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Rupturing violent land imaginaries: finding hope through a land titling campaign in Cambodia

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Abstract

In areas of land conflict, fear and the threat of violence work to reproduce imaginaries of land as a resource that powerful people can grab. An urgent question for agrarian scholars and activists is how people can overcome fear so that alternative imaginaries might flourish. In this article, we argue for attention to the affective dimension of imaginaries; ideas of what land is and should be are co-constituted through the material and social, imbued with powerful emotions that enable imaginaries to be reproduced, to be challenged, and even to be transformed. We draw from long-term research projects in Cambodia—a country known for plantation-fuelled dispossession—where the Prime Minister's surprise announcement of a land titling campaign in 2012 ruptured the wave of land grabbing, creating openings to imagine different outcomes that are rooted in the potential for legal recognition of smallholder claims. Although the campaign was an uncertain rupture in land imaginaries, these moments matter. Land claimants sought to create affective ties with volunteer land surveyors that embedded hopeful land imaginaries in rural areas and into the national cadastral system. The land title in this context is the material bearer of a land imaginary that centres on rural people's connection to the land, and also reinforces rural people's connection to the Cambodian state and the potential to gain the state's protection. We contribute to an emerging literature that locates the formative effects of hope as an orientation and as a method by exploring the possibilities inherent in rupture.

Keywords Land imaginary · Hope · Emotional political ecology · Land grabbing · Land titling · Cambodia

Introduction

Land imaginaries are crucial for understanding the spatio-temporal unevenness in land transformations. Distinct, and potentially conflicting, imaginaries of what land is (its ontology), what it should do (its affordances) and how humans should interact with it, alter the arrangements and possible transformations of land (Li 2014; Puig de la Bellacasa 2015). Literature on the construction of land as global commodity focuses primarily on land as an 'assemblage' of technological devices and development discourses, which dis-embed land from its biophysical and socio-cultural context (Li 2014). These explanations of how particular land imaginaries become dominant pay less attention to another crucial dimension: the *affective* dimension of imaginaries. In order to understand what enables particular imaginaries of land to take hold and to effect material transformation on the ground, we must recognise that imaginaries are emotional; ideas of what land is and should be are imbued with powerful emotions that enable imaginaries to be reproduced, to be challenged and even to be transformed.

We ground our analysis in Cambodia, where the government has granted more than 2 million hectares of land (approximately 53% of Cambodia's arable land) as economic land concessions for agro-industrial plantations since the early 2000s (Neef et al. 2013). State and corporate narratives of isolated upland areas as underutilised, disorderly and in need of agribusiness development belie the violence through which land concessions have transformed the landscape and rural life (Schoenberger and Beban 2018). The market imaginary of land has never became fully hegemonic in rural Cambodia and people continue to resist in various ways. But the political economic and affective force of

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politico-business elite limits the possibilities for people to secure competing imaginaries of land. This raises questions: why do some land imaginaries become dominant and remain stable for long durations? And where does the impetus for change come from?

Our analysis shows that moments of rupture in these violent landscapes can break open dominant imaginaries and enable people to imagine and enact alternative futures. In 2012, amidst violent land conflicts, the dominant land imaginary in concession areas was momentarily ruptured by a one-year government land titling campaign to award legal land rights to smallholder farmers in the form of private titles. We take this campaign as our entry point to explore how moments of rupture enable new collective understandings of possible futures—what Sheila Jasanoff (2015a) terms 'sociotechnical imaginaries'. We bring this together with work on power and affect to draw attention to the embodiment of imaginaries as they are embedded and extended across time and space. The power of affect as a core component of imaginaries lies in its potential; hope is 'the ground of not yet' (Bloch 1998), it is constantly under negotiation and contains the potential for positive change as well as for disappointment, subversion and failure within it. Many people found hope in the campaign's promise to recognise individual land tenure and their encounters with campaign volunteers in land concession areas produced an opening to materialise imaginaries that had been marginalised.

Our contribution is therefore two-fold. Epistemologically, this paper advances the agenda for hopeful research—for hope as an orientation and as a method—by exploring the possibilities inherent in rupture. Theoretically, we contend that affect underpins the material, discursive and social elements of land imaginaries, and that emotions are central to the ways imaginaries are reproduced and challenged. In what follows, we first set out our theoretical frame, bringing together work on socio-technical imaginaries, power, rupture, and the space-based practices of hope. Following a discussion of methodology, we lay out the rural imaginaries in land conflict areas prior to the land titling campaign. We then trace the process of rupture that the titling campaign entailed in three parts: origins, embedding and resistance (Jasanoff 2015b). In the final section, we expand on Jasanoff's analytic by tracing the challenges to the campaign, showing that while actors that benefited from dominant land imaginaries sought to re-establish their power, rupture can have lasting effects.

