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Overcoming Barriers to Interethnic Marriage among Khmer and Kinh Populations in Vietnam

When I was young, I often heard my neighbors teasing a homely young girl this way: “*Mày xấu quá chỉ gả được cho Sóc thòi*” [You are so ugly, you will have to marry a Khmer person]. This statement was meant to convey her low value in the Kinh community and their low estimation of Khmer people. Born and raised in a Kinh-dominated city and having no contact with the Khmer community, my only image of the Khmer was of racialized people who were “black and ugly,” as they were commonly depicted. Disparities in educational level, occupation, and economic status between the Kinh and Khmer groups are significant barriers preventing them from developing close relationships, and gave rise to these kinds of racist sentiments.

Many Kinh in contemporary Vietnam see Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage as abnormal and impossible because of the significant socio-economic gap between the two ethnic groups. Common stereotypes cast Khmer as strongly attached to their hamlets or “sroc,” somewhere very far from the city, and as overwhelmingly poor and underdeveloped. The same stereotypes depict Kinh as more developed and civilized.¹ These ideas have a long history: indeed some scholars during the colonial era contended that the social, cultural, moral, and psychological gulf between the

TABLE 1: The percentage of registered Khmer-Kinh marriage in total

Year	Percentage of registered Khmer-Kinh marriage in total								
	Lương Phi	Lê Trì	Châu Lăng	An Tức	Núi Tô	Ba Chúc	Cô Tô ⁴	Ô Lâm	Tri Tôn
2007	0.9	2.94	4.5	0	10.39	0.47		3.4	9.26
2008	0.88	1.56	2.24	6.3	9.3	0		4.3	6.67
2009	3.29	0	4.7	2.41	10.2	0		5.45	8.91
2010	2.13	1.45	6.16	6.98	10	1.21	7.56	1.73	9.9
2011	2.7	1.41	3.67	5.62	8.57	1.51	8.28	2.34	11
2012 (August)	2.63	0	2.42	0	7.6	1	10.34	2.22	15.09

Source: Communal Marriage Registration Books in Tri Tôn district, An Giang.

“Cambodgiens” (today’s ethnic Khmer) and “Annamites” (today’s ethnic Kinh) were a reason for why marriages between these two groups never took place, while marriages between ethnic Chinese and both of these groups were far more common.²

Nevertheless, Kinh-Khmer marriages have increased in recent years. Table 1 presents data on registered Khmer-Kinh marriages in Tri Tôn district from 2007 to August 2012.³ The incidence of interethnic marriage is quite high in ethnically mixed areas such as Tri Tôn and neighbouring communes such as Núi Tô and Cô Tô. These are areas where Kinh and Khmer people have had interactions for a long time.

One elderly Khmer man in Tri Tôn raised concerns about Khmer-Kinh intermarriage: “In recent years, more young Khmer have migrated to the cities in search of work and married with Vietnamese and now live in the cities. Khmer are going to be hybrid, not pure anymore.” As his statement shows, Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage raises questions about the cultural differences and historical tensions between these two groups.

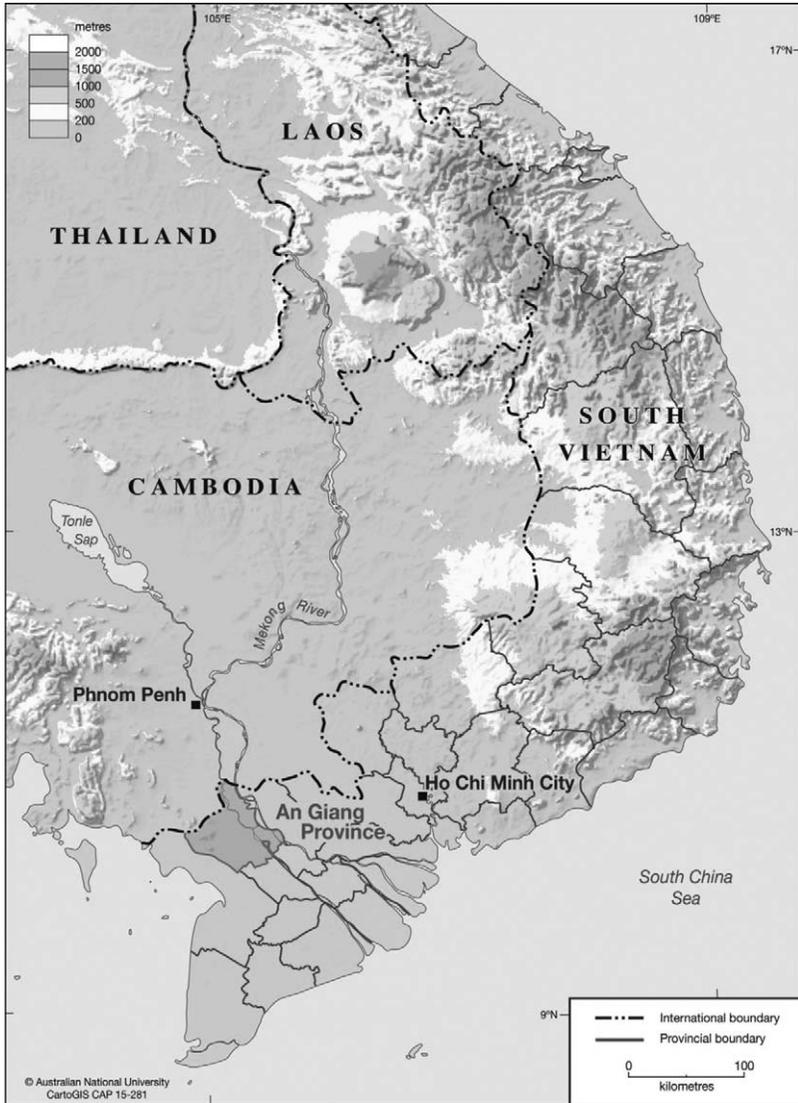
This essay examines Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples to shed light on the experiences of those attempting to marry outside of their ethnic group. In-depth analysis of several case studies will show the complex sociological and cultural barriers interethnic couples face. The essay will explore the contexts in which Khmer-Kinh couples first met, and the factors that allowed them to overcome geographic and class differences. This essay will

