

In Fluid Environments

Human-water engagements and reconfigurations in an urban context

A case study for Can Tho, in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta



“

Master thesis by

Floor Matla

In Fluid Environments

Human-water engagements and reconfigurations in an urban context

Can Tho, Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

We inhabit a world where all is in motion and nothing fixed, and in which it is no more possible to regain a passing moment than it is to step twice into the same waters of a flowing river"

(Radcliffe-Brown, 1957 p.12).

Master thesis Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

2018, Utrecht University

Floor Matla (6250467)

Supervisor: Gijs Cremers

Cover Page: Cai Rang Floating Market, Can Tho



Universiteit Utrecht

Abstract

This thesis highlights the socionatural forces that produced the Vietnamese Mekong Delta as well the entangled dynamics in which humans inhabit it and give meaning to it. Over the past decades the Delta experienced a rapid transformation which is mostly defined by the changing role of water. State-led water control efforts have largely altered the way people engage with water in which adaptation made place for the perception that human can construct their environment. Under the process of urbanization rivers were replaced by roads and life along the rivers was considered backwards. Despite rapid urban transformations there are still traces from the water-centered way of living detectable in present-day Can Tho. Cai Rang floating market embodies the human-engagement with water and is not only a tourist attraction but also an expression of how human adapt to the changing conditions in the Delta. By focusing on human-water engagements in an urban context, this thesis will show how the perception that humans can construct nature is to be contested and that adaptation is still a valuable quality of those who inhabit the Delta.

Content

Abstract	5
Acknowledgements	7
Maps.....	8
Preface	10
Introduction.....	13
<i>Conceptual Framework</i>	15
<i>1.3 Methodology and key informants</i>	18
<i>1.4 Structure</i>	19
Chapter 1: The historical and modern delta	20
<i>The road to Can Tho</i>	21
<i>1.1 Production of the socionatural Delta</i>	21
<i>1.2 Water-based way of living</i>	24
<i>1.3 From the river to the road</i>	27
<i>1.4 The modern Delta</i>	29
CHAPTER 2: An open-ended gathering.....	33
<i>2.1 Capturing the floating market</i>	34
<i>2.2 A gathering</i>	35
<i>2.3 A way of life</i>	36
<i>2.4 The importance of knowledge</i>	40
<i>2.5 Along the riverbank</i>	41
CHAPTER 3: A source of life?.....	44
<i>3.1 For the love of place</i>	45
<i>3.2 A conversation about conservation</i>	46
<i>3.3 Back to the roots</i>	49
<i>3.4 Crying for the common father</i>	50
Conclusion	52
References.....	54

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the product of a three month during ethnographic investigation in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta, the necessary research done beforehand and the endless library session afterwards.

I want to more than thank all of the people that helped me in my processes of gathering data, but more importantly for making my time Vietnam such a valuable experience. I will briefly thank the most important persons that have provided me with a second home. Thanks Anh for showing me the most beautiful sceneries of the Delta and your great insights in life. Thanks Quynh for your patience and friendliness in helping me make sense of the language and culture. Thanks Tran for showing me your compassion and letting me taste all the local flavours. Thanks Rose and Khanh Ngoc for making me dance, swim and most importantly laugh. Thanks Kent for your efforts to introduce me to your extensive network. Thanks Quang for teaching me all your knowledge about the Delta with passion and devotion. Thanks Prof. Tri for your advice and support throughout. Thanks Thanh, Huynh and Tri for your genuine generosity and truthful stories. And thanks to Christine, Trang, Long, Duy, Phu, Russel and Anh, Tho, Mrs. Trang, Jack, Jin, Yen and all the sellers on the floating market that let me stay on their boat even while eating or in the middle of a sale. Cam On, Thank you! I also want to thank those in the Netherlands who have supported me throughout the process by providing me with a lot of faith when I was lacking that myself! I want to thank Gijs Cremers for his time to revise and encourage, and his critical questions I sometimes needed to put things in place.

The processes of thesis writing as much as the journey to Vietnam have provided me with a lot of new insights, so many that not everything could be covered in the scope of this project. Still it provides a reflection of all that I have learned. There are many more stories to be told but at least I hope that after reading this thesis a bit of my love for the Mekong Delta and its people can be shared.

Maps



Figure 1: The Mekong Delta Basin, retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Mekong-River-Basin-map-and-water-distribution-in-each-country-involved-Source-MRC_fig1_259005760 on 5-8-2018



Figure 2: Major cities in the Mekong Delta, retrieved from: <http://bandovietnamtreotuong.com/tag/cua-hang-ban-ban-do-viet-nam/feed/> on 5-8-2018

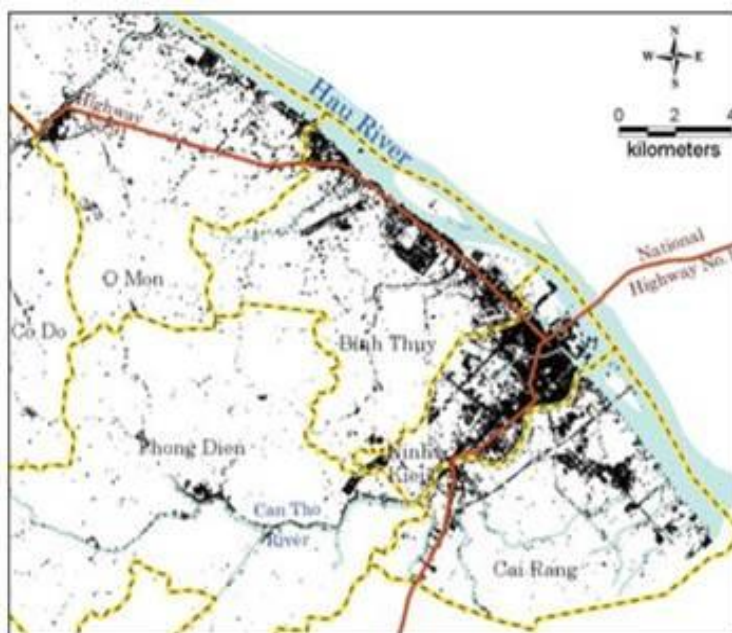


Figure 3: Can Tho and provinces, satellite image of urbanization, retrieved from Thy et al. (2010).

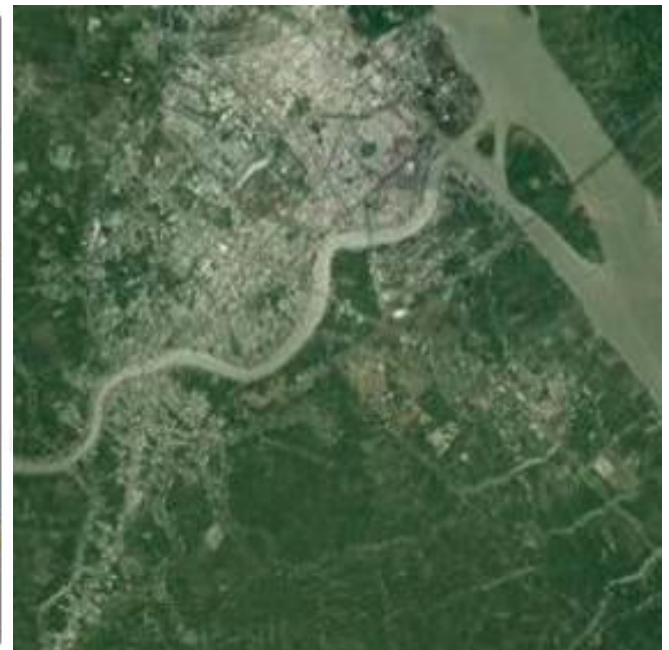


Figure 4: Can Tho dispersed along the Can Tho river, Google Earth image, 2016. Retrieved on 5-8-2018

Preface

“Sorry my English pronunciation is not always good.” Mrs. Trang a short woman in her late thirties with a soft voice and a smiling face opens the wooden door. A little earlier I had tried to talk with Mrs. Trang on the phone but due to the honking motorbikes on the city streets and the language barrier it was hard to make sense of the route description she tried to provide. The office where we meet is set in a tall narrow building just outside the centre of Can Tho and is furnished with not much more than a black leather couch and a wooden desk. Although Mrs. Trang is the national director of an NGO that is concerned with rural development in the Mekong Delta, she comes across as modest just like the interior of the room. We take place on the couch while Mrs. Trang hands me two bottles of water. “You need to drink a lot of water when the weather is like this.” This, ‘water’, was exactly the topic I wanted to talk with her about. After starting the recorder I decided to immediately ask about the problems in the Mekong Delta that the NGO is dealing with, so I pose: “What do you think is the main problem for the Mekong farmers?” Mrs. Trang tilts her head slightly down and sighs softly, the joyful glance she had in her eyes vanishes and makes place for one that reflects a genuine concern, her voice still soft but clear and confident. “The main problem... in fact there are *many* problems. The main problems are about the weather, the climate change. And one other thing is water. In many provinces... still in the dry season they do not have water. Even no water for drinking.” Rather than the answer it is the bodily response of Mrs. Trang that indicates the gravity of the situation in the Mekong Delta and her acknowledgement of it. “Water is mainly scarce because in the past they [the farmer] could use the water in the canal, from the river, but right now it is polluted. So this is a problem.. and the government right now, they also see the problem.” From the conversations it becomes clear that very rapidly industrial areas appeared along the Mekong and that these not always have treating systems for waste water in place. “They [the government] try to beat that [pollution], but it doesn’t work well. They cannot control it all.” While Mrs. Trang is critical about the pollution caused by industries she reasons that increasing labour in factories is necessary to develop the next generation. “We have 1 million people extra every year. A lot of young people. So the government needs to create a job for those people. They need to train those young people in the community so that these people can work in the factory.” Her ambiguity reflects the complex situation but at the same time I feel like it is a way not to criticize current affairs. Repeatedly Mrs. Trang says “this is the way the government does it” without addressing her personal opinion on it.¹

The conversation with Mrs. Trang was the first I had when I started a three -fieldwork in the Mekong Delta. The conversation focused mainly on the problems concerned with water in the rural areas but we also discussed the drivers and effects of urbanization, which made me realize that the development of society is closely linked to the availability and quality of water. Although the contemporary problems of the Delta such as pollution, climate change, erosion, salinization and land-subsidence (Minderhoud et al. 2017; Ha et al. 2018) will not be central in this thesis they have to be acknowledged to understand the fragility of the

¹ Fieldnotes and semi-structured interview, Mrs. Trang (NGO), 28-3-2018

environment and how current affairs are being influenced by the acknowledgement or neglect of such problems. I will shortly express the main philosophy that has been in the back of my mind and guided me throughout the research.

Philosophical underpinnings

The above conversation shows that water poses different challenges, yet I agree with the idea of Linton (2014) who states that: “it is not water that is the problem per se; rather all water problems are fundamentally social problems, and need to be addressed as such”(114). The contemporary environmental problems are the result of past actions and interventions. The Vietnamese Mekong Delta, as many other parts in the world, is dealing with an increased pressure on its water resources caused by climate change, population growth, industrialization, urbanization and intensification of agriculture (Roth, Boelens and Zwartveen, 2005). According to Roth et al. (2005) the ever increasing demand of water coincides with the scarcity, overexploitation and pollution of it. Water, the source of life, can turn into a source of disease or even stop being a source at all if we mistreat it. The changing condition of water has an impact on society that relies on it in a variety of ways, ranging from drinking water to hydropower energy. The way in which water is being regulated is according to Roth et al. (2005) both the result of the physical-ecological and human-made. Water is now more often being diverged from its natural flow in order to supply cities, dilute waste or to be bottled and sold on the market. Such new allocations of water raises questions on who decides for and over nature. Veronica Strang (2014) explains this in the case of urbanization: “Cities consume water that would otherwise feed the ecosystems from which it is abstracted. –[Hereby] focusing on a key issue about who owns and controls the flow of potentiality that water represents – and who is therefore advantaged or disadvantaged” (146).

These questions of access to and disposition of water resources are raised by researchers on political ecology. By adopting a political ecology approach, I hope to unfold the *naturalized* view I have of the environment as well as the view of those who live in the Delta. And so I hope to understand the environment as consistent of complex relations among actors established with and in their environment (Latour 2004). Relations are in a constant flux because nature and society continuously reshape each other. Our engagements with nature impact not only the representation of the environment but also how we see ourselves in it (Linton 2014). Water is embedded in the lives of people in the Mekong Delta and is used for drinking, cooking, irrigation and transportation to name a few. The dynamic between the social and the natural can be seen as an ongoing process of production and adaptation. This leads to Linton’s proposition that water resources are “the product of history and that water makes history” (2014, 116). The course in which water is flowing at this point in time is according is produced in accordance with forces that are political as well as hydrological (Linton 2014). This production determines the environment that human and non-humans inhabit (Swyngedouw 1999).

Since the reach of this research project does not lend itself to explore water configurations and social adaptation for the entire Delta I have chosen to focus in particular on the history of water in Can Tho, the capital of the Mekong Delta that has been subject to rapid urbanization. With the political ecology approach I will look upon the environment as something that is produced over time by a dynamic of the social and the natural, instead of being independent of or dominated by human activities. People can manipulate their environment but the outcomes are not always planned nor are they permanent (Tsing, 2016).

Introduction

“We inhabit a world where all is in motion and nothing fixed, and in which it is no more possible to regain passing moment than it is to step twice into the same waters of a flowing river” (Radcliffe-Brown 1957 cited in Ingold 2008). This quote which is also portrayed on the front page briefly discusses one of the main feature of rivers: they are always in motion. Although the river may seem unchanged it is never the same. By tracing back the flow of water it may become clear that a lot has changed. The following section will highlight how.

