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Reconstruction and the Politics of Homecoming: Repatriation of Refugees in Cambodia

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Introduction

The repatriation of refugees is often a key element in international peace agreements and the international community’s efforts to reconstitute societies riven by war and conflict. In Cambodia, as in other such societies, these efforts have aimed not merely at a return to a level of functioning prior to conflict and break-down but a thorough re-shaping of many state functions in an often painstaking transition to democratic government. In Cambodia this component consisted of an organised operation to return and re-integrate some 370,000 refugees held in Thai border camps. In spite of the mixed record of repatriation and reintegration as part of peace operations in the past, the approach is likely to remain key policy of international community also in the future (Helton, 2002). Indeed, repatriation as a solution to the refugee problem in general has gained a widened appeal in recent years and the 1990s have been designated by the UNHCR as the decade of voluntary repatriation. Lubbers, the UNHCR commissioner on a recent visit at the Iran-Afghan border, watching flows of refugees crossing the border and heading home to Afghanistan, happily declared he was now 'high commissioner for returnees, not refugees' (Reuters, 15 April 2002).

The shift in focus from priorities of the integration of refugees in host states to returning them to their home countries, can be seen in the wider context of global politics and new priorities. The security paradigm (e.g. Stubbs, 2001) after the ending of the Cold War is one such context. Implicit in the discourse promoting voluntary repatriation in the 1990s is the notion that return to the country of origin is the most ‘natural’ outcome of exile and, as such, it is also the least problematic solution.

While the operational aspects of repatriation and reintegration as part of peace operations have been given considerable attention in the literature (refs), much less focus has been directed to understanding the processes of ‘homecoming’ at local level, in particular from the point of view of those struggling to make new homes. In the case of Cambodia, while the repatriation operation was hailed as a great success, we know comparatively little about the fate of those who returned (Eastmond and Öjendal, 1999, Municio, 2000). The few in-depth or ethnographic studies focussing on repatriation (most of them from African contexts) suggest that far from being a simple solution, return is often a complex process and the outcome is far from given (e.g. Allen & Morsink, 1994; Allen, 1996; Black and Koser, 1999). The problem is both political and conceptual.
This paper addresses some of the conceptual questions at the heart of the repatriation enterprise and how they interact with the politics of reconstruction in Cambodia. Drawing on theoretical challenges of established notions of ‘home’ and ‘community’, it takes issue with some of the facile assumptions of the international discourse. The paper serves as an inroad into further investigation of repatriation and its dynamic interplay with processes of re-construction – further, how the outcome of that interplay affect what we know as ‘reconciliation’. It argues for the need to explore the complex interactions and negotiations that go into ‘re-integration’ and place-making, within the changing contexts of local social worlds and livelihoods and indeed in very notion of ‘home’ itself, with the bundle or rights and obligations that pertain to belonging. The integration process will tell us something about the workings of re-construction itself, from the position of some of the most vulnerable in the new system. The focus on returned refugees will then act as a ‘strategically situated ethnography’ (Marcus, 19986:72), in ways which reveal the workings of national and international systems of politics and economy with cultural interpretation.

Conceptualising home and return: Histories of place-making

Anthropologists in recent years has challenged the assumptions on which a facile repatriation optimism of ‘coming home’ are based (e.g. Harrell-Bond, 1989; Stepputat, 1994; Turton, 1996; Hammond, 1999). Essentialised notions of ‘home’ and belonging, are based on the taken-for-granted identification of community and culture with a particular place. In the ‘sedentarist’ paradigm that has long dominated policy as well as academic thinking, as Malkki suggests (1992), a given population is seen to have its own proper place. Whether tribes, ethnic groups or nations, they have been seen as unproblematically rooted in their particular soil, as something given in nature; in contrast, ‘displaced’ populations, as the term suggests, appear as an aberration. In that conception of world order, repatriation is easily seen as the return of people to their ‘proper’ place, a return to a natural and moral order. Thus, if refugees, as a result, have been structurally and academically invisible in the past, this would be even more true of returnees. The assumption seems to have been that once returned to their place of origin, people are automatically rooted and absorbed into their normal habitat. In the discourse of repatriation into post-conflict societies, return is often depicted as a vital component in the healing of the social body, torn apart by war and civil strife. In that logic, former refugees are thus to be ‘re-fitted’ as the missing parts into the disrupted and dis-membered national body. However, reconstruction may suggest the return to a previous order, one before war and devastation but it is always the creation of a new order. In the case of Cambodia, as in Bosnia, one monitored by the international community and models on the ideals of Western liberal democracy (Chandler 2000). Re-entry of those displaced into a substantially refigured social body is often a considerable challenge, often having to negotiate their place in new contexts of power and inequality (Ranger, 1994).

