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Local Perceptions and Responses to Risk
A Study of a Cambodian Village

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Local perceptions and responses to risk

A study of a Cambodian village

Introduction

This study focuses on the ways Khmer peasants living in a landmine-affected community build their survival strategy in the face of dangers and uncertainties that may physically, economically and socially impair their lives. Rural families living in post-conflict areas face a wide range of risks that encompass but are by no means limited to anti-personnel landmines.

Western frames of analysis have assumed that peasants are essentially risk averse. J. C. Scott's work illuminates the ways the subsistence economy of the Southeast Asian peasant is often based on safety-first principles because:

> "[the subsistence peasant] *works close enough to the margin that he has a great deal to lose by miscalculating; his limited techniques and the whims of weather expose him, more than most producers, to unavoidable risks; the relative absence of alternatives for gainful employment offer him precious little in the way of economic insurance. If he is even more cautious about endangering his livelihood, he has a rational basis for his reluctance*" (Scott 1976: 25).

This paper argues that in a context where danger permeates the same geographical and psychological space, Scott's argument falls short in anticipating how an individual consciously chooses to risk his life so as to prevent greater risks in the future. In a situation where families lack livelihood alternatives, it is by confronting risk that they protect themselves. This study argues that distinctions between apparently risk prone and risk averse behaviour are inadequate especially when the professional removal of landmines is followed by local initiatives to put them back. Indeed such simple distinction fails to take

account of the intricate linkages between time, local history, social organisation, political system, religious beliefs and human instinct for survival.

This study seeks to provide new insights into risk perceptions by drawing on ethnographic research into the knowledge, attitudes and practices of Khmer peasants. It is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter gauges and analyses the local exposure to vulnerability and discusses the array of risks the ordinary household faces on an everyday basis. The second chapter de-constructs the Euro-American definition of risk in light of local perceptions, understandings and risk-related discourse. The last chapter investigates peasants' pragmatic responses to risk and the ways local resilience, inventiveness and self-reliance form the basis of their survival strategy, hence crafting their own concept of "risk subsistence".

Methodology

This research draws on three years of professional experience in Cambodia working in humanitarian mine action. It is based on primary data collected during fieldwork undertaken in June 2006 in Cambodia. Two weeks were spent in the capital city of Phnom Penh to interview and liaise with landmine clearance agencies, identify the village and collect relevant data. I spent a week living in O'Neang with the national clearance agency demining team. For general safety purposes I was accompanied by a Khmer assistant familiar with the area. Fifty households living on cleared housing plots were interviewed using a questionnaire, an example of which is available in Appendix I. I also gathered additional qualitative data using semi-structured interviews, informal group discussions and participant observation as main research techniques. The target group included peasants, members of the local elite and professional deminers. All interviews were conducted in Khmer, which is my native language. I originally planned to stay in the village for two weeks but my time there was shortened as safety was becoming more of an issue. As we were progressing in our interviews we felt that the Khmer Rouge local elite started to become more curious of the type of information the local inhabitants were giving us.

A. LOCAL EXPOSURE TO VULNERABILITY

A. I. Village overview

O'Neang is a village located along the Thai-Cambodian border in the northwest province of Pailin.[1] The village lies at the base of low hills amidst patches of bamboo forest. In the late 1990s, the area was still covered with pristine forest, the canopy of which provided the Khmer Rouge insurgents who controlled the area with a natural shelter.[2] As a Khmer Rouge stronghold until 1996, Pailin was on the front line during the long-running civil war between the Khmer Rouge on the one hand and Vietnamese and Cambodian government troops on the other. Intense fighting, which started in 1979, resulted in the entire province being severely contaminated by anti-personnel landmines.[3] Today the area is a refuge for former Khmer Rouge leaders.

O'Neang was officially founded in 1998 with the settlement of ten families. Despite the presence of landmines, the village has steadily grown under the continuous flux of internally displaced people.[4] Today the population has reached 248 families with more incoming families attracted by livelihood opportunities along the border.

A. II. Household exposure to scarcity

> "*There are districts in which the position of the rural population is that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in the water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him*" (Tawney 1966 cited in Scott 1976:1).

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[1] To preserve the safety of the interviewees, names of places and persons have been deliberately modified.
[2] The forest or jungle (*prei*) is a symbolic KR hiding place and the formidable domain of wilderness (Ebihara in Ledgerwood 2002 : 94).
[3] According to the Cambodian Mine Victims and Information System (CMVIS), O'Chheukrom is one of the most high risk villages in Cambodia with 63 accidents since 2000. The Commune and districts rank first nationwide in terms of casualty levels.
[4] Most villagers have come from the provinces of Battambang, Kampong Thom, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Cham, Svay Rieng, Prey Veng, Kandal, Takeo, Kampot, and Pursat.

O'Neang is a poor farming community where villagers strive to maintain and expand a thin subsistence margin. Families are susceptible to various types of risk; some of which threaten their survival. For the villagers, making a living is very difficult and whether it is the food they produce for their own consumption or the wage they earn in return, what they have is just "not enough" (*kvah khat*).

Household economies vary from the poorest to the relatively wealthy and these variations translate into different perceptions of time. For the poorest, time is partitioned into short, truncated but equal units as surviving is scheduled on a day to day basis. Poor households lead a hand to mouth existence which they term *ma gnay si ma gnay* or "a day eat a day". More than half of the households interviewed[5] reported that their food supply would last them for a day or two. For the most vulnerable, concepts of time and risk are both measured on a day to day basis. For the more affluent on the other hand, time is linear, whole and continuous as long as the household economy allows people to subsist and plan for weeks or longer.

A. III. The landmine problem

O'Neang is recorded by the Cambodian Mine Victim Information System (CMVIS) as one of the most high risk villages in the country with ten accidents on average per year.[6] The village is located on the *Tumnup Kor Pram* or 'K5' mine belt, which runs along the international border with Thailand, forming a continuous stretch of approximately 600 km long and 500 metres wide.[7] At present, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) does not prioritise clearance on the K5, thus leaving land adjacent to the Thai border with a man-made physical frontier. Despite severe contamination and high casualty rates, mine clearance operations in the area are limited to ensuring safe access to water and other basic necessities. The extent of the landmine contamination notwithstanding, the economic

[5] In O'Neang, households often contain more than the nuclear family. Siblings, relatives and extended families as well as fellow farmers will often be part of the same household.
[6] CMVIS data collected in June 2006.
[7] Handicap International Belgium's estimates suggest the K5 mine belt may contain between 2 to 3 million anti-personnel landmines.

opportunities offered by the border make O'Neang a fast developing community where professional clearance and informal village de-mining occur simultaneously but at different paces.

As de-mining agencies' efforts focus on clearing housing land where families have already settled, local inhabitants progressively venture beyond the village boundaries reclaiming farming land from both the forest and landmines. Because professional clearance can hardly cope with the population's demand for safe land, most local villagers farm on suspect land and undertake mine clearance occasionally so as to maintain cultivation and gain customary tenure rights to the land.[8] The presence of anti-personnel landmines thus constitutes a severe source of physical risk for the ordinary households, which weighs heavily on the local livelihood scale. However it is by no means the single risk factor they face.[9]

A. IV. Land pressure and speculation

Since its creation in 1998 the village has undergone dramatic changes owing to border trade and the influx of people. The northwest province of Pailin is endowed with natural resources, making it attractive to businesses and entrepreneurs. Gem mining, logging and seasonal farming are the major drivers of a cash economy which is further stimulated by the proximity to the Thai border. The international border is fairly porous and sees trafficking of commodities and people alike. Gambling is banned in Thailand, and the Cambodian government has seized the opportunity to encourage casino investments on its side of the border.