examine the factors that allowed them to break the ethnic boundary, often compounded by geographic and class differences, as well as overcome opposition from their parents and broader community.

Background

Khmer minority people in Vietnam mainly reside in the Mekong Delta. An Giang Province has the fourth largest population of Khmer people in Vietnam; the province has a border area connecting with Cambodia. At present, the Kinh ethnic group is dominant in the province, occupying 94.74 percent of the population; the Khmer represent the second largest group in An Giang at 4.2 percent (see Table 2). I selected An Giang Province as my research site because the majority of its Khmer residents live in predominantly Khmer-inhabited rural areas and still keep a strong connection with Khmer in the adjacent borderlands area of Cambodia, meaning that their sense of cultural distinction is very strong. In addition, negative stereotypes about the Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups—rooted in the border war between Cambodia and Vietnam in the late 1970s—are still strong in this province. So, it is empirically important to explore how Kinh-Khmer couples in this area experience their marital life. I undertook my research with the assumption that different living settings and social backgrounds affect the experiences of Khmer-Kinh couples. Hence, I conducted research in three socially and ethnically distinct settings in An Giang Province: Long Xuyên (a Kinh-dominated urban area), Tri Tôn (an ethnically mixed semi-rural area), and Ô Lâm and Cô Tô (in a Khmer-dominated rural area).

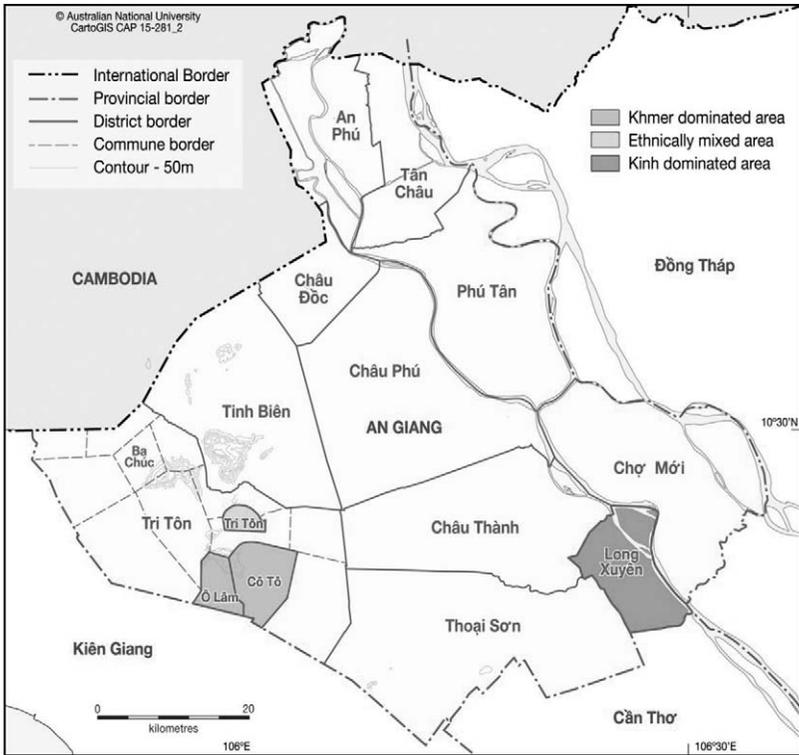
Long Xuyên City is the center of administration, commerce, services, and education of An Giang Province. It is located approximately 190 kilometers to the southwest of Hồ Chí Minh City, and is situated on a busy major channel of the Mekong Delta. Long Xuyên is predominantly inhabited by Kinh people, who comprise 99 percent of the population (275,894 Kinh among a total population of 278,658); Khmer people in the city number only 562.⁶ Long Xuyên City is, in demographic and cultural terms, a predominantly Kinh urban enclave, albeit one with the cultural “melting pot” characteristics of much of southern Vietnam. In recent years, young



MAP 1: Location of An Giang Province, Vietnam. Map by Australian National University.

Khmer have begun migrating to Long Xuyên City in search of work. Most of these rural–urban migrants work in manual jobs.

Tri Tôn is the municipality and capital of Tri Tôn District,⁷ which is located about 52 kilometers west of Long Xuyên City. This small, quiet



MAP 2: Study sites in An Giang Province. Map by Australian National University.

TABLE 2: Population divided into ethnic groups in An Giang, 2010

Ethnicity	Both men and women	Men	Women
Total	2,142,709	1,064,483	1,078,226
Kinh	2,029,887	1,009,307	1,020,580
Khmer	90,271	43,984	46,287
Cham	14,209	6,977	7,232
Hoa	8,075	4,074	4,001
Others	267	141	126

Source: Vietnam Institute of Ethnology.⁵

town is the center of administration and commerce for Tri Tôn District. I selected Tri Tôn, with 2,850 Khmer residents among its population of 14,911 people, as the ethnically mixed semi-rural area.⁸ This ethnic

diversity is evident in Tri Tôn market, where Kinh and Khmer are present as either sellers or buyers and many can communicate in both the Vietnamese and Khmer languages.

