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« The Indigenous Population of the North-East »

The indigenous population - also called Highlanders - is composed of different ethnic groups living mostly in the north eastern part of the country. They have been living in the remote hilly forests for centuries, while both Lao, Khmer and Chinese have more recently settled along the rivers and the highlands of the two northern provinces. By the way, it is worth mentioning that the term « minority » appears irrelevant in the sense that in Ratanakiri and Monduliri they constitute the bulk of the total population (70% in the former and 80% in the latter). In this context, they must be regarded more as a majority than a minority in these areas.

The term « Highlanders » implies a group identity which does not exist in reality. Above the village unit - whose average is about 200 people - there is no collective form of sociopolitical organisation despite the mutual recognition between villages belonging to the same group or to different ones. Different ethnic groups make up the total highlander population, and membership of one of these groups defines the individual indigenous ethnic identity.

Thirteen ethnic groups with their own distinct languages can be identified. If we except the Jorai who derive from the Malayo-polynesian linguistic family, the others belong to the Môn-khmer family. Most of them have a common origin. In the course of time, each one of them has developed his own peculiarity which permits him to define his identity by observable facts and figures (cultural pattern, crafts, ceremonies, specific features, etc.). However, these groups still share a similar belief system and agricultural practices even if nowadays some families shift to low land rice cultivation and are likely to adjust with the « Khmer way of life ».

The Highlanders have preferably established their homes and villages in the red basaltic land of the central plateau, cultivated an astonishing number of different hill rices and other crops, grazed their livestock, hunted, fished and gathered various products of the forest. Their way of life is founded on the recognition of the interdependence between themselves, their environment and their relationship with the spirits and the supernatural forces which they believe to inhabit their surroundings.

Highlander communities do not have to be considered in terms of uniform, static and unorganised societies. They have their own history, traced by migrations, wars and cohabitation, exchange, and more or less turbulent relationships with outside groups like the Cham, the Lao, the Thai and the French. The contact with the Khmer is quite recent, if we except some precursors who dared to penetrate the region for slave trade, from Angkor period onwards up to the nineteenth century. In fact, it was during the Sangkum period that the cambodian government implemented for the first time some national development policies, but unfortunately without any concertation with the local population. The assertion was to civilize and khmerize the people of the forest who were supposed to be ignorant, superstitious, unable to manage themselves, and « savage ».

Of course, this appears to be completely false. Rules of conducts and behaviours are numerous and the socio-economic organisation, mostly determined by kingship networks and clanic or lineage membership, confer on the village an elaborated framework. Villages function according to customary notions of obligations to the ancestors and the family, and the respect of the spiritual forces which inhabit the environment. Such a customary law, stewarded by elders, means that the spiritual forces do have the power to intervene in human affairs and can afflict the well being of the family, the group or the whole village if duties and ceremonies have not being properly done « according to the tradition ». This spiritual sphere which is acting as a reference and a cocoon around the living place must not be perceived as a mere superstitious set of beliefs - like the various ones we find in a khmer village - but as a pattern of sensitivity providing a *deep meaning* to the human life, even if the purpose of most of the religious festivities is to get rid of the malevolent spirits who roam in the living area. Simultaneously, the various kinds of supernatural forces are acting as « protectors » of the forest : some areas are not allowed to be cut or used in any way by the villagers. Some plants and a few special trees, supposed to be the domain of the divinities, are also restricted from any use. These relations with the supernatural forces provide a traditional system of protection for the ecosystem and therefore prevent an untimely and uncontrolled access to the local resources.

For ages, the Highlanders have learned, through observation and experience, how to manage with their ecological environment. So their vernacular knowledge regarding the nature is not only vast and complex but effective in the sense that, contrary to what the cambodian people think, they have not destroyed the forest by adopting slash and burn cultivation. This kind of practice means that the forest is temporarily cut : the land is cultivated from three to five years (depending its quality) and thereafter trees are growing again. The forest regeneration will take 15-20 years and only after this period the highlanders will be able to work again on this land. This system can be sustainable insofar as there is no demographic pressure and the fallow is respected.