The connection between people and place is more fruitfully formulated as processes and practices of ‘place making’ or emplacement, i.e. the dynamic and varied ways in which locality and belonging are historically and culturally constructed (Appadurai, 1992; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Leonard, 1997; Malkki, 1992; Lovell, 1998). Thus, in conceptualising return, we cannot a priori assume the existence of an original identity rooted in a local community tied to a particular place. The case of
Cambodia suggests that movement and flexibility, rather fixity, have historically been valued possibilities of ‘home-making’ for its rural population in times of political pressure. The perspective is useful in problematising ‘home’ and ‘community’ as contingent ideas, and exploring how they may or may not underpin returnees’ strategies of place making, while taking account of the changed circumstances into which many refugees return. It includes examining the cultural idioms in which such groups lay claim to a particular place as ‘home’, and the contexts of power in which they will have to negotiate and often creatively re-define such a place for themselves after return.

Thus, the paper highlights the conceptual myths and realities in the promotion of repatriation as optimum solution and an integral part of reconstruction and reconciliation. First, it examines the disparity between the sedentarist images of ‘home’ and ‘community’ held by the international organisations in charge, with the place-making strategies relied on by the returning Cambodians. The cultural models of the latter were rather those of mobility and flexibility, drawing on their historical experience of coping with adversity. Secondly, it discusses the implications of this disparity, conceptual as well as political, for their ‘home-coming’ against the backdrop of efforts at ‘reconstructing’ Cambodia and healing the wounds of violent conflict.

**The politics of repatriation**

The ending of the Cold War saw the active promotion of repatriation in current international refugee policy. In Africa, new and protracted conflicts followed on the more temporary exile of anti-colonial movements. It also became the key approach to the continuous exodus of Indochinese refugees in mid 1980s, initially given blanket refugee status and resettled in the West as people ‘fleeing Communism’. As a global preference, it reflects the growing reluctance of rich as well as less well endowed states to support growing numbers of refugees.

Large numbers of refugees have in fact been returning home since the 1970s, on an increasing scale, most of them unassisted and going back to a country still in conflict (cf. Cuny et al 1992). However, contrary to the images evoked by the current repatriation discourse, return may be less the result of a strong desire to return; the

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1 In a similar vein, other and more well-known ethnographic examples from the Horn of Africa, suggest that the voluntary making of ‘home’ in new places may form an integral part of the history and identity of a group, part of a traditionally valuable economic and political strategy (e.g. Turton, 1996; Getachew, 1996). Turton’s study of the Mursi and their search for ‘cool ground’ is a case in point. Seeing themselves as pioneers, even when movement was forced, they considered having to return to whence they came to be a sign of failure (Turton, 1996).

2 The many anti-colonial movements had always been assumed to be temporary affairs, hosted as a matter of African solidarity as supported by the OAU, and most were repatriated in the 1970s and 80s.

3 While repatriation had been defined as the most preferred durable solution since the inception of the UNHCR, claims by Jews and Palestinians to their homeland and its Cold War ramifications gave it low priority in practice (Allen and Morsink, 1994:2-3).

4 These trends, in some writings on the issue, signal the end of the international humanitarian right to asylum and individual protection from persecution (Hathaway, 1991).
vast majority go back either because conditions in the exile country have become unsafe or they are legally untenable. Thus, ‘return’ may be the only feasible option for refugees in a world of increasingly reluctant or unsafe host states. The growing numbers of large-scale returns in recent years, organised as a UN undertaking and part of a Peace Agreement, must be seen in this context. In the case of Cambodia, repatriation of some 360,000 refugees mainly from camps on the Thai border, was high priority in the political resolution of a protracted civil war which began in 1970, involving US bombings, Khmer Rouge atrocities, and Vietnamese occupation. Most of the returnees were civilians, rice farmers from north-western Cambodia, who had sought refuge on the Thai border from the ongoing conflicts following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime at the invasion of the Vietnamese in 1979. Some were driven to the camps by the retreating Khmer Rouge forces and in fear of the Vietnamese, the ‘hereditary foe’. Others were escaping the haunting effects of the Khmer Rouge years of famine, displacement and loss of family. Most were seeking a temporary refuge at the border, intending to return once the situation had stabilised.

Ironically, however, the Cambodians did not officially become refugees until the moment of their repatriation (Robinson, 1998). Cambodians in border camps were defined as ‘displaced’ - unlike fleeing Vietnamese and Laotians, they were not given refugee status entitling them to be resettled (Reynell, 1989). Instead, as pawns in a larger conflict scenario, they served the strategic and political interests of regional and Cold War agendas. To Thailand and China, supported by the USA and various regional and Western powers, Cambodians on the border were an important buffer and potential resistance to the feared expansion by Vietnam. To the Cambodian resistance, refugees were a vital resource both in terms of military recruitment, food and medicine, and political legitimacy. Three resistance forces, one of which were the Khmer Rouge, controlled the border camps, with support from UNBRO. Forming a coalition government in 1982, the resistance was assigned a seat to represent Cambodia in the UN. Most people in the camps were ordinary farmers seeking a temporary survival resource, and had scant motivation to engage in politics. Nevertheless, to the government in Phnom Penh, the camp residents became associated with the resistance, making refugees fear persecution upon return (Reynell, 1989). Caught in these unsafe and crowded camps, “like chickens in a cage”, exposed to incursions by Thai military, recruitment by Cambodian political factions, bandits, and a government in Cambodia that did not want them back, the refugees were hostages in a highly strategic war zone (Reynell, 1989; Robinson, 1998; French, et al., 1990).