Cô Tô and Ô Lâm communes in Tri Tôn District are Khmer-dominated rural areas; 97.40 percent (11,521 among 11,829) of Ô Lâm's population are Khmer and 38.78 percent of Cô Tô residents are Khmer (4,298 Khmer among 11,084 total population).⁸ Residents in these communes primarily farm. One distinct characteristic of Cô Tô is its rock mines, which has provided work for local laborers as well as Kinh migrants.

Besides Tri Tôn, Ba Chúc is the only town in Tri Tôn District, and its living standard is more developed than other communes in the district. It can be considered a semi-urban Kinh-dominated town with only 5.44 percent Khmer (877 Khmer among a total population of 16,108). The main livelihood of the local people is agriculture. In contrast to Tri Tôn, Khmer and Kinh people in Ba Chúc remain separate due to memories of the Khmer Rouge.

Barriers

EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES

Vietnam has significant disparities in educational participation between ethnic groups. Official reports routinely note the comparatively low level of education of ethnic minority groups such as the Khmer. For instance, in 2015, the Vietnam office of Save the Children reported that:

The primary school enrolment rate among Kinh ethnic group was as high as 95%, while the rate remained much lower among ethnic minority groups: About 71% of Dao children, 72% H'mong children and 86.4% of Khmer children attended primary school.⁹

The disparity in school completion rates between minorities and the majority in Vietnam increases sharply at higher levels of education. A 2010 UNICEF report notes that the primary school completion rate for Kinh students was 86 percent, while the rate for ethnic minority children was only 61 percent.¹⁰ In 2006, almost 60 percent of Kinh children attended upper secondary school, compared to just under 10 percent for the Khmer. Like their other ethnic minority counterparts, comparatively few Khmer

TABLE 3: Percentage of working population of Kinh and Khmer groups by economic sectors, 2009

Economic sector	Kinh	Khmer
Self-employed	3.5	3.8
Household enterprises	74.6	85.8
Cooperative/collective	0.3	0.1
Private enterprises	7.3	5.0
State	10.5	2.8
Foreign invested enterprises	3.8	2.5

Source: UNFPA, 2011.¹²

make it to post-secondary schooling. Bob Baulch notes that young people from ethnic minorities nationwide “make up just 2.5 percent of all post-secondary students (compared to their population share of approximately 16–17 percent).”¹¹

OCCUPATIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

Similar to the Khmer, a large population of Kinh in An Giang reside in rural areas, growing various types of crops and raising animals. In recent years, many farmers have also invested in fish culturing. Like the ethnic Chinese, Kinh people are also dominant in trading in both wholesale and retail markets. Lower-skilled workers are concentrated in manual work such as construction, transport, and factory work, as well as in the service industries. In contrast to Khmer people’s limited presence in official and state occupations, the Kinh are dominant in state and official sectors, and even in the mountainside region of Khmer people, the Kinh dominate the offices of administration. The disparity of their involvement in economic sectors can be seen in Table 3.

We can see from Table 3 that the percentage of Khmer people’s participation in private enterprises and state- and foreign-invested enterprises is much lower than that of the Kinh. This difference can be explained by the difference in educational level. Because of low technical skills, Khmer people’s participation in economic activities is also limited. In addition, language barriers may also hinder their access to this sector. In recent years,

TABLE 4: The percentage distribution of population of Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups by socioeconomic condition, 2009

Ethnic group	Poorest	Poor	Average	Rich	Richest
Entire country	15.3	17.6	20.3	21.7	25.2
Kinh	8.9	16.7	21.9	24.3	28.2
Khmer	40.5	28.5	16.3	10.7	4.0

Source: UNFPA, 2011.¹²

more Khmer intellectuals can be found in state economic sectors at the provincial, district, and communal levels. However, the number of Khmer staff in the state sector is very low.

ECONOMIC DISPARITIES

As a result of the difference in educational level and occupation, the economic gap between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups is also significant. Along with other ethnic minorities such as the Hmong and central Highlanders, the Khmer have been identified as overrepresented among Vietnam's poor. Development reports continue to declare the Khmer as poor, uneducated, remote, and in need of development—further consolidating the sense of difference. The economic gap between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups is recorded in the UNFPA report (see Table 4).

It can be seen from Table 4 that most Khmer people—69 percent of their population—are in the poor and poorest groups. In contrast, 52.5 percent of the Kinh population is in the rich and richest groups. The Khmer peoples' poverty is widely linked to their agrarian livelihood, insularity, and marginality.¹³ Their economic activity, which is small-scale, non-diversified, monoculture-based, technically unsophisticated, and strongly dependent on nature, does not adapt well to the modern market economy, further compounding their poverty.¹⁴ Ironically, official assistance to support and uplift the Khmer in various poverty alleviation projects consolidated among the Kinh a sense that the Khmer are incompetent, uneducated, incapable of self-help, and thus needing special government assistance.¹⁵