Theoretical frame: affective land imaginaries

Drawing from the work of Spinoza, we understand imaginaries as 'affectively laden thought patterns' (Gatens and Lloyd 1999, p. 5), which constitute our modes of being in the world and thereby constitute our subjectivity. Much of the work on imaginaries in sociological literature runs the risk of positioning imaginaries as existing separately from material relations, and as such falls back on a dualist relation between idealism and materialism (Dawney 2011). But imaginaries are not separate from the material: they play a role in the production of ways of life and they are carried by material objects like food, clothes and trinkets, as well people and technologies (Dawney 2011; Salazar and Graburn 2016). The construction of boundaries between 'our' space and 'theirs'—the bedrock of an imaginary of land as property—is effected through the socio-technical markers of maps, titles, as well as stories, policies, and discourses of development (Said 1978). In this way, 'technological objects' are enmeshed in society as integral components of social order (Jasanoff and Kim 2015). To begin answering the question of how existing imaginaries are reproduced, and how they are transformed, we turn to Jasanoff's (2015a) analytic of 'sociotechnical imaginaries', which she defines as:

> collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated and shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology. (5)

Jasanoff (2015b) posits a four stage process by which imaginaries are established and contested, moving from origins (involving the ideas of individuals and social groups), to embedding (turning ideas into material, institutional and behavioural realities), to resistance (by defenders of previously dominant imaginaries) and to extension of the imaginary into new contexts. We focus on the first three stages of the process because the land titling campaign was an inherently national process with state-building aims, rather than a campaign with global ambitions.

We bring to Jasanoff's framework a focus on the power of affect to 'embed' imaginaries across space and time, contributing to the emerging literature that seeks to locate how affect is interwoven with physical environments such that imaginaries are co-constituted with the material dimension (Hauer et al. 2018). Here we lean on neo-Gramscian work on power and hegemony that recognises affect and emotion as integral to politics, rather than outside of it (Mouffe 2005). Laclau (1990, p. 63) understands the social imaginary to be located in the space between attempts of meaning-making and the impossibility to conclusively fix meaning, a 'mythical space' that entails the 'intuition of fullness that cannot be granted by the reality of the present'. Universalising notions such as 'nation', 'peace', 'development', 'law' and 'the people' must be filled with meaning through constant affective investment to provide the force that binds together subjectivities around a common focal point. Imaginaries are thus a field of contestation; dominant imaginaries vie for

social positioning while 'competing imaginaries lurk on the edges' (Bouchard 2017, p. 19), and competition, clashes, and changes occur. This work to produce a common subjectivity also creates (and depends on) its outside; the 'other' against which the collective defines itself (Laclau 1990, pp. 110–111). Institutions of power, like legislatures, courts, the media, policy documents, as well as shadowy and opaque actors and backroom negotiations work to elevate some imagined futures above others, according them a dominant position (Schoenberger and Beban 2018).

Despite the attempts of powerful actors to embed official imaginaries across space, however, the politics of the everyday—the diversity of land imaginaries that people hold—reveals that the official, political discourse is rarely fully hegemonic and the everyday is a site of substantive meaning (Robinson and Tormey 2008). People resist powerful state imaginaries by both resisting the state and articulating competing imaginaries (or, as Jansen 2014 calls it, 'hoping against the state'), and also by appealing to powerful institutions to recognise their land claims, rearticulating their imaginaries of land to cohere to those of official discourse. These practices produce state authority (Lund 2016). In Cambodia, a diverse group of actors work to resist land concessions through legal training, petitions, mapping, organizing and protesting. Many of these strategies focus on pursuing goals outlined in law to the limit of other goals, and at the same time elevate the concession imaginary as being based in law, power, and contracts, thereby reproducing the imaginary of the concession as the object of contestation as they work to open new possibilities. Thus, social movements exist in a dynamic relationship with the state. The enactment of a counter-hegemonic strategy presupposes the existence of a hegemonic force against which the former contingently positions itself (Laclau, 1990). But where political elites are able to establish popular support, it is usually by channelling identities and concerns already arising in everyday life, rather than constructing imaginaries from scratch, and state actors therefore take on elements of counter-movement demands to retain legitimacy.

How, then, do we explain moments when alternative imaginaries have space to establish? We bring to this discussion a focus on moments of 'rupture', when the contradictions within dominant imaginaries are exposed and the rhythms of everyday life that seemed stable are revealed as contingent (Bryant 2014). We draw from Lund's (2016, p. 1202) work on ruptures in land relations, the 'moments when opportunities and risks multiply, when the scope of outcomes widens, and when new structural scaffolding is erected', to show how the land titling campaign ruptured the dominant fearful land imaginary with its own distinct imaginary of land for citizens. This opened up space to articulate other imaginaries, spawning multiple interpretations and efforts to shape the idea of how land titling ought to proceed.

