
Lan Thai Huynh Phuong

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University

November 2015

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School of Culture, History and Language
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Statement of Originality

To my best of my knowledge, except where otherwise noted, this thesis is entirely a result of my own research.

Lan Thai Huynh Phuong

November 2015
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents for their endless love and support.
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Abstract

This thesis investigates intermarriages between ethnic Khmer and Kinh people in a province of southern Vietnam. Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage raises paradoxes, for the very possibility of such unions is sometimes questioned owing to the socio-economic gaps and assumed differences in cultural practices between these groups, their historical tension, and mutually unfavourable stereotypes. Nevertheless, this type of marriage is real and has been increasing in recent years. This thesis aims to explore the facilitating factors behind this type of marriage; how Khmer-Kinh couples experience their relationship with each other and with their families; and how ethnic identity is transmitted to the children of such unions. It demonstrates that Khmer and Kinh couples engage in a dynamic process of negotiating multiple constraints and adapting to differences to make their marriages viable.

This thesis draws upon in-depth interviews and observations from a field study undertaken by the author in 2012 in An Giang Province. Thirty-five Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples took part in the study that examined marriages in rural and urban areas as well as ethnically segregated and ethnically mixed settings. The participants were drawn from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and included couples made up of individuals of similar and dissimilar socio-economic standing.

The findings highlight that geographical and socioeconomic disparities are significant barriers to Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage. Historical tensions also have led to the development of pejorative stereotypes between the ethnic groups, which significantly impede the formation of such intimate unions. The findings unpack the complex factors and conditions facilitating the incidence of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage, highlighting the significance of modernization and development factors in bridging the geographical, social, cultural and psychological gaps between groups, and the role of new marriage markets and personal experiences in facilitating such conjugal unions.

By examining couples’ relationship with each other and with their families, I found two core factors—class disparity and cultural differences—account for many of the tensions
and conflicts arising in their marital life. The findings also highlight the differential capacity of spouses and their families to cope with cultural differences. Educational level, residential location, ethnicity, gender expectations and practical utility were influential factors shaping the capacity of spouses to cope with the cultural differences encountered in their married lives.

The study further highlights the dynamics and variation in the transmission of language, identity and heritage to the children in Khmer-Kinh families, finding that all interviewed couples supported the proposition that their children embrace both cultural identities and acquire multicultural capacity. Nevertheless, the findings show that such transmission to these mixed children is shaped not only by individual choices or familial preferences but also by several other factors including gender, socialization context and socio-economic factors.

The thesis confirms that regardless of the socio-economic disparities, preconceptions and cultural differences between these groups, such unions are possible and viable in contemporary Vietnam. The study uncovers the sources of tension in their marriages and reveals that when conflicts do arise, most of the couples in this study make multiple negotiations and adaptations to make their relationship last.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent years, more young Khmers have migrated to the cities in search of work and they got married with Vietnamese and now live in the cities. Khmers are going to be hybrid, not pure any more. Khmer language may be lost in the next generation if it is not seriously maintained (Mr. Rang, Khmer elder, Tri Ton District).

I heard this concern from a Khmer elderly man on the occasion of visiting my Khmer in-laws’ family some years after my marriage.¹ Late in the afternoon, when my in-laws gathered to chat, Mr. Rang, a Khmer neighbor came to have tea and chat with my father-in-law,² and sometimes other family members got involved in the conversation. Being limited in Khmer language I was not aware of what their conversation was about, since they communicated in Khmer. Sometimes my father-in-law or my husband translated their conversation for me when something funny was said. This may have looked strange or raised concerns for Mr. Rang seeing that I could not communicate in Khmer even though I had been married to a Khmer husband for many years. In addition, hearing the chaotic communication of my son and his Khmer cousins, in which my son spoke in Vietnamese while his cousins spoke in Khmer, Mr. Rang learned that my son was also unable to communicate in Khmer. Hence he raised the above concern in Vietnamese so that I could understand.