STEREOTYPES

The overt conflict and tense relations between the Kinh and Khmer people have been caused by ethnic stereotypes. The relations between Khmer and Vietnamese were very tense and hostile under the Nguyễn Dynasty (1820–1841). The Nguyễn Dynasty’s maltreatment of Khmer instilled a hatred in Khmer people toward the Vietnamese, whom they called *yuon* (barbarians of the north). In turn, the Khmer were discriminated against and called *thồ* [men from the earth].¹⁶ A common harsh depiction of Khmer from ethnic Kinh majority members of the lower Mekong Delta community is that the Khmer are lazy, unintelligent, and simple-minded.¹⁷ In addition, the perception of Khmer as overwhelmingly superstitious is entrenched in the wider society.¹³

On the other hand, Khmer are very careful in economic transactions with the Vietnamese, whom they believe would stop at nothing for economic gain, including theft, cheating, lying, even selling their own daughters. Thus, Khmer have stereotypical judgments toward the Kinh as “dishonest, disloyal and too calculating,” which makes them wary of establishing close relationships with the Kinh people.¹⁷

Facilitating Factors

The previous section has illustrated the socioeconomic gaps between two groups and the stereotypes they have toward each other, which contributed to a lack of intimate relations from developing. This section will present some factors that bridge those gaps. By looking at individual cases, I show how couples negotiated and overcame such obstacles to their marriage. This study uncovers the sociocultural dynamics in the couples’ experiences. Different localities provide individuals different degrees of exposure to interethnic relations. Interviews with thirty-five couples reveal a diversity of circumstances under which the couples became acquainted with one another. In line with the sociological literature about marriage markets,¹⁸ three key contexts—the workplace, school setting, and proximate residential areas—provided the most significant facilitating conditions for interethnic dating between the Kinh and Khmer people. In addition, social networks of friends and relatives are also mediators for initiating these relationships.

THE WORKPLACE

The workplace is a significant marriage market for Kinh and Khmer couples. The workplace is commonly a setting for diverse cultural and ethnic interactions to take place through obligational exchange. Schools are among the most important “white-collar” workplaces in rural areas, where there are few factories, offices, and shops. The school setting serves as a marriage market that facilitates interethnic romantic relationships between Kinh and Khmer teachers. In line with a policy of Vietnam’s Education Department, all new teachers are normally assigned to work in schools in remote areas where teachers are in need. This policy has brought teachers from different areas and different ethnic groups together to teach in the same schools.

Neang Pho, a Khmer teacher, and Toản, her Kinh husband, first met when they were assigned to teach in the same high school in a remote Khmer village. Neang Pho and Toản were both migrant teachers, so a place was arranged for them to stay in the school boarding house. The lack of external social activities in such a context increased socialization between colleagues. Having the same educational level and working in the same workplace, they were able to support each other. Both were living far from their families, so the support they could give to each other was mutually appreciated. Toản recalled how their relationship developed:

At that time, we were assigned to teach in the school, this commune was still deserted and there was no recreational activity. So, we teachers just had drinks and chatted among ourselves after teaching hours. Sometimes we also organized a short tour for the teachers to the nearby mountains. Through frequent interactions, I developed more understanding about Khmer people and my intimacy toward my wife gradually developed.

However, Neang Pho went through a longer process of negotiation when falling in love with a Kinh man. Neang Pho was influenced by the stigmatization of Kinh as “dishonest” and “disloyal,” so she was initially very cautious. Owing to their daily interactions, Neang Pho felt that Toản was very nice and friendly to all his colleagues; she was impressed by his enthusiastic participation in Khmer traditional practices when accompanying her to the temple. In addition, she believed that his years-long effort to gain both families’ consent must have come from real love.

Besides white-collar office settings, rice fields and mining or construction sites also serve to facilitate marriage for Kinh-Khmer couples in rural areas. Specifically, the mines in Cô Tô have become an attractive destination for unemployed and itinerant laborers from all over the country. Many Kinh male laborers have migrated to Cô Tô to work in mines with local Khmer people. Three Kinh men I interviewed met their Khmer spouses after migrating to Cô Tô to work in rock mining.

Exposure to ethnically diverse workplaces has provided Kinh and Khmer people multiple opportunities to understand each other's culture and circumstances. People in the same place of work normally have specific skills and knowledge in common and may support each other in their daily jobs, which may facilitate interethnic friendships and romantic relationships. Frequent interactions in a shared workplace and occupational collaboration bridged the distance between Kinh and Khmer people and enriched their understanding of each other's culture. The intimate interethnic Khmer-Kinh relationships surveyed in this study developed in both "white-collar" office settings and in manual labor workplaces.

Some couples did not develop their romantic relationships directly in the workplace but in the context of their work responsibilities. Such was the experience of Tâm: his hometown is the Kinh-only commune of Phú Tân, but when he graduated in 2002, he was assigned to teach in the all-Khmer commune of Ô Lâm. He was first scared of the Khmer people because of the history of Khmer Rouge violence he had heard stories about,¹⁹ so he limited his contact with the Khmer local people. His story about how he met his wife shows how his attitudes changed:

I was very fearful of the local people, especially when seeing groups of young Khmer men in a deserted area. However, one of my occupational obligations was to go to villagers' houses to encourage their children to go to school. I gradually found that the Khmer people were friendly so I became less fearful. Having frequent drinks with my wife's uncle, I saw my future wife was very beautiful so I made her acquaintance.

This case reveals that interethnic Kinh-Khmer couples not only encounter each other directly in their work setting but also in the larger social field.