Economic growth over the past eight years has pushed up the value of land. A plot that would previously have cost a family 7,000 Thai baht (USD 184) could now be worth 18,000 to 25,000 baht (between USD 474 and USD 657) making land speculation one of

[8] "In fact, the land belonged to the one who cultivated it" (Thierry 1997: 102). For additional information see (Mabbett and Chandler 1995 : 23–38).
[9] Further information is available on the relationships between landmines, livelihood and poverty in (Prio 2004 : 31).

the most lucrative businesses in the area. The majority of the village large landowners are former Khmer Rouge cadres and casino businesses. Many disheartened villagers express the fear that all the land may have already been bought and distributed amongst them hence leaving the poorest with no alternative other than to rely on a patron or to venture into unsafe areas. The price of land is expected to rise further, encouraging villagers to sell the land they may have originally bought (or cleared themselves) in exchange for cash.[10]

A.V. Landlessness

Acquiring a piece of land is the main motive for people to settle in the village. Newcomers, the landless and female-headed households comprise the poorest segment of the local population due to the thinness and inflexibility of their subsistence buffer.[11] More than half of the households interviewed said they have very limited assets or none at all. People often lack land to live on, a house or a *chamkar*[12] (field for growing fruits and vegetables). The fewer the personal assets, the more difficult it is for the household to maintain itself within the social fabric of the community.[13]

Half of the households revealed that they did not own land[14] and were land-sitting for landlords. One of the major conditions to acquire a land title is to live and work the land continuously. With land speculation rife along the Thai border, landowners often ask poor families to occupy property in order to maintain a façade of presence until the owner fulfils the legal requirements. In O'Neang many families are land-sitting in this manner. This entails perpetual instability for the very poor who are compelled to move from one place to another as they are caught in a spiral of short-term land occupation with little prospect of owning their own property.

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[10] Peasants sometimes claim, "We are in a war of houses and a war of land" (Gottesman 2004 : 320).
[11] "The landless are among the poorest in any community" (Simmons and Bottomley 2001 : 39).
[12] Also called garden farming (Vickery 1984; Bottomley 2003).
[13] In Cambodian villages particularly "economic status is equal with power" (Nissen 2005 : 40).
[14] For additional information on the multifaceted problems of land see (Biddulph 2000 : 8).

Lim is a forty-four year old single mother and head of her household. She has moved from the province of Kampong Chhnang to find seasonal work in Thailand and a *chamkar* to cultivate. The land and the house she currently shares with her younger sister and her sister's children belong to the military police. They are land sitting for the owner and she does not know how long they will be allowed to stay. She has no money and she does not dare venture into mine suspected areas. As she put it, "You can't rely on anyone. We go and work in Thailand for three days so as to buy rice. The village chief records our presence but doesn't help us. There is no more land left. You have to take care of yourself, as no one will do it for you." Despite her destitution, Lim expressed no regrets – like many other settlers, the conditions in her home village would have been even worse. She has traded the certainty of having no livelihood prospects at home for the chance to find land and work in this new village. In this life of desperation she believes the slightest chance is still worth taking.

A. VI. Seasonal work in Thailand

Cambodia's north-western provinces offer work opportunities to local peasants[15] because of expanding business and farming activities along the Thai border. Many cross the border illegally to become day and seasonal labourers in large Thai plantations. O'Neang is no exception and villagers often resort to selling their labour abroad as a "fall back activity".[16]

Keo is a day labourer in a Thai cassava plantation. Although his sister-in-law owns a *chamkar*, no one in the family has cultivated it since the day she stepped on a landmine. Following the family's trauma, both Keo and his wife May prefer to work in Thailand for 100 baht a day (USD 2.6). Together with a dozen fellow workers, Keo leaves the village at 5.00 am and returns home at 5.00 pm using well worn paths across dense minefields. Keo usually works for four to five days consecutively but says employment opportunities are nonetheless unpredictable because of the varying demand for cheap labour. Villagers living

[15] Approximately 85% of the total Cambodian population works in the primary sector (Nissen 2005).
[16] Villagers in O'Neang have very few fall back activities such as the ones described by Scott e.g. basket weaving in order to supplement the household economy in times of hardship (Scott 1976: 62).

in O'Neang perceive seasonal work in Thai plantations as relatively safe in comparison with other border villages where the local police and military extort money. Nevertheless villagers expressed their preference to work for a Cambodian landowner even for lower wages (70 baht/ day or USD 1.8 instead) due to a combination of nationalistic sentiment and the hope of acquiring a piece of land from a benevolent landowner.

A. VII. The role of children and child labour

The average Cambodian household includes five to six children and in rural areas children comprise a substantial segment of the labour force. The Sok family came from Battambang province two years ago. Eight people, six of them children, live in the house. The two smallest stay at home, two are at school and the remaining two already work as peasants. It is crucial for the household economy that the children help their parents at home or in the fields. It is commonly understood that having one's children educated provides better life prospects for both them and the parents. However, parents cannot afford to lose this substantial labour source and few children continue studies beyond primary school. If the household economy allows it, parents with several children tend to give them specific roles that contribute to the household's subsistence in different but complementary ways. Yey Yom, for example, has three children: her eldest son is a monk who brings merit (*bon*) to the family, the second one studies in Battambang town[17] and the youngest helps her in the family *chamkar*.

A. VIII. Indebtedness

Local peasants usually own at least 1.5 ha on which they grow various crops including soya beans, potatoes, cassava, chilli and fruits.[18] The bulk of their produce is sold to local

[17] Battambang is the second largest town in the country after the capital city of Phnom Penh.
[18] A 1.5 ha land constitutes the minimum requirement for a family of 4 to 5 children to undertake subsistence farming.

markets, with middle-men coming into the village to buy directly from the farmers.[19] A large number of households are chronically in debt. Villagers' financial debts vary from 400 to 5,000 baht (from USD 10.5 to USD 131), while food debt is also very common, often involving two to three kg of rice. When possible, people prefer to borrow small sums from their immediate neighbours. This usually entails paying little or no interest; moreover geographical proximity and acquaintance often allow the borrower to negotiate better terms. Others borrow from provincial banks but this involves high interest rates (up to 30%), limited reimbursement timeframes and the risk of losing one's property if repayment is overdue.

Those most at risk are newcomers with no social or familial ties in the village. The Sok family is trapped in a spiral of debt, landlessness and lack of social support. Financial debt incurred through medical costs pushed them off their land in Battambang province and lead them to O'Neang. They say that villagers will not lend them food or money because they have not built any relationships of trust nor sought patronage ties with anyone. This compels them to enter minefields deliberately in order to feed their children.

A. IX. Village political system

A. IX. 1. A feudal model

O'Neang has a political system reminiscent of European feudalism. Poor villagers and landless families often ask a landlord's permission to live on his/ her land in exchange for their labour. This labour typically consists of house and land sitting, gardening and farming, and occasionally landmine clearance. Most of the villagers involved in this patron-client relationship are well aware that they may encounter mines when working the landowner's fields.[20] Few can actually afford not to work in these precarious conditions,

[19] The lack of transportation often compels poor families to rely on the middle men who will come to the village to buy the products directly. This implies that they will have a limited control over the price at which the crop is being negotiated (Moyes 2004).
[20] However "(…) the Khmer peasant patron remains a farmer among fellow farmers"(Ledgerwood and Vjghen in Ledgerwood 2002 : 114).

however. In return for the landowner's "protection" a villager may gain temporary housing, farming work and social backing. Some villagers make these valuable socio-political ties the basis of their long-term survival strategy.

With respect to patronage ties, the wealthier may support poor families and thus extend their circle of clients or "grandchildren" (*tchau*). Yey Hi Sau is one of the wealthiest living in O'Neang. She and her brother together own ten hectares of land at one end of the village. The house they are building at present will be the only brick house in the entire local community and for most of the poor families living close by she is a Good Samaritan who genuinely helps them by giving food, medicines and lending money. Yey Hi Sau in turn considers these families as an extension of her own and plays a matriarchal role. The Khmer discourse often uses kin terms to transform outsiders into relatives. Words like elder one (*bang*), little one (*own*), uncle (*pou*) and aunt (*ming*) are all common ways to speak to people beyond one's immediate family. The Khmer local discourse is imbued with connotations of respect, age, gender and social status, which are expressed in dyadic relationships.[21] Yey Hi Sau acts as a motherly figure to the very poor and as such people address her accordingly: the title *yey* immediately refers to a "female elder" or a "grandmother" but also, as discussed later, to a person of high social and political authority.

Officially there are no fixed rules governing how a villager chooses a landowner and vice versa. Villagers seem to select their landowner according to local reputation and geographical proximity and it is common to see villagers moving from one landowner to another in response to actual demand. As in other dyadic relationships, the connection with a rich household remains a substantial factor for social, political and economic integration. In this sense a household will often seek spatial closeness and maintain good relationships in return for political allegiance.[22]

These socio-political ties are visible in the village layout: small social, economic and political islets have formed along the main road where the houses of poor families rely

[21] Hinton provides great details on the social significance of the Khmer discourse (Hinton 2005: 116).
[22] "The main building blocks of the Khmer peasant village are kinship and patronage customs" (Ledgerwood and Vijghen in Ledgerwood 2002 : 112).

on nearby wealthier households. However this pattern neither subverts nor contradicts the overall village political regime, in which power is concentrated in the hands of a very few.