¹ My hometown is Long Xuyen City—a Kinh-dominated city in An Giang Province. I am ethnic Kinh—from the majority ethnic group in Vietnam—but I broke the ethnic borderline in getting married to an ethnic Khmer man. My husband came from a Khmer-dominated commune in mountainous and border-lying Tri Ton District in the same province.
² In my in-laws’ village, it is normal for villagers to visit each other’s houses without giving notice in advance.
1.1 The Motivation of the Study

Is Khmer-Kinh intermarriage becoming more common? Is Khmer identity being lost in Khmer-Kinh intermarriages? Mr. Rang’s concern made me reflect on my own family situation. I was not quite sure how common Khmer-Kinh intermarriage was in my husband’s village but it was very rare in my hometown. I remembered how surprised my friends were when they received my wedding invitation and how curious my neighbors were during my wedding ceremony. At first, I felt uncomfortable about their reactions but on thoughtful consideration, I realised that no one in my friendship network and my neighborhood had broken the ethnic line in marrying a Khmer, so my marriage was obviously uncommon and attracted their curiosity. Their perception of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage was that it was abnormal and impossible to happen because of the significant socioeconomic gap between the two ethnic groups. It was pervasively known among the Vietnamese community that Khmers are strongly attached to their Khmer-only hamlets or ‘sroc’, somewhere very different from the city, and that to be Khmer was to be remote, overwhelmingly poor, backward and under-developed, while Kinh were depicted as more dynamic, developed and civilized.\(^3\)

After my marriage, my close friend was still inquisitive about my marital life, especially about my in-laws. On an occasion when I visited my close friend’s family, she curiously asked me: ‘What do your in-laws live on?’ ‘How is life in their village? Is it hard?’ Her mother raised even more frustrating questions: ‘Were “they” in “sroc”, or did they live the same as “us”?’, ‘Were they aggressive?’ She recalled the not-so-distant history of the Khmer Rouge war\(^4\) in the mountainous region emphasizing Khmers were very brutal, killing thousands of innocent inhabitants in Ba Chuc. I could feel how hateful she was toward Khmers so I felt very uncomfortable since my husband is a Khmer. Such bad memories of Khmer-Kinh ethnic antagonism and pervasive stereotypical judgements strengthened my sense that Khmer-Kinh intermarriages did not occur easily. If so, how was

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\(^3\) Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country, comprising 54 ethnic groups. Kinh is the majority occupying 85.73 percent of the total population while the Khmer minority’s population is only 1.47 percent of the national population (see Appendix 1).

\(^4\) The terrible story that is told among Vietnamese refers to the chilling acts of Khmer Rouge under the lead of Pol Pot toward Vietnamese during this attack. The children were torn limb from limb and pregnant women were disemboweled, their fetuses torn from their wombs (Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, 1992).
it that Khmer-Kinh intermarriages were becoming more common, as Mr. Rang had assessed them to be? What factors lie behind that trend?

It was true that residing in a Kinh-dominated city, our family members communicated only in Vietnamese. On visiting my in-laws’ family, sometimes I felt frustrated being in an unfamiliar language-speaking setting. I wanted to study Khmer language to have closer interaction with my in-laws but I was always overloaded with my work and my family responsibilities. Importantly, I was not strongly motivated to learn the Khmer language, since my family-in-law could communicate in Vietnamese with me and my ambition was to pursue overseas higher education to strengthen my academic occupation, so learning English was more practical to me. My husband sometimes thought about teaching Khmer language to my children but it seemed infeasible, as he was always busy. My father-in-law sometimes suggested teaching my children Khmer but they were not interested. My oldest son has reached eleven years old but he has no sense of Khmer language. Is this a threat to Khmer identity? How about identity transmission to the children in other Khmer-Kinh families? I was motivated to explore what is going on in Khmer-Kinh marriage.