Migration for work in ethnically distinct areas has increased contact with other ethnic groups. The direction of mobility—be it from the city to the countryside, the country to the city, or from one rural locality to another—depends on the nature of their occupation and their socioeconomic status. These migrant workers often cling to their ethnic networks and identity, but they also develop interactions and associations with the local ethnic people. Work-related outreach tasks increase the chances for them to meet prospective spouses in the wider society.

In line with much research about gender and mobility,²⁰ this study also finds that both Kinh and Khmer women are limited in their geographical mobility compared to men. In this study, almost all migrant spouses are either Kinh or Khmer men; only two women are found to have migrated to another area, but it is worth noting that when migrating they were accompanied by their family members. Both Kinh and Khmer men have been geographically mobile to destinations where members of other ethnic groups reside, which increased their contact. In addition, family control is also reduced because of the geographic distance from their parental home. Frequent contact with local people in their work may make them more open-minded, so they may have a higher tendency toward interethnic marriage. In addition, the structural characteristics of the marriage market also influence the marriage decision of these male migrants. They live and work in a region where their own ethnic or social group is very small, so they are less likely to meet potential spouses.

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Educational institutions are common sites for peer socialization and dating, so education is assumed to be a mechanism affecting the probability of interethnic marriage. The schooling context is an important marriage market for Kinh and Khmer couples. High school and university are places of interaction for people from different places and different ethnic backgrounds. Students are normally of the same age, and educational cohorts include both male and female students, so intimate relationships can easily develop. In addition, higher education also increases people's exposure to different cultural perspectives and highly educated people are thought to be more open-minded.¹⁸

Consistent with Larry Barnett's discussion of the impact of increased contact between students of different nationalities on intermarriage occurrence,²¹ this study reveals that with the state policy supporting education for minorities, increased enrollment of Khmer students into state schools and colleges has facilitated contact between Khmer and Kinh students. Highly educated Khmer people are also fluent in Vietnamese, so they have no barriers to communication with Kinh people. Since not many Khmer students are able to pursue higher education, those that do are surrounded by a high concentration of Kinh people. Thus, they have less opportunity to find a mate at the same educational level in their own ethnic group if that is a desirable trait. Furthermore, the schooling environment brings more status-equivalent contact with persons of other backgrounds or ethnic groups. Five couples interviewed in this study became acquainted and dated while at their schools. It seems educational institutions provided them with public and leisure activities, such as sporting and music, which brought people together.

The intermingling of students of different socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicities can easily be seen at An Giang University. As An Giang province is one of four provinces in the Mekong Delta with a large population of Khmer people, Khmer students can be found across An Giang University campus. An Giang University, therefore, is an ideal marriage market for Kinh and Khmer students. Khang, a Khmer teacher in Tri Tôn, met his Kinh wife when they were both students at An Giang University. Khang's hometown is Ô Lâm commune, a Khmer-dominated area in Tri Tôn district; his wife, Loan, comes from Núi Sập in Thoại Sơn District. Even though they were in different classes, they got acquainted by joining after-school activities.

Having experienced Khmer Rouge violence, the Kinh community in Ba Chúc, especially families who lost relatives in the massacre, still have a strong prejudice toward Khmer people. As a result, Kinh spouses from Ba Chúc experienced tensions when married to a Khmer. Linh, a Kinh high school teacher, first met her Khmer husband when she studied at a high school in Tri Tôn. Linh told me that before knowing her husband, she limited contact with Khmer people, as she heard that they were aggressive and unclean. However, frequent interactions with her

Khmer husband gradually changed her mind; she found he was as good-natured and educated as she was. Linh emphasized their similar views on life and orientation toward the future. Similar to Neang Pho, Linh's strongest impression of her husband is the respect he demonstrated to her relatives.

These findings are fairly consistent with Clark-Ibáñez and Felmlee's argument: "Frequent communication facilitates the process of reducing uncertainty about a romantic partner by providing information about one couple member to the other. Supportive information lowers uncertainty regarding a potential relationship and is apt to enhance the likelihood of interethnic dating."²² A diverse cultural environment in a schooling context enriches people's understanding of each other's ethnic group, so Kinh and Khmer ethnic people gradually break down the existing social stereotypes toward each other. Having diverse social networks also makes people more open to crossing ethnic barriers.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL PROXIMITY

Residential locality comprises the third important marriage market for Kinh and Khmer couples. Proximity has long been recognized as a factor influencing intermarriage. Proximity by residence, especially, elevates the chances of interaction among youth, leading to long-term partnership and marriage. By virtue of frequent interaction, people can absorb each other's cultural practices. Bilingualism can be quite common.

Tri Tôn is a mixed Kinh-Khmer area in which Khmer and Kinh people have lived and mutually interacted for generations. The dynamics of Kinh and Khmer ethnic relations are evident at Tri Tôn market. Both Kinh and Khmer people can be found to be either sellers or buyers in the market. Long-term and frequent mutual interaction has enriched their knowledge of each other's culture, so cultural differences were not a barrier. In addition, Kinh and Khmer participate in each other's traditional rituals, such as weddings, funerals, Buddhist ceremonies, and New Year celebrations. Another important encouraging factor for local Khmer-Kinh couples has been the social acceptability of marriages between Kinh and Khmer people in Tri Tôn for generations. Therefore, the individuals interviewed in Tri

Tôn did not feel they were breaking endogamy rules when marrying members of a different ethnic group.