“I grew up next to the river... it used to run through Can Tho, but nowadays you cannot find it anymore because it has converted into a road” Yen, a young looking woman close to 30, recalls a memory about her childhood in Can Tho, the city she has lived in all her life. Over the past 20 years Can Tho has grown rapidly and under such growth much of the earlier environment has changed, including the river. For a long time , the rivers provided the main infrastructure to transport people and goods from one place to another, but recently they are being accompanied or even replaced by concrete alternatives of roads and bridges. I meet up with Yen in the hostel she owns located in the same street as where I am staying. We sit down in the common room of the hostel and Yen sighs “I wished I could go on a holiday”. Yen is a hard worker, on top of having her own hostel Yen is in charge of a successful touring corporation organizing private tours around the Mekong Delta, which is the main reason I decide to meet up with her. I was introduced to Yen by Kent, a tour guide who used to work her company. “She has been living in Can Tho whole her live so she knows a lot”, Kent told me. Together with two other tour guides working for Yen we meet up to talk in particular about Can Tho’s famous floating market, which is regarded one of the foremost reasons for tourists to visit the city. The market, which is set on water, is being regarded a unique and authentic place and has been assigned as national heritage. However the market is shrinking which will impact the people that work on it but also the associated tourism activities. After some speculations about the markets future the conversation slowly shifts to stories about the past and specifically how water played a role in that. “You mean those houses half on the land, half on the water? I used to live in one!”, Yen notes with enthusiasm. The house Yen talks about was set along a river which ran through Can Tho. Although her house does not exist anymore her memory of it is vivid. “During the rainy season the water of the river started rising- it would rise so high that we had to sit on the bed to stay dry. We were not scared, instead when sitting on the bed we could catch fish that were swimming in our living room!” Later on, Yen describes how more and more people started to live along the river and brought ‘bad things’ (referring to pollution) to it. “My family had inhabited the area for more than 70 years but at one point more and more people came to live there and brought bad things to the river. This resulted in bad smells and clogging of the water, so the government decided to convert the river into a road. In 2000, that was when we lost the river.” The way Yen describes narrates her childhood next to the river reveals a sentiment in her voice. Still the river plays a role in the life of Yen, but a different one.²

² Fieldnotes and informal conversation, Yen, 3-5-2018

While being alive, people as well as other organisms constantly create and recreate their surroundings and at the same time surroundings also change naturally therefore shaping the way they are inhabited. “The conversion of physical water- and landscapes into modern, semi-industrialised areas involves cultural change and the renouncing of a typical water-centred way of living” (Ehlert 2012). The landscape of the Mekong Delta has undergone a rapid transformation over the past century which also influenced the way people inhabit it. The streets in the centre of Can Tho are now full of multiple-story buildings, asphalt roads and constructions sites. By focusing on the modernization of water this thesis will demonstrate how intervention in its flow alters the way people imagine water and (are able to) engage with it. Although each individual or organism is altering the environment by daily interactions, the ability to produce nature is shaped by regimes-of-representation. Our perception of ‘the natural’ is coloured by the production and reproduction of dominant hegemonic processes (Swyngedouw 2009). Transformations of nature through urbanization processes, like the one described by Yen, often take place under the banner of modernity and progress and are therefore seen as necessary for development (Hommes and Boelens 2018). I will adapt the conceptualization of modernization as defined by Ehlert (2012, 4) as: “state-planned evolutionary and teleological change towards progress, which, calculated in economic terms, is achieved through the application of advanced technology, the commercialisation of subsistence agriculture, the industrialisation of production and the urbanisation of rural populations.”

Despite rapid urban transformations there are still traces from the water-centered way of living detectable in present-day Can Tho. The city’s floating market is not only a tourist attraction but also an expression of human inhabiting the water environment. Floating markets, embody the water-centred way of living within an urban context. By focusing on the socionatural forces that produced the Mekong Delta as well on the entangled dynamics in which humans inhabit their environment and give meaning to it I will demonstrate how humans engage and reconfigure the role of water in the rapidly transformed/ing context of Can Tho. The next sections develop on these ideas by placing them in a conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

The production of nature

Erik Swyngedouw (1999) introduces the term waterscape to highlight the relation between (water's) nature and society in case of Spain's modernization. Swyngedouw demonstrates that historical and geographical processes are closely linked to the human intervention in water flows. Swyngedouw (1999) conceptualizes that nature and its landscapes, or waterscapes, are never completely natural but are partly social, constituting a socionature. The dynamic and entangled ways in which the social and natural are fused together is what renders them inseparable (Swyngedouw, 1996). Using the concept of socionature recognizes that nature has an agency and counters the idea that human can master or dominate nature (Smith, 1984). The importance of socionature in the context of the VMD can be seen from the seeming lack of such a vision. The mastery over human over nature has been and still is a dominant perception in the VMD. Neil Smith was among the first to highlights that society and nature *are integral to each other and produce permanencies in their unity* (in Swyngedouw 1999, 446). Smith suggest to speak of the production of nature instead of domination of nature; human interventions to control water are driven by the intrinsic relation between nature and society that is already present. Swyngedouw argues that our contemporary world, especially after modernization practices including industrialization and urbanization is becoming more socionatural instead of consisting of the untouched, *pristine* nature (Swyngedouw 1999; Smith 1984, p.7). According to Smith (1984) the production of nature is not the result of domination of nature that requires technical intervention but it is much rather shaped by political events and forces. Therefore the concept of socionature asks for serious questions about: who controls, who acts, and who has the power to produce what kind of socionature? (Karpouzoglou and Vij 2015, p. 12).

Hydrosocial territories

In response to these questions raised by the concept of socionature I will introduce concept of hydro-social territories that was developed by Duarte-Abadía, Boelens and Roa-Avendaño (2015) to highlight the political and human role in constituting water geographies. They argue that territories are formed by the interaction between humans and their environment and are therefore socially constructed through imagination, rather than being naturally bounded. This implies that not only the material representation of a water environment is in constant flux but also the discursive social meanings assigned to it. These discursive meanings of nature are according to Boelens (2008) about more than nature itself; it is also about who has the right to decide about nature. The concept of hydrosocial territories draws particular attention to the fact that our perception of 'the natural' is coloured by the production and reproduction of dominant hegemonic processes (Swyngedouw 2009). Power colours the way we look upon what is 'just' or 'true' this is also argued by Foucault's (1980) regimes of truth. Examination of water-flows and hydrological interventions therefore gives insight in who has produced them and under which ideologies they were formed.

Duarte-Abadía et al. (2015, 251) discuss how alternative perceptions of territorial waters are often side-lined, including the locally embedded cultural understandings and meanings attached to nature and livelihood construction. It is exactly this notion that Käkönen (2008) calls upon to explain current problems and risks in the VMD which she explains is driven by modernist water control schemes. The ideology of modernization thus plays an important role in the reconfiguration of the socionatural and the representation of contemporary hydrosocial territories. Meanings of water are formed through its purpose/virtue in social circumstances, but at the same time people's interactions with 'meaningful' water shapes human identities and imaginaries (Strang, 2004) in the same way stresses that water is an intrinsic part of people's identities, cultures, worldviews and religious perceptions.

Unintentional design

Boelens (2016) acknowledges that humans adjust their environment through daily practices, but might be unaware of the indirect but also direct consequences of smaller and larger alterations. The outcome of different practices can therefore be unintentional. Tsing (2016) looks upon this *unintentional design* of the environment as the result of overlapping world-making activities of multiple agents, human and non-human. Tsing writes that design is clear in the landscape's ecosystem. But none of the agents have planned this effect (22-23). Therefore Tsing dismisses the perception that human are able to dominate nature. By paying close attention to the interactions across many acts of world-making, patterns emerge (Tsing 2016, 22). These *patterns of unintentional coordination* develop in assemblages, which can be harmful, beneficial and of no account. "To notice these patterns means watching the interplay of temporal rhythms and scales in the divergent lifeways that gather" (23-24). Assemblages therefore comprise the open-ended gatherings, the entanglements of life ways, that are never settled

Along similar lines, Tim Ingold (2012) argues that lifeways are always in motion and through encounters with others make up entangled patterns of emergence. Ingold specifically draws attention to how life ways are in a constant process of becoming rather than that life is defined by what is. In relation to how human shape the environment the following notion of Ingold (2008) is valuable: "There could be no places were it not for the comings and goings of human beings and other organisms to and from them, from and to places elsewhere. Places, then, do not so much exist as occur, they are topics rather than objects, stations along ways of life" (13). To conclude it can be argued that places such as hydro-social territories are defined through interactions, which makes them complex, unboundable and ever-changing (Massey 2004, 1). The notions of Tsing and Ingold will be used to understand the entangled interaction between human and the water in their environment.

Sense of place

Lastly the notion *sense of place* will be used to show that engagement with nature does not only physically change the environment it also changes the meaning ascribed to it. Ingold (1996) argues that being part of place is what gives meaning to it: “meaning is immanent in the relational contexts of people’s practical engagement with their lived-in environments” (113). Sense of place derives from the associated feelings, attitudes, and behavior that are inherent in the engagement (Shamai, 1991). Massey (1994) argues that places and senses of place are fluid and often subject to constant change by the flows of society as opposed to being singular in nature (Massey, 1994). I will use this concept to demonstrate the role environment plays in our experience of the lived-environment because, as argued by Tuan (1974), “it compromises all emotional connections between physical environment and human beings”(2). Harvey (2006) discusses how ‘sense of place’ cannot be created by professional intervention, which makes it something that lies beyond our direct control.

1.3 Methodology and key informants

This ethnographic fieldwork has been carried out primarily in Can Tho, the urban centre of the Mekong Delta, between the 16th of February until the 6th of May 2018. Characteristic for ethnographic research is its aim to tell rich and sensitive stories through participating within the research setting and with the research population (O'reilly 2012, 3). Participating can best be understood as 'deep hanging out' engaging with the everyday activities of a group of people learn about the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 1). I decided to stay in with a Vietnamese family to learn about the culture, every day practices and norms and values but also for the comfort of having people around and feel at home in the city. Rose and her family are originally from the North of Vietnam and I repeatedly I have accompanied them to family celebrations, work meetings and yoga classes. Next to Rose I have established contact with 10 students that have helped me with the language, explained concerns for the young generation, showed me the city and even other parts of the Mekong Delta. Although these activities and informal conversations did not feel as research at the time they have provided me with a lot of knowledge about modern life in Can Tho. It was also through these activities that I met some key informants. For instance during one of the workshops I joined about the challenges of the Mekong Delta.

One of the difficulties I faced was getting access to people on the floating market. Because of my appearance I initially came across as a tourist, which was not always appreciated. Floating market sellers are in general occupied with their business for the majority of the day and the free time they use for private matters. In addition they can only be approached by boat. Through a friend³ I came in contact with Kent, who has worked as a tour guide on the floating market for a couple of years. Kent who is now an English teacher provided me with his knowledge about the floating market and introduced me to a family that stays on the floating market. Accompanied by Kent it was easy to find the non-touristic corridors from the land to the water. Thanh, the father of the family, has been of great help and introduced me to other market sellers, this process is referred to as *snow-balling*. In total I have been able to make multiple visits per week and either conducted semi-structured interviews or had a more informal conversation with 16 market sellers.

Another way to gain access has been by consulting multiple scientists at the university of Can Tho (CTU) and NGO's. The scientists and NGO's I met with have been able to support by supplying relevant contacts, supervising interview questions, advice on local research tactics and even letting me join in some of their meetings. I also conducted three semi-structured interviews with scientists and three with an NGO to understand their view on the water problems in the Delta and to reflect how much of these concerns were shared by residents of Can Tho. Through contact with CTU I also established connections with students. Quynh, a female student of tourism at CTU has accompanied me to most interviews as my translator. The level of English is of people outside the city is very low, this was also true for the floating market. Working with an interpreter has its limits because, as a I was not able to completely control the course of the conversation. It has been more difficult to establish trust because I could not directly show my empathy with

³ Trang, who I met via a Facebook group for 'Expats in Can Tho'.

the words of the respondents. On the other hand, Quynh's presence also enabled access as I felt that her knowledge of the cultural norms and values made the respondents feel at ease. In order to minimize that parts of the conversation 'got lost in translation' almost all conversations were recorded and transcribed as soon as possible. In the course of the conversation I would also take notes about the surroundings. Prior to the recording we would ask permission to the respondent and inform him/her about the purpose of the research, guaranteeing an informed consent.

For building rapport it has been quintessential to remain flexible but at the same time patient in the process. I had to frequently change my daily routines based on the wishes of others, despite possible inconvenience, to demonstrate my gratitude for their corporations. In the Vietnamese tradition it is important to show respect towards elderly and traditions, such as weddings but also dinner and naps. In the time I was not in the field, or at least not actively trying to find respondents, I would take time to review the data I already gathered in order to avoid gaps in the data.

Although I have tried to look critically upon my research, examining my own inputs and objectivity as a researcher, it is always coloured through personal world-views. It is therefore that I constantly reflected on my interpretation of what I considered the reality. The stories I was presented sometimes conflicted with each other, that is why I was always critical on the initial data I found and asked different actors the same question in order to verify my data and improve validity. Lastly, I have been very observant of my surroundings, being aware that how I looked upon the current environment is the result of past actions. This has enabled me to provide *thick descriptions* as Geertz (1973, 3) defines it, which are important for a rich and sensitive story.

1.4 Structure

Chapter 1 covers the historical and contemporary human efforts to produce the Mekong Delta and provides contextual information about the current representation of the water-/landscape and society. Chapter 2 zooms in on the floating market of Can Tho to unravel the dynamics between people and their environment by tracing the many processes that have come together and diverge and give shape to life on the market. Chapter 3 focuses on the importance of the lived-environment and discusses how the changing role of water impacts this experience.

Chapter 1: The historical and modern delta

Water control efforts have played an important role in the current natural as well as social representation of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta (VMD). The concept of hydrosocial territory will be used throughout the chapter and applied to the case of the VMD in order to understand the politically and economically inflected ways in which water moves and is distributed (Swyngedouw, 2009). Water has been crucial in the development of agriculture and human interventions. Human efforts to improve productivity and efficiency have resulted in a transformation of the environment but also the way society inhabits it. The modern delta is the outcome of an extensive history in which the imagination of water played a key role.



4

⁴ Woman and man working on the rice field: A characteristic image of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta. Photo by author.

The road to Can Tho

The bus to Can Tho departs from a small pick-up station from the center of Ho Chi Minh city and is fully packed with Vietnamese families that are going back to their hometown to celebrate the national holidays of 'TET' (or Vietnamese Lunar New Year). The bus drives steadily, not too fast because of the crowded and sometimes rough road surfaces. The open windows of the vehicle make the air pleasantly move, taking away some of the heat. After about 20 minutes the first glimpses of green become visible. Paddy fields make up most of the green landscape and quite consistently banana and coconut trees pop up. Due to minimum elevations of the surface it is hard to get an overview of the landscape. Houses, factories and shops interchangeably position themselves along the road. The road itself is mostly crowded with buses, trucks, cars and the sides are packed with motorbikes and even some cyclists that are brave enough to use the road's margins. With only two lanes to drive on the claxon seems to be of crucial importance. During the ride multiple bridges are passed. The road elevates as it enters the ramp of the bridge and beneath the flowing water of the *Cuu Long* (Vietnamese name for Mekong) appears.⁵ The Mekong River flows through China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia before it reaches Vietnam (see figure 1). Surrounded by the South China sea, the Delta is characterized by a landscape of waters, a waterscape. People in the delta have a long history with water and have shaped their lives around it but at the same time flows of water were altered for the benefit of society. The road towards Can Tho reveals much of the characteristic Delta landscape. However this road-centered view does not reveal the water-based way of living. Roads are now the main infrastructure but this has been different in the past. The following sections describe the transformations that have taken place in the Delta that constituted the view which I now (am able to) have.