Ruptures are processes that may be imbued with hope as they enable new ideas about the future as 'that-which-might-become' (Popke 2009, p. 83). A significant body of social science literature inspired by feminist, social justice-oriented work seeks to illuminate hope by identifying imaginaries that lie outside of dominant political-economic structures (Gibson-Graham 2006), and finding hope in seemingly hopeless situations. This literature is criticized for a tendency to understand hope as a normative category rather than an analytical category (see Kleist and Jansen 2016, for example); that is, for focusing on establishing that hope is present rather than attention to what it is that people actually hope for. One response to this critique is to focus on the labour of producing and spreading imaginaries. Hope is more than a psychological state or an affect emanating from an individual, rather, hope 'takes place' in that 'it does not only (re)orient and shape life trajectories, but is co-constitutive of shaping and changing of the … landscape' (Hauer et al. 2018, p. 61). Conceptually, the opening of space for contestation following dislocatory events is often accompanied by attempts to reconstitute the social order (Laclau, 1990), what Jasanoff refers to as 'resistance' of previously dominant imaginaries. Our approach similarly interweaves the temporal and the spatial to focus on how hopeful imaginaries emerge, embed and conflict in social spaces through material objects, embodied encounters, and relationships with land.

This approach to interweaving the social, material and affective dimensions of imaginaries reveals that technical objects and state policies, such as land titles, are traveling universals (Tsing 2005) that take on different meanings as they touch down in different contexts and are enrolled into different imaginaries of land. An extensive literature on land titling shows that the land title as a focus of claims making has ambiguous, and potentially devastating effects; it can enable (legal) dispossession, break up solidarity between those who are titled and 'untitled', and make people more vulnerable to debt and extractive state surveillance; and it can also provide security and the potential for economic improvement (de Soto 2000; Akram-Lodhi et al. 2007; Scott 1998). Much of this literature, from both critics and proponents, takes for granted the meanings people give to the land title, and the questions of who surveyed land, and how this process was negotiated. But these questions matter. As later sections in this paper explain, the use of technoscientific tools are negotiated in affective interpersonal encounters and can transform titles into objects of hope.

Methodology

This paper is part of a collaborative writing project to understand how affect transforms land relations in the midst of protracted conflict. It took root in 2014 and has been an

ongoing source of 'critical hope' (Zembylas 2014) for us. Our previous writing focused on the production of fear and uncertainty in land concession areas (Beban and Schoenberger 2019). In this article, we shift to focusing on the production of hope and the question of how alternative land imaginaries become embedded. This shift of analytical focus mirrors the shifts we observed and experienced in the field. We began our long-term research projects prior to the announcement of the land titling campaign, at a time when hope was difficult to locate in the midst of violent dispossession. Even when the Prime Minister made a sudden announcement initiating the land titling campaign in the lead-up to the 2013 national election, we were sceptical. But as we observed people's encounters in rural areas, we began to reconsider the significance of the campaign as part of a proliferation of openings for things to become otherwise, and we became attuned to the possibilities that moments of rupture enable—what Anderson (2017) terms a 'method of hope'.

Imaginaries are produced and embedded through discourse, material objects, and practices that are imbued with affect; thus, epistemologically, knowing an imaginary requires attention to the myriad ways that ideas circulate across spaces and moments to produce collectively held meaning. This necessitates a multi-method approach that focuses on the multiple conduits through which imaginaries become visible in the form of objects, bodies, words, images, metaphors, lines on a map, relationships with others, land use practices and concrete material outcomes (Daniels 2011; Jasanoff and Kim 2015; Taylor 2002). We draw primarily from fieldwork in rural areas conducted between 2010 and 2015, covering the period before, during, and after the land titling campaign, and we complement this data with reflections from interviews undertaken in 2020. Our methods toolkit includes participatory methods, group discussions and interviews with multiple actors; analysis of official discourse (through performative speeches and policy statements) and cultural production (such as karaoke songs and videos about the campaign that circulated in rural areas); attention to rumour and gossip; and observations of people's interactions with the survey volunteers, with the material objects of titles, and with the land itself. We bring these elements together as we trace how policies and processes of land titling are a 'traveling universal' (Tsing 2005) that overflow their temporal-spatial location to emerge as an imaginary.

We each conducted research for around two years in different parts of the country and our insights on imaginaries here are formed particularly from our long-term ethnographic work in communities experiencing land conflict—all areas where land concessions are prevalent and targeted by the land titling campaign. This paper does not include the experience of communities in lowland areas far from land concessions, nor does it include the experiences of indigenous communities seeking legal rights to communally held land. Indigenous communities had very different experiences as the campaign only allowed for private land title and thus undermined communal claims (see Milne 2014). Because many of our research participants requested anonymity, and due to the threats land activists face in Cambodia, we do not name informants or specific research sites in this article. While this does limit the ability for us to provide specific context, our point here is to trace the ways imaginaries embed as collectively held visions, looking for the patterns in people's words, encounters and practices that exceeded any one research site or moment. The titling campaign was a national-scale intervention that was intended to be applied without deviation, and we focus on the ways this imaginary embedded, and was challenged as people occupying different positions of social power sought to use the campaign and assert their own imaginaries of land.

Competing imaginaries of land in postwar Cambodia

To show the rupture of the land titling campaign, it is first necessary to understand the trajectory of land imaginaries prior to the campaign. Cambodia's political elite have long depended on land to gain and maintain political control. Through the years of sovereign kingship, through colonial rule and independence and into the post-Khmer Rouge era, Cambodians had access to land for their own use, with land use governed by 'acquisition by the plough' (Thion 1993). The colonial state made efforts to privatise and register land (Guillou 2006), but in the 1970s, the Khmer Rouge regime implemented forced collectivisation and destroyed cadastral records. Following a government decree in 1989, local authorities issued land according to the policy of 0.2 hectares per person (Guillou 2006). As refugees returned and landlessness and poverty rose in the 1990s, people moved to upland areas to find new land, and a proliferation of imaginaries emerged—land as an open resource available to those who use it, as a family home for generations, as a potential source of income through logging and cash crops, and as a source of territorial power amongst local state officials/military elite.

