Traditional Forests and Ethnic Minorities in Ho Moong Commune, Sa Thay District, Kon Tum Province

Introduction

Ho Moong is a resettlement commune which was established in 2006 after being separated from Sa Nhon commune, Sa Thay district, Kon Tum province for the construction of the Pleikrong hydro-power plant. The commune is located 30 km north east of the Sa Thay township. It has seven villages, live ethnic minority groups in six of them (Ka Bay, Ko Tol, Ko Tu, Dak Yo, Dak Wot and Dak Wot Zop villages – a new village separated recently from Dak Wot village), while the Kinh majority live in one village. As of 2015, the commune population is 5,995 people living in 1,291 households, among which the Ro Ngao (Ba Na) ethnic people account for 70%, the Gia Rai - 16%, and the remaining is the Kinh majority and people from other ethnic groups.

Before 2006, Ka Bay village was located in Sa Binh commune, Sa Thay district and Ko Tol, Ko Tu, Dak Yo and Dak Wot villages were located in Ha Mon commune, Dak Ha district. People used to live a stable, peaceful and happy life on their old homeland. They all had sufficient land for cultivation, sacred forest for spiritual practices and watershed forest for supplying sufficient clean water for their daily lives and production throughout the year. Villagers were dependent on the forests. They lived well as their livelihood was secure their self-sufficient economy left nobody hungry.

In 2006, the Pleikrong hydro-power plant was built. The above 6 villages were forced to resettle as their land and residential area were submerged in the reservoir. On the resettlement
land, everything was new to them. Their lives were completely changed and their livelihood was no longer secure. Most of the cultivation land for daily food production was obtained by flattening hills, rendering the soil infertile. Houses were built in the urban design, i.e. one is next to another with numbers issued by authorities. The villagers completely lost their traditional living spaces, with no forest gardens and no home gardens for vegetable cultivation and animal husbandry, which led to a crisis of belief with no clear solution. Although the new areas were located in the forest and mountainous regions the villagers had neither forests nor land for cultivation. Their daily livelihood mainly relied on cassava cultivation or working for private companies.

In 2013, CIRUM supported Ka Bay village to request that the local authorities allocate two forest areas near the village for water source management and protection. As a result, the Sa Thay District People’s Committee (DPC) granted Ka Bay a Land use rights Certificate for 30.8 ha of the watershed forest. Following Ka Bay village, in 2014, the three other villages of Dak Yo, Dak Wot and Ko Tu also filed applications to the local authorities for allocation of land and forest in order to maintain the village’s water source. Finally, they were also granted rights to use, manage and protect forests. Since then, beliefs and practices of the ethnic minority groups have gradually been revived, contributing to the stabilization of the people’s lives and the security of the commune.

The villager’s livelihood before resettlement (before 2006)

1. Cultured-based forest and land planning, use and management brought a stable livelihood for people

Upon the establishment of the village, the community had planned their forests and land in three ways in order to meet their cultural and spiritual needs and stabilize their daily lives. They are:

- Sacred forest (called Chu Tuoi in Ka Bay village and on Dam Ti hill of the former Ho Moong village): This was the place where villagers practiced their beliefs and rituals to worship the Nature Spirits in order to be protected and supported, with good health for every
villager, fruitful crops and good animal husbandry, etc. Every year the villagers held the Water Drop ceremony in January and February after the harvest. This ceremony, led by the village elder, was to worship the Thunder Spirit, the Mountain Spirit and the Water Spirit, etc. residing in the sacred forest and to pray for good weather, good health and peace for the whole village. It also reflected the bond of the Gia Rai and Ro Ngao ethnic groups with their forest and land. This sacred forest area was collectively owned by the community and fully protected and respected. No one was allowed to enter the forest for logging or collecting non-timber forest products. This area was considered a special-use forest, ensuring the water supply to the villagers for their daily lives and production throughout the year without droughts.

- Forest for common use: This area was often near the sacred forest where the villagers could go to collect vegetables, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, shrimp, fish, and firewood and timber for building houses and animal houses for domestic purposes. Fish from the spring is a vital source of food. According to the local people, as much as 80% of the shrimp and fish that were consumed by the village were caught from the village springs and Po Ko river. This area served as the daily livelihood of the villages, which was stable, safe and self-sufficient. This area was also used for the village animal grazing.