1.1 Production of the socionatural Delta

The dense network of over 30,000 km of waterways cross-cutting is a fundamental characteristic of the Delta and makes up most of the *waterscape* of the delta region (Benedikter 2014). The waterways that seem to fit *naturally* in the Delta landscape are in fact designed and constructed by humans. According to David Biggs (2009, 120) "almost every inch of the delta's surfaces are cultivated by human hands". Nevertheless most of the digging was done with the help of machinery that was first introduced in the area at the end of the 19th century. Many of the canals were dredged under the French colonial regime which Biggs describes as a lucrative intervention. The swampy interior of the Delta was carved out to improve trade routes, thus opening up new areas but also "disrupting existing hydraulic works" (Biggs 2009, 43). Biggs (2009) argues that the construction of canals also led to a destruction of existing environmental and social processes. The canal building exerted a control over the landscape and enabled the creation of new spaces but also ended pre-existing spaces as it for instance cut through farmlands and graveyards (43). Biggs stresses here that little attention was paid to how the canal building profited local society. Local territories were neglected and the technological knowledge about dredging gave the French a powerful position and established new

⁵ Observations, 22-2-2018

territories. Knowledge brought from Western colonizers had an impact on the earlier adaptive way in which the Delta inhabitants lived with water, adjusting the creation of social spaces in line with environmental conditions (Ehlert 2012). The western mechanistic perception of nature became the new regime-of-representation (Boelens et al. 2016; Wantzen et al. 2012). The mastery over human over nature has been and still is a dominant perception in the VMD. Kakonen (2009), Biggs (2012) have illustrated that misinterpretation or neglect of the specific environment has resulted in the inability to dominate nature. The work of engineers in the Delta has been accounted as *too efficient* (Käkönen 2009, 1) or as the production of *artificial landscapes that failed to halt the delta's ecological and social unravelings* (Biggs 2012, 124).

Käkönen (2008) also refers to the influence of French colonial rule as a project of *civilizing* or, in the words of James Scott (1998), *domesticating* nature which served mainly economic objectives. Canals were the symbol of modernization as these infrastructural interventions of water control have helped to “convert wild swamps into manageable and productive land” (Biggs, 2012,p.220). The dry land that was created by holding back floodwaters enabled new ‘modern’ forms of agriculture, commerce and industry. The modern forms of agriculture enabled Vietnam grew out to be one of the biggest rice exporting countries and is referred to as the Rice Bowl of Vietnam. The control of water has played a key role in the constitution of region’s character (Strang 2014). Strang discusses Allan’s (2011) concept of *virtual water* to highlight that water also translates itself in the establishment of agricultural products such as rice.

Before the introduction of the modern water control schemes people in the Delta used a system of adaptation that has been focused on living in harmony with the rhythm of the water, such as the tidal differences of ebb and flows and the seasonal monsoon rains resulting in recurrent floods. Judith Ehlert (2012) demonstrates in her book ‘Beautiful Floods’ how floods, a natural phenomenon in the Mekong Delta, are perceived as “a top-down technocratic management issue by the government” (iv). This contrasts the perspectives of people living in rural areas who perceive annual flooding as a crucial development resource, something that can be ‘beautiful’. Mekong, Cuu Long in Vietnamese, can be understood as Nine Dragons which suggests a powerful ‘serpentine’ identity of the river (Biggs 2012, 6). Although humans developed a sense of superiority over nature, in 1937 when the flood year was higher than normal destroyed a great deal of crops, it became evident that water could not easily be boxed in (Ehlert 2012, 26; Ingold 2008). Dependent of the role of water in society the Mekong can have multiple epistemological identities (Boelens et al. 2016).

Whereas in the past engineers faced difficulty in the construction of permanent spaces due to unsolid grounds and complex hydrological system, modern technology and a better understanding of the Delta’s ecology eased the construction of roads, bridges and cities⁶. Yet the amphibious Delta grounds remain to pose challenges to human’s will to construct permanent spaces. Especially within cities riverbank erosion forms a threat to houses that are built along the waterway⁷. Increasing riverbank erosion in the Delta

⁶ Informal conversation, Quang, 7-6-2018

⁷ <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/environment/201731/mekong-delta-erosion-incidents-increase.html>, 4-8-2018

is largely ascribed to the construction of upstream hydro-power dams that retain sediment and alter the flow of the water⁸. The river's border-crossing flow and ability to dissolve other materials and carry it along, may result in unforeseen implications due to alterations made elsewhere. The notion that "riparian countries are developing different parts of the river basin independently has raised many concerns, as the mismanagement of this large resource would cause severe transboundary environmental problems" (Lu and Siew 2006, 23). Particularly Chinese dam-building projects to guarantee energy supply for their population challenge the water resources and territories downstream (Lu and Siew 2006). The milk-brown waters of the Mekong River have specific qualities because of sediments that it carries, which in their turn stabilize the riverbank and enable fertile soils.⁹

Although it may not be directly visible in the landscape of the Mekong Delta, the area has served as a battleground during a period of on-going conflict, including what in the West is known as the Vietnam war. The Vietnam War or the American War as referred to it in Vietnam, was particularly a war on ideology between communism in North-Vietnam and the capitalism in South-Vietnam. The end of Vietnam War in 1975 marked the reunification of North and South Vietnam which implied the defeat of capitalism imposed by US forces in the South. The whole of Vietnam was now under the control of communism. This implied a radical restructuring of the country's economy, especially for the South that had been used to free trade. The period of a collectivized and planned market following the end of the war, is locally referred to as *bao cap* and required farmers to hand over their produce in return of state-planned food rations¹⁰. According to Käkönen (2009) the collective-state system was inefficient due to the lack of incentive of farmers to increase production. The American War, that is still in the memories of a large part of people in the Mekong Delta has shaped the Delta by natural and social constructions and ruptures.

But rupture made place for recovery where in 1978 the national food deficit experienced a record, less than 20 years later Vietnam had become the world's second largest rice exporter. A great deal of this success can be credited to the Mekong Delta's shift from adaptive water management to artificial water control over the past 20 years (Käkönen, 2008; Le Anh Tuan et al. 2007). In addition a radical policy change made an end to the collective state planned economy and enabled free trade and foreign investment. *Doi moi*, which can be translated as renovation, is the name of the policy that brought neoliberalism into Vietnam. While the state remained socialist it is undeniable that the defeat of capitalism has only lasted for a short while. The current political system is defined as socialist but market oriented. The government is made up of a single party of which the members are elected by the people. Although as I was explained multiple times, getting into politics is not for everyone. People with a religion besides Buddhism are not allowed in the party and it is based on who you know.¹¹

⁸ Participant observation, workshop Mekong Delta, 10-3-2018

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Informal conversation, Quynh, 26-3-2018

¹¹ Field notes, 15-3-2018

1.2 Water-based way of living

People in the Delta did not only use water of the river for development but also for daily practices. The rhythm of the river has had a great impact on the design of the Delta and its society. *“Do you know why all big cities in the Delta are 60 kilometres away from each other?”* Jack asks me. Jack is a young man who grew up in the Delta, although he works as an engineer he frequently provides tours around the Delta to show the tourists the Delta life. He had learned a lot about life through conversations with local people that inhabit for instance the floating markets. These markets on that happen on the water are one of the main tourist attractions as they seem to reflect the history of life in the Mekong Delta. The city of Can Tho is home to one of the biggest remaining floating markets in the Delta. Jack continues: *“Maybe you have noticed, but every 6 hours, the streams change direction... In these six hours boats can drive about 60 kilometres. The cities were formed because these places, when the water would turn, was where people would come together and take a rest.”*¹² When looking at the map of the Delta this pattern can indeed be retraced (figure 2). In this canal-centered environment town planning involved around riparian space. Tuan, Wyseure and Viet (2004) have also paid attention to the geographical distance between the delta cities: *“every 60 kilometres we have a major city or town - The human settlement points fit a compromise between East Sea tidal effects and the Mekong river flow”*. In reality there might have been multiple factors influencing the shape and content of the Mekong Delta, but the foundations of cities are very likely to be guided by the flow of the Mekong waters.

As Morita (2017) demonstrates in case of the Thai Chao Phraya Delta, the *riparian space* used to be the most important social space, where people met, traded and lived. In the case of the Mekong a similar situation can be seen. The reliance of boats and the Delta’s waters resulted in people settling close to the riverbank. Houses were built along the river, their fronts facing the water. From a bird’s eye view you can how settlements disperse along waterways (see figure 4). Still many people use the water of the river directly for daily practices. In the backwaters of Can Tho it will still be common to find mainly women crouching next to the river to do their laundry or to wash dishes. Here you will still find a lot of stilt-housing, which partly stretch over the river and are raised on poles. These houses reveal the embeddedness of water in the life of the people that inhabit them.¹³ All the stilt houses that I visited relied on the water of the river for their income and have lived there for a long time. The small canals are also beneficial to grow productive gardens as I have been able to experience.

One day, my friend Christine brought me along to worship her ancestors in the house they inhabited in Phong Dien district (figure 3). The peri-urban district is far more quiet than the city’s centre and people live mainly along the Hau river or smaller canals. Christine, who I have met in the café where she works, has lived in Can Tho for her entire life of 21 years. The house we visit belonged to her grandparents and is now inhabited by her aunt. The kitchen where we will prepare the food, to offer, is set along a smaller canal. One of Christine’s uncles is cutting a jackfruit which he brought from his garden close by and washes the knife he

¹² Informal conversation, Jack, 3-5-2018

¹³ Observations, 23-2-2018

uses in the stream of water that runs by, the sweet smell of the fruit fills the room. When the food is prepared it is placed into a *sampan* (traditional wooden boat). I am directed to board the tiny boat and together with Christine and her two aunts we make our way to the ancestors tombs through the extensive fruit garden on the waters of the small canal. The two uncles cross the garden by foot and have to pass multiple canals by bridges made of bamboo poles, referred to as *cau khi* (monkey bridge). “Could you stay here haha?” Christine’s uncle asks me when we arrive. His laughter reveals that he assumes that this way of life is not something I am used to. He is right. I am amazed by the whole experience which I would describe as authentic. Returning to the land of the ancestors feels in a way taking a step back in time, which makes me unpleasantly aware of my own preconception of modern and backward. Nevertheless, during the offering I notice something particular, a bundle of paper with small pictures of razor blades, cigarettes, Adidas flip-flops, an iPhone and some other modern-day luxuries. The papers are burned and the items on the pictures, symbolically rise up with the ashes to reach the spirits of the ancestors. Even Buddhist traditions catch up with the *modern* lifestyle.¹⁴

Another strong engagement of the Mekong Delta population with water is reflected in the floating markets, as can be told from the name. This water-based market uses the natural advantage of the water network to transport and also trade products on the river. However, Phuong (2014) states that until the start of the 19th century the actual trade mainly took place in town markets. Boats clogged densely on the rivers to transport goods but were not trade still took place on the land. The exact starting date of the floating market is not known as they gradually developed according to the access to land and water. In 1908 the city of Nga Bay, meaning seven (canal-)intersections, was founded and provided a strategic node of trade activity. The optimal conditions for floating markets are crossroads like this where the water is not too deep nor too shallow, the flow not too heavy and the river not too broad nor too narrow (Phuong 2014, 50). Biggs, Miller, Hoanh and Molle (2009) discuss that these spots of restricted flow, where among French engineers perceived as meaningless or even as hinder since the low water-level during low-tide interrupted the river traffic. The French referred to *dos d’âne*, translates as donkey backs, a phrase used for speed bumps in the road as well. For the local society the phenomenon caused by the change of tidal flows had a completely different meaning and were known as meeting points or *giap nuoc*, which literally means water interface (Biggs et al. 2009, 213). The process of assigning meaning is what Boelens et al. (2016) refer to as *humanized nature*. Territories are the result of humanizing nature since it is people that define its borders and its role. Anyhow, as shown in the above example constructions of territories are not uniform, instead multiple ideas about the role of this particular piece of land- or waterscape exist. Hoogesteger, Boelens and Baud (2016) use the term *territorial pluralism* to refer to overlapping, interacting or conflicting territorial representations. The *dos d’âne* are a constraint in the conceptualization of the French who see the canals as infrastructure for larger transport while the Vietnamese use the decrease in flow for local trade. The way space is being

¹⁴ Fieldnotes and participant observations, 5-4-2018

territorialized is determined by people's imagination of what a place is and could be, formed under the regime-of-representation (Boelens et al. 2016).

Rivers in the VMD are freely accessible and requires no business tax which is also why floating markets favoured the water above the land (Phuong, 2014). Although the waterscape of the Mekong Delta may be officially 'free of use' to anyone that does not mean that the constitution of territories happens equally. According to Hoogesteger et al. (2016) disputes may arise from competing interests and efforts that 'aim to consolidate boundaries, socio-natural organization and control for a specific purpose at a specific spatial scale' (92). The constructors of territory often aim to shape territory according to their own interests (Hoogesteger et al. 2016). In case there are conflicting definitions on territory power plays a critical role (Duarte-Abadía et al. 2015; Swyngedouw 2009). Political agendas and power relations determine to great extent the entitlements of people to territory. Castree (2001) discusses how knowledge and language are powerful tools to construct representation of the natural world, which leads to Foucault's conceptualization of power-knowledge and that both shape each other. This is what makes Jerkins (2009) say that it is when *voices of authority* assign a name to a space that it is in this process that space turns into a meaningful place. Floating markets might not have appeared, or may have looked differently, if the *points of restricted flow* were not realized as *meeting points* as well.

Still perceptions and definitions of territory remain to be challenged, especially in cases where a plurality of about it exist. The earlier discussed Nga Bay floating market was relocated from its 'place of birth' after a traffic decree had been issued to reduce inland water traffic: *"It was in 1996, that the government issued a decree to reduce inland waterway traffic across the country. - I told them [the authorities] that the market was formed in the first place because of its unique open location. It had developed there for nearly a hundred years; they couldn't just simply apply something new and bureaucratic like the traffic decree to review the market and its value to the area."*¹⁵ The decision was made regardless of the concerns which resulted in the disappearance of the once thriving market. Sellers had little options but to change their livelihood¹⁶. The way space is inhabited, used or managed depends on the natural representation as much as on the social meaning that is assigned to it and the recognition of thereof. Top-down and bureaucratic decision making are common in the Mekong Delta (Ehlert 2012). Voiced critiques, like in this case of Nga Bay, about inappropriate designs or applied technologies have been falling on deaf ears of the state-led government (Benedikter 2014).