Once the Peace Agreement was signed, getting the refugees ‘home’ for the national elections in 1993 was seen by the UN as a vital part of the peace process, and a priority of a long and costly border relief operation. Returning refugees which also

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5 A very small number had been able to secure resettlement, in most cases to the USA. Applying for resettlement was only possible by making one’s way into one of the camps, Khao I Dang, run by the UNHCR and open only for a brief period of time.

6 United Nations Border Relief Operation.

7 The collection of life stories of Cambodians in the border camps by French et al. (1990) gives important voice to a population who could not make themselves heard, and provides a picture of the diversity of life courses and motives for coming to the border.
appeared politically biased to certain parties of the opposition was seen as particularly valuable to the democratic process. The return to vote was then to lend special legitimacy to a new and democratic Cambodian government and the international undertaking of ‘re-construction and re-conciliation’. This political agenda of rapid return to establish the democratic process seemed to take little account of the more concrete concerns of those returning, which had more to do with securing a livelihood. As we shall see, one did not follow automatically from the other. However, as camps were closing, and permanent asylum elsewhere was out of the question, return was the only realistic option. As the departure date drew close, there was in fact a hurry to get out and not be the last in what was correctly assumed to be a fierce and uncertain scramble for livelihood chances in Cambodia. Perhaps the dark little tune, chanted by the Khmer Rouge to support an earlier attempt by Thailand and the UNHCR to move people back, was now felt to be more than a sinister rumour spread in the camps:

“Those who go back first will sleep on cots.  
Those who go back second will sleep on mats.  
Those who go back third will sleep in the mud.  
And those who go back last will sleep under the ground”

(Shawcross, 1984 cited in Robinson, 1998:75)

Organised repatriation: practices and underlying assumptions

Some of these organised mass returns have been hailed as great successes, such as those to Zimbabwe (Jackson, 1994) and Namibia in the late 1980s (Simon and Preston, 1993). On a closer look, success refers mainly to the logistics of these operations, often extremely costly, the actual physical movement back across the border. Much less attention and resources have been given to the longer-term and highly complex process of re-integration (Stein 1994). This may be symptomatic of a discourse which sustains the idea of repatriation as the least problematic solution (Black and Koser, 1999). A common underlying assumption of such delimited return operations thus seems to be that re-integration will follow once the ‘natural’ tie between people and their native place is restored, once people have crossed the border (Hammond, 1999; Tapscott, 1994: Jackson, 1994). Returned to their native country, their ‘proper soil’, the argument seems to run, refugees will be organically re-absorbed into rural life, through ties of kinship and local communities.

Like other repatriated populations before them, Cambodians found that repatriation does not equal homecoming (Hammond, 1999). There is very little knowledge about what kinds of expectations the returning Cambodians had of life.

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8 That would have required considerably more time and better preparation, as Reynell points out. She sees little reason why refugees could not have participated in the election while in the camps (Reynell, pers comm).

9 For critical literature on the operational complexities of return assistance including the political problems of follow up, see e.g Allen and Morsink, 1994; Allen, 1996 (Africa), Bernander et al. (1995).
upon their return from the camps. After years of absence, and decades of war and disruption, few could have expected to return to a life that once was. They no doubt knew that others had moved into the lands they once had cultivated. A survey of the refugees’ choices for assistance on return made by the UNHCR prior to leaving the camps provide a clue to their own preferences: Most were eager to obtain land for cultivation, not surprising for a population of rice farmers, and the preference was to settle in areas of fertile land, rather than returning to their village of origin. However the initial promise of UNHCR to provide land to everyone was reversed at a late stage of preparation (in fact land had never been guaranteed by the Cambodian authorities), and most people settled for the small cash grant with a tool kit instead.

Relief assistance of rice was provided for all for the first 400 days in Cambodia. With that, people were bussed across the border to reception centres, from which they were encouraged to return to their native village, or to try to locate kin (Bernander et al., 1994). According to Rodicio (2000), repatriation was translated into khmer as ‘ka twee meat to phum ni wat’, ‘coming back to the country to make a living’. Encouraging refugees to return to their home communities is often based on the understanding that kin networks will provide for them during the integration period. This is not always the preference of those returning, and may not be a feasible solution in the long run, particularly if no other resources for livelihood are available. The practice rather reflects a ‘facile communitarianism’ that locates people, with their ‘likes’, in a particular place; it also denies the transformations and rifts that may have occurred over the years of absence (Warner, 1994) as well as peoples ability to take account of them. This sedentarist bias tends to coincide with the notion of ‘the rural village’ as an assumed universal salient in development paradigms and in much anthropological thinking to date (Ovesen et al., 1996).