But today such an increase in the population can be noticed in some areas : for example some big villages can reach 700 people, a density which is traditionally unusual. One of the reasons is increased monopolizing of the red fertile land in Ratanakiri by the new migrants (Khmer, Sino-Cambodians). The result is that the Highlanders face land pressure and, consequently, tend to

increase the duration of cultivation and shorten the traditional adjusted period which allows a proper reforestation.

It is common to hear among the Khmer that the Highlanders have to face regular problems to avoid hunger, poverty, disease and, more generally, a deprived life. In fact, their traditional agricultural system does not contribute to verify this drastic statement. Some precise calculations demonstrate that the yield for the dry rice (on the basaltic soil) is above one tonne per hectare, and can reach twice, even more. Even if a village is made up of socio-economic disparities despite a mutual aid system, a good amount of families have a regular surplus of crops - including rice and vegetables - they can sell or exchange to the district markets.

Regarding health, it is true that villagers suffer from serious disease in this highly prevalent malaria area. But it does not mean they have no knowledge regarding health practices. The traditional remedies made up of plants, roots, leaves and barks are thus very useful, and the magico-religious therapeutic ceremonies have some positive social and psychological effects, whenever modern medicine is non available, or not sufficient to recover from biological and social disorders.

Nowadays the indigenous people, who are still living over a wide and scattered area, have to face some unprecedented changes. These transformations take form in the increasing influence of the market economy, the rapid exploitation of the uplands areas for commercial purposes and government policies which implicitly support these changes and encourage the « khermisation » of the Highlanders by shifting their villages nearer roads, making them practising settled agriculture and trying to integrate them in the modern market economy (an insertion that some of them do quite well). These foregoing changes pose severe problems for the future subsistence, security and autonomy of the local communities. If we add the exponential increase of migrants who take the opportunity of lack of any strict regulations regarding land access and who do not hesitate to take unscrupulously, sometimes illegally with bogus documents, the forest traditionally used by the Highlanders, we can presume that many aspects of indigenous culture, knowledge and wealth are seriously threatened if nothing is done *very quickly* to protect the rights of these people.

The most drastic change by expropriation of forest lands by private commercial interests has already started. This trend is followed by the government of Phnom Penh as well : recently, the major part of the forested areas in Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri has been given to an Indonesian company having a poor forest management experience. We may wonder what about the future of the 50 000-60 000 Highlanders who are living in this granted zone. It seems astounding that the concerned populations have never been consulted and, even today, are not yet informed about this so called forest development project which is not less than a mere robbery of their own traditional land.

If such a thing happens, Ratanakiri - nowadays a peaceful and lovely province - will face a dramatic social and ecological crisis. Not only some of the most wonderful primary and secondary

forests will be destroyed by logging, but the inter-ethnic relations between Khmer and Highlanders will be strongly distorted. The present problematic situation in this part of Cambodia needs to be discussed and debated by various specialists working together and, more importantly, along with the local population.

Up to now, the indigenous' critical position is compounded by the fact that their legal rights have not been clarified so far. They have not yet been recognised as citizens of Cambodia although it is expected they will shortly be recognised as citizens through their categorisation as « Khmer loeu ». But so far, this absence of legal status prevents them to receive « official » legal land rights.

Different moves have to be implemented to protect the elementary rights of the local people. We will just quote here the three most important and urgent ones. Firstly they need a *citizenship recognition with a special status, acknowledging them as an indigenous population of the land they have historically occupied*, stipulating a particular relationship with their environment. If not, it is likely they will be given individual land rights on a par with Khmer citizens, without recognising the particular form of communal land use traditionally practiced by Highlanders using swidden agriculture. Yet if they are recognised as the unique indigenous population of the highlands which they inhabit, then negotiations could be made to ensure some recognition of their communal claims to land and the customary laws which govern much of their behaviour in relation to their physical environment. Secondly, an urgent requirement is the establishment of a communication system whereby there would be the dissemination of information to communities allowing them to make informed choices, and a system of consultation and representation which ensures their voice is heard. Thirdly, moves must be made to create a social environment where cultural pluralism is accepted as an integral and vital element of a modern nation democratic state that Cambodia is supposed to become.

Phnom Penh, 18 janvier 1996