Although there might have been substantiated reasons to build the dikes and obstruction of trade was an unintended result, there is enough reason to consider that floating markets were not recognized as valuable. Ironically, it is now more than 20 years later that the government wants to revive Nga Bay market. Still some floating markets persisted and still reveal the hydro-social territories that have their roots in the *giap nuoc*. One of these markets is Cai Rang the floating market of Can Tho, that is currently the largest

¹⁵ <https://thediomat.com/2017/03/saving-vietnams-floating-markets/>, 5-6-2018

¹⁶ Ibid.

remaining floating market within the Mekong Delta. Be that as it may, the market is challenged by the establishment of roads that enable faster transport routes.

1.3 From the river to the road

As demonstrated in the introduction rivers are being cast into concrete under the idea of progress, modernization. The road replaces the role of water as infrastructure and changes the way people interact with water and imagine it. Roads just like rivers open up spaces or improve connection between them. Settlements in the Mekong Delta that used to run along rivers, now more and more run along a road. Taylor (2006) explains the introduction of roads as a 180 degree shift in the people's way of living: "Where a road is built along a waterway, people will literally turn their backs on the river" (in Benedikter 2014, 87). This is also what probably happened to Yens's house along the water. The river was neglected and instead turned into a place where people dumped their waste. "My father tells us there used to be a beautiful big, nice and clean river all local people live around and use water from that river"¹⁷ Yen's remark highlights the different value and purpose of the river it had in the past.

Modernization efforts, like constructing roads, have indirectly altered the waterscape and people's ability to constitute territories. The reason for the government to change the situation and build a road may seem reasonable; however, as Taylor (2006) describes roads are likely to have caused the neglect of the river's qualities (in Benedikter 2014, 87). The earlier described overwater stilt housing has been replaced by multi-story buildings that are not connected to the river but rather to the road. According to Hryczyszyn and Neil (2014) the stilt houses are defined as marginal settlements in a modernizing city as Can Tho. Although the government allows people to live there, mainly because resettling all requires a lot of time and money (Hryczyszyn and Neil 2014). Tuan an elderly man who lives along the riverbank where he own a small café explained that "They stay at the river because that is actually the only place where they can afford to live." Which means that these people are considered poor and have little opportunities. The homes are poorly constructed, made of wood and metal plates. "They know that one day they will have to move so they don't try to improve their home, unless it is necessary."¹⁸ Since a couple of years there are plans to construct solid embankments along the riverbanks which means that all houses have to be moved¹⁹. Stilt houses are often built without legal documentation Tuan explains. "In the past, before 1975, people would receive a paper. The government only compensates those families with a paper." Hryczyszyn and Neil (2014) reckon that the reorientation of people, from waterways to the land will likely lead to a decline of floating markets, water transport and water-based housing. Which in their eyes results in the loss of cultural and tourism.

As expressed by Shannon (2009) the improvement of the roads, literally makes people lose their connection with water. Water no longer constitutes the major transportation route and is more frequently

¹⁷ Semi-structured interview, Yen, 4-5-2018

¹⁸ Informal conversation, Tuan, 16-4-2018

¹⁹ <https://vietnamnews.vn/society/261001/can-tho-to-invest-vnd1-trillion-in-riverside-embankment.html>, 5-6-2018

being perceived as an uncomfortable crossing or a good that can be bottled and sold on the market. Heidegger (1977) argues that the use of technology changes our phenomenological perception of spaces. This modern ability to reassign nature within a technological context is referred to as *enframing*. A dammed up river becomes now a supplier of energy instead of a source of spiritual traditions (Heidegger, 1977 in Jerkins, 2009). Rivers that used to be 'opening up' areas are now becoming borders that need to be bridged. The construction of bridges in the Delta happened rapidly after the implementation of *doi moi* when foreign money was entering the country.

"Many people were working in distant places across the river. It was quite terrible... it would take people over three hours to get onto the ferry. There were so many people and they all had to cross the river. Now it is much better, it will take even less than an hour to get to Vinh Long." Anh, a 21-year old student, who grew up in Can Tho talks about the bridge as we are crossing it. Can Tho bridge or *Cau Can Tho*, an imposing cable stayed bridge that crosses the Hau river and in that way links the Mekong Delta with the rest of Vietnam. The bridge was completed in 2010 and at the time was one of the largest cable stayed bridges in South East Asia. Including its approach ramps the bridge stretches a distance of over 15 kilometers. We pass the bridge to get to Vinh Long a neighbouring city of Can Tho, which lies across the river. "The bridge symbolizes the development coming to Can Tho", Anh states when we looked at the bridge from a distance. HCMC is the country's second largest city and most important business center a lot of people who live in the Delta are now able to travel there more easily in order to find a job²⁰. "Without the bridge we would probably still be waiting to cross." Anh joked when we reached the end of the bridge, "It is really our savior."²¹ Right now, a new highway is being installed to make the connection between HCMC and Can Tho even faster. "When the highway is finished Can Tho will develop even more."²² Quang, a professor at CTU explains his perspective on the role of roads.

Yet terrestrial development still has to take into account the presence of the river-network, for instance when crossing it by ferry. On the bus ride from HCMC to Can Tho the rivers crossed vary in width, from 2 meters up till 200 meters. For some of the larger crossing ferries are still in place. The ferry is large enough to carry dozens of motorbikes, cars and buses. The road and the river that represent two radically different networks of flow coexist along each other and at times even overlap. A similar case is found in a study by Morita (2016) wherein he describes how modern terrestrial infrastructure in the Chao Phraya Delta in Thailand *interplays* with the pre-existing aquatic infrastructure instead of replacing it. At the end of the asphalt road, the bus is being driven onto a ferry which follows the course of the river towards the beginning of a new road, or the continuation of the road we left off. On the deck of the ferry there is a small area to sit and overlook the river. A mother and her son are seated on the windy deck, on their way to visit the mother's parents for the TET holidays. The little boy who is no older than 10 years old looks scared when

²⁰ Informal conversation, Anh, 17-3-2018

²¹ Informal conversation, Anh, 17-3-2018

²² Informal conversation, Quang, 6-4-2018

the ferry absorbs the shocks from the rippling river. *“I don’t know what’s happening, but I am so scared”* the small boy tells me. Although it is not the first time the boy crossed the river he seems to be unfamiliar with the shaking of the boat caused by the waves of the water. The boy’s words amazed me, not so much of their meaning but because of the fluent English pronunciation of them. The mother explained how her son studies English for a couple of years now in HCMC. The little boy’s ease to talk in a foreign language with strangers contrasted his discomfort of sitting on a shaking boat on the Mekong’s waters²³.

Not even as much as 15 years earlier the majority of the transport happened by boat. Those who were travelling between or around the delta were doing so by boat. *“When I wanted to go back to my parents in Ca Mau I had to take the ferry. It would take maybe eleven hours to get there. These days, by car, it may be as much as four hours”*.²⁴ Long, who I met in a café that I frequently visit, explains to me how different the situation was in the Delta at the time he was studying about 10 years ago. Long is now a construction worker in charge of building one of the major water bottling companies in Can Tho. He has been living in Can Tho from the time he started his studies there.

1.4 The modern Delta

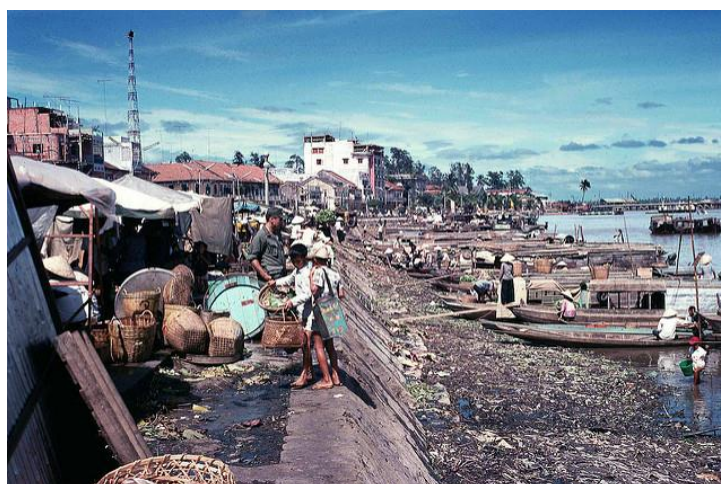
“Twenty years ago, when I was studying, Can Tho was more like a village. When I look around these days, I just wonder where all the motorbikes have come from”. Mrs. Trang recalls memories about the past of Can Tho as we discuss urbanization. Although the Mekong Delta is characterized by its productive agriculture sector the rapid increase in industries initiated by *doi moi* attracted more people to the city. Within twenty years the urban area in Can Tho city has doubled (Thy, Raghavan and Pawarr 2010). Due to the government’s prioritization of industrialization over agriculture the “incomes in the agricultural sector have lagged far behind those in other sectors of the economy, creating a strong push effect for outmigration from rural areas” (Thy et al. 2010, 23). Industrial parks often concentrated in and around urban areas, like Can Tho. Young people move away from their families and move to urban centres in the hope to find a stable income in the factory.²⁵ The establishment and improvements in the road network had increased the process of urbanization and eased connections with and within the Delta. As mentioned earlier roads became the symbol of modernization and replaced some of the river’s functions. Where urban sprawl once followed the river it was now following the road. For example, Thy et al. (2010) remark that by looking at spatial data it becomes clear that the construction of Can Tho bridge likely resulted in the urban increase of the south-eastern part of the city.

²³ Observations and informal conversation, 22-2-2018

²⁴ Informal conversation, Long, 5-4-2018

²⁵ Semi-structured interview, Mrs. Trang, 28-3-2018

Water gains a new purpose in the city. The many canals that are present in the city provide sewage services that rainwater will be able to drain off quickly to a larger river (Pham 2011, p.13). Within the city center of Can Tho there is not a lot of surface water and the canals that are present are mostly black and smelly because people directly discharge their waste water in there. Still one of the most important features of the city is set along the riverbank. The river-front park, Kieu Quay or *Ben Ninh Kieu*, is the city's commercial center as most of the banks, hotels and public spaces are set here.²⁶ The park offers a broad view over the Hau and Can Tho river. The large road that surrounds the other side of the park is filled with small shops, restaurants, bars and in particular coffee and 'milk tea' places which are most busy at night time. Many of the tourists visiting Can Tho city can be found here. In the past the boulevard used to be the main trade port of Can Tho. On a picture from 50 years ago it can be seen that market activities occupied the entire riverfront (image 1). I was told by one of my respondents as well as I heard during multiple conversations that this was the location of the floating market. Although the market is no longer set here the boulevard is still in connection with Cai Rang's floating market which is set five kilometres southwards on the river. The old market building along the riverfront, once used by local traders, is now one of the city's most popular restaurants for tourists. Market activities have definitely not stopped but have a different aim, which is mainly directed at national and international tourists.



²⁷ Image 1. Ninh Kieu Quay, Can Tho, 1968.

Along this riverside boulevard of Can Tho one will evidently encounter a dozen of middle-aged ladies dressed in brightly coloured suits and equipped with traditional triangle shaped hats. Smilingly the women try to convince bypassing tourists to take a ride on the river waters. "By boat?" or if that doesn't work "Tomorrow maybe?"²⁸. The river as a place of leisure also creates new ways to make a living, new forms of embodiment. Tourists make up a new group of actors that challenge existing territories in the Delta. Although tourist do not actively convert the landscape they influence the imaginaries of the people in the city. Development

²⁶ Observations throughout research

²⁷ https://www.flickr.com/photos/128517792@N02/galleries/72157647906018533/?rb=1#photo_9771990354

²⁸ Observations throughout research

within the city is mainly focused on foreign investment and foreign visitors. This shift in imaginary has led to new ideas about what the riverbank of Ninh Kieu Quay could be. According to Strang (2004) people's interactions with meaningful water co-constitute human identities and imaginaries (p. 4–5).

It is clear that the billboards are not meant to benefit the people living in Cai Rang but are aimed at the wandering visitors of the Ninh Kieu park. A ferry connects the two distinctively different parts of the city. The rivers seems to have become a border in the development. I remember Danh, a CTU student living in Cai Rang, telling me about the low level of development interest in the area: "The people there have no say in the development of the city, only recently the government seems to have more interest to develop infrastructures here."²⁹ Although it only takes a ferry crossing to reach the 'opposite side' it appeals to me as a village rather than a part of Can Tho. People seem to have a close connection with the neighbours and are able to grow their own fruits. Quynh described the area as "not developed" and explains that the government has plans for this area. In a feasibility study of Can Tho City People's Committee (CCPC) the plans concerning this area are described as follows: "the embankment is constructed to create landscape of river, the body of embankment will be taken advantages of for brand advertising, land on embankments will be used as parking lots, amusement parks and restaurants. Therefore, the land around the embankment will promote efficiency and bring more value."³⁰

The embankment that will be built along the main rivers in Can Tho should prevent the increasing erosion of the riverbank that has resulted in the loss of multiple houses.³¹ The development of tourism is an important means for Can Tho to enable investments like the embankment. A lady living next to the river, opposing Ninh Kieu Quay, tells me that she is aware of these plans: "Next time when you come back here, we will have a park!" The lady seemed happy about this development but she also remarked that she was not sure whether she would be living there as well. "I don't know if I will still live here, but I am sure the government will take care."³² Development has a very positive connotation for many who live in Can Tho.

To conclude

The historical production of the modern Delta has been part of an ambitious project to transform the swampy and complex water environment into an efficient and productive landscape. The extensive natural as well as constructed canal system made people in the Mekong Delta incredibly reliant on the rivers for transport and agriculture. However the existing adaptive human-water relation was predominantly neglected by Western colonizers who introduced their technical knowledge to manage water flows to improve agricultural efficiency. The local population had no choice but to accept to the new water regime.