A. IX. 2. Petty corruption and "patriotic contribution"

Some of the poorest villagers expressed their frustration at the conduct of the village authorities, citing lack of welfare support, misinformation, small scale extortion and social marginalisation. Some complained, for instance, that they are rarely informed when an NGO comes to the village to distribute rice and water tanks and that the same families always benefit from these rare external donations. Likewise land distribution and partition prior to and following landmine clearance are generally perceived as being biased and politically motivated. However people feel they have no choice, "We have what they give us; otherwise we would have nothing".

The most vulnerable households often suffer from a scarcity of information and are generally located far from the power centre and away from a landowner's political cluster. As such the village chief and others in authority rarely visit them as "Pattern of visits served to define the village status hierarchy" (Scott 1976: 03). On the other hand misinformation may bring financial benefit to the local authorities. In one case the village chief told the villagers that Seila (a UNDP-funded programme of infrastructure projects) needed their financial support to maintain the 7 km stretch of road that traverses the village. These types of levies are also commonly and ironically termed: "patriotic contributions" (Gottesman 2004: 327). Households duly contributed between 10 and 10,000 baht (USD 0.26 to 263) depending on their social status and wealth. Although some villagers suspect that this levy does not benefit the community as a whole, they nonetheless feel obliged to contribute, even if modestly, in order to maintain themselves within the social fabric.

A. IX. 3. The Khmer Rouge centre of power

The village of O'Neang was originally established by ten families who were Khmer Rouge cadres during the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime. Originally from other provinces, they did not wish to return to their home villages where they might be killed in retribution for their crimes.[23] There is presently little literature on Khmer Rouge (KR) cadres following their fall from power in 1979 and later defections to the government in the 1990s.[24] Interviews with villagers indicate, however, that former KR cadres around Pailin maintain tight networks that allow them to exercise de facto political control over the area.

O'Neang itself appears to be effectively governed by a small clique of four to five former Khmer Rouge cadres. This clique exercises power over the community through patronage, social connections, coercion and occasional displays of violence. The village system is very hierarchical and characteristic of an "un-institutionalized paternal authority of the founders"[25] whereby the local elite may show benevolence in return for political allegiance.

The two largest landowners, whom we may appropriately call "Big Sister" and "Big Brother"[26] have built their political authority on their background, reputation and present connections beyond the village boundaries. They hold decision-making power over all social and economic matters in the village and the role of the village chief is thus an essentially clerical one. The brotherhood among the village elite is forged in the history of the Khmer Rouge – its members have all been involved in the DK regime and resistance against the Vietnamese. As the founders of the village, they have been able to take possession of most of the land and thus maintain their social and political authority.

[23] Following the DK's demise some KR cadres have been killed by the local people (Hinton 2005: 92).
[24] For more information on this particular issue cf. (Rowley's article in Cook (ed) 2005).
[25] Expression used by (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983: 114).
[26] In reference to Orwell's "Big Brother " in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell [1949] 1992).

Yey Pou (Big Sister) owns one of the largest plots of land, situated at the centre of the village on the main road. This physical location reflects her hierarchical position and she has a privileged overview of the daily activities of the village. Big Sister was previously a KR cadre in charge of evacuating the population of the Southeast to the Northwest zone. This prominent role during the DK regime reinforces her present authority. Her husband, meanwhile, was the head of a KR squad and has acquired the reputation of being invulnerable to landmines.

A. IX. 4. Old rules for a new social game

Most historians agree that former Khmer Rouge who have resumed a peasant life bear little outward resemblance to the extremist cadres of the DK regime.[27] However Pailin province remains a KR fiefdom where former leaders hold significant influence over the political and social life of the area.[28] In this complex socio-political landscape where the memory of the past encounters modernity, villages have accommodated the old with the new, allowing some former KR practices to survive.

In O'Neang villagers perceive the elite as exercising power over local movements and discourses, sometimes through KR practices such as the use of informants and spies. An old Khmer Rouge saying – "Angkar (the KR Organisation) has the eyes of a pineapple" conveys this sense of being under permanent surveillance; with the pineapple a KR adaptation of J. Bentham's panopticon.[29]

Social and political obligations as well as "embodied hierarchical practices" (Hinton 2005 : 187) form the village's underlying rules. Most people (peasants and professional deminers alike) understand that if they do not abide by these implicit rules they could be

[27] For more details on the subject see Rowley's article on the Khmer Rouge.
[28] Ieng Sary is the former Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affaires during the DK regime between 1975 and 1979. His son, Ieng Vuth, is the current Deputy Governor of Pailin. For more detailed information see Rowley's article and (Jennar 1995 : 30).
[29] "The "eyes of the pineapple "became a metaphor for the Khmer Rouge panopticon, as Angkar's authority pervaded all domains of life" (Hinton 2005: 132). People also used to refer to the DK regime as the "prison without walls" (ibid. : 1). Also see Ben Kiernan, 1996, *The Pol Pot Regime* for more insight into the DK.

penalised. Villagers' discourses, attitudes and behaviour are permeated by social and moral obligations, which maintain the community's hierarchical structures. To remain within the community social fabric, the individual needs either to build relationships of mutual support with relatives and neighbours or nurture vertical support through the "comforting shade of a potent benefactor".[30] In this context of moral coercion, daily activities are influenced by a complex and intricate system and the root causes of the individual's vulnerability are thus difficult to disentangle.

The village political rules are strict and so resistance is seen as a threat to the established power structure. To the loyal, Big Brother or Big Sister can be generous and lenient. To the defiant however, episodes inscribed within the local memory have demonstrated that the local elite does not hesitate to "discipline and punish" those who show disrespect.

One such episode occurred in July 2003 when a young female farmer, Mom, got into a dispute with Big Sister. A few days after their argument, Mom stepped on an anti-personnel landmine while she was weeding her land. Villagers reported that this was not an ordinary landmine accident as the land had already been cleared by the national clearance agency. Most villagers believed that Mom had been punished by Big Sister for not giving her "face" or showing appropriate respect.[31] In this specific case, it is not possible to ascertain whether or not a crime was actually committed. In either event, however, the memory of the accident reinforces the incumbent power-holders and maintains villagers within imposed behavioural boundaries.

Another incident occurred in November 2005 when May decided to cut across Big Sister's private land in order to avoid entering a minefield. Big Sister confronted May and stabbed her in the eye with a farming knife. She then challenged her, “Report it if you dare”. May was assaulted because she did not give Big Sister "face" and did not apologise

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[30] Quote from Hinton to describe the Khmer patronage system (Hinton 2005 : 112).
[31] The head as the social part of the body. See Hinton and the importance of maintaining the face and shield (Hinton 2004 : 159). This also refers to the importance of adopting proper conduct with superiors (Ebihara *et a1.*1994 : 93).

properly for entering her property without permission. Following the attack, Yey Hi Sau warned May: “Be careful, don’t be too strong” *Broyat kom khlagne pek*. These two threats illustrate the way villagers have to speak and behave within a well-defined social and political space. In both cases the expressions used by the two powerful women: "to dare" (*hien*) and "to be strong" (*khlagne*)[32] emphasise how the established rulers perceive individual manifestations of bravery, autonomy and self-esteem as serious challenges to the prevailing social order.

Following the assault, May filed a complaint with the provincial court. The local judiciary, health services and police are both corrupt and dominated by former KR cadres however and the court rejected May's case, citing insufficient evidence. May has since become both socially marginalised and subject to frequent intimidation; to the extent that she and her family have been brutally expelled from their former property. The walls of the house they now occupy have been scrawled with curses telling her to leave and Big Sister's son sometimes sleeps beneath the building in order to spy on her. Villagers have been reluctant to help May as this would automatically be interpreted as their siding with the victim. A few sympathisers have nonetheless helped her discreetly with petty cash and food for the children.

The above cases illustrate how some Khmer Rouge attitudes and practices have survived, notably the concept of disproportionate revenge (*sangsuk*) which translates the notion of "an eye for an eye" into "a head for an eye" (Hinton 2005 : 27). Villagers take for granted that the local elite will use spies (*chlop*)[33], coercion, intimidation and violence to maintain their power. As a single female head of household put it, "[In this village] there are no human rights" (*ot minh seut meunuh*).