Close residence was found to facilitate the intimate relationship of Tin and Kha. Tin, a Kinh man, resides in Tri Tòn and Tin's family business has given him the opportunity to interact with Khmer people since he was young. His personal interaction with Khmer villagers has built his Khmer language capacity and cultural understanding of Khmer people. Tin noticed Kha, his Khmer wife, who was also living in the same town. Kha sold rice soup every morning in front of her house. Tin recalled that when passing her place of business every day, he noticed how hard she worked, so he often had breakfast there in order to talk with her. They courted for nearly two years before getting married.

In addition, social networks including friendships, parents' social ties, high school peers, and neighbors may bring people together and facilitate interethnic dating among young adults. Some couples met through the mediation of their friends' and parents' social networks. Such social networks expanded their opportunities to find a partner from a different ethnic background, and they also gained more support for dating across ethnic boundaries.

SOCIOECONOMIC DIFFERENCES: HOMOGAMY AND EXCHANGE

Another factor that has the potential to magnify the presumed barrier to Kinh-Khmer marriage is class. This question has been explored in scholarship highlighting the significance of homogamy in mate selection, in which people tend to marry persons close in status. Homogamy, or "assortative mating," refers to the tendency of people to marry spouses who resemble them. Similarity between marriage partners has been found for physical characteristics, age, religious affiliation, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, educational level, intellectual and cognitive variables, and personal traits.²³ As Matthew Kalmijn notes:

"Socioeconomic resources, measured by education and occupation, is the common criteria people consider in selecting their spouse because socioeconomic resources can produce economic wellbeing and status. People maximize their income and status by searching for a spouse with attractive

socioeconomic resources. Competition for socioeconomic resources on the marriage market thus leads to an aggregate pattern of homogamy.”²⁴

Based on the homogamy theory, I assumed that the disparity in socioeconomic status of Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups would be one obstacle to Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage. Why do Khmer and Kinh people still get married regardless of the significant gap in socioeconomic status? Is the homogamy theory not applicable to Khmer-Kinh couples? My hypothesis is that there are dynamics and types of situations with regards to these two groups that do not go along with the homogamy theory.

One significant factor is the government’s reform in 1986. The 6th National Congress in 1986 and subsequent congresses issued many policies to bring about “the new life” for the Khmer people. A series of decisions and policies were issued with the aim to support the socioeconomic status of the minority ethnic people. In addition, Resolution No.22-NQ/TW (October 27, 1989) proposed many state policies to develop the socioeconomic status of the ethnic minority in the mountainous area. Among these policies were priority policies in education for the ethnic minority in mountainous areas. Minority people were to be given favorable conditions to learn their own language along with the official language, and boarding schools for ethnic minorities in their local areas were to be expanded. Priority policies in university entrance examinations and grants for ethnic minorities were also proposed in the resolution.

Besides these general supporting policies, specific supporting policies for Khmer ethnic people were clearly defined in Direction 68-CT/TW (April 18, 1991). In response to this policy, a boarding school was established in Tri Tôn District in 1992. The school was established as “The Tri Tôn Khmer Secondary Boarding School” for secondary Khmer students. In 1996, the school was expanded for both secondary and high school students and its name changed to “The An Giang Ethnic High Boarding School.” The ethnic students studying at the school are given monthly grants, exemption from paying tuition, and many other incentives such as the provision of belongings, learning tools, and transport costs to visit family during New Year and on traditional holidays. This boarding school for ethnic people has brought a new life to Khmer people in the area; the

education level of the Khmer people in the area has improved significantly. The school has trained many cohorts of Khmer students, many of whom have become leaders, senior professional staff, and highly educated and qualified officers.

Under the priority policy of lowered school entry requirements, Khmer students are selected to attend preparation study and are appointed to study at university without taking entrance exams. Thanks to the state policies, many Khmer students can gain access to higher education and become leaders and professional officers in different sectors. In general, these policies have eased Khmer's mobility geographically and socioeconomically. Easier mobility facilitates more interaction with Kinh people.

Many Khmer youths have proven their capacity in higher education along with their Kinh friends. Linh and Chương are a couple who were brought together through education. Linh, a Kinh high school teacher in a Khmer-dominated setting, said that when she migrated to Tri Tôn for high school, she very much enjoyed talking with her husband after school. Linh recalled that they often shared their funny stories from their classes and also problems they encountered in their studies. Being away from her family's love and care, Linh highly appreciated Chương's care for her. Equal educational level can be considered a factor facilitating Linh's development of an intimate relationship with Chương.

Besides similarity in education, homogeneity in occupation is another notable feature in many Khmer-Kinh couples interviewed. The presence of educational and occupational homogeneity is very strong in Kinh-Khmer couples in this study. Many couples have either education or occupation in common. The assortative matching on education and occupation is a significant socioeconomic characteristic of Khmer-Kinh couples. Such homogeneity brings them more opportunities for interaction and enriches their mutual understanding. This finding is consistent with Kalmijn's observations about intermarriage in America in the 1950s–1960s, in which “the degree of education homogamy was found to be stronger than the degree of social-origin homogamy in marital homogamy among partners.”²⁵

Different from the other couples who have the same education or occupation, Chau Thi, a highly educated Khmer man with a high-status position

in a state agency, married a Kinh garment worker from a lower educational background. How did Chau Thi and his Kinh wife, Kim Ngân, fall in love and marry, considering the difference in their respective education and occupation? Chau Thi's hometown is in Châu Lăng and he migrated to Long Xuyên city, a Kinh-dominated area, to look for work. Through the help of a relative, he was fortunate to get a good job in a state agency. Thinking of settling in Long Xuyên city for the long term, Chau Thi thought that having a Kinh wife in Long Xuyên rather than a Khmer wife in his hometown would be easier for his career and his future children's education. He told me that his criterion in selecting a wife was not her beauty but her respect and piety toward his family. While they were dating, he saw how Kim Ngân made efforts to develop a close relationship with his family, so he believed Kim Ngân could be a good wife. Kim Ngân confided that her job was very unstable but she was lucky that her husband had a good job so he could afford to care for the family. To Kim Ngân, his education and his earning potential take precedence over his Khmer minority ethnic status.