²⁹ Informal conversation, Danh, 2-3-2018

³⁰ CCPC rapport, retrieved on 28-4-2018

³¹ <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/environment/201731/mekong-delta-erosion-incidents-increase.html>, 4-8-2018

³² Informal conversation, woman on the riverbank, 26-4-2018

In terms of productivity the water control schemes have been effective and the economy of the country expanded. The introduction of *doi moi* increased foreign investment which led to the introduction of industries, urbanization and roads. Roads replaced the river in being the main form of infrastructure and people started to turn their focus to the land instead of to the river. People who continued their lives along the river were considered backwards and were not legally recognized. Bridges replaced ferries and eased accessibility between the Delta and other parts of Vietnam. Can Tho is now the Mekong's Delta biggest city with over a million inhabitants. Within the city water ways are neglected and become increasingly polluted. Yet there are still people that rely on the Delta's waters: the floating market of Can Tho of which the roots lie in the natural advantage of the canals operates on the river that runs through Can Tho. In addition it provides the city with a unique asset which in the past was not recognized but with the increasing importance of tourism becomes more valuable. In general, water that was once essential to sustain life in the Delta is increasingly withdrawn from daily activities.

CHAPTER 2: An open-ended gathering

Territories are an expression of the way humans create meaningful spaces. Boelens (2016) describe *territories* as configurations of *space* that are presumably bounded under human imaginations and are therefore to be contested. The floating market of Can Tho is a territory that is formed by the human engagement with water. Places, such as hydro-social territories, are therefore defined through interactions, “which makes them complex, unboundable and ever-changing” (Massey 2004, 5).

This chapter will demonstrate that territories are not only challenged by direct claims on land or water but that they are also the result of the many lifelines of humans and non-humans that come together and in a specific place assigning it with different meanings. The floating market embodies the interaction of people with their environment and it is not fixed or spatially-bounded but rather a place of open-ended gatherings. Which in the terms of Anna Tsing becomes what it is through the interactions of different lines of life that come together and create meaning in their unity (Tsing 2016, 22-23). Cai Rang floating market in its current form is the result of different processes coming together rather than a place designed and constructed by people. Although the floating market may seem like a remnant from the past, this chapter will show that it is much more an open-ended gathering, an assemblage, of socionatural processes (Tsing 2016; Ingold 2009).



33

³³ Cai Rang's colourful floating market, a seller on his house-boat using a bucket to get water from the river and a buyer in a small sampan. Photo by author.

2.1 Capturing the floating market

*"If one has not visited floating market, he has not visited the south-west of Vietnam"*³⁴ it says on a popular Vietnamese travel website. Cai Rang, which literally means 'teeth of crocodile' is the name of the biggest remaining floating market in the Mekong Delta and is presented by many travel magazines and websites as the must-visit in South-Vietnam. Within the cities banners of the floating market are found and almost all hotels offer a trip to see the water-based market. Which explains that one of the first things I did when I arrived in Can Tho was booking a trip to experience the market.

It is 5 AM when we (me and six other tourists) gather, the sun has not risen yet and the air is relatively cool. A boat picks us up in front of the hostel, which is situated next to a small canal that is part the backwaters of the city's main river. When we leave the small canals and reach the main river the first thing that gets my attention are the vast number of boats. Although the boats vary in form and size almost all of them are heading in a similar direction with a substantial speed, like passengers hurrying catch the train. Partly due to the morning dusk, it is hard to make a distinction between the boats; which one is part of the floating market and which one is there to behold it? By the time we reach the place of destination the sun is almost up making it easy to distinguish among the different boats. Boats that belong to the floating market are not filled with people but are fully loaded with fresh fruits and vegetables such as pineapples, watermelons, onions, potatoes or a little bit of everything. Large wooden poles point in the air, attached to it is (are) the product(s) sold on that particular boat. The wooden boats are basic in their design and despite the weathered state they looked bright and colourful. The rays of the sun that become stronger as time passes are taken up by the material of the ship and produce a smell of warm wood and integrates with the river's odour of fish and water hyacinths, an assemblage of smells. On the boats of the people laundry is hanging to dry, a hammock offers a place to rest and even a dog walks around on one of the decks. The sudden realization that people are actually living on the boats makes me feel a little out of *place*, especially because of the camera I am holding, ready to capture people in their most intimate space as they work to earn a living. I feel detached from the place which I have come to admire but with which I don't have a connection. I slowly realize that I legitimized myself to take pictures because the floating market is in my eyes a tourist destination and everyone around is doing the same. It is at that time that one of the others passengers asks the tour guide named 'Tho', who is also taking many pictures, the following question: *"You must have many pictures of the market already, right? So why are you still taking them?"* Tho replies: *"Yes, I have many. But you know, these people don't own smartphones so I cannot see them very often. Also, I want to keep the memory for the day the floating market may disappear"*³⁵. Capturing the floating market in the form of pictures is one way in which the place can be preserved in the minds of people. At the same time Tho's remark raised my awareness about the fact that the floating market is not a permanent space and that its presence is being challenged. Tho explained how the young generation thinks the live on the boat is

³⁴ <https://www.vietnamonline.com/shopping/cai-rang-floating-market-can-tho.html>, 5-6-2018

³⁵ Fieldnotes and observations, 29-6-2018

boring and moves away to the land. The floating market that seems to still embody the water-based way of living within an environment that has rapidly urbanized, and seems to become a place for tourism. Ingold (2009) argues that it is in the processes of *becoming* that we define ourselves and the world around us. The next section will focus on how the people of CRFM have become and are becoming.

2.2 A gathering

When visit the floating market with Kent, who was also able to translate for me, I get a chance to ask the sellers on the market about the possible disappearance of the market. “There are actually two main reasons that challenge the floating market: one is the development of trucks and technology, the second one is that the next generation doesn’t want to live on the boat.” Thanh, a market seller, explains to me when I ask him about the future of the market. “Still I strongly believe that the floating market will continue to exist.” Slightly surprised by his determination I ask what makes him believe that. “I strongly believe the floating market does not disappear because it is the main attraction of Can Tho, and the government invests a lot of money in it.”³⁶ There seems to be multiple processes that seem to reconfigure the current shape of the floating market. The multi-faceted level at which change occurs creates a complex dynamic underneath that what can be seen from the surface.

Ingold (2008) draws out the theory of *the meshwork* to better understand such a dynamic. Ingold writes: “Life itself, far from being an interior property of animate objects, is an unfolding of the entire meshwork of paths in which beings are entangled” (Ingold 2008). Instead of saying that living beings exist in places Ingold (2008) argues that they travel along paths, which is referred to as wayfaring. Ingold (2008) provides the example of a circle, that is defined by the line that encompasses a space rather than by the space within it. Similarly Sack (2000) describes how places are constituted by “the occurrences of activities rather than by a set of locations in an abstract space - Place in general is felt as involvement with events, that often re-occur”. Floating markets are specifically places defined by their occurrence rather than by the geographical locations. Williams sees place more than ‘just the site of an event... but as the materialization of a history which is often quite extensively retracted (Williams, 1979, 276). The floating market of which the roots lie in the natural advantage of the canal system is not only a tourist destination but also full of history shaped by the people that inhabit it. In general people on the floating market do not refer to it as their home, but as a way of life. As argued by Ingold (2009) as people move within the Earth, they inhabit it: “It is as wayfarers that human beings inhabit the earth” (148). Therefore I will still refer to the people on the floating market as inhabitants, but regard them as wayfarers.

Territories are therefore not only constituted through by active claims but also by humans inhabiting their environment, making their world. Because world-making activities of different agents overlap the outcome is often unintentionally coordinated (Tsing 2016). This counters the view that people are in control of their environment and can master it. I will demonstrate that the past, present and future of the market

³⁶ Semi-structured interview, Thanh, 6-3-2018

are shaped to a large extent through patterns of unintentional coordination. In the line of this argumentation one of the respondents of the floating market describes the future of the market as follows: "Anything you want to know about the future of the market, you'll have to wait for it."³⁷ The quote also indicates that many of the sellers feel like the preservation of the floating market lies beyond their control. I will now draw out the reasons that constitute these thoughts.

2.3 A way of life

"During the TET holidays we left to go back to Hau Giang, our hometown. But after four days already we started to miss the floating market." Thanh shows his attachment to the floating market. Thanh and his wife Huynh have been staying on the floating market for almost 20 years. They have a boat that can carry up to 17000 kg of *khaoi mo*, purple water-yam. I meet them on their boat which settled amongst many other similar looking ships. During the visit I am accompanied by their son Tri who lives on the land in Can Tho and Kent who has introduced me. Although the boat is big most of the space is used for loading leaving few space for living. In the small kitchen that is present on the boat Huynh prepares Vietnamese ice coffee, locally know as *ca phe da*. Thanh picks up an empty plastic cup and throws it into the river. I feel discomforted by his gesture but out of politeness I keep quiet. Later, when we discuss pollution of the river Thanh admits that he knows it is not good, but that there is no other way. "Going up and down to the riverbank to dump the waste is very inconvenient."³⁸ In order to reach the riverbank inhabitants of the market This seems not to be the only inconvenience the market sellers face. "People will think that we live a simple life, but it is hard. There are many things to worry about. Sinking when the boat is too heavy, in the rain it is too wet, in the summer too hot and the space is small." Despite the difficulties Thanh and Huynh still miss the market, "mainly because of the people."³⁹ A friend of Thanh named Tuan later remarks: "I feel happy in the early morning when everybody wakes up and we talk to each other or sing karaoke."⁴⁰ Only by observing the market a strong sense of community can be felt; especially after most of the business is done, people frequently hop from one boat to the other to drink a cup of coffee or play a game of Chinese chess.

Most of the people on Cai Rang have been staying on the market or other floating markets for over 20 years. An important distinction has to be made between the sellers and the buyers. Sellers are the transporters of agricultural produce and often own a large boat that can carry up to 17 tonnes of weight. Buyers come own smaller ships and buy from the wholesaler to resell it elsewhere, they function as a middle-man. Trucks have for a large extent replaced the boats that sellers used to travel by. Over the past 10 years the roads have received a lot of attention from the government which can also be felt in the floating markets as it is one of the direct reasons why it is reducing in size. "The sellers who are able to now buy trucks." Thanh explains, "The amount of buyers stayed the same, but the sellers went away, that is why Cai Rang is

³⁷ Semi-structured interview, Binh, 22-4-2018

³⁸ Semi-structured interview, Thanh, 6-3-2018

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Semi-structured interview, Tuan, 6-3-2018

now getting smaller.”⁴¹ But roads do not only substitute they also work together. As discussed in the previous chapter terrestrial infrastructure can coexist with the aquatic one and at times also overlap (Tuan, 2009). In the case of the floating market the road that runs along the river provides an informal way to do business. Boats can drive up to the riverbank to make business with a truck that is parked alongside the river. Some of the people on the market even attribute a better business to the presence of the trucks. A watermelon seller explains how he even sells products to buyers in Hanoi. “I will hire someone to drive the truck to go to Hanoi. I will drive along because the transaction has to be made in cash.”⁴² Where the products come from and end up is up to the seller and buyer and are based on the social network and experience.

It can be concluded that people have travelled many different paths that brought them to the market, but they shared the same drive: creating an income. Some of the sellers 'inherited the job', something which is common in Vietnam Quynh explained to me. Nevertheless, a large share of the sellers explain how they used to work on the land, mostly on the rice-fields. Tuan, who is in his 40's and has been living on the market for over 8 years explains his background: "I used to work on the rice fields, but there I cannot earn a lot of money. You have to invest a lot of money and there will be little profit, the next year you have to invest again. I started this business so my children can go to school"⁴³. Another seller named Linh explains "My father gave me two options: work on the rice fields or on the boat. I choose to work on the boat, to follow my father's job."⁴⁴ Diem, who now sells drink in a small boat on the floating market explains how she met her husband when they worked together on the rice fields and has come here because "life in the village is too difficult and I think my children should study in the city to get a better future."⁴⁵ The tough conditions on the rice fields as discussed earlier are due to the low incomes that very generated by the oversupply of rice and the prioritization of industrial over agricultural (Bosma 2005; Thy et al. 2010). The livelihoods of the rice farmers was impacted by forces beyond their control and they sometimes had no other option than to change it. "Any job that would generate an income, I would do." a pineapple seller replied to the question how he started working on the market. Ehlert (2016) describes the progress in the agricultural sectors as follows: "Despite being a success, this pursuit of modernisation is accompanied by precarious rural trajectories"(146). Floating markets have in a way generated a way out of for those impoverished by the pursuit of modernization. By coincidence I crossed paths with the man who says to be one of the founders of Cai Rang Floating Markets, he also describes how the market has been a way out of poverty for him.

“Before the country had freedom, I was studying to become a lawyer. I worked as a lawyer for about two years but in 1975, everything of the old dynasty was gone.” The elderly man called Mr. Tuy sits on his boat as he explains us how he started to work on the floating market. In the course of the conversation

⁴¹ Semi-structured interview, Thanh, 6-3-2018

⁴² Semi-structured interview, Binh, 24-3-2018

⁴³ Semi-structured interview, Tuan, 6-3-2018

⁴⁴ Semi-structured interview, Linh, 24-3-2018

⁴⁵ Semi-structured interview, Diem, 10-4-2018

Quynh tries to explain what he means by 'everything of the old dynasty was gone'. If you were too rich, you would have worked for the old dynasty. When after the war a new dynasty came to power they required people to study about the new government. Someone that in the eyes of the new government belonged to the old dynasty was seen as a traitor and therefore was not hired. *"My wife and I decided to start doing business around the Mekong."* Mr. Tuy explains how he was one of the founders of the current Cai Rang floating market. *"I was the first one there to buy a big boat, one that can carry up to 22 tonnes. While the average load at that time was about 3 tonnes. Everyone else was laughing at me for having this big boat, so I became a little concerned. I stayed on the boat for 3-4 days... without any products to sell. Luckily a friend in Long An called me and asked me to carry around 30 tonnes of sweet potato, which he could not get rid of. I remember I was so happy when he called. I made a lot of profit and other people quickly followed."*⁴⁶ Mr. Tuy is still working on the floating market, no longer as a seller but as a tour guide. The floating market is still part of his life but in a very different way. He realized that the market was becoming a popular place for foreign visitors and changed his livelihood to benefit from the market, he now owns a large roofed boat that can carry up to 12 passengers.

Just like the people who worked on the rice fields the foundation of the floating market derived from the inequality created by state-led interventions. People have found ways to escape poverty by benefitting from the unregulated but unstable life on the water. The life on the boat remains a challenge and not everyone chooses the lifestyle which requires separation from the comforts on the land. To make a living seems to be the main reason to work on the floating market, a watermelon seller named Binh explains: "If I go to the land and open a store, I can eat more comfortable, I have an airco to sleep. But I am too familiar with living on the boat and especially I want to earn profit."⁴⁷ This optimistic market driven attitude is common among floating market sellers and is what makes the floating market literally and figuratively a place of buoyancy.