[32] The social meanings of the word *khlagne* are well described in (Hinton 2005: 102 & 104).
[33] "Personal accounts of the period invariably focus on the constant fear of *chlop*, "spies/ informants" (often children) hiding to overhear conversations" (Marston in Ledgerwood 2002: 43).

A. IX. 5. The bamboo curtain as a coercive tool

Landmine clearance in border areas is a contentious national issue. The K5 mine belt (metaphorically termed the "bamboo curtain") runs continuously along the western Thai-Cambodian border and parts of the Laotian border in the north[34]. Yet despite high accident rates and the highest landmine density, national and local authorities have expressed their intention to leave the K5 mostly intact. In O'Neang, moreover, landmines may act as a powerful political tool for the local elite. Interviews with the village's founding (and ruling) families reveal that they know where the mines are because they laid them themselves during the conflict.[35] This knowledge, set against the ignorance of the newcomers, further reinforces their power.

Villagers living in O'Neang are susceptible to different types of risk. Although these are often interrelated, the individual's coping capacity may be further stretched when one risk factor weighs particularly heavily. The terms "vulnerability" and "risk" can be used interchangeably in our village case where the threat of a landmine accident is particularly pervasive and they are effectively synonymous.[36] Both illustrate the space of anxiety where the ordinary person faces the possibility of being harmed physically and psychologically hence challenging the household's entire survival mechanism. The following chapter investigates the local interpretation and understanding of risk. As will be shown, the concept of risk is often personally, temporally and contextually defined depending on the elasticity of the individual's survival buffer.

[34] Quoted from (Rowley 2005).

[35] Yey Hi Sau claimed that during the resistance against the Vietnamese, she was part of a female KR unit and used to lay two hundred anti-personnel landmines per day over a few months period.

[36] The Collins English dictionary gives the following definitions: "Risk": possibility of incurring misfortune or loss; a hazard. "At risk": vulnerable, likely to be lost or damaged. "Vulnerable": capable of being physically or emotionally wounded or hurt. Also see Mary Douglas' comparison between the concepts of "risk "and "danger" and their possible permutation. (Douglas 1992 : 46).

B. LOCAL PERCEPTIONS & UNDERSTANDING OF RISK

B. I. Local discourse and perception of risk

The majority of families in O'Neang moved there in the hope of finding a place to live and land to farm. A large number of villagers said they regretted settling in a village where farming is a hazardous activity and where land competition is exacerbated by population pressure and land speculation. Most expressed their determination to stay, however. All interviewees are fully aware of the landmine problem. More than 50% of the households interviewed have had at least one landmine accident and five accidents have been recorded since the beginning of 2006. For people living in O'Neang, this constitutes "risk as usual".

Despite the risk of landmine accidents, villagers emphasised their lack of livelihood alternatives because they have "no other ways" (*tol tchrok*) than to carry on. Although Eng's husband has sustained injuries to his eyes and hands from a landmine blast, they "cannot afford not to" (*ot bahn*) continue farming their *chamkar*. Villagers often use the word *tosou* or "struggle to live" when asked to describe their daily life. This term was particularly widespread in the discourse of the Khmer Rouge regime in which life was perceived as the reward for the hard worker only. In this latter case *tosou* means "fighting bravely" or "heroically".[37] For the people living in O'Neang, their coping ability is constantly subject to different risk pressures. It is only through continuous effort that they just maintain their heads above the water to save the entire family from drowning.

Lim came to the village seven years ago and owns the land and the house where she presently lives. When her husband was hospitalised following a mine accident in their field in which he lost his eye, their two hectares of land was taken away. As Lim explained: "Our *chamkar* was taken by someone else in the village. We can't get it back. My husband doesn't know how to clear mines but he knows how to survive" (*tcheh tosou*). Families with

[37] For more details on peasants life under the KR and the notion of "struggle" see (Warner 1989 : 197).

landmine victims are particularly hard pressed due to the physical, economic and social costs of an accident. Lim has four children and is currently pregnant with a fifth. For her "life is difficult everyday" but she and her husband will continue to make efforts (*khom preugn*) to fight their way through life.

B. II. Local translation of risk

Living and interacting with landmines has become both a normality and a livelihood necessity and risk-taking activities are perceived as part of the village routine. The regularity of accidents, the continuous presence of the de-mining agencies and the frequent sound of mines exploding as they are neutralised have become part of the daily monotony. This has ultimately drawn the community into a risk "habitus" whereby behaviour, practices, knowledge and discourse have shaped the villagers' perception of what constitutes a real threat to their livelihood.

People understand "risk" as actions or decision making which may deeply harm or endanger the survival of the entire household. There is no Khmer equivalent for the Euro-American concept of risk. People commonly attempt a direct translation using the term *krouh thnak* "accident" or the expression *peuthoy peuthan*, which literally means "to take the decision to go ahead". In O'Neang where most of the families live each day as it comes, farming on landmine-affected areas is a source of risk but not farming the land at all is an even greater risk.

New families continue to arrive in the village, often offering their services to local landowners. They admit being unsure whether the land they have been allocated is contaminated by landmines but remain nonetheless determined, "we will give it a try" (*sak meul* meaning literally: try and see). In extreme situations where there is no other alternative (*ot min phleuv tchreuy reuh*) taking the risk becomes synonymous with "gambling" or "trying one's luck". Yet contrary to the following Euro-American definition:

"*proceed in an action without regard to the possibility of danger involved in it*"[38] villagers are conscious of the consequences of a mine accident. It is because of such a permanent awareness that they purposely take the decision to become risk takers at least for some of the time. The ordinary household risk management strategy has an underlying rationality. It consists of taking a risk today in order to avoid greater risks tomorrow. In fact "the kind of risk which prevails is not characterized by uncertainty but by certainty [of a worse future]" (Nugent in Caplan 2000 : 241). As such, each day spent farming and clearing the land without incident is another step towards livelihood security. In such circumstances, the risk taker will often resort to forms of protection such as tattoos, amulets and local deities to reduce his physical and psychological vulnerability.[39]

Because of the "discontinuous character of human needs"[40] the notion of risk is both complex and constantly changing. What one considers a source of risk today may be different tomorrow and what a major source of risk is to one family may be irrelevant to another. Differences in perception occur between and also within individuals depending on personality, time, confidence, fear, political context and flexibility of the household's subsistence margin. A host of factors come into play when considering whether something qualifies as "risk" and whether to take the risk or not.[41] As long as the subsistence margin can cope with external pressures it is unusual for the individual to take unnecessary risks until it comes to a point where survival itself is threatened.

B. III. Village risk ranking

According to Douglas and Wildavsky:

> "*Ranking dangers (which is what risk assessment requires) so as to know which ones to address and in what order, demands prior agreement on criteria. There is*

[38] Definition provided by the Collins English dictionary.
[39] For complementary details on protection beliefs used by village deminers see (Moyes 2004 : 114-115) and (Bottomley 2001: 54-55).
[40] Quoted from J. C. Scott (Scott 1976 : 176) .
[41] "A risk is not only the probability of an event but also the probable magnitude of its outcome. The evaluation is a political, aesthetic, and moral matter". (Douglas 1992 : 31).

no mechanical way to produce a ranking. As Jerome R. Ravetz, a philosopher of science puts it: the hope that one can produce a taxonomy, evaluation, and finally a technical fix to the problem of risks is in substance as ambitious as the program of putting all of human experience and value onto a scale of measuMoment for mathematical or political manipulation." (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983 : 3).

Although any attempt at ranking sources of risk may be ultimately doomed to failure, it still provides interesting insights into the process of identifying which risks may have the most detrimental impacts.[42] It also offers an illuminating, if provisional, picture of the perceptions of an individual, a family or an entire community. This is indeed susceptible to change especially in response to unforeseen externalities. For instance good weather may yield good crops for both family consumption and market sale, thus widening the household's subsistence margin, which in turn is likely to produce new perceptions.

With this in mind, interviews with fifty families attempted to identify which risk factors are or have been the cause of greatest distress. More than 90% of the interviewees reported the risk of landmine accidents as being the most severe. The presence of landmines is a prime source of anxiety because it threatens key household survival needs like access to land and water, financial stability, physical and mental health and social integration. Villagers ranked various risk factors as follows:

1. Mine accident
2. Lack of food
3. Disease
4. Landlessness
5. Indebtedness
6. Lack of water
7. Malevolent ghosts and evil spirits

[42] "Risks can be measured and ranked, compared in all sorts of ways, but it is not always clear how" (Day in Caplan 2000 : 50).