During the postwar period, the political ambitions of the new politico-business elite and development agencies' visions of prosperity through foreign investment in agriculture enabled an imaginary of land as an asset for the powerful to become dominant in upland areas. This marginalised, but never fully displaced, other land imaginaries. Since the 1990s, the ruling party [the Cambodian People's Party (CPP)] intensified their grip on power through building politico-business networks in which officials and business

elite are given access to lucrative contracts and land concessions in exchange for loyalty—what scholars have termed a 'neo-patrimonial' or 'shadow state' system (Le Billon 2002; Neef et al. 2013). The national Land Law enables the state to grant land concessions of up to 99 years on state land by simply changing its designation from 'state public land' to 'state private land' required for national development purposes. Although the Land Law also enables some rural people to claim ownership rights for land in their possession, provided they were on the land before 1996, land titling was largely confined to the lowland settled rice areas throughout the mid-2000s, while land concessions expanded across the uplands (Dwyer 2015). Cambodia's government embraced land concessions as a mode of development, with the promise that private sector investment will provide jobs and reduce poverty (RGC 2010). But these state-sponsored 'land grabs' have incited fear and widespread social and ecological disruption. People who farm land that is designated as a concession can be labelled 'illegal settlers', regardless of whether their tenure predates the concession, and the state's law enforcement agencies and military forces used to violently exclude them (Springer 2013).

In this context, the land imaginaries that people articulated when we began fieldwork (prior to the campaign) were imbued with fear. Villagers living near concessions said they felt that the company 'has control over whether I live or die', 'I'm thinking of the future and I do not know where to go', and 'people cannot do anything because we are so deeply affected by worry' (Group discussion, August 2010). Despite this fear, a coalition of community members and others resisting land grabs have long worked to open spaces to affirm alternative subjectivities through collective organizing (Öjendal 2013). Much of this organising focused, however, on building a sense of collective identity and raising people's confidence to speak back to power, rather than gaining state recognition: 'We should depend on ourselves, not the authorities and not the NGOs that come to the village… If we can't help ourselves, then the Company will take all the land in the future (Group discussion, August 2010). No one saw a possible future in which the government would offer (and fund) the means for smallholders to secure their land vis-à-vis the claims of powerful concessionaires.

The socio-technical imaginaries of the land titling campaign

In 2012, as land conflicts were peaking (ADHOC 2014), the terrain unexpectedly shifted when Prime Minister Hun Sen announced the land titling campaign, formally titled '*Order 01-BB on Measures for Strengthening and Increasing the Effectiveness of the Management of Economic Land Concessions*', or 'Order 01' for short. This was a time of turmoil. Hun Sen faced political pressure from outspoken activists and a united political opposition party, as well as internal tensions within his own networks (Öjendal 2013). He sought to regain his legitimacy. First the Prime Minister announced a moratorium on land concessions. Then days later he announced the land titling campaign, recruiting more than 2,500 university student volunteers to survey land that lay within land concessions and other state land areas. The surveyed land would be 'donated' to rural people who 'actually occupied and cultivated [the land] with annual or perennial crops' (RGC 2012, p. 10). After the announcement, the land survey itself was organised and carried out with impressive speed and scope. From the start of the campaign in June 2012, to the posting of Order 01 results in December 2014, approximately 610,000 titles were issued, and a total of 1.2 million hectares of land were reclassified from land concessions and state land to private property (MLMUPC 2014).

The campaign ruptured the dominant imaginary of land as a global commodity controlled by violent networks of state/corporate elite, and opened the possibilities of different futures for rural people. In doing so, it moved the goalposts for communities embroiled in protracted conflicts with land concessions by introducing a new solution to the remote uplands: private land titles to formalize land use and claims. In the next section, we analyse how this rupture enabled the production and embedding of alternative imaginaries of land, propelled by the Prime Minister, the volunteers, and rural land claimants.

Origins of the Imaginary: By Khmer, For Khmer

Sociotechnical imaginaries can originate in the visions of single individuals or small groups, rising to the status of a (collective) imaginary through 'blatant exercises of power or sustained acts of coalition building' (Jasanoff 2015a, 4). The Prime Minister's land titling campaign was a 'blatant act of power' that momentarily ruptured the dominant imaginary of land as a resource vulnerable to grabbing by the powerful and opened space for an alternative imaginary of land as a gift from the central state to rural people. This was a calculated political response to rising unrest over land concessions, and the very real possibility that the ruling party would lose the upcoming national election. In speeches and public performances announcing the campaign, the Prime Minister deployed a populist imaginary of land as the property of Khmer farmers whose productive farms would enable future prosperity. The Prime Minister nicknamed the campaign the 'leopard skin policy', signifying that smallholder farms would be carved out of land concessions like animal spots across the landscape. This image touted the benefits of the campaign for both smallholder farmers and ELC companies: the companies would have a stable local labour force and farmers who received land title would gain

tenure security, access to credit, and employment at land concessions to finance their small farm enterprises. This discourse reflects the efforts of development agencies (most notably the World Bank and the German agency GIZ) that were instrumental in developing Cambodia's postwar land administration scheme, but these actors were explicitly shut out of the campaign.