'Buoyancy'

When looking the term 'buoyancy' up on the internet it will provide you with three distinct definitions which I will argue can all be applied to the floating market. The definitions are: 1. *the ability or tendency to float in water or air or some other fluid*. 2. *an optimistic and cheerful disposition*. 3. *a high level of activity in an economy or stock market*.⁴⁸ The first one is obvious as the market is literally floating on water. The second definition refers to the happiness the sellers ascribe to the atmosphere on the water. The third definition refers to the economic activity that is associated with the floating 'market'. The activity is therefore what gives the term its meaning.

⁴⁶ Semi-structured interview, Tuy, 6-4-2018

⁴⁷ Semi-structured interview, Binh, 24-3-2018

⁴⁸ <https://translate.google.com/#en/nl/buoyancy>

Ingold (2008) also believes that it is activity, movement, that creates meaning. Movement is described by Ingold as something *place-binding* rather than place-bound as it is defined by occurrence. The floating market is arguably a good example to demonstrate place is defined by *occurrence* (Sack 1972; Ingold 2008). If people stop going to the floating market then the place would cease to exist. There is no materialized contract which requires the sellers and buyers to attend but attendance is rather based on a social contract. Yet every day the sellers wake up around four or five in the morning to await those who will buy from them. The unregulated character of the floating market makes the life on the market flexible: “The life of the people in the floating market does not have a schedule. It is a very flexible life, and it is dependent on the buyers. Sometimes I have to stop eating my lunch for more than three times to do business”⁴⁹. This indicates that the rhythm of the market is characterized by irregularity. An assemblage, as Tsing (2016) describes is formed through *patterns of unintentional coordination*. “To notice such patterns means we have to watch the interplay of temporal rhythms and scales in the divergent lifeways that gather.” (Tsing 2016, 23). To give an example, in the past before there were roads and trucks people could reach the market only by boat and this required close attention to the tidal flows, the rhythm of the river. Every six hours the river changes its direction, therefore people would leave early in the morning at the start of the ebb-tide to return home before the start of the flow-tide. The shift in flow is not hard to miss, around 10-11 AM the boats slowly start to spin and turn around 180 degrees, the same happens around 4-5 PM.⁵⁰

This is the main reason why the floating market starts so early. “People still think that the floating market is only there in the morning, but that is not true anymore.” Tri, the son of Thanh and Huynh explains the misconception of the tour companies. Ironically Luc, a pineapple seller, explains that he does not understand why tourists sometimes visit so early because he is not even awake at that time. “The engines of the tourist boat sometimes wake me up.” Luc does not seem bothered but he admits that tourism does not benefit the people on the market a lot: “You know people now actually start selling later in the day, because in the mornings it is so crowded.”⁵¹ The presence of the tourist boats therefore alters the rhythms of the market. But tourism also adds to the buoyancy, the happiness, of the market. “*I actually like the tourists, it is connecting him with the rest of the world, as I am not able to go on land very often. When I wake up and have coffee I can see people from the whole world.*”⁵² Thanh explains that although tourists do not affect his business he is happy that they are there. Some floating market sellers complain that tourists are blocking their sales while others feel that tourists bring more liveliness to the market. Overall tourism is not directly influencing the floating market sellers.

49 Semi-structured interview, Thanh, 6-3-2018

50 Observation and field notes, 20-4-2018

51 Semi-structured interview, Luc, 8-4-2018

52 Semi-structured interview, Thanh, 6-3-2018

As buyers come from various places they will come at different times. *Every day is different, sometimes I can sell a lot but sometimes there are only a few buyers.*⁵³ Thanh explains that one of the main challenges of life on the market is the uncertainty of the sales for the day. Prices fluctuate a lot and that is why people experience loss-making once in a while. There are several sellers of khoai mo on the market, so the competition is high. Especially the Chinese market is becoming an increased threat. Tsing (2005) argues due to the globalization reality is made up of an interconnectedness of both local and global processes. The floating market that seems to be a remnant from the past is however integrated in this connectedness. Thanh explains: “What happens is that Chinese will buy products from Vietnam when they are cheap, they will buy a lot, so then the prices will go up... When the prices are high China sells back the products to Vietnam. This is how they control the market. “Prices in the country have gone up for the past 10 years and overall we can buy less.” Thanh explains. The buoyancy of market prices is taken advantage of and even manipulated by Chinese traders creating artificial fluctuations to accumulate wealth by dispossessing others (Harvey, 2004). A way to deal with the variable market is to establish prices with all the sellers over the phone. For instance if the demand is high the prices can go up and if the demand is low the prices can go down. “But you know what happens sometimes is that people are not completely honest and actually say they sell at a higher price than they do so they will benefit for being the cheapest seller.”⁵⁴ Thanh expresses the unreliability of the system. Which reminds me off the unreliability of technical fixes that are characteristic for the technocratic government of the Delta (Käkönen 2009).

2.4 The importance of knowledge

“There is no book that teaches you how to live on the floating market. It is not for everyone... but you will learn through experience”. Minh explains that only through experience you can learn to live on the floating market. This is also how Ingold (2008) describes the creation of knowledge; not consistent of facts but rather picked up through experience along paths. It is by doing that we learn. Although most of the sellers on the market are not highly educated they have a lot of knowledge that is not found in books. “What I actually like most about the life on the floating market is that it has made me a strong man. I can live in all conditions because I am used to the hard life on the boat.” Thanh’s words show how precious the knowledge and skills acquired by experience are to him. Yet he admits that he thinks the life on the boat is too hard and therefore he wants a different life for his son.

A watermelon seller, named Phuc, explains that “those who study hard will find a job on the land.” The majority of the people values the knowledge of universities over the knowledge of the floating market. Children are often staying on the land to go to school. One seller on the floating market is a mother of two sons and explains that she has no other option than to let them stay by themselves even though she worries

⁵³ Semi-structured interview, Thanh, 28-3-2018

⁵⁴ Semi-structured interview, Thanh, 28-3-2018

about them⁵⁵. Ehlert (2012) describes how the modern knowledge is being perceived as more important than local knowledge. All sellers on the floating market try to offer their children education even though this may cost them their entire income. A lady selling pineapples, named Suong explains her struggle to pay for the education of her son: “I worried because I didn’t have enough money, about 50 million at the time but I needed 600... I borrowed the money from relatives to pay for his studies. He worked really hard to pay it back, so hard at hat he became really thin.” Although Suong managed to provide her son with an education it was a challenge.

Other sellers are sceptical about the need for education, they acknowledge the difficulties that it brings and therefore argue that life on the boat may be the better choice. Mr. Tuy who was himself able to escape poverty because of the market explains: “My son, the youngest one, used to study as a doctor, but he stopped and came back to work on the market. I can honestly tell you that selling watermelon will earn more money than working as a doctor. You can earn around 500.000 VND a day while only 200.000 as a doctor, so that is why he left that job”⁵⁶. Binh explains a similar story: “You will be wrong if you think that you when you study you will earn a lot of money, while I am living on the boat and I can earn a lot of money.”⁵⁷ He ascribed the limited career opportunities to a social inequality which he calls ‘con ong chau cha’ – which means ‘The son of the king will be the king’. Quynh explains that her boyfriend also experiences this form of nepotism in the business he is currently working for. He sees other people get a promotion while they don’t do much better than him. Still the majority of the market sellers seems to want another life for their children. Binh also adds to that people have a preparation: “Don’t misunderstand people will live and die on the boat, they always have a preparation for their old days.”⁵⁸ Thanh and Huynh also remark that about 85% has bought a house on the land as a preparation for the future . Away from the water towards the land.

2.5 Along the riverbank

A corpulent lady, called Mrs. Vi, has been inhabiting the house from her childhood for about 32 years now. Her livelihood has always been closely linked to the floating market which in the past took place even closer to her house underneath the bridge. Mrs. Vi used to work as a boat-driver to transport goods and people from the water to the land, a job her son has taken over. Now Mrs. Vi uses her house to stall the motorbikes of the people on the floating market. The floating markets although set on the river has a close connection with the land that surrounds it, the riverbank. Many livelihoods that live along the riverbank have a physical as well as emotional connection to the floating market. “I feel happy when I see the floating market in the river, it is really natural, peaceful. I think the embankment will make the floating market disappear, just like it did in Nga Bay. It will lead to a cultural loss.” Mrs. Vi explains how she has received a letter from the municipality that announced the establishment of a concrete embankment. The embankment will imply that

⁵⁵ Semi-structured interview, woman on floating market, 22-4-2018

⁵⁶ Semi-structured interview, Tuy, 6-6-2018

⁵⁷ Semi-structured interview, Binh, 24-3-2018

⁵⁸ Ibid.

all houses set along the riverbank have to move. People that have their livelihood attached to market need to find other ways of making a living. "The government did not invite the people on the floating market, they do not care about what will happen to the floating market. They don't care, don't care."⁵⁹

The embankment is argued as necessary to prevent the increasing accidents caused by erosion of the riverbank. During a conversation with one of the designers of the embankment, as PhD student named Hong, it became clear that the current plan is to establish concrete stations for tourist to depart, in order to regulate the number of tourists. The connection between the land and water is therefore tried to be controlled by design. "The main profit for the government is from the tourists"⁶⁰ Luc explains. Tourism has changed the imaginary of what Cai Rang floating market could be and this is materialized in built environment. The floating market is increasingly tried to be preserved by attempts to create permanencies. Ingold (2008) argues that "under the rubric of the 'built environment', human industry has created an infrastructure of hard surfaces, fitted out with objects of all sorts, upon which the play of life is supposed to be enacted." The stress in this remark is on "supposed to be." In the floating market government strategies to improve conditions on the floating market have not been successful mostly due to the misunderstanding of the dynamics of the place. Inhabitants of the floating market are used to the life on the boat and the basic facilities that come with it. People use the water of the river not only to wash their clothes but also to relieve themselves. Mainly as a response to concerns from tourists, the local government of Can Tho decided to tackle the unhygienic conditions by building a floating toilet. "The government tries to help to improve water pollution. But it doesn't work. Like the toilet, we have to pay every time we go there because we need a ferry to get there, and have to pay for it. That is why later they removed the toilet again."⁶¹ Despite the government's best efforts the installation of the toilet was largely attributable to the lacking effort to understand the situation on the floating market. "They [local authorities] are not addressing the right questions... Every year a meeting is organized to talk about the future of the floating market but they never come here, so how can they know?!"⁶² Kent who is sceptical about the future of the market explains his concerns and feels that the government should change its strategy. Other sellers like Binh feel that it is not the responsibility of the government to develop the market: "it is not up to the government but to the customers whether I will stay on the floating market."⁶³

However pollution of the river is likely to be a concern for the government as well as for the people that inhabit the floating market. Although people still rely on it for cooking and washing, they don't drink the water anymore. Bottled water is bought from tanks in the floating gasoline station. "By my eyes I cannot see it... but I think it is much more polluted, but I am not a scientist so I don't know how polluted it is. I see the factories along the riverbank blowing into the water." Linh talks about the condition of the water and

59 Semi-structured interview, Mrs. Vi, 4-4-2018

60 Semi-structured interview, Luc, 8-4-2018

61 Unstructured interview, Thanh, 6-3-2018

62 Semi-structured interview, Kent, 6-3-2018

63 Semi-structured interview, Binh, 24-3-2018

the drivers behind it. “Maybe because I am familiar with the water in the river, I don’t feel itchy.”⁶⁴ From multiple observations it is clear that the people on the floating market dispose a lot of waste in the water. Although it may be inconvenient to travel ashore, there is also no incentive to do so. In addition, people largely do not acknowledge that the water they use is polluted. Binh, for example, does not see the need to improve the condition or expect the government to improve it: “We do not need support, until the people cannot use the river water anymore, then we will need support.”⁶⁵ But reversing the situation might be difficult. Which will be explained in more detail in the next chapter.

To conclude

The people that inhabit Cai Rang floating market have travelled different paths that brought them to the market. The majority of the market sellers did not grow up on the water but choose the career in order to generate an income. On first glance people on the floating market do not seem directly attached to the water of the river, however the adaptiveness they embody is characteristic for the water-based way of living. Local knowledge about life on the water cannot be described in words but is shown in their embodied adaptiveness to changing situations. It is therefore that those who inhabit the market, whether or not they believe the market will remain or disappear, have a positive outlook on the future. People live a modest life and most of their income is used to provide their children with an education to ensure a life on the land for them. Despite the increase in tourism over the past years, the people on the market describe that they are not really affected by it. Although local authorities argue that they want to preserve the cultural value of the floating market people in and around the floating market have been excluded from developing adequate strategies to keep the market alive.

⁶⁴ Semi-structured interview, Linh, 24-3-2018

⁶⁵ Semi-structured interview, Binh, 24-3-2018

CHAPTER 3: A source of life?

“Despite human attempts to hard surface this world, and to block the intermingling of substance and medium that is essential to growth and habitation, the creeping entanglements of life will always and eventually gain the upper hand”(Ingold, 2009). So far, terrestrial development has been improving the economy of the region but on the long term a price might have to be paid.

This chapter critiques the dominant mechanistic view that the government uses to produce the environment as it demonstrates that nature has a role to play as well. As chapter 2 shows change takes place constantly and with unexpected results. The way people engage with water has transformed rapidly and not without implications. Within the urbanizing Delta water begins to stop being the main source of life, as society turns more towards terrestrial infrastructures. In this process waterways have been neglected and are increasingly polluted. Driven by the attachment to places people develop concerns for the future of the Mekong rivers. This chapter shows how these views are being or *not* being incorporated in the production of socionature.



66

⁶⁶ River pollution in Ca Mau, the water has turned into a trash dump. Photo by author.

3.1 For the love of place

"I am not a farmer.. nor I am an expert when it comes to hydrology or agriculture, but I am passionate to protect the Mekong Delta and I think that is most important."⁶⁷ I meet Quang at a café close to the CTU where he teaches. I came to talk with Quang about the floating market but during the conversation I found out that he has recently established an NGO called the Mekong Environment Forum (MEF). The objective of the NGO is "To protect Mekong Delta's ecosystems and support the rights of communities who depend on them". When I asked Quang why he started the NGO he explains to me that it is for his love for the Mekong, as can be read in the above quote. Quang acknowledges that his concerns about the Delta are not shared by a lot of others. "It is hard to motivate the youth to participate for the environment. They seem to care only about their smartphones."⁶⁸ During a conversation with my friend Anh she makes a similar point: "A lot of my friends are not interested in nature, they just want to stay in the city and do not enjoy spending a day in the forest or on the river. They will only go there so they can take a picture to show their friends that they travel a lot, but actually they don't care to really look at nature."