- Forest area for rotational-shifting cultivation: The traditional village foods were produced in this area, which was located on the lowest land, usually near the villages where rice, maize and secondary crops were grown. This area was privately owned by individual households, the farmland boundaries of whose were demarcated by traditional landmarks (rocks, big trees, springs and mountaintops, etc.). Normally, the villagers farmed on one land plot for 1-2 crops, then they moved to another land plot for cultivation, then returned to the former after 5 – 7 years. This cultivation method allowed the to recover its fertility. The average upland rice capacity of 1.5 tons per ha, or sometimes 3 tons per ha on the fertile land excluding the secondary crops, provided sufficient and diverse food for the villagers. No one suffered from hunger. “In the old villages, the villagers had never suffered from hunger. When crops failed, we were nurtured by forests, rivers and springs. We found our life hard only when we were forced to move to another area by the Nguy troops (represented the government of South Vietnam during the American War), where we lived without any production” – shared a village elder.

2. Effective forest management and protection based on traditional beliefs and practices (customary law):

According to the villager’s beliefs, in the sacred forest reside the Spirits who protect and support them with good health, abundant crops and community solidarity, etc. Therefore, these forests were strictly protected by all villagers without violations. No one was allowed to collect products, cut down trees or hunt animals in such forests. Violations mean to be contrary to the morality and harm the Spirits, and were be punished severely. The forms of punishment varied: payment of pigs or buffaloes, or exile from the village.

Other forests were also used and managed based on customary laws. Traditional boundaries were respected and demarcated naturally and noticeably by big trees, big rocks and mountain-tops to make sure everybody could see then and avoid conflicts among the community. Traditional rotational cultivation and the use of native species to respect and care for the land have been affirmed by scientists as a sustainable cultivation method. It keeps the land healthy and offers a secure life for the community.
In each village, the village elder is elected among the elderly people, who with the Elder’s Council leads annual rituals and ceremonies and resolves conflicts between villagers, land conflicts, or negotiations between villages. Therefore, the village elder is respected and relied on by all villagers.

The village elder’s role and position is very important. According to the local people, almost all of the villages resolved their internal issues or the issues with the other villages by themselves. The CPC only played the role of witness and rarely had to deal with the village issues directly.

People’s lives became harder after the resettlement (from 2006 – 2012)

1. The planning of residential areas was not based on traditional culture, which was mixed between village and urban style, and left the local people unsatisfied.

According to the resettlement policy of the Pleikrong hydro-power plant project, each household was allocated 400m² of residential and garden land. No land was available for further household separation. Houses were numbered and built in the urban design. There was no space for the ethnic minority groups to practice their traditional culture. Their living space was too narrow for them to use land for vegetable farming and animal raising. As a result, the villages that used to have access to forest areas and land for traditional rituals and ceremonies had transformed into the half-city villages. Many households, refusing to settle their lives in the resettlement area, had set up temporary huts by Po Ko river to survive.

The resettlement area in Ho Moong commune

2. The villagers lived a poor and unstable life due to the critical shortage of production land and water

Each household of 6 people was allocated only 1 – 1.2 ha of land for secondary crop cultivation and 0.05 – 0.12 ha of land for water rice cultivation, which only met 60 – 70% or even 30 – 40% of the household’s demands in Ko Tu village. The allocated production land was only ⅓ -½ of what they used to have before the resettlement. Furthermore, they also lost a very important source of income generated from forest products and aquatic products from Poko river (only 5% among 80% of the households benefited from the aquaculture). More
seriously, according to the resettlement project, no forest space was planned for the villagers to practice their spiritual culture, leading to loss of their faith in life and production, causing instability in their lives.

The lack of land for production, and forest for water source protection, for daily life became big concerns during this period of time. To survive, the villagers had no other option but to seek out other arable land for cultivation by cutting down trees. Many of them even went beyond the commune boundaries to seek farmland. After 10 years of cultivation, they heard that that land belonged to Quang Trung State Forestry Enterprise of Dak To Forestry Company. Land conflicts have arisen since then, and have been getting more and more complicated until now. The Ka Bay villagers once announced: “the forestry enterprise is of the State, and we are of the State, too. Why don’t we have land? If we are not allowed to continue our cultivation, it is better to let us die”.