It can be seen that the theory of homogamy is insufficient to explain this case. Social exchange theory helps account for Chau Thi and Kim Ngân's marital matching. In their spouse selecting process, each partner brings a collection of desirable traits to the marriage market to seek their prospective spouse. Chau Thi is involved in interethnic marriage with Kim Ngân by exchanging his high socioeconomic status for the dominant ethnic group status of his wife and vice versa, which parallels Kalmjin's observation that "[m]inority men are able to compensate for their lower 'ethnic prestige' by offering white women a high occupational status and income."²⁶

OVERCOMING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY OPPOSITION

It is common for parents to prefer that their children-in-law come from similar social and cultural backgrounds. What makes the individuals in this study interesting is that they all broke the ethnic boundary to marry out. Some parents in this study objected when their children first broached their marital plans, while parents who had more contact with another ethnic group were more open-minded about their children

marrying out. It seems that Kinh spouses experience stronger tensions from their family and community compared to Khmer spouses. In terms of gender, because of the socially expected role of maintaining cultural identity, women may experience stronger opposition from their family toward out-marriage.

Both men and women in this study encountered strong opposition from their family because of differing ethnicity and stereotypes toward each other. Strong parental opposition is especially common in families who have little personal interaction with another ethnic group. Mrs. Neang Bane, Neang Pho's mother, resided in a Khmer-dominated village and had little interaction with Kinh people so she was unable to communicate in Vietnamese. She explains her disapproval of her daughter's marriage to a Kinh:

I did not understand what a risk-taker [*liều*] my daughter was until she fell in love and wished to married a Kinh. She should have learnt from neighboring Khmer-Kinh couples that Kinh spouses are cheaters and disloyal. In addition, many previous cases have shown that being a daughter-in-law in a Kinh family is full of hardship. I worry that my daughter would be stuck in a similar situation.

She unhappily stated that regardless of her opposition, her daughter maintained her relationship and for years kept trying to convince her to give consent. Seeing her daughter getting older but still in a romantic relationship with a Kinh man, she reluctantly approved their marriage.

Besides her mother, Neang Pho said her older brothers also raised their concerns about the relationship, saying they did not trust Kinh people. Their view was that Kinh were "dishonest" [*không thật lòng*] and "cheat" [*gian dối*]. One of her brothers pointed out other interethnic couples in her hometown, remarking that the Kinh husbands' drinking and gambling caused the couple to separate. He did not want her to be in the same situation.

Neang Pho and Toàn also faced opposition from Toàn's family. Toàn's parents were concerned that cultural differences between the two ethnic groups could negatively impact their son's life. However, the greatest opposition was from his aunts and grandmother who were living in Ba Chúc. Having a Khmer relative was unacceptable to them. Neang Pho confided

that she had discussed with her husband about ending their relationship to please both families, but her husband did not agree, so their strategy was to maintain their relationship until they gained the support of their families. To get the consent of both families, the couple tried to create more personal interactions between the two families with the purpose of enriching mutual understanding.

It seems families having more personal interaction with other ethnic groups are more open-minded toward their children's interethnic marriage. People living in Tri Tôn, an ethnically mixed area, are exposed to diverse cultures; they have frequent social contact and mutual exchange, so interethnic marriage between the Kinh and Khmer is more easily accepted. In addition, people in Tri Tôn are exposed to cultural diversity and they even practice each other's ethnic traditional rituals, so cultural difference is not their concern. Many couples living in this mixed area experienced no resistance from their family.

Chau Dinh, who is a teacher in Tri Tôn, recounts how he met his Kinh wife. He grew up in Tri Tôn, where his mother managed a fabric shop in Tri Tôn market and had long-term business interactions with Kinh people. Being a retailer in a market, his mother could communicate in Vietnamese very well, so language barriers were not a problem. In addition, residing in a mixed-ethnicity area, his family had already adopted some Kinh traditional practices—such as Vietnamese New Year and the mid-year ritual—before Chau Dinh married his Kinh wife. Furthermore, he had some relatives with Kinh or Hoa spouses, so when he introduced his Kinh wife to his mother he was not the first member in his family to break the ethnic barrier, and his mother expressed no opposition to his choice of spouse from another ethnic group.

It can be seen that marriage is not merely a decision two individuals make, but a union of two families. Spouse selection, therefore, is often a process involving the whole family. Over the years, individuals have developed more freedom in selecting their own spouse and parental influence on their marital choice has decreased. This study shows that though most interviewed individuals were economically independent when they decided to get married, they all asked for their parents' consultation and consent in the marriage decision. Individuals could have ignored their

parents' opinion and their parents' wishes in selecting their spouses, but they did not get married until obtaining their parents' approval.