The risk posed by landmines connects with a wider range of social, political and economic threats. For example, the presence of landmines may prevent villagers from accessing, owning and cultivating land for household consumption (risk factors 1; 2 and 4). Lack of food may, in turn, cause malnutrition, which can induce disease and indebtedness (risk 2, 3 and 5). Finally malevolent spirits may cause the weather to be exceptionally dry and force the household towards more risk prone activities or cause a landmine to detonate[43] (risk factor 7; 6 and 1). Multiple scenarios show that the leading factor is consistent[44] and it is by confronting it that the individual can effectively offset the others. As soon as this factor can be isolated from the livelihood equation, the individual is then able to leave the space of anxiety (the liminal space) and focus his attention on other sources of exposure.

Interviews reveal that the physical presence of an anti-personnel landmine is not seen as a major source of risk in itself. The threat is the mine explosion and its consequences for both the individual and the household. Villagers generally trust the quality of the mine clearance agencies' work. However, with landmine density being so high, people are convinced that some will always remain buried under the surface of the soil.

A few interviewees mentioned that mines have been found even after land has been cleared by the national de-mining agency and ploughed for a couple of years. Only a few interviewees were convinced that their land was completely free from landmines. The majority consider that as long as residual mines do not explode, the risk remains acceptable, however. As one villager put it, "for us caring for food is most important, we need to take one priority at a time". In a situation where "life is not simply hard but also perilous" (Scott 1976: 128) taking the risk become a "safety first measure". When risk-

[43] In the course of the fieldwork no trace of witchcraft practices were found especially in causing landmine accidents.

[44] As the ultimate threat other sources of risk may appear quite tenuous in comparison. For instance the fear of ghosts from the unburied bodies of the Khmer Rouge regime is regarded as low for you cannot "see" the risk. Landmines in turn can be seen, touched and may leave permanent marks on your body, which is regarded as the greatest livelihood threat.

taking practices become locally accepted the individual's risk tolerance level is relatively high.[45]

Soy is a relatively rich landowner. He and his sister Yey Hi Sau were amongst the ten founding families and together they own ten hectares of farming land. Soy says that he "used to pray to the spirits of the land to protect me from landmine accidents. Today I pray to them to bring rain and good harvest. Now that I feel relieved (*thou*) my priorities have changed and I am not worried about mines anymore, but about my crops". He explained that, "Now that landmines have ceased to be my major concern, they have shifted down a notch or two within my risk scale ".[46]

This villager's comments show that once the threshold of livelihood security is reached (meaning having enough), the individual will stop taking risks and tries to optimise what he already has. Even if high levels of risk tolerance usually make people more flexible, risk taking behaviours are generally subject to constant negotiation. In times when the household economy is strong, people are generally reluctant to work in mine affected areas. When bad crops and illnesses put the household under economic strain, people may want to resume their work in hazardous areas temporarily. Risk factors constantly fluctuate along a vertical axis and once the individual has attained a certain level of sustainability or comfort the number one risk may fall a notch or two. However some cases will show that subsistence security is a very subjective concept, which may vary greatly from one person to another.

[45] Village rankings differ from places to places and landmine affected villages do not systematically place the landmine risk factor at the top of their risk scale. In Tuol Til village, Kamrieng district, Battambang province, landmine appears as a third or fourth risk factor owing to low accident rate, limited presence of landmines in housing and farming land, reliance on fall back activities (rice farming) and greater subsistence margin (findings of personal research undertaken for the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining – GICHD – July 2006).
[46] This interviewee manifested an unusual ability to conceptualise and demonstrate his ideas.

B. IV. Gauging the level of risk tolerance

Most households have a narrow subsistence margin, forcing them to balance several risk factors on a daily basis. The needs of the poorest usually craft their risk acceptance accordingly and the greater the needs of the household the more people will be motivated to take risks. For instance the threat of landmine accidents is dealt with almost mechanically; rudimentary agricultural tools and the simplest methods eventually turn landmine clearance into an "ordinary" activity. After a while villagers develop their "risk habitus" claiming that they are hardened to it and have learnt how to internalise the pain (*soam*). But as soon as a person feels he has reclaimed "enough" safe land, he does not take further risks. Risk taking behaviour is a temporary "default choice" so as to bounce back economically and socially. In this context risk averse discourse and attitudes may be an option for the relatively wealthy only.

A large number of villagers in O'Neang occupy land they have cleared themselves; with few accidents since the cultivation of the first crop they have developed their own quality assurance method. Although much lower than international standards, this threshold is tailored to their livelihood requirements. Villagers' spontaneous mine clearance or use of a tractor to push the top soil away[47] is generally perceived to make the land tolerably safe. In O'Neang most accidents have occurred when the individual was clearing and cultivating the land for the first time. Following the first crop, villagers usually trust that the land is reasonably safe for them to continue to farm.

B. V. Risk and gender

Perceptions of and attitudes to risk are often conditioned by gender and women are often more risk averse in interacting with explosive items.[48] In general mine clearance is

[47] Anti-personnel mines are usually buried between five to fifteen centimetres under the surface.
[48] For additional information see (Moyes 2004) and (Bottomley 2001).

commonly understood as part of the male domain, reflecting the Khmer gender division of labour. However in O'Neang risk perception amongst the poorest households was strikingly consistent across gender and age differences. Members of very poor families farming suspected minefields all perform the same tasks; adult male, female and children's domains merge and all are equally exposed.

Households with a wider subsistence margin, however, tend to separate gender roles and activities according to Khmer tradition. Men work on unsafe land while women manage the house and look after the children's education. Gender differentiation in terms of labour can thus be understood as a privilege of the relatively wealthy. For the poorest, by contrast, the boundaries between genders are blurred. As in the case described below, a single female head of household may occasionally undertake a man's traditional role in order to save her family descending into the depths of poverty.

Sothea comes from Battambang province. Two days after arriving in O'Neang in February 2002 she stepped on a landmine on her way to the Thai plantations and lost the lower part of her right leg. Sothea, whose husband left her around two years ago, has a two year old daughter and lives in a single room house that is also home to five other family members, including her parents. They are land-sitting for a landowner and paying an annual rent of 1,000 baht (USD 26). The Halo Trust[49] is now clearing the housing plot they occupy and the landowner is planning to sell the land to plantation developers once clearance is complete, meaning that Sothea and her family may soon have to leave. Sothea has little hope for the future unless she can find employment. She has thus taken a position as a community deminer with the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), a UK-based NGO. MAG offers community deminers a salary of USD 95, which is a substantial income by Cambodian standards.[50] Through this new opportunity, Sothea hopes to find greater security for her daughter and parents, “When all the roads are shut to you it is the only solution left”. Although she is still very frightened of landmines, she is not afraid of dying. In fact she is determined to face danger so as to leave something to her child, "So that

[49] The Halo Trust is a British organisation clearing landmines worldwide.
[50] For details on MAG and its locality demining concept cf. (Prio 2004 : 9–21).

nobody would say that this child has been abandoned by her parents with no education and no possessions".

This case shows how a single female head of household has to confront several risk factors simultaneously.[51] Sothea has to compensate for the absence of a husband (presumably a major income supplier) as well as other economic, physical and social obstacles. In her case the desire to be a good mother is paramount and the decision to face risk on a daily basis appears the most logical and risk-averse choice. Ensuring her family can subsist is part of Sothea's rationale, but integrating the child within the community is a stronger motivation for risking her safety.[52]

Risk perceptions are contextual, personal and temporal. One single variable within the livelihood equation may tilt the family's risk scale towards adopting a risk prone attitude; it becomes the duty of all its members to restore its equilibrium. Although the underlying motivations of a risk taker may be several, the ways in which they are translated into pragmatic responses are often homogenous. These local responses are discussed in the following chapter.

[51] For additional information on gender issues see (Bottomley 2003 : 33).

[52] "Some fears are physical, some are social. Perhaps physical fears would not threaten to overwhelm citizens who felt confident of justice and social support. Perhaps people are not so much afraid of dying as afraid of death without honour. In addressing questions of acceptable risk without considering their social aspects, we could be speaking to the wrong problems." (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983 : 6).

C. LOCAL RESPONSES TO RISK

C. I. Spontaneous responses to mine related risk

Although the risk of landmines is closely connected with other sources of risk, this chapter will treat it separately. Some of the local responses have been exclusively tailored to reduce the probability of an anti-personnel landmine accident while others address wider social, political and economic difficulties. The following analyses the ways in which people have used their own resources to deal effectively with the landmine threat.