Losing forest led to the sharp decrease in the underground water level. Of the 135 wells supported by the resettlement project, only five or six of them had water in the rainy season, while they were all completely empty in the dry season. Some households had to dig wells three times at the different depths, but still could not find any water.

Due to the water and production land shortage, the households were unable to grow rice and coffee. Instead, they had to grow cassava to generate immediate income, even though cassava is a genetically modified plant which is harmful to the land and causes rapid land erosion.

The lack of land reserves caused the cattle production (water buffalos, cows and goats) to drastically reduce, resulting in depleted income for the villagers. Before the resettlement, 70 – 80% of the households had three, four or even ten buffalos/cows per household. However, after the resettlement, only three to five households raised cattle in the village with one or two per household, due to narrow space for cattle raising, loss of natural forest and unavailable land for rotational cultivation allowing very few families to pursue their cattle production. In such circumstances, even affording a buffalo for worshipping the Spirits in the Water Drop ritual was a hard thing to do for the villagers, as the a buffalo normally costs from VND 30 – 40 million, which was too much for the community members to contribute.
Secondary crops farmland is mainly used for growing cassava

Water rice fields were replaced by cassava fields

The spreading hunger pushed the villagers to work for coffee, rubber or construction companies. However, their income was unstable and risky. Men were paid VND 150,000 per day per person, while women – VND 13,000 per day per person. They only worked when called by the employers, which was sporadic and unreliable. Only strong people were hired as they had to work very hard for the whole day, regardless of the weather conditions. If one could not work more than three days a week, his or her family could not earn enough money to buy rice.

At present, the villagers are growing Boi Loi (Litsea glusinosa C.B.Rob) and coffee. Some households can earn up to VND 1 million – 1.5 million/person/month. Although Boi Loi is considered a good tree for hunger alleviation and poverty reduction in the region, its consumption is overly dependent on Chinese traders. The first cycle for its uses from 4 – 6 years, and the second cycle is after 2 years. If the demand lessens, people will lose their chances to improve their lives, taking them to go back to hunger and poverty.

The village poverty rate was always above 56% and trended to be higher (it could reach up to 71% based on the multidimensional criteria of poverty). In addition, the population growth was relatively high, at 3 – 5% each year. The newly separated households continued to suffer from the lack of land for production and house building.

**Table:** The population and rate of the poor households in the ethnic villages of Ho Moong commune

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Total households</th>
<th>Total people</th>
<th>Poor households</th>
<th>Poverty rate (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ko Tu</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>412</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Dak Yo</td>
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<td>Dak Wot</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dak Wot Zop</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>83.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ka Bay</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>48.78</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Villager’s life after the allocation of residential and production land and forest to the community (2013)

1. Planning residential land attached with production land in accordance with the traditional culture to secure the villager’s life

Although houses were not designed based on the traditional culture, the planning of residential and production land for the villages of No. 56 and No. 42 has proved effective, addressing the concerns of the villagers. The local authority has decided to rename these villages as their people want them to be, namely: village No.56 was renamed Dak Tang, and the village No. 42 was renamed Dak Wot Zop. The locations of their villages in the resettlement area were also chosen by the villagers, which made them very happy. In addition, in the resettlement area, residential and production land was planned based on the demands and desires of the villagers. No more half-city styled villages. Each household has got 1,000m$^2$ of the residential area and garden attached with 1 – 1.2 ha of production land. The living space of the households has been expanded and the production land has been secured for every household. A ceremony dedicating the move of the two villages to the new location was held in accordance with the Ro Ngao customs, making the villagers very happy, and stabilizing their lives. However, these achievements have been gained only in Dak Tang and Dak Wot Zop villages, while the other villages still suffer the shortage of farmland and unreasonable house planning.

![The residential land and garden attached with the production land in the resettlement village of Dak Tang (former village No.56)](image)

2. Forest and land allocation (FLA) for village management and protection is proven to be a sustainable strategic solution