There is no systematic follow up data on where returnees actually did go, but according to the final destination declared at the reception centres, the majority were heading for the North Western provinces. Land and employment opportunities were considered favourable there, and being close to the border was a safety measure in case of the outbreak of new violence (see Eastmond and Ójendal, 1999). Rodicio’s

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10 The UNHCR made pre-assessments of conditions of return, a novel feature of repatriations but these seem to have had little effect on the actual outcome. They would have improved by involving refugees in the planning and implementation – or to allow them to make their own way across the border (crossings back and forth had been done clandestinely over the years), focussing assistance resources on post-return phases.

11 Some had returned there early in anticipation of land as promised by UNCHR and found themselves with nothing (Rodicio, 2000). Nevertheless, UNHCR did assist in making titled land available to a small number of families after return, provided either in existing villages or as larger settlement sites for larger number of returnee and IDP households.

12 Over 80% chose cash among a range of other options offered. USD50/adult, USD25 for children under 12 was a generous offer compared to grants to returning African refugees Kibreab (1996) but not sufficient to buy land for cultivatin.

13 My own sources give it a less extended meaning: *tveu mittaphumnivat* is the verb to return to your country. *ka tveu mittaphumnivat* is the noun from that verb (so the act of returning to one's country). Biddulph, pers.comm.

14 See e.g the returns to Namibia and Zimbabwe, Jackson, (1994); Simon and Preston (1993);Tapscott, (1994).
study of 246 returnee families in two of these provinces in 1999 is one of the few more recent qualitative enquiries into the fate of those returning from the border camps. It provides valuable empirical data, in spite of its limited coverage, on a population that seemed to disappear from view once they had crossed the border and cast their vote. Her interviews reveal that the majority did not go back to their original villages or seek out kin, as they were expected to. Many had avoided doing so for shame of being destitute, feared losing face in their village or being rejected by relatives. If we place Rodicio’s data in a broader historical and cultural context, the choices may also be seen as well-known patterns of ‘place-making’, particularly as regards the role of kin and community in relation to livelihood. Thus, the ties to villages of origin which the repatriating agencies assumed would sustain them, were not consistent with the patterns of social organisation of Cambodian rural life. Cambodians own preferences instead signalled a preparedness to build new lives in new places, even in some cases defying restrictions to settling in areas that were heavily mined. These also reflected a familiar response to change and disruption, with strong historical precedents: a strategy for coping which had served them for generations in a country with a very long history of political instability (e.g. Vickery, 1986; Thion 1992).

**Strategies of place-making: Historical and cultural contexts**

The scant literature that exists on Cambodian rural social organisation, concerning the past as well as the post-war present, would not define the local village or a kinship network as ‘natural’ bases of social identity and entitlement, less so than in many other societies in the region. In fact, there are historically no social groups providing enduring identity and organisation (or corporate discipline over the individual) situated between the state and the family (Thion 1993, Vickery, 1986). The village (phum) is an administrative unit; in khmer it denotes ‘inhabited space’ rather than a socially organised community (Kiernan, 1982, citing Delvert, 1960). The residents are independent households of nuclear families, sometimes related, working their plots of land, coming together in very informal ways at local events and for mutual assistance. Thus, the presence of a ‘village’ or neighbourhood matters, but its interrelationships do not form morally binding ties. In the privatised economy of contemporary Cambodia, such reciprocity seems at any rate to be diminishing as relations are increasingly monetarised (e.g. Ovesen et al., 1996). Thus, in Cambodia it is the nuclear family and the household, rather than local community, extended family or another larger structured kin group which is the clearly defined and enduring basis of social identity (Ebihara, 1963).

Kinship is cognatic and rather flexible, as in similar systems in the region, with little generational depth. Genealogical links are rarely remembered or revered among ordinary people. While bilateral kinship produces an extensive network of kin, these are not cohesive units in which individuals have rights and obligations, but may easily disintegrate beyond the nuclear family. Such networks cannot therefore be relied upon for support. Nor can assistance be taken for granted from parents and siblings, even if they are important in other ways to the adult Cambodian. Rather,

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15 For references to some of the earlier reports on return, see Eastmond and Öjendal (1999).
there is a tendency to pattern kinship on patron-client relations, and using members of the kin group selectively to fulfill individual ambitions. Thus, claims from kin may be mistrusted or rebuffed by those to whom such claims are addressed (Thion 1993:123). Many of the returning Cambodians had had lost touch with their relatives during their years in the camps and feared rejection upon return (Rodicio, 2000). More than a biological link, kinship is everywhere a social relation it must be re-affirmed through a variety of interactions over time. However, in a system where solidarity cannot automatically be deduced from kinship relations (Thion, 1993:123), such rejection of requests for assistance was a real possibility. In addition, the poverty in rural areas and new forms of land control also made even willing relatives less able to lend their support for any length of time.

This instrumental or pragmatic approach notwithstanding, emotional ties to close kin, specially parents and siblings do matter to adult Cambodians. Rodicio’s study found that even if nearness to kin in the village made little difference to people’s perceptions of their economic welfare after return, many felt emotionally more content. Older returnees were often nostalgic about ‘ancient times’ when they lived near their families (Rodicio, 2000). Younger people had fewer memories of their parents’ village and, having lived most of their life in camps, may have been less inclined to look to the places of the past as emotional reference points in placing themselves in the present. Also, while land for cultivation has traditionally been inherited by sons and daughters of the family, the waves of displacements and land re-allocations since the 1970s meant that few could expect to return and make claims on family land.