Relp (1985) remarks that "people cannot be trained to marvel at landscapes, nor to love their places and the planet." (p.30). Yet is it exactly the deep connection between human and nature that Harvey (2016) argues is lacking worldwide: "Instead of nature becoming a gigantic gasoline station it must be seen as serving, bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal." (145). In the case of water in Can Tho such services have been degrading over the past decades. Whereas in the past people were able to drink from the river it now starts to turn against the people that rely on it. For instance, I remember that when I was walking around the city once in a while a penetrating smell of rotten eggs overwhelmed me. The smell was coming from one of the smaller canals that is running through the centre of Can Tho. The water in the canal is low, completely black and filled with rubbish. "A friend of mine had an aunt who lived her, but she sold the house, because the smell is here is so bad."⁶⁹ Danh, a student at CTU, told me when we drove past the stream. In many cases domestic waste water ends up directly in the canals without any treatment.⁷⁰ The woman who Danh describes may or may not have a close attachment to the place but the fact that she moved away shows the importance of the state of the environment we inhabit. The next sections will show that there are ways in which water turns against us instead of being a source of life.

*"This place is my childhood"*⁷¹

This reference by Rose indicated the symbolic meaning that can be attached to place and how this meaning generates a strong connection between human and their environment. Rose has become a good friend and therefore we talk a lot and also about the research that I am doing. When I meet Rose down in the living

⁶⁷ Informal conversation, Quang (MEF), 15-3-2018

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Fieldnotes and informal conversation, Danh, 2-4-2018

⁷⁰ <https://www.sei.org/featured/managing-water-amidst-urban-sprawl-climate-change-can-tho-city/>

⁷¹ Informal conversation, Rose, 11-4-2018

room she sits on the couch and looks down to her phone. You see this...” Rose shows me a picture on her phone. “This river I used to play in when I was a kid.. now its black!”⁷² The picture indeed shows an almost black stream. “I feel so sad when I see this, because now when I take my children I cannot show them the beauty of the place where I grew up. Instead they will think it is dirty.” Although the place where Rose grew up is not situated in the Mekong Delta the way she talked about it indicates her affection and sentiment towards it. According to Sowman (in Coles and Millman, 2013) places are fundamentally about meaning that is spatially referenced and culturally mediated. However the construction of places is also inherently about lived experience, memories and affections of place are formed through repeated encounters and complex associations (Relph, 1989, p.26). “I remember that when I was a kid, we used to swim there and one time we built a boat to go up and down.” The repeated experiences have created the value that Rose attaches to the river. Even though Rose does not live next to the river anymore the understanding that the river turned into a black, smelly stream already affects her indirectly. “I have talked to some of my friends there, we will try to do something about this. This place is my childhood and I want to share it with my children.” Although the river is no longer perceived as a clean source of water providing refreshment and entertainment, the images that it once was are still present in Rose’s imagination. At the same time Rose imagines her children to see the river and enjoy it in the same way as she did. *Imaginaries* like this are according to Lennon (2015) characterized by affect, the emotions, feelings and desires which mark our engagement with the world. The mental images of for instance a place we have are the vehicles for such affect.

Imaginaries are therefore different from perceptions. Imagination adds a creative component to our sensory images. Lennon describes that imagination can make things that are absent in some way present or in reverse. *Imaginaries* of place go beyond the perceived present but are constituted by the memorized past and projected future (Lennon, 2015). The ability to imagine is also what makes us able to act upon it. Hommes and Boelens (2016) describe imaginaries as more than symbolic and discursive aspects of territory but can also act as forces that can become materialized. Affection to a place therefore partly shapes the imaginaries we have about such a place. Harvey (2016) therefore states that: “By the virtue of its strong attachment of moral community to the experience of place, it frequently directs environmental politics towards a preservation and enhancement of the achieved qualities of places.” The attachment of place is argued to underlie efforts of preservation of place and its quality. Although this may be true, such efforts are often challenged by imaginaries about progress and development.

3.2 A conversation about conservation

In the process of modernization and liberalization of the market the Vietnamese government pursued an industrial pathway which they believed would develop the country. Ehlert (2016) demonstrates the associated mind-set by the following reference, derived from an industrial planner in Can Tho: “When industry develops, the cultural and spiritual life of the people will also develop. Their educational background

⁷² Ibid.

will be developed, as will their personal skills. (interview, CEPIZA, Can Tho City, 24.02.09).” A similar process is also described by Duarte-Abadi and Boelens (2016) in the case of the protection of the Páramos in Colombia: “On the one hand, the government needs to respond to claims for environmental conservation, and on the other, it actively pursues an aggressive neoliberal agenda that is at odds with livelihood protection.” (p.16). Industrialization happens to a large extent along the riverbank where it can discharge waste water into the flowing river. Nevertheless, I met an employee of a coal factory who claimed that the water they were using was coming out cleaner than before⁷³. I did not have the chance to verify his statement but based on my personal knowledge I can say that they are not at all a clean source of energy. “Factories are putting more and more pressure on the ecology of the Mekong Delta. They are damaging it. With my NGO [MEF] we try to get into conversation with them, make them aware of the negative consequences and we try to come up with sustainable and more environmental friendly practices for these companies.”⁷⁴ Quang who describes himself as an environmental activist does not think that factories in itself are bad for the development of the Mekong Delta but that they should be more responsible for the impact they have on the environment. “These factories are often not locally owned but come from China, Singapore, Thailand etc. Which means that they care less about the impact on the environment here.” The impacts on the environment that are exerted by industries are not directly felt or forming a threat by those who are responsible for it. As a logical explanation, Milton (1996) suggests that if people do not need the environment for their own survival and comfort, they are less likely to be concerned if it is under threat. This makes care for the environment also dependent on a sense of responsibility. Although the government is associated with such a responsibility the rapid growth of foreign investments has outpaced the government’s ability to control the impact (Ehlert 2012).

There seems to be a conflict between the economic development of Vietnam and the conservation of nature. During a meeting at CTU I get a chance to hear how some experts in the Delta are look upon the problem of conservation in the Delta. One of the attendees is Joe, an American researcher and journalist who is a member of the Stimson Centre⁷⁵ and partner of the MEF. Joe can also be described as an environmental activist and is critical on the impact of factories on the environment. “You know, we faced a similar problem in the US. There were so many fish deaths without a clear reason. When students took samples of the river water it became apparent that the local paper factory was the main driver. Despite the outcome people did not take it seriously because they needed the factory for jobs. The Mekong Delta faces a similar problem.”⁷⁶ Joe believes that the government is aware of the pollution caused by big factories in the Delta but they have ‘another agenda’. Many people in the Mekong Delta reckon that the increase in industry is necessary to provide jobs for the population. I remember that when I visited the floating market Thanh posed me his dilemma: “The government asked my opinion... should we cut down trees to boost

⁷³ Informal conversation, coal factory employee, 16-4-2018

⁷⁴ Informal conversation, Quang, 1-4-2018

⁷⁵ <https://www.stimson.org/programs/mekong-policy-project>

⁷⁶ Observation CTU meeting, Joe, 28-4-2018

industry or not? I did not know, I guess it depends on the factory.”⁷⁷ Thanh who has had an education and makes travels around the country understand that the Mekong is vulnerable, yet he remains concerned about the jobs for the next generation. Vietnam has one of the youngest populations which is increasing, as described by Mrs. Trang⁷⁸. Young people that grow up in rural areas more often turn to working in the factory Quang explains. “The government wants to industrialize rural areas to pull those migrants back to their villages, the problem I concern most is that local generations-established traditions and lifestyles would be faded away and replaced by modern urban lifestyles which are not always good.”⁷⁹ With those migrants Quang refers to the high level of rural workers that travel to the city for work.

‘Conserving authenticity’

Why modern urban lifestyles are not always good Quang doesn’t say. But the concerns that modernization leads to the loss of traditions and lifestyles, culture, is also shared by Relph (1985) who argues that place is being destroyed, rendered ‘inauthentic’ or even ‘placeless’ by the organizational power and deeply embedded focus on the market. The argument indirectly implies that all those who live in *modern* worlds inhabit meaningless places, this is a critical remark voiced by Harvey (2009, 187). What is insightful about Relph’s argument is the notion that *authentic place* is a modern value. Authenticity is often regarded as those who live *in place*. The relationships between people and place can be referred to as ‘a sense of place’ (Shamai, 1991). “The effort to evoke a sense of place is now often deliberate and conscious” (Harvey, 1996). Harvey argues that the reconstruction of authenticity is modernization in the most extreme form. The earlier discussed Nga Bay floating market has disappeared over the past decade mainly due its relocation and the establishment of a concrete embankment. These measures were taken to improve river traffic to ensure economic growth. Now that tourism starts to develop authorities try to revitalize the market but this has not been successful yet. Cai Rang floating market may be challenged in a similar way when the embankment is installed on the surrounding riverbanks. With Can Tho’s profit generated by tourism preservation of Cai Rang’s floating market is a priority but efforts by the government are critiqued for being inadequate (as can be read in the previous chapter). The main reason for this is that the system is top-down rather than community based. Knowledge from within is lost by disconnecting the people that live along the riverbank from the market. Ehlert (2012) remarks water and nature as the main structural elements of local lifeworlds become less relevant for Mekong Delta trajectories.

This shows that the efforts to *design* the environment are challenged. Instead of applying technocratic measures to evoke a sense of place it is according to Harvey (2016) crucial to develop an understanding of activities and evolving social behaviour that will enrich the life of place, restore its life supporting systems and establish ecologically and socially sustainable pattern of existence within it. It

⁷⁷ Informal conversation, Thanh, 1-5-2018

⁷⁸ Semi-structured interview, Mrs. Trang (NGO), 28-3-2018

⁷⁹ Informal conversation, Quang, 10-5-2018

involves becoming fully alive in and with a place. It involves applying for membership in a biotic community and ceasing to be it exploiter (187).

3.3 Back to the roots

“We need to show children where their bananas come from.”⁸⁰ This quote came from a lecturer during a workshop called ‘The connection between environment and people in Mekong Delta’ which I joined. Although the lecturer did not really explained his point in-depth, since we were talking about the rural-urban transition I assumed that he voiced his concern that children can become detached from nature and might forgot to see its value. Many young people still have relatives in rural areas but this might change due to increasing life in the cities. The workshop was organized by two member of ASEAN Youth. (ref). In total about 20 people attended and most of them were students. Since not all of them were able to speak English the workshop took place in Vietnamese. Luckily my friend Ngoc was able to translate parts of what was discussed. At one point one of the attendees raised her hand. From the slides could read that the topic of pollution was being discussed. “She explains that her parents are from a town in the rural areas, there are no trash bins there and no one to pick it up, she wonders what they should do with the garbage” Ngoc explains. “The professor answers that they should burn it.”⁸¹ Surprised by this remark I want to ask the lecturer about the possible health consequences, but before I got the opportunity another lecturer makes a critical remark: “Instead of burning, I would suggest that it is better to reduce waste, prevent the problem at the roots.”⁸²

In rural areas plastic has also made its introduction which ask for a different way to deal with the disposal of waste. In the past people where using biodegradable products that could be thrown into the river without doing harm to the environment, they still seem to rely on this habit. However to reduce the use of non-degradable substances like plastic is not easy I can tell from my personal experience. In any market all products will be directly wrapped in plastic, even when I asked the sellers not to do so they would usually still do it. The need to buy bottled water also required me to buy the plastic in which they were coming. In addition, for many Vietnamese it very common to eat take-away food which is also served in Styrofoam boxes, of which a lot end up in the landscape and the river.⁸³ The introduction of plastic in the floating market has mainly been a result of the increasing consumption by tourists . “It is more convenient to sell for the tourists. For tourists I can use plastic cups. For the people on the boats she I will use glass cups, it is a lot of work pick up the glasses and sometimes I forget to whom I sold it.” Diem explains the changes she experienced with the introduction of tourism to the market.

Ehlert (2012) discusses how changes, like the introduction of plastic, imposed by modernization efforts can create inequalities based on the ability to adapt or respond them: “Local actors have to deploy

⁸⁰ Observation, Mekong workshop, 10-3-2018

⁸¹ Informal conversation, Trang, 10-3-2018

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Observations throughout research

different strategies of going about and reconstructing daily routines, which inevitably entails a profound shift in the requirement of livelihood-based knowledges.” When I ask people about the education concerning pollution I mostly get the response that children are told about the effects of pollution but it has not effect. Jack explains the situation as follows: “The children are being told to take care of their waste, they will have to throw all of it in a garbage bin. At the end of the day when the bin is full, the teacher will empty it in the river. No wonder that the Vietnamese have a habit of littering.”⁸⁴ The problem seems to be deeply embedded in the behaviour of the people, but at the same time there seem to be no incentives by the government to combat the problem. The next section will develop on this thought.

3.4 Crying for the common father

After a bus ride of almost five hours we arrive in a small town in Ca Mau province. The town is the place where professor Quang grew up and where he takes me and three other students to work on a project for his NGO. Outside it is pitch dark. The absence of the visual emphasizes the other senses including the smell of rotting fish. We walk towards a tall building and it becomes clear that this the source of the smell. The factory produces fish feed including fermented fish. I try not to breath when we walk past the building but it turns out to be the place where we have to wait for the ferry that will take us to the other side of the shore. Ca Mau is the most southern province of the Delta and is surrounded by the sea. The town we visit is also located next to the sea. When looking out over the water there is nothing to see but a few dim lights. The light coming from the factory enables me to see what is beneath me. The small wooden pier on which we are standing is not surrounded by water but by a colourful mix of garbage. This is where the trash ends its journey, because rivers eventually mouth in the sea. “You can throw your cup there too, what does it matter.”⁸⁵ Quang says to me since I am still holding on to an empty plastic cup from the coffee I bought on the way. I feel hesitant and realize that if everybody thinks like that, than nothing will change. A popular Vietnamese saying goes ‘Cha chung khong ai khoc’ which means ‘no one cries for the common father’. In other words, no one looks after what belongs to everyone⁸⁶. What I find particular about this quote is the recognition of a commons, ‘what belongs to everyone’. This perception reminds me of Hardin’s (1968) conceptualization of the commons⁸⁷ where he highlights the divergence between the individual and collective rationality. For the sake of personal profit people will neglect the collective outcome of individual actions. This idea is also translated in another well-known Vietnamese saying ‘*Nguoi khong vi minh, troi tru dat diet*’ – “If you are not living for yourself, the land and the sky will not let you live”. Quynh recognizes such

⁸⁴ Informal conversation, Jack, 3-5-2018

⁸⁵ Fieldnotes Ca Mau, 7-4-2018; Informal conversation, Quang, 7-4-2018

⁸⁶<https://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/06/crying-for-the-common-father/>, 21-7-2018

⁸⁷Hardin uses the following metaphor to describe his view on the commons: If each herdsman found it more profitable to graze more animals than the pasture could support, because each took all the profit from an extra animal but bore only a fraction of the cost of overgrazing, the result would be a tragic loss of the resource for the entire community of herders. Thus Hardin concluded that "freedom in the commons brings ruin to all" (Hardin, 1968, p. 1244).

behaviour in daily life: “People don’t really care about the welfare of others if they are not getting better of it.” Such a perception is very individualistic. In contrast, the commons view of water recognizes it as: a flow resource essential for life and ecosystem health, non- substitutable and tightly bound to communities and ecosystems through the hydrological cycle (Shiva 2002 in Bakker 2007). Water in the rivers of the Mekong is free of use, which also implies that there are few restrictions. This is actually what Hardin (1968) refers to when he says “freedom in the commons brings ruin to all” (1244). Anh who is remarkably open about her critique towards the government says that “a good government should cry when they see what is happening in the Delta”.⁸⁸ Anh feels as if the government is not emotionally attached to the environment which is why they fail to protect the environment.