The Order 01 land imaginary was explicitly tied to a reinforcing of state authority; by claiming the authority to seize land from global companies and 'donate' the land to smallholders, the Cambodian state used the land titling campaign to shore up political support. The campaign was touted as 'By Khmer, For Khmer', and the government excluded international donors and NGOs from any involvement. This is exceptional in a country where donor funds have made up half the annual postwar state budget. The campaign was also highly personalised as the 'Prime Minister's land titling campaign'. Performative and discursive elements centred on the Prime Minister, and the campaign operated in parallel to formal state systems. Its budget was generated from 'private donations' from the Prime Minister's family and its implementation relied on thousands of young volunteers (named 'Samdech Techo Volunteering Youth Heroes', in reference to the Prime Minister's honorific title). Hun Sen emphasized his role as the driving force behind the campaign, highlighting his financial support, and promoting the image of himself as 'uncle' to the volunteers in public speeches. In a lavish dinner prepared for volunteers, Hun Sen congratulated them on helping Cambodians 'secure their land so companies could not seize it' (Hun Sen 2012). The dominant message during training, as one volunteer recalled in an interview, was that the volunteers' job was to help the people by getting land back from the companies so they could use it and that doing so would develop the country (female volunteer, 20 s, 2.2.15).

In his performative public speeches, Hun Sen also focused on the links between land title, rice-based farming productivity, and poverty reduction. His discourse connected land title to his goals for increased rice exports as a key aspect of the national development strategy:

> Titles will achieve stability on issues of land possession and occupation, social safety, effective land use, poverty reduction and economic growth. We will see new houses and new cultivations on our people's land… we no longer have to give them rice but they will give us *ambok* (pounded rice) in return. (Hun Sen 2012)

In this imaginary, the campaign allows for the creation of a productive, prosperous farmer who will help the nation by providing rice. Implicit in this imaginary is a farmer who farms land as a discrete bounded system held as private property, for only private land titles were distributed during the campaign. This further marginalizes indigenous people who farm land communally, as well as peasants who use private land in conjunction with communal forest land and grazing land. It also erases the on-the-ground realities that much of the titled land was better suited for cash cropping than rice production, and people put it to use growing market-based crops, exploiting the ecological conditions in ways similar to the concession companies in their midst. The imaginary also explicitly produces a shared 'us' against a common 'them' of foreign companies that draws on strong collective memories of civil conflict and aggrieved feelings that Cambodia has been besieged by outsiders for centuries (Gottesman 2003), belying the fact that most concessions are joint-ventures with Cambodian investors and some of the most egregious are owned by members of the ruling party. The campaign's claims to peaceful order and prosperity were inserted into this 'imaginary horizon' of fullness and catastrophe, and thus acquired a sense of moral right and urgency (Laclau 2005).

Embedding the imaginary of the leopard's spots

The Prime Minister's vision became a collective imaginary as it spread down from the central state and embedded in rural areas through the discourse and practices of local officials and volunteer land surveyors, as well as recordings of Hun Sen's speeches and karaoke videos depicting the volunteers. At showy land titling ceremonies, provincial officials repeated the Prime Minister's messages of nationalist pride and smallholder prosperity. At one ceremony we attended, a high-ranking official proclaimed:

> Look at all these people coming together! The opposition party says that we can't rule the country, that the different ministries aren't cooperating. But look at this! We have taken land from the companies to donate to the people. Land title is important because you can take loans to grow your farm, you can sell your land for more money, and it means the land is yours.

The provincial official here reproduces the Prime Minister's imaginary of land as a gift from the government and bringing companies to heel. In our interviews, volunteer land surveyors echoed this idea of giving land back to the people, saying they signed up because of a genuine desire to help their country and to 'help poor people instead of companies', as well as a desire to have an adventure and to win a coveted government job after deployment.

The involvement of the 'student volunteers' was key to rupturing people's fear and embedding this new hopeful imaginary of land in rural areas. While many rural people were sceptical of the Prime Minister's intentions and distrusted government officials, the presence of the volunteers made the campaign much more popular. The volunteers

embodied hope for rural people as they were youthful, unconnected to corrupted local institutions, and yet explicitly tied to the Prime Minister and his power and therefore potentially able to bring about change that local officials and collective organising could not. The potential of the volunteers was reinforced through 'material bearers of imaginaries' (Salazar and Graburn 2016, p. 8), namely the volunteers' clothes, transport, the GPS units, iPads, and mobile phones they used in the field, and the documents they issued. From the moment the volunteers rolled into villages on the back of military trucks (a moment captured in numerous karaoke videos[1] and poems depicting the campaign in the popular imagination), they were markedly different from prior representations of the state in rural areas. The volunteers received three days of training on spatial mapping and administration prior to deployment, and were equipped with handheld GPS units and iPads, technology that is seldom seen in rural Cambodia and is certainly not the norm in local government offices. For villagers, the sight of the military fatigue-clad volunteers brandishing their GPS units accentuated the volunteers' connections to Hun Sen and lent them an aura of masculinised techno-political power. Furthermore, the leader of each 12-person volunteer team carried a dedicated mobile phone to receive phone calls from either the Prime Minister or his wife. Volunteers, farmers and local authorities all talked about these phones, and they were a signifier through which the volunteers became imbued with the Prime Minister's power.