Thus, home, as lived space, is very much the relations, routine and ritual practices and emotional attachments of the Cambodian family, a basis both of livelihood and identity. While the rural family relies on and cherishes having land for cultivation, there seem to be few few social or cosmological moorings which tie it to a particular place or a located set of kinsmen. Spiritual relations rather seem to underline the theme of mobility and flexibility. While dead parents’ spirits are remembered, identities are not construed in terms of permanence or rooted ancestral continuity, which in some systems connects an individual through kinship and time to a particular place. The Chinese family in one of the villages I studied, who buried their dead in the rice field behind the house, presented a striking contrast to the

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16 The system of patronage has been described as a linear reciprocal social relations in which a structurally less powerful person accepts the authority of a more powerful one in exchange for protection and assistance. It is an aspect of all reciprocal hierarchical relationships in Cambodia, kin or non-kin. (see Vickery, 1986; French, cited in Curtis, 1998:111).

17 Similarly, Hammond (1999) found in her study of Tigrayans returning to Ethiopia, the idiom of territorial descent notwithstanding, there were generational differences in the meaning of time and place as a basis for creating new lives.

18 For an overview of land policies in the 1980s see Vickery, (1986) and Thion (1993). For instance, the PRK government in the 1980s permitted those using land that others had left to remain on it.

19 Home is not everywhere a place ‘where one best knows oneself’ and establishes personal identity, as posited by Rapport and Dawson (1998); this may be a particularly Western idealised conception of home. Nevertheless, it may well be conceived of as a place relieved of the constraints of public interaction, of personal security.
practices of the khmer families. For them, ancestors’ ashes may be kept at the local wat or carried along, not buried in the ground or otherwise symbolically connected to the land. Like the ancestral spirits, the neak ta or guardian spirit, as far as it represents a family and/or the land it is cultivating, may also be mobile, even, perhaps like the people it is supposed to guard, dislocated. The mention in Ovesen et al. (1996) of the displaced neak ta which had problems finding a place in which to settle peacefully, may be a case in point.

“Escaping to the forest”: mobility and adversity

Thus, in seeking to deal with change and adversity upon their return, returnees were also drawing on a long history of mobility. The looser connection to place, says Thion comparing with the Vietnamese, was facilitated by this lack of ancestral rootedness. “When dissatisfied with local conditions, Khmer farmers, who do no bury their ancestors in the ground, could easily dismantle their house, load it on to an oxcart and move elsewhere” (Thion, 1992:226). Forgetting, rather than remembering, one’s origins or genealogical ties, as Carsten (1995) argues in her study of other migrants with reference to the ‘structural amnesia’ of South-East Asian kinship systems, may be a vital facet also of Cambodians’ localising strategies. Social place, in contrast, in a strongly hierarchical society with few means of changing one’s lot, has been characterised by fixity, at least in the present; nevertheless, Buddhist doctrine and the open-ended future of individual karma nevertheless suggests possible transience also in this respect.

The history of mobility is related to the system of political control in Cambodia in the past: Where princes and patrons had been more interested in controlling manpower than land, and population density was relatively low, the practice of ‘escaping to the forest’ was a common response when social and political pressure was mounting (Mortland and Ledgerwood, 1987). Clearing virgin land and settling elsewhere, attaching themselves to a new and more benevolent ruler, had been a strategy available to peasants in former days. Until recently, there was no competition for land, and no system of registration and taxation of land (the harvest was taxed instead); in Cambodia, “local acceptance was the proof of possession” (Thion, 1992:26). The French colonial power had repeatedly failed to establish a system of private land ownership in the countryside and the custom of cultivation providing ownership prevailed. Thus, until the end of Colonial rule, in comparison with neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Vietnam, land was readily available for peasants to use to their own account, and there few incentives to land accumulation (Thion, 1993:41).

20 The significance of the neak ta is not clear from the literature. It is variously said to guard the village/the community ( ) but also a spirit connected to the family and/or the land, see the review by Ovesen et al. (1996)

21 Thion, writing in the early 1970s, comments on the co-existence of private property/Roman law with customary law. Even if “the heartland of the rice-growing areas is more or less registered as private property, still virgin land is regularly being cleared and there, as is the custom, occupation means ownership” (1993:41). The pattern contributes to the ambiguity surrounding land tenure in contemporary Cambodia. A new land law is in the making, which aims to clarify and consolidate principles of land tenure, with titling according to one of two categories, private and State property. (Öjendal, pers. comm.)
Mortland and Ledgerwood (1987), researching patterns of secondary migration among Khmer refugees in the USA found the same adaptive strategy of mobility, kinship and patronage in making a new place for themselves in difficult circumstances; it entailed moving to and attaching themselves to a resourceful relative acting as patron vis-a-vis U.S. local authorities. A crucial question for the returnees to Cambodia is thus to what extent they have been able to utilise such strategies of place-making in the Cambodia being re-constructed after their return.