Seeking to know more, I searched the literature for studies on interethnic marriages in Vietnam. A number of studies have been conducted on marriages between Vietnamese and foreign nationals and on the interethnic marriages of Vietnamese abroad (Lin et al., 2009; Williams & Yu, 2006; Yang, 2008) but almost no scholarship exists on intermarriages between people of different ethnic groups within Vietnam. The relationship between the Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups in Southern Vietnam has received a lot of interest from research scholars. However, no previous work has been done on intermarriages between these groups. Indeed some scholars in the French colonial era (1861-1954) contended that such was the social, cultural, moral and psychological gulf between the ‘Cambodgiens’ (today’s ethnic Khmers) and ‘Annamites’ (today’s ethnic Kinh) in Vietnam, that intermarriages between these two groups never took place, although marriages between ethnic Chinese and both of these groups were said to be commonplace (Bouault, 1930, p. 20).
From a certain perspective, the obstacles to such marriages would indeed appear to be daunting. Many studies have discussed the tense relations between these two ethnic groups since the settlement of Kinh people in present Southern Vietnam in the seventeenth century. Such scholarship highlights themes ranging from segregation and preferential avoidance between these two groups to inter-group enmity and overt conflict (Biggs, 2010; Brocheux, 1995; McHale, 2013; Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, 1992; Taylor, 2014a, 2014b; Thach, 2004; Wook, 2004). The legacy of historical tensions has led to the development of pejorative stereotypical judgments towards each other’s ethnic group, which further widens the distance between them. In addition, the socioeconomic disparity of the two groups has also been discussed intensively in previous development research that highlights geographic, linguistic, educational and economic gaps between these two groups (Baulch et al., 2002; Scott & Chuyen, 2004; Taylor, 2004b). Although such scholarship is silent on the existence of Kinh-Khmer intermarriage, conceivably the tensions and gaps they identify might act as an impediment to marriages between these two groups.

A different vein of scholarship emphasizes the positive and harmonious relations between these two groups. Some studies focus on the instances of cooperation and solidarity between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups in reclaiming the Southern land of Vietnam from nature and wild animals; rising up against ‘feudal’ oppressors; and driving off the foreign aggressors (Mac Duong, 1991; Phan Thi Yen Tuyet, 1991; Son Nam, 2005b). Several studies have noted processes of intercultural exchange between ethnic groups (Đo Thien, 2003; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 1983). Some have gone further to describe the southern Vietnamese plain as in essence a melting pot, a place of everyday hybridity and of intercultural fusion in realms as diverse as food, fashion, housing, religion and language (Huynh Ngoc Trang & Truong Ngoc Tuong, 1999). Such a perspective might lead us to imagine that intermarriages are commonplace and embraced as normal. However, intriguingly, this special form of solidarity, exchange and intermingling between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups—interethnic marriage—has not attracted the attention of any of these scholars and consequently we know little about interethnic marriages between these two ethnic groups.
This type of marriage by itself raises a paradox as it is a combination of individuals from two ethnic groups which experience historical tensions and a wide socioeconomic gap. Despite the official rhetoric and policy that purports to close this gap and foster friendship between ethnic Khmer and Kinh peoples, we know nothing about the issues couples face as they attempt to form intimate unions of this kind, or about the agents, factors or conditions that facilitate or impede them in this process. How do Khmer-Kinh couples experience their intimate relationships? Are we to assume that love, or perhaps self-interest, has led these couples to overcome all the differences and tensions said to exist between these two ethnic groups, or are these interethnic marriages indeed characterized by conflict? If so, how do they negotiate through such difficulties? Finally too it is of interest to explore the issue of the ethnic identity of the children of such unions. Do such unions inevitably lead to the assimilation of a minority group’s culture and heritage into the identity of the majority ethnic group or do the outcomes confound such an expectation? If so, what factors and considerations inform such outcomes?

This thesis will explore the marital experiences of Khmer-Kinh couples in An Giang Province of Vietnam. Based on in-depth interviews of thirty-five couples involved in long-term interethnic unions of this kind, I argue that Khmer-Kinh couples encounter tensions and conflicts arising in their pre- and post-marital life, which stem from cultural differences, familial and inter-generational disagreements, social stereotypes and gaps in socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, I describe in detail the multiple factors that make such marriages possible. The analysis sheds light on the experience of interethnic marriage from the perspective of both men and women and spouses of different geographical and class backgrounds. I demonstrate that these marriages entail a dynamic process of negotiation and adaptation to a variety of factors and influences, showing how couples have been able to keep their marriages viable in the face of significant challenges.