The performative elements of the volunteers' embodiment reproduced Hun Sen's power as a strong military leader and also as a benevolent 'father' to the Cambodian people. Volunteers stayed in villages for weeks, sometimes months, lodging at local temples or village meeting spaces (*sala poum*) and slowly making their way around village land to meet with land claimants to complete land survey request forms, survey the land, and educate people about the process (Group discussion 20.7.14). The Prime Minister encouraged volunteers to help villagers in the fields and join village celebrations, and in this way, the volunteers also embodied the possibility of a caring state. For the most part, communities found the students helpful, respectful and competent, and appreciated their spirit of volunteerism (see Grimsditch and Schoenberger 2015, pp. 257–260). For each surveyed plot, the volunteers issued a survey receipt to the landholder. The survey receipts carried an uncertain potential; in Cambodia's politically-aligned judicial system, there is no certainty that a piece of paper will trump people with money and power. But because the survey receipts distributed by the volunteers were personally backed by the Prime Minister, the documents held the potential to function otherwise (Schoenberger 2017). One NGO worker based in a rural province explained that 'I was told by someone, 'at our village, the student volunteers are like the gods, and are powerful'' (18.03.14). This sentiment was echoed by a village administrator who explained that the volunteers sometimes effectively out-ranked commune chiefs or district councils who 'were afraid of the students because of the power of the Prime Minister' (02.07.14).

Shaping imaginaries through encounters with the volunteers

Rural people's sense of hopeful possibility was perhaps most intimately articulated in their interactions with volunteers, who provided an embodied counterpoint to the shadowy networks of land grabbers. These interactions mattered because the volunteers had considerable discretionary power on the ground. The land titling campaign was remarkably sparse in its directives over what forms of land use would be suited for title, or what the ideal entitled smallholder would look like (Schoenberger 2017; Work and Beban 2016). This lack of clarity raised the risk that people could be excluded from the land survey. But it also created openings for diversely positioned smallholders to convince the volunteers of their particular imaginaries of the land and the potential for those imaginaries to be codified.

Land claimants articulated imaginaries of what land is and could/should be that weaved together past experiences with knowledge of the land's ecological, spiritual and social properties. Some land claimants sought to prove their long presence on the land (and hence their right to claim a land title) by pointing out particular trees they had planted; others demonstrated their relationship to the land through their intimate knowledge of the soil and what could be grown where; yet others told stories of the land's spiritual power. Nearby land claimants gave testimony of their family relationships and friendships with their neighbours. Some land claimants said they told the volunteers their stories of hardship, hoping to make the volunteers feel sympathetic toward them. One young woman took the volunteers inside her house to show them the lack of food rations for her children (woman, 20 s, 10.8.14). These stories reconstructed relationships with land; the voicing of socio-ecological and spiritual knowledge embedded the imaginary of land as the domain of rural people who know the land intimately, rather than an asset for distant powerful concessionaires.

The encounters between volunteers and land claimants had real effects on the decisions volunteers made about where and in whose name to survey. The emotional intensity of interactions added to the volunteers' confusion; in our interviews, several volunteers recalled people who became angry, started crying and screaming, offered monetary and

[1] Examples of the karaoke videos can be found on YouTube at https://youtu.be/zdrwplDEbAw and https://youtu.be/4SbDA7h0L-M.

food bribes, pleaded and recounted stories of poverty and desperation. The volunteers were quite unprepared for this and one said he 'didn't know what to do'. One male volunteer became visibly upset in the interview, shaking his head as he recounted, 'this is so difficult to solve; people get upset when they can't get the land they want. Either way, it is difficult – if we measure this [forest] land, this is against the law. If we don't measure the land, the people are angry, it's so hard'. Some volunteers said they went 'by the law' and only titled 'peacefully' cultivated land; some said they titled land if they could see that it had been used for agriculture in the last four to five years; yet others described their decision making as much more holistic, depending on their judgement of the individual's character, particularly his or her propensity for using the land in the future. As a result, stories imbued with emotional imaginaries of land made their way into the survey and the resulting cadastral maps and titles.