**Continuity and change: The realities of return**

According to the policy guiding operations of repatriation, reintegration is to be tackled through a comprehensive development strategy focussed on poverty reduction and rural rehabilitation (World Bank, 1990, in Wilson, 1994:20). The principle is to support entire rural communities to alleviate poverty rather than earmarking assistance to returnees. However, these goals have been undermined, in Cambodia as elsewhere, by increasing rural poverty; Structural Adjustment Programs have cut public spending for those most in need, and a skewed aid distribution has consistently bypassed the rural poor (Bernander et al., 1994; Curtis, 1998). In the past ten years of steady and substantial economic growth in Cambodia, two multi-party elections, and a host of well-funded development activities, Biddulph notes, landlessness has more than doubled. A disproportionate number of landless are returnees (Biddulph, 2000).

Thus, the challenges facing the returning Cambodians were considerable. Acquiring and holding on to land for cultivation was pivotal to reintegration, but was clearly hazardous in the new political and economic system. As is often the case for those returning after years of civil conflict and extended exile, people had lost property and land rights in their absence, and now encountered intense competition with local residents for scarce resources: Repatriation coincided with the introduction of a liberal market economy and the privatisation of land. This created a scramble for land as a scarce and valuable commodity, which in the absence of a functioning legal system meant greater power in the hands of local authorities and the military. (Eastmond & Öjendal, 1999). In this situation, returnees had little bargaining power - or new virgin land areas to move on to - and could even be evicted also from titled

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22 E.g through Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) such as building a village school or a road, seeking to bridge the relief-development gap

23 Cf similar experiences of reintegration elsewhere. In Africa such strategies have not been conducive to absorbing large numbers of returnees, who enjoy very little sustained assistance and legal protection. Cuny and Stein in fl

24 In their absence, land had been distributed by the PRK government to those working the land (see Thion, 1993 for a history of land holding patterns).

25 The reduced access to other natural resources, in many places taken over by commercial and military interests, diminishes the options of diversifying livelihood through fishing and foraging, a strategy through which many rural people have survived scarcity in the past (Biddulph, 2000).
land. While dispossession did not only affect returnees, their legitimate claims to livelihood were easily attacked. As “people from the camps”, i.e. identified with the resistance factions, they were mistrusted by local residents and authorities alike, discredited as people “who took the wrong path.” Those who did seek out relatives, perhaps hoping for a safety net, often found that, as their settlement assistance ran out, they had outstayed their welcome. The findings, as Biddulph notes, are “an indication of just how inadequate the provisions for their reintegration into the national economy and society were” with insufficient land or money provided to returnees to buy land or invest in other means of production, and little effective follow up protection (2000:7; 33).

**Homeless at Home: From centre stage to social invisibility**

Nearly ten years later, many are still struggling, living from hand-to-mouth, or in the local idiom “eat one day, look one day” (Davenport, et al. 1995). Recent reports suggest that while one in eight rural families have no land in Cambodia today (Biddulph, 2000), three out of four returnee families are landless (Rodicio, 2000). The marginal position of returnees in many places is spatially marked by the poor quality and placement of houses in relation to the rest of the village (Boyden and Gibbs, 1997, Rodicio, 2000:45), and discrimination of returnees is a recurring experience in the narratives of Rodicio’s informants. The high proportion of returnee households without men, reinforces patterns of social exclusion. The conditions have also been observed to destablise the ties that matter most in Cambodia, those of family, with increase in domestic violence and abandonement of women and children (Boyden and Gibbs, 1997). Diffulties in securing livelihood prompt people to move on, and many returnee families have moved more than once. There is a relation between landlessness and migration also for other rural poor (Biddulph, 2000).

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26 It is instructive to look at the single case of successful integration of newcomers into a village of Rodicio’s study: The contributing factors were a positive village chief with high local legitimacy, secure land tenure of villagers and an otherwise well-resourced community (school, Wat). Both village leader and monks were involved in the integration process, which included a solidarity fund and adoptions of returnees without family.

27 The fact that the young had not learnt the skills to farm (and few other skills either) were a concern to refugees in the camps. Ryenell reports that requests for a secondary school were firmly rejected by the agencies in the camps, sometimes feared to favour the political resistance (1989). The problem of land and education were to known to the UNHCR before return (Reynell, pers comm; Rogge, 1990) but were not adequately addressed.

28 An average of 73% of the returnees in Siem Reap and Bantey Meanchey were landless (compared to a country-wide average of 13%, Biddulph, 2000) – most of these returnees had never acquired land or had been dispossessed. Also, 82% of the returnees were found in the three poorest strata of the rural population according to the 1999 Household Survey (Rodicio, 2000).

29 See Ovesen, et al. (1996) on the outcast status of “widows”, referring to women whose husbands have died or abandoned them.