The topic of interethnic marriage has been of interest to scholars for a long time. Three main areas have been intensively explored in research. The first consists of the barriers to intermarriage and the factors that drive intermarriage or make such marriages possible in spite of such barriers. The second issue attracting study is the marital life experiences of interethnic couples, the challenges these couples face, and how they negotiate and adapt to
the differences between them and to the perceptions of their union held in the wider society. The third focus of research is on the transmission of identity or cultural heritage to the children. In the following pages, I provide a review of previous scholarly research in these three main areas, before outlining my own research questions and methodology.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Barriers to Interethnic Marriage

An interethnic marriage is a marriage between members of different ethnic groups, in which each of the parties to the marriage was reared in a cultural and national environment which differs from that of the other (Gordon, 1972). In several contexts such marriages are referred to as ‘mixed’, ‘inter-racial’ or ‘intercultural’ marriages, or simply as ‘intermarriages’. In this thesis I primarily will use the term ‘interethnic marriage’ for the two inter-marrying groups in this study commonly are identified in contemporary scholarship and national governance as distinct ‘ethnic groups’ (đan toc).

Bystydzienki (2011) suggested a detailed definition of ethnicity: ‘Ethnicity refers to the shared beliefs and patterns of behavior, including a perceived common ancestry, an assumed shared historical past, and symbolic elements such as kinship patterns or nationality, as well as a consciousness of kind among member of a group’ (p.5). Yuval-Davis (1997) further analyzed the political aspects of ethnicity: ‘Ethnicity is primarily a political process which constructs the collectivity and ‘its interest’ not only as a result of the general positioning of the collectivity in relation to others in the society, but also as a result of the specific relations of those engaged in ‘ethnic politics’ with others within that collectivity. Gender, class, political, religious and other differences play central roles in the construction of specific ethnic politics, and different ethnic projects of the same collectivity can be engaged in intense competitive struggles for hegemonic positions’ (p.44).

Much of the scholarship on interethnic marriage is devoted to isolating the obstacles that exist to marriages of this kind. Some studies adopt the perspective that intra-ethnic marriage is the norm: that marriage tends to be a union between people of the same ethnicity. For instance, Marcson observes that intermarriage is assumed to occur only when
people’s attachment and loyalties to their ethnicity are not strong enough to restrict crossing the group boundaries (Marcson, 1950). Explaining this, Kalmijn notes that children are brought up with a sense of group identification, and the stronger the feeling of group identification people have, the less intention people have to get married exogamously (Kalmijn, 1998).

In addition, the family was found to be a significant barrier to intermarriage. Conservative families are found to be one barrier toward intermarriage. The stronger the family norms and family contacts are, the more resistant the family is to intermarriage. The family members strongly keep ‘ethnic strangers’ out of the family. However, warm and trusting family relations can promote more tolerance and a more open view towards ethnic out-group members (Huijnk et al., 2010). Intermarried couples sometimes experience the disapproval of their immediate families, especially in terms of religious differences and the potential cultural disconnection of their children (Fu, 2008). Examining the lived experience of Asian Indian-White couples in the US, Inman et al. (2011) found that such couples experienced disapproval from their families toward their marriage decisions owing to concerns about not transmitting cultural values to the future generation.

Besides individual and family barriers, intermarriage is also influenced by the larger society. The occurrence of interethnic marriage depends not only on the readiness of ethnic minority groups to integrate, but also on the openness and acceptance of the majority group (Huijnk et al., 2010). Huijnk and co-authors found that members of the majority ethnic group showed higher resistance toward interethnic marriage as compared to those of minority groups (Huijnk et al., 2010). However, Jiobu (1988) argued that minority group members might also reject intermarriage.

Social and cultural distance between groups also influence people’s decisions to marry across ethnic lines (Klein, 2001). Social and cultural factors such as group attitudes toward race and skin color and the experience of racial discrimination all play important roles in shaping the interethnic dating and marriage patterns of Dominican and CEP (Columbian, Ecuadorian, and Peruvian) Americans (Lee, 2006). In a study of mixed marriages of Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand, Harré (1966) found that the different status position of the two
races, the prejudice of some Pakehas, and a few cultural differences all act to restrict the chances of young people forming relationships which may lead to marriage. The initial reaction by a Pakeha to the possibility of a close relationship with a Maori is often associated with the articulation of current unfavorable stereotypes.

Although in middle-class USA, the individual’s attitudes and choices are normatively held to be the main factors in choosing a partner, class has been found to affect mate selection. People prefer to select mates in the same social class. It was pointed out that in the upper and upper middle class, parents influence and build up expectations in their children of marrying people from the same social class or higher (Marcson, 1950). Inman et al. (2011) also pointed out that class difference is a significant reason for family opposition to interracial marriages between Asian Indian-White couples.