Rural people sought to hold onto, and widen, this moment of rupture by monitoring and courting the volunteers. Some land claimants described waiting days at their fields until the volunteer teams arrived at the plot. In interviews, rural people stressed the need to know where the volunteer teams were in order to ensure their land was surveyed, and to avoid the volunteers falling prey to possible corrupt machinations of local elite. In some villages with well-established community activist groups, land claimants gathered together to collectively monitor the volunteer teams' movements, as one villager explained,

> [Community organizers] made a plan for who would follow the volunteers and the land ministry people, and we had all the documents ready and waited at our land. The survey team was happy because the community activist group knows more about whose land is whose than anyone else! We got all our land measured (1.4.14).

Communities of land claimants also appealed to the volunteers, courting them through food, drinks and gifts to persuade the volunteers to survey their land. Across studied areas, rural people described to us the ways they catered to the volunteers' bodily needs by giving them soft drinks and cooking them meals (Grimsditch and Schoenberger 2015; Work and Beban 2016). One woman who had a large plot of land near a stream recalled,

> We gave them things, like a chicken, like something to eat, because they walked all day to measure… It was the rainy season when they came here; they had to swim to measure our land! (28.9.14)

This woman's justification emphasises the care shown to the volunteers as expressions of gratitude and looking after their bodily sustenance in return for the labour the volunteers undertook. Others similarly noted that they gave food and gifts as gratitude because they 'felt sorry' for the volunteers, as well as to ensure that their land was measured quickly. This practice frustrated local officials, such as a village chief who complained, 'the volunteer teams often spent their time drinking, sometimes drinking so much that they could not go to work' (26.7.14). Some of these local officials, as well as land holding elite, also expressed their resentment of the volunteers who they perceived as usurping their control. One village chief said pointedly, 'the students get directives straight from Hun Sen—like his grandchildren; not reporting to village head or district' (22.5.14). Many land claimants told us about informal cash payments they gave to the volunteers, ranging from small tokens of gratitude to large monetary bribes reportedly offered by urban speculators and companies who sought to regain their dominant foothold in land conflict area, as we describe in the following section.

Resisting new imaginaries, suturing the rupture

The rupture of Order 01 was momentary. As hopeful possibilities were thrown open, those whose power was threatened sought to re-establish their dominance. Certainly, hope, as the domain of the uncertain and the 'not-yet', contains the potential for disappointment and disagreement within it (Back 2017). Across rural areas, many people missed out on land titles due to political interference, bad weather, and mistakes, which meant that the campaign produced disappointments. The exclusion of collective ownership in favour of privately-owned plots also led to displacements that have lasting effects and produced new inequalities in rural areas. One village chief emphasized how dire the situation was by saying, 'some of my people whose land was not measured perceived Order 01 as worse than Pol Pot' (26.07.14).

Powerful local actors also grabbed onto the campaign and attempted to bend it to their interests. Concessionaires attempted to maintain the size of their holdings, while government officials and local elite sought to secure tenure to multiple land plots by clearing land in advance of the campaign, or paying community members to claim the land as their own (Work and Beban 2016). These strategies to manipulate the students had to be done with care, however, as Hun Sen made public examples of officials accused of bribing the volunteers by convicting the officials and throwing them in jail (Hun Sen 2012). As a result, this was often a gradual process as new opportunities to subvert the campaign arose. We turn now to an account from a community in a high-conflict area to understand the slow, uneven, subversion; the ongoing work by powerful actors to suture the rupture. At the outset of the campaign, the community

organized a group of key villagers to assist the survey team with identifying land claims. A person involved explained,

> at first, the process seemed to follow the plan and the schedule for measurement and really focused on local residents' land. Step-by-step, however, the families began to provide a meal for the student team, as part of the incentive for requesting to measure the land. As soon as this practice occurred, the measurement no longer followed the plan (27.7.14).

These small practices facilitated the re-establishment of village hierarchies into the process of the titling campaign. Better-off families and wealthy non-residents with goals of securing land were able to convince the volunteers to survey their land while the poorer families had to wait longer, as a community member noted.

> Outsiders who claimed to have bought land in the village ordered the students and technical teams to give them priority and to ask the local people to wait. We then got frustrated as the students now spent more time measuring the land for outsiders, rather than working on our land… As a result, at the end of the process, only half of the families got their land measured and the rest are still waiting … (27.7.14).

The community perceived these 'outsiders' to be government officials from the provincial town. In a few particularly egregious cases, people observed that the land owner was not physically present at all and simply made a phone call to demand measurement, an order the teams then followed. Discouraged, the community disbanded their efforts to escort the survey teams since 'the process got too confused and no longer followed any agreed schedule… especially near the end of measuring' (27.7.14). The community leaders noted that.

> The strong collaboration between the Order 01 teams and these powerful individuals that we saw during the land measurement in our village, this made us even more afraid that they could do anything they wanted here (27.7.14).

Although discouraged, and now even more worried, the community wished to 'send their voice to the government' that in the future they should:

> first, put top priority on local people, far more than outsiders. Second, we want more spaces where we can ask questions, express our concerns and negotiate as equals. Third, the students should come with civilian clothes, not army uniforms (27.7.14).

This community's account of Order 01 contains several notable elements: the care with which they organized to engage with the students; the slow ways in which the campaign's goals were subverted, first by local elites and then by powerful outsiders; and the dual effects of the campaign's outcomes working to reinforce feelings of fear while also demonstrating the possibility for things to be otherwise in the future, as evidenced by their hopeful suggestions for a better approach to land titling.