From 2013 – 2014, the villages in Ho Moong commune were granted certificates by Sa Thay DPC for natural watershed forest management and protection over a total area of 82.6 ha. After the FLA, the villages have set out their own regulations on forest management and protection that were legalized by the DPC. Since then, their forest culture has gradually been revived and their lives have been remarkably improved and stabilized.
Spiritual culture: Since regaining the forest, the villages have revived their rituals to worship the forest and Forest Spirit. The traditional buffalo sacrifice has been held in a happy atmosphere, which strengthens the belief of the villagers. They are more confident in their daily lives and production, and as a result the solidarity between the community members has also been strengthened. The village elder’s role were promoted and they become the spiritual support for all villager members. Accordingly, the values of customary law have also been preserved and used effectively. Customary law in forest and land protection is strictly followed by the villagers. Based on village regulations, two cases of violations committed by outsiders who cut down trees and bathed in the clean water source area were detected and fined a 30-kg pig each. After that, the village elders killed the pigs and invited all villagers to come to the traditional Rong house to eat it together. By doing that, the village elders educated the young generation in the village to respect and strictly comply with the customary law. The villages also request each village member to contribute VND 20,000 to the forest protection fund. Each village also has their own protection teams which are responsible for patrolling and protecting the forest by schedules. Once a violation is detected, the rest of the team members are notified, and the village elder and the whole village are informed in order to find a resolution. Currently, the village forest protection is well maintained. Nobody violates the forest. All four villages that have been allocated forest and land since 2013 are now eligible for a Payment for Environmental Services (PES). It is estimated that each year these villages receive approx. VND 10 million from the PES system. This amount is mainly used for patrolling and protecting the village forests. The remaining is contributed to the village fund for common purposes. This contributes to further strengthening the trust and responsibilities of the villagers in patrolling and protecting forest, making them more confident in applying customary law for the better forest protection.

Economy: The villagers started planting native tree species and building up native species nurseries to regenerate the forest and generate income. For these villagers, protecting the forest means protecting their lives. Once the forest is recovered, the cultural practices are revived. In 2016, a 10-year celebration of the Ka Bay’s return to Ho Moong commune (2006 – 2016) was held according to the village’s traditional culture: goat, buffalo and pig were the offerings for the ritual, and the buffalo sacrifice ceremony was led by the village elder. The budget for this ceremony partially came from the PES and contribution of the villagers.

In November 2014, under the support of the local authorities and organizations, the villages of Ho Moong commune organized a cultural exchange with the villages in Po E commune,
Kon Plong district. On those days, the Rong house was full of villagers from Ho Moong commune. “It has been so long since we heard the Gong sounding in the flame and seen so many people happily and joyfully flock to the Rong house like this” – cheerfully shared an elderly person from Dak Wot village.

![Gong performance to welcome the visitors to Dak Wot](image)

3. The coordination of forest protection is an effective solution

After the FLA program in the community, people felt happier and more confident. Given the lack of forest and land, and the Southern Paper Company’s management over the majority of the village forest land, all villagers met and decided that they should coordinate with other villages for better forest protection. Accordingly, they have set up an inter-village watershed forest protection team including village heads and village youths who are strong and enthusiastic. They agreed that only men go patrolling in the deep forest, because women are weaker and they are often scared of snakes and other animals. The team members meet up anytime and anywhere depending on their work and issues. Thanks to their hard work, the forest is well protected. They have also worked with the village elders and the Elder’s Councils of the villages to successfully handle many cases of forest encroachment and violation including overlaps in farming that affects each other’s water sources. In addition, the fighting between youths from different villages has also been remarkably reduced, contributing to the social order stabilization.

In addition to the inter-village coordination for forest protection, the village forest protection teams and village elders, on behalf of the villages, also took initiative in negotiating with the Southern Paper Company the witness of the CPC, the team met with the company regarding the coordination on forests and water source protection. The villages agreed to protect the watershed forest, which is under the management of the company, while the company is committed to not using herbicides or chemicals for processing the vegetation, and will cease burning the vegetation that has caused pollution to village water sources. As a result, forests have been well protected by the villagers. No mass forest fires are reported. Small fires have been extinguished immediately. The villagers have also helped the company to stop the fires. The company hasn’t used herbicides in the watershed as promised.
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There should be forest planning for resettlement villages to ensure their rights to spiritual practices and to secure their sustainable livelihood in an effort to maintain and develop their traditional cultural values as ethnic minorities;

2. Land reserved for production and residential area should be sufficient for the resettlement villages of ethnic minority groups to make sure their new locations are as good as the old ones if not better. The new residential area should have gardens and production areas, and all the families have access to land; and

3. The designing of houses for the ethnic minority people should be based on their traditional customs and practices in order to secure their spiritual life and environment.