Gender also shapes propensities towards out marriage; women experience more family and community resistance to their out-group marriage decisions than men because of the responsibility vested in them of transmitting ethnic continuity to the next generation (Sassler, 2005). Similarly, in a study about interethnic dating and marriage among African-American, Latino and White residents of southern California, it was found that White women receive more family opposition than other groups while their male counterparts are comparatively free of social and family constraints (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

### 1.2.2 Factors Facilitating Interethnic Marriage

Even though these above-mentioned barriers hinder people from different ethnic and/or social groups from establishing intimate relations, previous research has pointed to some important factors driving interethnic marriage:

**Homogamy**

In selecting a spouse, individuals evaluate a set of potential spouses on the basis of the resources they offer and the individuals also offer their own resources in return. They prefer to marry someone who is similar to them in term of socioeconomic and cultural resources. Kalmijn (1991b) analyzed two dimensions of status homogamy in marriage choice:
ascriptive status homogamy and achieved status homogamy. Ascriptive status homogamy refers to similarities in a couple’s social class background and social origin, emphasizing the occupational class of the spouse’s parents and the cultural values and preferences transmitted by parents, while achieved status homogamy relates to the match in spouses’ individual educational attainments. By analyzing two cohorts from the Occupational Change in a Generation (OCG) surveys to explore the status homogamy of couples in the United States, Kalmijn (1991b) found that over time, husbands and wives matched on their educational attainments more than on their social class origin, hence finding that ascriptive homogamy had declined in salience as a boundary in spouse selection.

**High Education**

High education has a strong effect on the likelihood of interethnic marriage in different countries in terms of both opportunity and preference (Kalmijn, 1991a). High education increases the opportunities people have to meet schoolmates from diverse ethnic or racial groups so higher educated people have more chances to get married interethnically or interracially (Cohen, 1977; Lievens, 1998; Marcson, 1950; Muttarak, 2004; Qian, 1999). In addition, education is found to influence people’s values, making them more open-minded and having a more universalistic view on life than lesser-educated persons (Cohen, 1977; Kalmijn, 1998; Lee, 1988; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). It is also suggested that high educated people can adapt well to different cultures and customs so they have more opportunity to get married with people from different groups (Furtado, 2012). Moreover, higher-educated people also have access to a larger geographical labor market so their attachment to their ethnic community is likely weaker, leading them to marry outside their own ethnic group more often (Furtado, 2012; Kalmijn, 1998; Lievens, 1998).

**Socioeconomic/Status Exchange Theory**

According to neo-classical economic theory, people are assumed to be rational in their decision-making. It is assumed that cost and benefit are calculated also in marriage decisions and that a marriage is made after a profitable prospect is ensured. People often look for a spouse with attractive socioeconomic resources to enhance their status (Kalmijn, 1998; Muttarak, 2004). Socioeconomic exchange theory has been used to explain interethnic marriages between high-achieving minority men and White women in the
United States, according to which the former are assumed to gain prestige through their marriage to ethnically high status spouses. On the other hand, White women who are willing to marry minority men of high achievement are often themselves of low achievement. This pattern has been held to show that both partners maximize their benefit through this status exchange (Blackwell & Lichter, 2000; Fu, 2001; Fu, 2008).

**Demographic Factors**

Some structural factors including number of groups in an area, group size, and sex ratio in either group are important factors that can shape the opportunities for people to meet, get acquainted, and marry members from a different group. It is proposed that the rates of intermarriage are higher when there are more racial groups in an area, or when a group’s size is relatively small or the sex ratio within a group is imbalanced (Fu, 2008). When there are diverse groups present in metropolitan areas, the chances of interaction and getting acquainted with out-group members and the likelihood of intergroup marriage also increase (Heaton & Jacobson, 2000; Okamoto, 2007; Sassler, 2005). Group size also affects the opportunities for interaction between group members. Members of a small group will have lower chances of marrying endogamously than members of a larger group. When the group size decreases, the chances for having a marital mate from another group also increase (Kalmijn, 1998; Muttarak, 2004; O'Leary & Finnäs, 2002; Okamoto, 2007; Sassler, 2005).