The ongoing effects of momentary rupture

When the dominant land imaginary is destabilized, it does not necessarily re-settle in the same way. Order 01 lingers. Land claimants, volunteers and local officials carry these encounters, and their affects, with them. The land itself also carries these encounters. Land claimants altered the landscape to be visible to the survey teams by clearing land, planting new crops, and erecting fences, sometimes with the effect of gaining legal recognition through a title. The national cadastral system for upland areas was transformed by making smallholders visible on state documentation for the first time. The campaign also showed people that political pressure from below could influence the state. This in itself provides hope that rural people are seen by the state, and may gain state protection. However, exactly what the land title means and what it may provide is still an open question for many rural people.

When we asked people what the title meant to them, those in positions of power in rural areas were often enthusiastic about the benefits the land title brought to their communities, while rural smallholders were unsure. One village official, for example, declared, 'the land titling campaign could happen because of the Prime Minister… It brought benefits to people. It made people happy, hopeful, and confident [about] their future because they hold titles, they do not fear that their land would be grabbed' (19.07.14).

Rural people and everyday smallholding farmers did not view the titles as providing absolute security over their land tenure because their distrust in the legal system and the government was too great. Instead, people described the land title as important because it provided the possibility of holding onto their land, 'it gives us something. So… at least they have a chance then' (community leader 22.12.14). When asked why the land title was important, people often simply said that the land title meant 'this is our land'. Some said, 'we can use it to get loans', and many had lodged their titles with microfinance institutions as collateral to access loans, sometimes with disastrous implications as they fell into debt. Others had taken advantage of higher prices for titled land to sell their land after Order 01. Often people smiled proudly as they showed us their titles, and simply said that 'the titles are important because Hun Sen gave them to us' (2.2.14). The last statement is a recognition that the Order 01 title's association with the Prime Minister, and delivered by his volunteers, endows the object with greater potentiality.

This potentiality persists. A year after the campaign, a group of villagers who had received survey receipts but were still in conflict with the concessionaire marched to the Prime Minister's residence holding their Order 01 receipts aloft. For these villagers, these documents held potential to enact justice, and to seek rights as citizens (Schoenberger 2017). In 2020, 7 years after Order 01 volunteers were recalled from the countryside, villagers who remained caught in a protracted land conflict continued to refer in our interviews to the time 'when the students came'. Some people cast hopes for a potential resolution to the students' return, as one woman said; 'we got the title to some land when the students came, but not this area… we will ask for this to be titled if the student volunteers come back' (30.1.20). Even as the imaginary of the titles as legal instruments has not necessarily taken hold, for people still distrust the enactment of law, the title represents a relationship with the powerful; a claim to citizenship and rights to state protection that opens possibilities.

Conclusion

Even as the dust settles on Order 01, and the Cambodian government once again steps up surveillance and violent repression of land activists, traces of the rupture persist. While ruptures might later be sutured and established patterns of power partly re-stabilised, ruptures produce lasting shifts in the material and immaterial traces they leave behind. The linear organisation of this paper, moving from hopelessness, to hopeful rupture, to the partial closing of rupture and its lasting effects, recognizes that rupture is a process. But this is not a neat linearity; imaginaries are a field of contestation and processes of rupture and stabilization are cyclical and messy. This insight has implications for scholarship on social mobilisation in contexts of violence as it suggests the importance of recognising (and using) moments of rupture to overcome fear and encourage the proliferation of new imaginaries—an epistemological re-orientation towards hope.

Our paper also invites scholars of land imaginaries to examine their affective dimensions. Much work on land imaginaries focuses on the discursive work of assembling land as a financialised global commodity; we sought in this paper to show how discursive and material assemblages are underpinned by affects. This is not a causal relationship (where emotional charge creates material changes in the landscape); rather, the material, social and affective elements of imaginaries are intertwined. A focus on the 'embedding' of alternative land imaginaries shows how imaginaries are not just cognitive ideas about the world; they are carried by material objects and embodied encounters. In the Cambodian context where rural people do not trust that the law will be fairly enacted, it was not just the technical objects of land survey instruments and paper titles that became objects of hope, but the young volunteers who travelled to rural communities to survey land. Rural people sought to interact with the volunteers, court them, care for them, and monitor their movements. Doing so created affective ties with the volunteers that embedded hopeful land imaginaries in rural areas and into the national cadastral system. The land title in this context is the material bearer of a land imaginary that centres on rural people's connection to the land, and also reinforces rural people's connection to the Cambodian state and the potential of the state's protection.

Epistemologically, our orientation towards hope sought to move beyond much current writing on Cambodia that leaves the failures and disappointments of the powerful, and the hopes of rural people, hidden from view. If the momentary cracks in dominant (ideological and material) structures remain hidden, then state actors and private companies appear to have the ability to shape the world in accordance with their own grandiose agendas, leaving others powerless. To move beyond this paralysing standpoint, our paper pays attention to hopeful ruptures in land imaginaries; moments that can make space for things to become otherwise.

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