C. I. 1. "Aller au chagrin"or rendering the land safe

"*What may be accomplished within this symbolic straightjacket is nonetheless something of a testament to human persistence and inventiveness (…)*" (Scott 1976: 33).

Most people farm land which is heavily mined and use agricultural tools to "scatter and separate [mines] from the soil" (*riiy riiy*). Now that de-mining agencies are operating in the area they do not attempt to neutralise the mines but still take them out of the soil and put them in a corner of their field for the deminers to take away. Interviews reveal that some villagers (both men and women) have developed techniques for handling and disposing of particular types of landmine.[53] Upon discovering a mine, these farmers say that they first examine its overall physical condition. If it looks old or corroded, they then drag it with a long spade or a garden fork. If the mine does not detonate, they may then conclude that it is damaged and safe for handling and removal. In other cases, the farmer will burn it or eventually ask someone else (a former soldier or a professional deminer) for help. Villagers argue that they have to rely on themselves because everyone else is preoccupied with their

[53] In this specific case: people would likely pick up a Chinese 72 A (blast mine) rather than a 69 type (bounding fragmentation mine) the latter is likely to cause severe multiple injuries due to metal fragments being projected on a 360 degree covering a relatively large surface area hence harming several people at the same time. The former will injure the victim through the power of the blast.

own survival strategy. As a female farmer explained, "If we've managed to survive thus far through the mines, it means we can carry on".

For the poorest a day passed is another day survived. This perspective is transposed onto the farming of hazardous land. A day spent reclaiming the land from both nature and explosive Remnants of war is a small step closer to livelihood security. The villagers' tenacity in undertaking perilous activities is reminiscent of the French coal miners of the 19th and early 20th centuries for whom going to the coal mines was "aller au chagrin" (literally "going to sorrow").[54]

Yet villagers would not consider themselves deminers, however. Instead they tend to view their farming and intermittent clearance activities as complementary to professional de-mining work. Sothea's choice can thus be interpreted as an exceptional act of desperation. Psychologically the individual would rather think that he/ she is still trying his luck farming safely; yet villagers believe it is crucial not to "gamble" too long by farming on suspected land; otherwise they may attract misfortune.

C. I. 2. Stretching risk boundaries

According to J. C. Scott, Southeast Asian peasants are generally risk averse. Arguably people would not take more risks than they need if they already have enough to sustain their livelihood. O'Neang has a spectrum of different household economies ranging from the very poor to the relatively well off. The most risk averse are those that have already reached a certain level of livelihood security. At the other end of the social spectrum, very poor households are forced to become risk takers. Balancing the risk of an accident against the need for financial wages or land acquisition would more likely encourage the individual to be provisionally a risk taker.

One of the most difficult local perceptions to record and obtain satisfactory explanations for is how a household decides its livelihood security is ensured. In other

[54] Cf. Deramaix 1998 'Du tripalium au chagrin'.

words: in what ways does the individual assess whether he has gained enough to stop taking further risk?[55] In situations where farming is unsafe the individual usually tries to clear one portion (e.g. 1-2ha) of contaminated land at a time. Once this land is cleared, the individual may stop and cultivate the land to obtain customary rights. Households which cannot expand their *chamkar* (due to adjacent land already owned or lack of confidence) concentrate on optimising their land. Others, by contrast, continue clearing unsafe land so as to maximise their livelihood potential. This is particularly common in the case of former soldiers with mine-laying experience who have confidence in their personal de-mining skills. Interviews show that if they have an accident they often interpret it as a sign that they have run out of luck (*kam*) and are no longer under the spirits' protection.

A former KR soldier explained how after a first accident in 1998 and a second in 2001 he carried on reclaiming the land from both the forest and the mines. With several hectares of land, farming animals and an enviable social position within the community, he bemoans the fact that there was only 20m left to clear when he got injured by a landmine. Instead of considering the surface of land already secured (around 5 ha) the man was focusing on what remained to be claimed, well after the point when taking a risk remained a livelihood necessity. For him, "You get as much as you can, you do as much as you can ". Drawing the boundary where taking the risk becomes unnecessary turns out to be a complex mechanism as each and every individual strives to survive in a context of a zero sum game whereby someone's loss becomes someone else's gain. Similarly, having secured their basic survival needs, greed, pride and self-esteem drive some well-to-do villagers with military background to amass more land in search of financial benefits.

[55] "How much safety is enough?" (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983 : 184).

C. I. 3. Village rituals and the "genius loci"

The peasant's life is organised by religious activities in which the commemoration of the family's ancestors and the worship of local deities maintain equilibrium in everyday existence. Villagers make offerings on the sacred days of the month (*thgnay seul*) and during the main stages of the farming cycle. Offerings of food and rice to the spirits of the land (*meutchah teuk, meutchah dey*) ensure fertile land and a good yield. When entering a liminal space i.e. a suspected minefield, peasants and professional deminers alike pray to the spirits of the land to grant them physical protection and bring them good crops. They also make offerings to restore imbalances caused by bad weather, illnesses or accidents.

Deminers explained that they always make offerings to the spirits of the land prior to and after clearance of a minefield, usually in the form of the head of a pig with a whole chicken.[56] The opening ritual requests permission from the spirit living in the minefield while the closing ritual expresses gratitude for the spirit's protection. The deminers' wives also participate actively in these ceremonies to ensure their spouses remain safe during their work.[57] Although many deminers believe their protection comes primarily from their personal protective equipment (blast proof visor and armored jacket) they seldom neglect the power of the local spirits. Many villagers and professional deminers draw on various Buddhist and animistic means of protection, creating a sort of local syncretism. According to one deminer, "we take on everything; we never know, just in case it works".

According to the Khmer tradition, hills and mountains are the privileged abodes of the deities.[58] O'Neang is nested at the foot of several forested hills, which are all inhabited by the traditional *Neak Ta* "the divinities of the very life of the peasants" (Ishizawa cited in Mabbett and Chandler 1995 : 111) or "génies chtoniens" (Tranet 1981:6). Local villagers pray to the spirits of the three mountains in the west as well as *Lokta Saravane* who lives

[56] This Cambodian Mine Action Center - platoon specifically.
[57] Because "the land belongs to them" (Chandler 1996 : 106).
[58] "Those phnom, hills or mounds are sacred sites haunted by neak ta" (Thierry 1997: 107–109). Also see Tranet on their origins (Tranet 1981 : 105) and a possible comparison with Burmese local deities e.g. the *Nat* (Leach [1959] 2004 : 172).

on a nearby hill. *Lokta Saravane* meaning "grandfather Saravane" is the epitome of the "genius loci"[59] whose unlimited power reaches out to different domains of the peasant's existence. For Srey, a female villager, Lokta Saravane is truly benevolent and powerful for there is no problem he cannot solve. In times of hunger or fear, he brings food and confidence. In the case of landmines, he makes them "rotten" and harmless. A small figurine of *Lokta Saravane* has been placed next to the river to prevent people from drowning when they are being pulled by the *tcheugn kop*, who are malevolent spirits living underwater. These evil spirits are traditionally perceived as beings who died tragically near the river and who are now waiting for a bather to come. The *tcheugn kop* crave a return to the earth so they attempt to drown someone so as to regain a place amongst the living. In local memory many children have died in the river but not since the time that the effigy of *Lokta Saravane* has overlooked and protected the bathers.

In a similar way this genius loci helps villagers to defend themselves against ghosts and especially blood suckers (*priyy*). As one villager said, "When the owl starts to sing long and loud in the night, it is an ominous sign: the *priyy* will come or a mine accident will occur or someone will die in the next days. It has always happened this way". To protect a house from the *priyy*, people pray to *Lokta Saravane* and hang bottles of red liquid on their gate so as to lure the malevolent spirits and appease them. According to the Khmer tradition, people who have died a violent death (either by murder or suicide) are turned into *priyy*. They cannot go to heaven nor to hell and so their spirits wander on earth amongst the living. Villagers often say that they live inside trees, meaning that if someone cuts the tree to farm the land they must appease the *priyy* before they come out to search for blood, cause a landmine to explode and avenge themselves.

[59] In the Roman mythology it is the protective spirit of a place often depicted as a snake.

C. I. 4. Tatoos, *krus* and amulets

In Cambodia, tattoos (*sak*) are a popular means of forging bonds between soldiers. Former Khmer Rouge soldiers and present professional deminers bear different sorts of Pali inscriptions and drawings on various parts of their body. Besides their aesthetic and bonding purposes, soldiers use them for protection against landmines, bullets and diseases. The position of a tattoo is both symbolic and functional. When placed on the chest, the back and the hands the tattoos are meant to protect from bullets; when located on the feet they shield the person against landmines.