**Local Marriage Market**

Propinquity (or proximity) in geography and personal experience are important elements for mating and getting married. Local ‘marriage markets’, where people share common activities together, increase the opportunity for members of different backgrounds to get acquainted. Three local settings—the school, the neighborhood and the workplace—are considered efficient markets for people to get acquainted and marry (Kalmijn, 1998). Propinquity in residence and occupation increases the frequency of contact between people from different groups and plays an important role in contributing to intermarriages (Klein, 2001; Muttarak, 2004; Tsay & Wu, 2006). In addition, college is also found to provide considerable opportunities for out-group mating as the college environment may increase contact between people from different groups and reduce socioeconomic distinctions.
(Heaton & Jacobson, 2000; Stevens, 1991), while people in college are in the same age range and are heterogeneous with respect to sex (Kalmijn, 1998).

**Modernization**

Some of the significant aspects of modernization are increased geographical mobility, urbanization and more pervasive mass communication. People travel farther and more frequently than before for different purposes such as visiting, studying, or finding employment. Such migration is expected to increase contact between people of different social backgrounds, to sweep away the cultural barriers between them, and to limit parents’ control on the spouse selection of their children (Smits et al., 1998). Increased globalization, involving mobility through tourism, internationally-staffed offices, business travel, international study and student exchanges, and short-term temporary skilled migration, is the apparent reasons for the emerging patterns of international marriage in East Asia countries (Jones, 2012) Government modernization or integrative ‘nation-building’ policies, such as the teaching of lingua franca languages free of charge to minority children, employment quotas for minorities, and compulsory recruitment into national institutions such as primary school or the army are designed to reduce barriers between ethnic groups (Geertz, 1963), while the violent dimensions of modernization such as population transfer policies or wars to suppress insurgencies in ‘new nations’ can lead to the dispersal and mingling of people from different localities and backgrounds in coerced migration flows (for Vietnam, see Huntington (1968). In addition, technological advance also eases communication around the globe. By increased interaction and easier communication between people of different groups than in the past, intermarriage occurrence has also become more frequent (Bystydzienski, 2011; McFadden & Moore, 2001; Williams & Yu, 2006).

1.2.3 Living with Difference

**Marital Experiences/Encounters**

Almost all couples experience challenges in their marital life; however, couples from different cultures may encounter specific additional challenges. Members from different ethnic groups are assumed to have different cultural expectations so couples in an interethnic marriage are also expected to have an increased prevalence of unsatisfying
romantic relationships (Gaines et al., 2006). Scholars have stressed that our behaviors, thoughts, desires and expectations do not naturally exist but they are molded by the larger society and broader culture of which we are members (Barbara, 1989; Henslin, 1992), so in their marital life, interethnic couples can encounter unfamiliar cultural expectations including differences in values, customs, religion, language, gender-based role expectations, finances, sexuality and child-rearing. Couples from different cultural groups learn very quickly how cultural differences can cause conflicts and they develop coping strategies to deal with cultural differences (Frame, 2004). However, Rodriguez-Garcia (2006) argues that conflicts arising in mixed marriages are due more to socioeconomic, situational and personal factors than to cultural differences, and are sometimes the result of a combination of these factors.

Romano (2008) stressed that similarity in social background (education, attitudes, tastes and manners) is an important ingredient in any marriage and class difference is one of the troublemakers in intercultural marriage. However, intermarriage is normally a combination of partners with differences in status (i.e., race, social class, job position and educational attainment), which can intersect and influence the couple’s relationship. It has been found that intermarriages involving couples from socially distant groups were more likely to break up than those between individuals of socially proximate groups because of potential problems that they can face such as stress, social disapproval, and cultural differences (Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). However, in examining the risk of divorce in mixed ethnic marriage between one White partner and an ethnic minority partner in Britain, Feng at al. (2012) found that the risk of divorce for mixed ethnic unions is quite close to the risk found for the two constituent co-ethnic unions. Education is found to be very important in interethnic marriage as it can influence people’s values, helping them to be more open-minded and have a more universalistic view on life so that they can adapt well to different cultures and customs (Cohen, 1977; Kalmijn, 1998; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). In addition, personal multicultural interaction also increases people’s understanding of others and sweeps away their cultural barriers to others (Bystydzienski, 2011; McFadden, 2001).

