fishing trips - they have only small-scale fishing gear, plus most importantly, have only a small boat, which cannot protect them from storms, wind or heavy rain. As a result, fishing activity is low, since the fish catch from such trips would not cover the costs, particularly fuel costs. Due to the transportation costs, such trips are only undertaken by households with a motorized boat and which have enough capital. These households have to travel far to find good fishing grounds, in some cases between seven and twenty kilometers away from the village; crossing into other provinces such as Siem Reap and Pursat. They call this period 'traveling to chase the fish migration'. Fishing traps are not used so much due to the depth of the water, so nets are used. This period incurs most hardship for the poor, as the fish catch only provides enough to cover food consumption. Due to the high costs of undertaking long fishing trips, as well as geographical constraints, the Vietnamese fishers normally stay in the village and go fishing nearby, selling almost all their fish to supply food consumption needs. Some use the days before the onset of the peak fishing season to modify or repair their fishing gear. It should be noted that fishing activities have reduced in recent years because the size of the fish catches has fallen, and many household have to take out loans (from fish traders) in order to support their families, especially their food and home consumption activities. However, the more they struggle the less secure they become, as they cannot sell enough fish to cover their loans. They make an effort to cope with hardship by reducing their food consumption activities, such as changing their diets from eating cooked rice to porridge. With the increase in outstanding debts, some families keep a rice stock to one side, to cover this period. The poor are not able to save money and instead call on small loans to buy condiments, rice or get cash from petty traders, relatives or neighbors, particularly in times of need or crisis. These debts usually focus on covering their food supplies rather than expanding their fishing activities, due to the calculus of gain and loss, in the sense that fishing is a low return

activity and has risks. They earn additional income by collecting wild leaves, morning glory and snails; gathering firewood and aquatic animals for sale, but this is done mostly by Khmers who live close to the larger flooded forest.

October, November and December: At this time the water level recedes gradually and fish migrate in. Because it is the peak of fishing season, fishing activity is high. Fish are relatively abundant and fishers go fishing almost every day. The price of fish is relatively low at this time because the supply is good at the market. During this period, people hope to save money and settle any debts from earlier periods. If they cannot catch fish at this time, their outstanding debts will increase and they will not have enough money in reserve for the off-fishing season. The living conditions are better at this time, as they are able to catch more fish, have more cash and are able to settle their debts to the fish traders, as well as save money. Due to the informal fishing fees and the need to buy or upgrade fishing gear, fishers have to take out more loans from the fish traders at this time. The fish traders tend to provide the loans, as this makes their businesses more profitable.

January, February and March: At this time, the water flows out of river toward Tonle Sap Lake, and the fish stay near the surface and are easily caught, because the water is receding and the fish migrate to near the village. Also, the fishing grounds reduce in size with the receding water. Most of the households fish at this time and can save money to cover the off-season. The living conditions are better at this time because they catch more fish to cover their cash needs and can settle any small debts with the fish traders, as well as save money. Calling on loans from the fish traders is also rather easy at this time. Recently, since the fishing lots were closed, local people have not been able to find work as wage laborers at the lots; in the past they could find alternative work such as lot laborers and repairing mesh nets (especially the women), while some families used to pay fees to fish inside the lots.

April, May and June: The water level falls rapidly and becomes quite shallow in some parts of the lake, especially within the community fisheries, which are off-limits to fishing. The fish catch is rather small, so local people seek help from fish traders in the form of cash loans.

In short, the fish catch periods can be classified into three: the lowest fish catch period between July and September, the highest fish catch period between October and December, and the medium fish catch period between January and June. The local knowledge mentioned above is based partly on Khmer people's accounts, as the Vietnamese view their fishing activities as not regular, plus they do not fix their fishing gear like the Khmers. Aside from this fact, local people change their fishing gear throughout the year in order to fit-in with the changing water regime. To sum up, owning no land, together with having little capital available, the fishers manage to survive by changing their fishing gear and practices, based on the changing ecological system. However, this does not give a full explanation of the human ecology of the area, given the informal economy context within which it operates.

3.4 Summary

This chapter has shed some light on the historical development of the Vietnamese community, and especially the fishing community around Tonle Sap Lake, including its composition at the present time. In this chapter, I have also illustrated how village patterns have been changed and have not remained homogenous due to war in Cambodia, and nature of community need to be deep understanding. The composition of Phat Sanday community is remarkably heterogeneous, as it consists of returnees, mobile dwellers, the vulnerable and displaced, and has done so particularly since the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime. This population includes first and second wave Vietnamese, who were encouraged to return during the socialist SOC regime, under Vietnamese influence. The Vietnamese in Cambodia have had to deal with political attacks and violence, as carried out by Khmer Rouge soldiers during the early 1980s plus after the first national election in Cambodia in 1993. Meanwhile, being fishers, their ways of life are attached to fishing as a form of biological survival, and they use local knowledge to adapt to the changing ecology of the Tonle Sap and its water regimes. However, an image of harmonious access to fishing resources does not provide a complete explanation of the situation, given the informal economy context within which they exist.