30 Pressure on land and increasing migration is also being felt in the most remote and sparsely populated areas of upland Cambodia today from lowland khmers seeking to settle (Biddulph, 2000) Perceived as a threat to the livelihoods of its indigenous minorities, it is likely to be strongly contested.
In the past, in the absence of any formal institutions of welfare and legal protection (through kinship or the State), linking oneself to a more powerful person, a patron, has been an important source of support in times of need. However, people returning from the border camps have had difficulties in accessing social networks important in a system of patronage (Rodicio, 2000:87). Increasing migration of returnees may then indicate an inability to attach themselves to new patrons (kin, village chiefs, other resourceful persons), perhaps as politically ‘suspect’ people. Alternatively, since also other landless Cambodians are forced to move today, one may speculate that the institution of patronage itself is changing. Although conditions of poverty and insecurity are conducive to promoting systems of patronage, new modes of becoming rich offered by the contemporary economic system is undermining at least one of the important incentives of being a patron in the past (Öjendal, pers.comm.).

In most official texts and contexts (as in plans by government or major development projects), the category “returnee” has ceased to exist. This might, at a first glance, be a sign of integration. Nevertheless, in local areas “returnee” remains a persistent and often stigmatised category of social interaction and economic entitlement and, in some places at least, it is an identity that is being passed on to the next generation. (Eastmond and Öjendal, 2000; Rodicio, 2000:135). Although there are local variations, returnees continue to be found among the economically most marginal of the rural population. Without the economic means to buy land and the legal means to remain on it, the implications for many Cambodians have been continued exclusion, either ‘keeping silent’ at the margins of local communities or on the move in search of viable livelihood. From the limelight of national importance in the 1993 elections, the former camp refugees have been moved into the margins on the national scene, structurally invisible both as returnees and as landless poor.

Landlessness and the destabilisation of family seems to undermine the most vital bases of ‘home’ as defined by a rural Cambodian. Structurally invisible and marginal in the national community of khmer, and with little foothold in rural communities; they are, in several respects, ‘homeless at home’ (cf Jansen, 1998).

New Sites of Belonging?

‘Coming home’ is then a considerably more complex process than repatriation operations may envisage. If home is an idea, rather than (or not only) a particular place, it is also dynamic and responsive to social change. The two interdependent modalities of place making that seem to have characterised rural livelihoods in Cambodia, i.e. stability (use rights of land) and mobility (clearing new land), have depended on the availability of land. In the new economic and political context,

31 The political gains of patronage is likely to persist even if reshaped, however, also in the new political system. As an aspect of all hierarchical relationships it is deeply entrenched in Cambodian political culture; the extent and ways in which patronage will be affected by political change, especially at local levels, remains to be seen.

32 Current statistics, procured with the aid of major development organisations and the World Bank, do not include figures on landlessness (thus, lacking the basic tool for development planning). (Biddulph, 2000:11). Any new land policy based on the same orthodoxy that has characterised the development effort of the post-conflict reconstruction decade, cannot be expected to make a difference.
localisation in the sense of private ownership and attachment to land increases in significance; holding on to land becomes important to survival. Also mobility takes on new meanings in this system, especially when there is no place to go.\textsuperscript{33} While movement in the past had been a valued possibility to escape political pressure and establish new homes for themselves, migration in the present context becomes a sign of social exclusion and personal failure, not the successful strategy of ‘pioneers’. As such, it signals new and less overt forms of structural inequality replacing older and more explicit patterns of hierarchical control.

The development of ‘returnee communities’ seem to be new strategies of place making that may be a creative adaptation to new circumstances in Cambodia which also entails new meanings of placement and community. Such formations are not uncommon among repatriated populations, based on social networks established in exile and often in response to social exclusion on return (e.g. Cuny et al., 1992; Hammond, 1999; Stepputat, 1994). For the Cambodians, apart from equal access to land of all residents, the shared ordeal of life at the border and of discrimination upon return seem to have constituted a basis for identification and community. These ‘returnee sites’ were initially a temporary emergency measure to settle returnees by land secured by UNHCR, not considered ‘proper’ or even potential communities (Eastmond and Öjendal, 1999). Other such ‘new villages’ have emerged as returnees have moved from their initial destinations seeking out other returnees\textsuperscript{34}. Although data are insufficient about these sites, and we know very little of their placing in the political landscape of rural Cambodia, they have emerged, Rodicio’s study suggests, as new and more cohesive forms of social organisation and patterns of leadership, which differ in interesting ways from the ordinary, more loosely organised khmer village. Women of two different sites sum up the experience voiced by many others such residents:

“We had many problems with locals. They called us ‘blue plastic bags’[provided by UNHCR, used to build houses], they blamed us for getting their land and they looked down on our children. I was very angry with that and I had to move many times. Now here we are all returnees and we do not have problems.” (Rodicio, 2000:134)

“I am very poor. In this village the people are very good with me. I became a widow and do not have much to eat. I told the chief of the village and now the neighbours are helping me” (ibid:120)

The Politics of ‘home-coming’: Repatriation and re-construction

The Cambodian experience of return echoes those of other repatriated populations in past few decades (Allen & Morsink, 1994; Allen, 1996, Simon and Preston, 1993). Far from being the ‘optimum solution’, as the myths depict it, in reality, return and re-integration are dynamic and contested processes of power and inequality, in which

\textsuperscript{33} As an emerging landless rural proletariat, there is as yet little industrialisation to offer any alternatives (Öjendal, pers. comm.)