Trung, a professor of Environmental studies at CTU, explains that one of the main means to guarantee a more sustainable growth of Can Tho is to develop adequate policies. “Education is also important... but policies and institutions immediately tackle some the causes of problems, such as erosion and pollution.”⁸⁹ Regulation is what is in the perception of the “commons” exactly what is lacking. However to ensure adequate regulation for water resources Bakker (2009) argues that community should also play an active role in the constitution thereof. The work of NGO’s can play an important role to engage society in changing wasteful behavior. Thy who is part of the organization Clean and Green Vietnam says that “for the government to take measures we need a larger enforcement of people.”⁹⁰

To conclude

This chapter focuses on the importance of lived experience. The pollution that is associated with urban littering and industry impacts the quality of the water and environment. Most of the people in the Mekong Delta fail to take responsibility for their environment which results in a neglect of the commons. Water is slowly turning into a place to discharge waste instead of being a source of life.

⁸⁸ Informal conversation, Anh, 26-4-2018

⁸⁹ Semi-structured interview, Trung, 26-4-2018

⁹⁰ Semi-structured interview, Thy, 6-5-2018

Conclusion

Within this thesis I have demonstrated that the representation of the contemporary Vietnamese Mekong Delta is the result of an on-going dynamic between society and nature in which both shape each other. While being in the world that we receive we engage with it. The way we interact with our environment is based on what we perceive to be the purpose of it, how we imagine it to be and imagine what it can be. Water, an essential feature within the Delta, is because of its fluidness a symbol for the constant motion of our life worlds.

The VMD underwent and is still undergoing a rapid transformation from a civilization that strongly relies on rivers towards a society that grows up in the concrete of the city. Life along the river is starting to be considered backwards now that roads take over the function of the water ways as the main infrastructure. Bridges replaced ferries and eased accessibility between the Delta and other parts of Vietnam. Concrete embankments that are argued necessary for the erosion of the riverbank do however erode the human engagement with water. All of these processes are largely being seen as normal to people who inhabit the Delta which can be explained by the *regimes-of-representation* under which they pursued (Boelens et al. 2016). The will to be developed is dominant among inhabitant of Can Tho.

So far, state-led efforts to develop the country predominantly to benefit the national economy of have resulted in a neglect of the river system. Cai Rang floating market however still embodies the human engagement with water. Located in Can Tho, the Delta's largest urban center, the market makes a remarkable appearance. The roots of the floating market can be found in the extensive canal system that was largely expanded under French colonial rule. At the time local settlers occupied specific places in the river, points of restricted water flow, to gather their boats and trade agricultural products. For a long time the markets have been regarded as an obstruction to other river traffic but nowadays when the markets are gradually going extinct authorities want to preserve them. The imaginary about what the floating market could be for Can Tho has changed. Cai Rang floating market is considered important for the development of tourism. The markets which I personally regarded as a remnant from the past and is also portrayed to be so have persisted within an urban context in which the role of the river slowly lost its value. The reason for this is to an extent attributable to the adaptability of the floating market sellers to their environment. The ways of life from the sellers on the floating market have produced the current representation of the floating market. But as lifeways are in a constant process of becoming these lifeways may diverge, altering Cai Rang floating market as a place (Ingold, 2009; Tsing, 2016). Many of the market sellers turned to the flexible life on the river when life on the land became too difficult. The agricultural productivity of the Delta may have resulted in a growing economy but income in the agricultural sector lacked behind. However the adaptability of the floating market sellers is now more directed towards the land as they want to provide their children with an education in order to get a better life, on land.

Government efforts to improve conditions on Cai Rang floating market, like hygiene, have not been successful, mainly because they have excluded the perceptions of the people that live in and around the floating market. Sellers on the floating market see the preservation of the place they inhabit not as a concern for the government. However with the decreasing quality of the river's waters the people on the floating market will be the first to notice. Regulation of waterways is slowly being brought forward by scientists and NGOs.



91

⁹¹ Street-art in HCMC, raising awareness for the environment. Photo by author.

References

Anthony, Edward J. Guillaume Brunier, Manon Besset, Marc Goichot, Philippe Dussouillez and Van Lap Nguyen. "Linking Rapid Erosion of the Mekong River Delta to Human Activities." *Scientific reports* 5 (2015)

Bakker, Karen. "The "Commons" Versus the "Commodity": Alter-globalization, Anti-privatization and the Human Right to Water in the Global South." *Antipode* 39, no. 3 (2009): 38-63.

Benedikter, Simon. *The Vietnamese hydrocracy and the Mekong Delta: Water Resources Development from State Socialism to Bureaucratic Capitalism*. Vol. 25. LIT Verlag Münster, 2014.

Biggs, David, Fiona Miller, Chu Thai Hoanh, and François Molle. "The Delta Machine: Water Management in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives." *Contested waterscapes in the Mekong region: Hydropower, livelihoods and governance* (2009): 203-225.

Biggs, David Andrew. *Quagmire: Nation-building and nature in the Mekong Delta*. University of Washington Press, 2012.

Boelens, Rutgerd. "Water Rights Arenas in the Andes: Networks to Strengthen Local Water Control", *Water Alternatives* 1(1): 2008, 48-65.

Boelens, Rutgerd. Hoogesteger, Jamie. Swyngedouw, Erik. Vos, Jeroen. & Wester, Philippus. (2016). "Hydrosocial territories: a political ecology perspective". (2016): 1-14.

Bosma, Roel H., Henk MJ Udo, Johan AJ Verreth, Leontine E. Visser, and Cao Quoc Nam. "Agriculture Diversification in the Mekong Delta: Farmers' Motives and Contributions to Livelihoods." *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development* 2, no. 1&2 (2005): 49-66.

Castree, Noel. "Marxism, Capitalism, and the Production of Nature." (2001): 189.

Chamlee-Wright, Emily, and Virgil Henry Storr. " "There's No place like New Orleans": Sense of Place and Community Recovery in the Ninth Ward After Hurricane Katrina." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 31.5 (2009): 615-634.

DeWalt Kathleen M. and Billie R. DeWalt. *Participant Observation: A guide for fieldworkers*. Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2011.

Duarte-Abadía, Bibiana, Boelens, Rutgerd and Roa-Avendaño, Tatiana. "Hydropower, encroachment and the re-patterning of hydrosocial territory: The case of Hidrosogamoso in Colombia." *Human Organization* 74.3 (2015): 243-254.

Ehlert, Judith. "Beautiful Floods: Environmental Knowledge and Agrarian Change in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam". Vol. 19. LIT Verlag Münster, 2012.

Foucault, Michel. *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. Pantheon, 1980.

Geertz, Clifford. "Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays (pp. 3-30)." *New York, NY: Basic* (1973).

Ha, T. P., Carel Dieperink, Henriëtte S. Otter and Piet Hoekstra. "Governance conditions for adaptive freshwater management in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta." *Journal of Hydrology* 557 (2018): 116-127.

Hardin, Garrett. "The Tragedy of the Commons"(1968) 162." *Science* 1243 (1968): 63.

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*: Oxford: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1990.

Harvey, David. *Space as a keyword*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006

Harvey, David. *The ways of the world*. Profile Books, 2016.

Heidegger, Martin. "The question concerning technology, and other essays." (1977).

Hommes, Lena, and Rutgerd Boelens. "From natural flow to 'working river': hydropower development, modernity and socio-territorial transformations in Lima's Rímac watershed." *Journal of Historical Geography* (2018).

Hoogesteger, Jaime, Rutgerd Boelens, and Michiel Baud. "Territorial Pluralism: Water Users' Multi-scalar Struggles Against State Ordering in Ecuador's Highlands." *Water International* 41, no. 1 (2016): 91-106.

Hryczyszyn, Kate, and David Neil. "Overwater stilt housing in Can Tho, Vietnam: distribution patterns and implications for development policy and master planning." *International Development Planning Review* 36, no. 4 (2014): 475-501.

Ingold, Tim. "Culture, perception and cognition." *Psychological research: Innovative methods and strategies* (1996): 99-119.

Ingold, Tim. "Ethnography is not Anthropology." In *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 154, pp. 69-92. 2008.

Ingold, Tim. "Bindings against boundaries: entanglements of life in an open world." *Environment and planning A* 40, no. 8 (2008): 1796-1810.

Ingold, Tim. "Against space: Place, movement, knowledge." *Boundless worlds: An anthropological approach to movement*(2009): 29-43.

Ingold, Tim. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. Oxon: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011.

Jenkins, Jae. "Heidegger's Bridge: The Social and Phenomenological Construction of Mars." *Florida Philosophical Review* 9, no. 2 (2009): 121.

Käkönen, Mira. "Mekong Delta at the Crossroads: More Control or Adaptation?." *Ambio* (2008): 205-212.

Karpouzoglou, Timothy, and Sumit Vij. "Waterscape: A Perspective for Understanding the Contested Geography of Water." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water* 4, no. 3 (2017): e1210.

Latour, Bruno. *Politics of nature*. Harvard University Press, 2004.

Linton, Jamie. "Modern Water and its Discontents: a History of Hydrosocial Renewal." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water* 1, no. 1 (2014): 111-120.

Lu, X. X., and R. Y. Siew. "Water Discharge and Sediment Flux Changes over the past Decades in the Lower Mekong River: Possible Impacts of the Chinese Dams." *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences Discussions* 10.2 (2006): 181-195.

Massey, Doreen. *"A Global Sense of Place"*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press. 1994

Massey, Doreen. "Geographies of responsibility." *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86, no. 1 (2004): 5-18

Minderhoud, Phillip, S. J., G. Erkens, V. H. Pham, Vuong Tran Bui, Laura Erban, Henk Kooi, and E. Stouthamer. "Impacts of 25 years of groundwater extraction on subsidence in the Mekong delta, Vietnam." *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 6 (2017): 064006

Morita, Atsuro. "Multispecies Infrastructure: Infrastructural Inversion and Involutionary Entanglements in the Chao Phraya Delta, Thailand." *Ethnos* 82.4 (2017): 738-757.

O'reilly, Karen. *Ethnographic methods*. Routledge, 2012.

Phuong, Nguyen Thi Huynh. "Floating Markets and the Development of Floating Market Tourism in Can Tho City, Vietnam. PhD diss., Chulalongkorn University, 2014.

Østigård, Terje. *Water, culture and identity: Comparing past and present traditions in the Nile Basin region*. BRIC, 2009.

Relph, Edward. "Geographical experiences and being-in-the-world: The phenomenological origins of geography." In *Dwelling, place and environment*, pp. 15-31. Springer, Dordrecht, 1985.

Roth, Dik, Rutgerd Boelens, and Margreet Zwarteveen, eds. *Liquid Relations: Contested Water Rights and Legal Complexity*. Rutgers University Press, 2005.

Sack, Robert David. "Geography, Geometry, and Explanation." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62, no. 1 (1972): 61-78.

Scott, James C. *Seeing like a state: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. Yale University Press, 1998.

Shamai, Shmuel. "Sense of place: An empirical measurement." *Geoforum* 22, no. 3 (1991): 347-358.

Shannon, Kelly. "Landscape as Urban Structure: the Case of Cantho, Vietnam." *Landscape—Great Idea! X-LArch III* (2009): 54.

Smith, Neil. Uneven Development: Nature. *Capital, and the Production of Space* 3, 1984

Strang, Veronica. "Fluid consistencies. Material relationality in human engagements with water." *Archaeological dialogues* 21, no. 2 (2014): 133-150.

Strang, Veronica. *The meaning of water*. Oxford: Berg, 2004.

Swyngedouw, Erik. "The City as a Hybrid: on Nature, Society and Cyborg Urbanization." *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 7, no. 2 (1996): 65-80.

Swyngedouw, Erik. "Modernity and Hybridity: Nature, Regeneracionismo, and the Production of the Spanish Waterscape, 1890–1930." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89, no. 3 (1999): 443-465.

Swyngedouw, Erik. "The Political Economy and Political Ecology of the Hydro-social Cycle." *Journal of Contemporary Water Research & Education* 142, no. 1 (2009): 56-60.

Swyngedouw, Erik. *Liquid power: Contested Hydro-modernities in Twentieth-century Spain*. MIT Press, 2015.

Tsing, Anna. "Introduction." In *Communities and Conservation*. AltaMira Press, 2005.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: a study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall. 1974

Tuan, L. A., G. C. L. Wyseure, and L. H. Viet. "Sustainable Water Management for Rural Development in the Mekong River Delta, Vietnam." In *The second International Symposium on Southeast Asian Water Environment (Poster presentation)*, Hanoi, Vietnam. 2004.

Van Van, Hoang. "The Current Situation and Issues of the Teaching of English in Vietnam." *立命館言語 文化研究* 22, no. 1 (2010).

Waibel, Gabi & Benedikter, Simon & Reis, Nadine & Genschick, Sven. *Water Governance Under Renovation? Concepts and Practices of IWRM in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam*. 167-198. 2012

Wantzen, Karl Matthias, et al. "River Culture: an Eco-social Approach to Mitigate the Biological and Cultural Diversity Crisis in Riverscapes." *Ecohydrology & Hydrobiology* 16.1 (2016): 7-18.