These cases reveal the different concerns both Kinh and Khmer parents have toward their children's interethnic intimate relationship. Owing to limited interaction, the only understanding of each other's group is from racialized stereotypes. Social stigmas toward each other's group have created an ethnic boundary distancing Kinh and Khmer. The above cases reveal that even though the Khmer Rouge violence toward Vietnamese took place more than three decades ago, perceptions of the Khmer people as dangerous are still pervasive among the Kinh community. Personal interactions and especially intimate relations between these two groups are hindered by this deadly history. Khmer partners also suffer their families' negative reaction toward their marriage decision, but their reaction is quite different from that of Kinh families.

These results largely align with prior research that individuals can be impeded by their family from marrying across ethnic divides. Even though parental control over children's marriage decisions is becoming less decisive, parents still can interfere in different ways.²⁶ In line with previous scholarly studies,²⁷ most of the Khmer-Kinh couples interviewed claimed to have encountered either an initial wariness or resistance to their interethnic relationship from at least one of their families of origin. Similar to the finding by Arpana Inman²⁸ that some Khmer-Kinh couples encountered initial resistance from their family toward their marriage for fear of failure to transmit cultural values to the future generation, "losing ethnic roots" [*mát gốc*] was also a common concern. However, more predominant concerns included negative stereotypes and parental worries over the social status of their spouse. In addition, these findings share parallels to black-white couples in the United States in the 1990s²⁹ in that both Khmer and Kinh spouses expressed that familial disapproval led to questioning of their own decisions, but they worked around this disapproval in order to maintain the relationship. However, this study finds no evidence to support Simon Marcson's statement that "religion functions as the chief basis for channeling mate selection."³⁰ However, the argument by Jobu that minority groups might also reject interethnic marriage is relevant to this study,³¹ for the Khmer community do not encourage Khmer-Kinh marriage.

Conclusion

This essay shed lights on the complex factors that facilitate Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage. Spatial and social proximity (through workplaces and school settings) provided facilitating contexts in which Khmer-Kinh couples first encountered each other and built close relationships. Furthermore, by focusing on subjective barriers, this study describes experiences of sociocultural struggle to overcome the ethnic boundary and break down stereotypes. This article also explores why unions form despite the significant socioeconomic divide between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups, uncovering evidence that suggests the relevance of homogamy and social exchange theory, which explain how couples who marry exogamously overcome socioeconomic disparities between ethnic groups. Finally, this article examines the factor of parental refusal by describing the reactions of parents of prospective couples and showing how couples negotiated to receive parental consent.

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the complex set of sociological barriers to interethnic marriage that the Khmer-Kinh couples face and the facilitating factors that bridge the gaps and facilitate interethnic marriage. The findings highlight that geographical and socioeconomic disparities, as well as stereotypes between the ethnic groups, are significant barriers to Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage. The study unpacks the significance of modernization factors, as well as recent demographic and social changes in bridging the geographical, social, cultural, and psychological gaps between groups.

KEYWORDS: *Khmer, Kinh, interethnic marriage*

Notes

1. Vietnam is a multiethnic country, comprising fifty-four ethnic groups. The Kinh are the majority, comprising 85.73 percent of the total population; the Khmer minority's population is only 1.47 percent of the national population.
2. J. Bouault, *Geographie de L'Indochine*, Vol. III "La Cochinchine" (Hanoi-Haiphong: Imprimerie D'Extreme Orient, 1930), 20.
3. As the collected data is limited to five-and-a-half years, it cannot show the fluctuation in Khmer-Kinh intermarriage recounted by the elderly. In addition, many Khmer-Kinh couples may register their marriages with the local justice in the Kinh spouse's hometown (legally, newlywed couples only need to register their marriage to the local justice office of either the husband or wife's side), so the data I collected may not fully record the real number of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages in the district. In addition, the justice officers complained to me that some couples did not officially register their marriage, so the data of marriage they had were under-recorded.
4. Marriage registration books in 2007, 2008, 2009 in Cò Tô commune were lost.
5. Viện Dân tộc học [Institute of Anthropology], "Statistic data," <http://viendantoc.org.vn/modules.php?name=Doc&op=viewcategory&cid=7> (accessed October 2012).
6. Chi cục Thống kê Tỉnh An Giang [Statistic Department of An Giang], *Niên giám Thống kê Tỉnh An Giang 2013* (An Giang, 2013).
7. Tri Tôn district is one of the two mountainous districts in An Giang Province.
8. Phòng Thống kê Huyện Tri Tôn [Statistic Department of Tri Tôn], *Niên giám Thống kê Huyện Tri Tôn 2013* (Tri Tôn, 2013).
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15. Philip Taylor, “Coercive Localization in Southwest Vietnam: Khmer Land Disputes and the Containment of Dissent,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 9, no. 3 (2014), 77–79.
 16. Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860–1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Center, 1995); Phan An, “Một số vấn đề,” 109–170.
 17. Philip Taylor, “Redressing Disadvantage or Re-Arranging Inequality? Development Interventions and Local Responses in the Mekong Delta,” in *Social Inequality in Vietnam and the Challenges to Reform*, ed. Philip Taylor (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies [ISEAS], 2004), 236–270.
 18. Matthew Kalmijn, “Intermarriage and Homogamy,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 395–421.
 19. He refers to the invasion and massacre in 1978 of residents of this district by Khmer Rouge troops. In Vietnam, the term Pon Pot (Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge supreme leader) is the condensed shorthand way by which the government and citizens refer to the Khmer Rouge regime of Democratic Kampuchea.
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