The *kru* or tattoo master is the person who originally assigns power to the tattoos. It is important to return to a *kru* regularly in order to get one's tattoos reactivated as their power can become exhausted and only a *kru* has the power to reactivate them. Each tattoo has a particular *domnaung* or an imposed set of rules, which when violated render the tattoos completely ineffective. Common rules imposed by the *kru* may forbid the tattoo bearer to drink, eat game meat, lie and use the tattoo to prove one's invulnerability or display pride, self-esteem and vanity. It is thus not possible for a person to use tattoos for other purposes than self-protection. Pali inscriptions and drawings (of mandala, deities, tigers etc.) create an invisible envelope for the bearer to enter and leave a liminal space without harm.[60] Hak, Big Sister's husband and a former head of a KR squad, claimed he has survived numerous mine accidents during the civil war. As a result his reputation for being invulnerable brings him the esteem of fellow comrades who walk behind him when venturing into the jungle. As he explained, “My protective *kru* is very powerful".[61]

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[60] For more insight on the issue of liminality and threshold, Douglas examines Van Gennep's notion of external boundaries in *Purity and Danger* (Douglas [1966] 2002 : 141).

[61] Khmer *Krus* seemed to have fulfilled an important role in the KR resistance: "Kru ["Master"] Keo (…) and his two lieutenants (…) pass themselves off as teachers in the art of sorcery and claim to be capable of making people invulnerable, and with their mystical signs can make them avoid rifle bullets" (Kiernan 1985 : 67).

Soldiers and civilians often use amulets made of tiger or wild boar tooth and sometimes human foetus in the same way. People tie them onto a necklace as a potent safeguard against evil. Most of these amulets are personalised and may have their own powerful history. Amulets, tattoos and spirit protection fulfil a crucial role in giving the risk taker self-confidence and the ability to push back the frontiers of danger. [62]

C. I. 5. Professional landmine clearance

Landmine clearance in Cambodia commenced more than ten years ago with international donor countries providing substantial technical and financial support. Today it is undertaken by four main organisations[63] competing for limited funding on the basis of efficiency, cost-effectiveness, work quality and social and economic impact. In O'Neang the work of professional deminers relieves vulnerable households from some of their livelihood burdens. Clearing housing plots gives poor villagers the opportunity to concentrate on other pressing sources of risk such as finding food and seasonal work.[64] Yet to some extent professional de-mining interferes with the village's political and social structures.

Interviews with villagers and professional deminers revealed that the clique of former KR cadres treat deminers with contempt because they are identified with the lowest layer of the social hierarchy. De-mining agencies have received negative feedback in the past as local discontents[65] arose following the removal of landmine. Professional landmine clearance challenges the de facto political system, in which mines represent a powerful means of social and political control. In a few cases landmines have been re-planted to

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[62] Additional information on protection beliefs can be found in (Moyes 2004 : 114–115) and (Bottomley 2001: 54–55).
[63] Namely the Cambodian Mine Action Centre, The Halo Trust, The Mines Advisory Group and the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces.
[64] Appendix II provides a summary of how land is being selected for professional landmine clearance.
[65] The local elite's dissatisfaction has been occasionally reported from ear to mouth within the village. However few detailed information was gathered on the relationships between clearance agencies and the local elite.

delineate private property, maintain political power and harm other people.[66] Amidst this tension the presence of the de-mining teams may nevertheless provide the most vulnerable families with a wider social and psychological buffer against the violence of their daily existence.

C. II. Local resistance to economic, social and political risk

Villagers have formulated other sorts of pragmatic responses in order to reduce their economic, social and political vulnerability. The following section discusses local attitudes and forms of organisation used to alleviate financial, moral and political threats.

C. II.1. Systems of reciprocity and exchange

Social and geographical proximity often establish informal systems of reciprocity between households especially isolated villages like O'Neang, where development activities are generally limited.[67] In the case of a patronage arrangement, the client is often considered a member of "the extended family" participating in a system of exchange (although seldom equal)[68], which guaranties them support in times of hardship. In this sense "The benefactor must act in a fashion that preserves at least the form, if not the substance, of mutuality" (Scott 1976: 197).

Families who do not belong to a landowner's "string of loyal followers" rely on relatives and close friends as a social safety net and encourage the pooling of resources. Members of the same family usually farm adjacent portions of land. This approach widens the household's security buffer, offering safety and additional labour. Friends and close neighbours likewise tend to work on *chamkar* that are close to one another so as to protect themselves against land grabbers. Villagers know they would benefit better from sharing

[66] According to a few deminers and villagers, landmines are also used for local vengeance purposes.
[67] Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are in general reluctant to implement projects in Khmer Rouge dominated areas, which are commonly perceived as socially and politically complex.
[68] Some relationships are characteristic of a real system of exploitation whereby the terms of exchange are particularly constraining for the poorest and most beneficial for the well off. See J. C. Scott on the concept of agrarian exploitation (Scott 1976 : 158).

their resources with their neighbours and so usually nurture these relationships based on mutual trust. This reciprocal system is often extended to watching over the children and becomes more explicit in the form of loans and food sharing at times of scarcity. Landless villagers and new comers are often deprived of this valuable safeguard because of their limited acquaintances within the community. However some very poor families still try to support fellow strugglers regardless of their own insecurity. As Theravada Buddhists, these villagers perceive sharing of their few resources as an act of merit making.[69] It is also common sense – offering their support to poorer people today ensures a return of support tomorrow. The density of this informal social support is essential in the household survival strategy. It is therefore not unusual to find three unrelated families sharing a house and food and helping each other to survive. [70]

In case of landmine accidents, each villager would expect to be supported through evacuation and transportation to the nearest hospital. Because a landmine accident can happen to anyone, there is an implicit agreement that this is the minimum community social contribution. As one villager explained, "Today someone is hurt, tomorrow it will be someone else [maybe me]. It is difficult for all of us" (*Veteuni teugnoh khni*).

C. II.2. Defiance through attitude and discourse

In a context of moral and political coercion villagers use modest yet subtle means to express their resistance. In the case of road maintenance levies, some have deliberately given much smaller sums than expected while others have decided not to pay at all, claiming they did not have the means to contribute. Hierarchical status is spatially organised, with the most vulnerable families living relatively far from the centre. This marginalisation leads some to respond with stratagems such as non-attendance of village gatherings, with the absentees feigning illnesses or unfinished business outside the village.

[69] Some poor villagers would also look after children who have been abandoned by their families.
[70] However Thion would argue that village and family organisations are particularly weak compared to China for instance. (Thion 1993 : 98).

These attitudes constitute "everyday forms of resistance"[71] which are small in scale but very meaningful for those deploying them. They shape a psychological domain where the poorest can virtually challenge the established system. Yet it is unlikely that these acts of resistance could be merged and organised into a homogenous class movement for social struggle. People are conscious that by moving from the virtual space to the forefront of the real political scene, one might incur severe sanctions and be left on the edge of "a social precipice from which there is no return" (Scott 1976: 101).

In manifesting their frustration villagers also habitually engage in a discourse in which gossiping and deprecation open up a new space where the individual can freely express himself. Mam claims that she speaks her mind and is not afraid because she is "angry". As a single female head of household and a mother of three with no land, she is upset that the village chief is doing so little for her. She feels marginalised because the housing plot where she currently land-sits has never been considered for landmine clearance. She and her poor neighbours are all land-sitting at one end of the village where they can hardly interact with the centre. As one neighbour complained, "Yey Hi Sau only cares for the people living at the other end of the road [where she lives]. She does nothing on this side".

Hard-pressed individuals often use derogatory discourse to express their anger. This fertile terrain allows for multiple ways to talk about someone using deprecating names. Khmer attitudes and discourse are permeated with indications of hierarchical status. Terms accompanying someone's name always express social relationships according to status, age or kinship proximity. In this sense people largely make use of discourse as an effective means to vent discontent. For example, naming someone using the term "*a*" in front of a male's name or "*mi*" in front of a female's name translates as "the contemptible".[72] In Khmer this conveys social meaning (status difference) but it can also be interpreted as an insult whereby the nominated person is lowered to the status of an animal or less. Following her assault, May refers to Yey Pou (Big Sister) as "mi Kpou". The

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[71] The everyday forms of resistance as "The prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents and interest from them." (Scott 1985: 29).
[72] For further details see (Hinton 2005 : 183).