\textsuperscript{34} Also when living in villages, the social interaction of returnees was often limited to that of other returnees (Rodicio, 2000).
those coming back have to negotiate their ‘place’ in new circumstances (Ranger, 1994:291). The terms of that negotiation, which have to do with principles of inclusion and entitlement connected to identity, are very much set by the socio-political context of return, and the transformations the country has undergone in their absence or as a part of a major re-structuration. Further, the history and politics of displacement as well as the experiences and perceptions of those who remained are important for understanding social acceptance. For example, the freedom fighters of anti-colonial movements in Africa were assured a place in the new and independent nation; perceived as heroes, their political identity provided important symbolic capital. Nevertheless, as Jackson (1994) shows for the case of Zimbabwe, the warm welcome appears to have made little difference for their subsequent integration, in a situation of pervasive rural poverty. The returning Cambodians largely lacked such symbolic capital (and any other kind); they were identified with the resistance forces, and were those “who took the wrong path”.

Many return populations are embraced by the national (and international) community at the time of return as vital in the construction and legitimation of a new political order, but as ethnographic investigations illustrate, the process at local level may work out very differently from the official political rhetorics of return. In a transformed homeland, new principles of entitlement and inclusion, formal or informal, may be replacing old ones, critically affecting returnees’ own strategies of insertion. Former citizenship has been replaced by more exclusive, ethno-nationalist bases of belonging and entitlement, as in many Bosnian local communities. While principles of descent provided rights to ancestral land in many African systems, and the actual practice of cultivation provided ownership in Cambodia in the past, these may have been eroded by successive land re-allocations and scarcity; the introduction of private land tenure in the new Cambodia has been a major obstacle to re-constituting life and belonging. Returning Cambodians had few resources with which to obtain a basis for livelihood upon their return. Apart from a minority of middle-class camp refugees, many of them absorbed into work with international organisations upon return, the majority were rice farmers who had acquired few new skills in the camps. Even when returnees gain legal access on new principles, they may be easily challenged and dispossessed in situations of scarcity (Biddulph, 2000). In the politics of homecoming, the very returnee label is often morally discrediting. The emergence of competing discourses of suffering between those who left and those who stayed is common. Also in Cambodia, having left, while others ‘stayed and suffered’ often seemed to have justified discrimination of returnees. “We held on to our land”, as once Cambodian farmer put it, “while they ran off to the camps”.

Conclusion

The systematic failure of massive, organised returns to provide durable homes throws into serious question the premises on which repatriation is being promoted. The problem is both political and conceptual. In the Cambodian case, return was a also symbolic showpiece of a peace agreement (brokered by the very same political interests that had kept people in the camps), vital in legitimating a new democratic regime in Cambodia, of strategic importance to the UN, donors and many Western

35 Summing up the African experience of repatriation
states. As such, it demanded a swift and effective movement of large numbers of people in time for elections. In such large-scale organised operations, standardised solutions and tight control are key to operational success. These tend to overlook two of the important components of successful return, namely timing and refugees’ own assessments and initiatives. To reiterate a well-known controversy, repatriation appears to address ‘the refugee problem’, i.e. the political and institutional challenges that refugees pose, rather than refugees’ problems, that is, the struggles of refugees to create a secure life for themselves, whether that be in the country of origin or elsewhere (Wilson, 1994, Harrell-Bond, 1989).

Thus, repatriation certainly does not always mean ‘coming home’, even if it takes people back to their country of origin. What happens after crossing the border is often very different from the idealised trajectory as envisioned by the agencies of repatriation. People are not ‘naturally’ and easily absorbed into their original or other communities but have to negotiate their placement in locally complex situations. Although an emerging body of research suggests that local situations, particularly in post-conflict societies, are complex and particular and not responsive to blanket solutions, ‘home’ is rarely problematised and presented in this discourse as something beyond the notion of the ‘homeland’; instead, it builds on simplistic expectations of people’s reintegration into the national or local community. This calls for continued, in-depth ethnographic enquiries into the local dynamics of refugees’ return in ways which may capture and make justice to such complexity. That includes exploring returnee initiatives in re-conceptualising ‘home’ and building new communities (e.g. Hammond’s study of the Tigray in Ethiopia, 1998; 2002) and the circumstances which promote such agency and initiative, locally as well as in relation to wider national and international forces.

36 As an alternative to the rushed retour, voting in the Cambodian election could have been organised from the camps and time could have been allowed for members of family to seek out a place in Cambodia before taking the family back. People could have been allowed to walk across the border, and the enormous costs of transport could have served as grants sufficient enough to invest in land or other means of production (it was allegedly not considered safe for refugees to carry large sums of money).
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