Khmer language contains many mechanisms for conveying words' movements, shapes, sounds, colours etc. In the above example, Yey Pou could have been "Mi Pou" or "Mi Yey" yet she has been designated as "mi kpou", whereby the additional "k" sound is particularly depreciative and expressive of anger. This allows May to release her frustration and enact a verbal violence in return. In this way the individual's sense of injustice is somehow compensated through discourse as a substitute form of revenge.

C. II.3. Local pagoda: centre of authority or haven of resistance?

The traditional life of the Khmer is based on three main foundations: the family, the village and Theravada Buddhism (Hinton 2005: 9). In rural areas, the construction of a pagoda at the heart of the village is significant for its social, political and religious importance. In O'Neang the local pagoda was built prior to the start of landmine clearance operations with funding from the local villagers and the casino business. It is located near a mass grave dating from the Khmer Rouge regime. Today nine monks live in the pagoda, including novices, *bikkhus* and a senior monk who after a life as a KR soldier decided to take on the Buddhist precepts. This monk explained that they had found human remains near the pagoda, which they decided to bury at the foot of a tree accompanied by Buddhist prayers. Yet despite the burial ceremony, ghosts leave the tree every night to roam free from 11pm to 4am. The unburied dead from the Khmer Rouge regime do register on the villagers' risk scale although to a lesser degree than other risk factors. In a post-conflict environment, the spirits of the dead nevertheless constitute an additional source of risk, especially on former battle fields where bones are often unearthed during farming. Local people believe that malevolent spirits may worsen an existence which is already permeated with various forms of vulnerability.

In a context where the life of the ordinary villager is fraught with multiple sources of risk the pagoda and its monks are perceived as a source of stability and moral comfort. As the official religion in Cambodia, Theravada Buddhism plays a crucial role in maintaining beliefs in karma, which explains human suffering on earth. The problem of

risk is thus often perceived as a sign of retribution for sins committed during past existence. The village monks acknowledge that they can only bring limited support to the villagers and as "everything is a result of karma"[73] a landmine accident is interpreted as the results of someone's past misdeeds (*bab*). For Sok, a novice monk, "Mines are like *sorokai* (evil ghosts who possess people) they are thieves of life". In a sense the village life being organised around the pagoda helps people to maintain an appropriate conduct but also to better cope with the burdens of their present life so as to resume a better existence in the next.

It is worth recalling that the Khmer Rouge regime banned all religions on the grounds that they perpetuated social inequalities and false consciousness[74] and at first sight it is not clear where the pagoda and its monks are located vis-à-vis the actual centre of power. In O'Neang it seems that the pagoda stands apart from the local elite and provides the poorest villagers with a spiritual space of social comfort and resistance. May admitted that following the attack by Big Sister, local support has been unreliable, modest and informal. In spite of the social isolation she suffered, however, the senior monk has regularly supported her with petty cash and rice for the children on the condition that she does not tell anyone. Despite a KR past the senior monk shows resistance against the political and social establishment by extending his support to the outcast. This confirms that in spite of social and behavioural compliance, rhizomes of informal support are active beneath the surface, reaching out to the most vulnerable. At the same time, however, all major acts of resistance must remain concealed from the power-wielding KR clique and its multiple "eyes of a pineapple".

[73] Interview with the Venerable Monk Rithipol on 2nd of August, 2006.
[74] For Michael Vickery, Theravada Buddhism was already long desecrated before the DK regime (Vickery 1984 : 12).

Conclusion:

This paper shows how, regardless of post-conflict dislocation and poverty, the individual makes rational choices that involve balancing the costs of risk and evaluating how the gains derived from a hazardous activity weigh against the potential loss. This process is constantly being re-negotiated in light of the individual's shifting degree of vulnerability as well as his interpretation of what constitutes a real source of danger.

The household defence mechanism crafts people's perception of risk and determines how the landmine risk factor is deeply embedded within a wider system of social, political and economic threats. In a situation where landmines act as a powerful means for social and political coercion, keeping one's few social and material assets constitutes the household "quantum of subsistence" and the danger of losing everything in the future is offset by the present decision to face the danger. Therefore crossing high-risk areas for a day of labour, venturing into suspected areas to claim land ownership and undertaking mine clearance in farming fields are expressions of the peasant's determination to survive and remain in the social fabric.

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Appendix I: Questionnaire example

Background & history:

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. How many people live in your house?
4. How many inactive persons? (e.g. small children, old persons, handicapped)
5. How long have you been living in this village?
6. Where do you originally come from? (province, district, commune and village).
7. Do you have family living in this village? commune/ district/ province?
8. Does this house belong to you?
9. Does this land belong to you?
10. Do you have a land title deed?
11. Do you intend to stay here in the next few months (e.g. 6)? over the next years?

Household economy:

1. What are your main activities? (local farmer, seasonal labourer in Thailand …)
2. What are the activities of other household (HH) members?
3. Do you have a "chamkar"? How far is it? How big is it?
4. What type of crops do you grow?
5. How much can you produce from it? (kg/ hectare)
6. What stops you from increasing the size of your chamkar?
7. Is drought/ flood a major problem?
8. What can you do / have you done in the past to protect yourself from the environment?
9. Do you mainly produce food for your household consumption? or for sell to the local market?
10. Do you have any animals? agricultural tools?
11. Do you have enough food:
    a. everyday
    b. every week
    c. every month
    d. every year

12. In case of problems, who do you call for help?
13. Do you often cross the Thai border? for what reasons?
14. Is the border a dangerous area? If yes, why?
15. What did you do in most difficult times to get by? (e.g. borrow money…)
16. Have you ever borrowed from someone? (money, tool etc.)
17. Who did you borrow from? Have you repaid your debt? (check if loss of land …)
18. Have you ever lent (money etc.) to someone?

Religious beliefs:

1. What is your religion?
2. Do you believe in bun/ bab/ re-incarnation?
3. Do you believe in ghosts/ evil spirits?
4. Have you ever seen any?
5. Do know if there are spirit possession/ witchcraft in this village?
6. How do you protect yourself?
7. Have you found human Momains wMay working in the field? what did you do with them?
8. Do you often go to the pagoda?
9. Do you often make offerings to the spirits of the land? what do you ask them for?

Landmines:

1. Have you ever seen a landmine/ UXO?
2. If yes, where?
3. What was your reaction? (fear, curiosity…) and what did you do?
4. Have you received any Mine Awareness from CMAC or other organisations?
5. Can you recognize the different types of landmines?
6. Do you know where the mines are in this village?
7. Do you often go into mined areas?
8. If yes, how often and what for?
9. How do you "protect" yourself? (see if use of amulets, tattoo…)
10. Have you ever cleared landmines yourself?
11. Do you know if anyone uses the landmines for scrap metal trade?
12. Where do they sell the metals to? and for how much? (baht/ kg)

13. Has CMAC, Halo Trust, the military …been clearing the land?
14. Do you feel safer after their work?
15. Do you know which areas have been cleared?
16. Have you directly benefited from this clearance? if no, do you know why?
17. What would be your clearance priority? why?
18. If clearance started tomorrow, would you rather have the villagers, the military, CMAC? Halo Trust or other organisations doing the work? why?
19. If you wanted to make your village safer, what would you do?

Risk:

1. Have you ever taken risk? (see what "risk" means and how it is translated)
2. How and wMay?
3. Do you think you live in a risky area?
4. Have you ever fallen sick? (see if this led to indebtedness)
5. Do you often take risk?
6. Does anyone in your family take risk?
7. Do you educate your family in being careful? e.g. children not to touch landmines

8. Do you know anyone in your village who takes risk you would never take?
9. Why do you he/ she does that?
10. If they asked you for help, would you help him/ her?
11. Is landmine a major risk factor in your village?
12. Do you know any landmine victim?
13. What do you think of them? Would you help them?
14. What are the major sources of risk in your daily life? (mine /land/ environment/ illnesses/ debt/ ghosts/ bad reincarnation ("kam" or "bab")/ Thai border/ others…
15. Can you rank them from the most dangerous to the less?
16. Is it OK for operators not to clear areas where they think there is no mine and leave them to the villagers? (e.g. land in agricultural use for at least 3 years with no accident)
17. Do you believe it is necessary to clear landmines everywhere?

Appendix II: Summary of the Cambodian process for land selection & landmine clearance