A detailed study of relationship quality in interethnic marriage and cohabitation in the United States found that the relationship quality of interethnic couples is lower than that of
couples of the same ethnicity because interethnic couples face greater challenges, more conflicts and less satisfaction with their relationship than same-ethnicity couples. Specifically, the relationship quality of interethnic couples is affected by more complex relationship histories, greater heterogamy, fewer shared values and weaker social support, but not by lack of socioeconomic resources (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008). It is emphasized that interethnic couples face more challenges outside their current relationship, such as tensions with each partner’s parents and extended family, which makes their marriages more difficult to sustain (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008; Luke & Luke, 1999; Polek & Schoon, 2008). In addition, it also has been reported that wives show lower levels of marital happiness in inter-racial marriages than their husbands. Such a difference was explained by the fact that women are more relationship oriented so they are more sensitive to community pressure and extended family’s interaction (Fu et al., 2000; Schnepp & Yui, 1955).

In addition, the marital life of interethnic couples is found to be governed by larger social hierarchies. In Israel, Russian-Mizrachi\(^5\) Jewish couples and their mothers were found to compete with each other over their cultural models for raising children. It is pointed out that the struggles and interactions of Russian-Mizrachi couples are shaped by macro-level interethnic power relations and social discourse. In this case, the struggles can be explained by socio-class factors rather than cultural differences. Specifically, the Russian immigrants have high value in Israeli society, white ethnicity, and European cultural capital, while the Mizrachi locals have such resources as ‘proper’ Jewish identity, and locality. Members in Russian-Mizrachi families use their own resources to compete against each other (Lomsky-Feder & Leibovitz, 2010).

In reviewing previous scholarships on the stability of international marriages in Asia, Jones (2012) found limited evidence indicating the differences in background between spouses increased the risk of marital dissolution. He assumed that because of limited alternative choices, the international couples had to work hard to keep their marriage viable, or perhaps a complexity of factors involved that more researches need to be done to explore these issues (p. 15)

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\(^5\) Mizrachi refers to Jews descended from local Jewish communities in the Middle East.
Negotiation and Adaptation

Scholarly researchers have found that to make their marriage ‘possible’, interethnic couples engage in a dynamic process of negotiation and adaptation to the differences they encounter. ‘Adaptation’ is the term used to refer to:

…both the strategies used during acculturation and to its outcomes. Three strategies [exist] in adaptation: adjustment, reaction, and withdrawal. In the case of adjustment, changes in the individuals are in a direction which reduces conflict between the environment and the individual by bringing one into harmony with the environment. In the case of reaction, changes are in a direction which retaliates against the environment, these may lead to environment changes… but not by way of group or individual adjustment. In the case of withdrawal, change is in a direction which reduces pressures from the environment, in a sense, it is removal of the group or individual from the adaptive arena, and can occur either by forced exclusion or by voluntary withdrawal (Berry, 1992).

In studying the marital experiences of African-American and African couples living in the United States, (Durodoye & Coker, 2008) found that even though intercultural couples experience challenges in adjusting to each other’s differences, they still can strengthen their marriage by showing openness to and respect for cultural diversity. Another different marital experience was found in Black-Whites couples in the United States, who face disapproval from their family of origin and friends. To cope with this challenge, the couple limited contact with their families and friends to protect their own family’s well-being. In addition, these couples also experience social resistance. In such cases it is especially the Black spouses who are more sensitive to social disapproval. To deal with social resistance, the couples either make a good impression in public places or else disassociate from one another publicly. It was found that interracial couples also make negotiations around their differences to establish a couple’s identity: acknowledging and compromising over the differences to re-envision their integration; leaving behind the history, tradition and rituals of their family of origin (Killian, 2001).
Family identity negotiations among Japanese-American couples living in the United States occur over issues including family roles and child rearing (Moriizumi, 2011). In addition, this study also found that the couples engage in negotiations of their racial, cultural, and relational identities in interaction with other community members, including their family relatives, neighbors and coworkers, who tended to have negative stereotypes and ideologies toward their marriage. Importantly, it was found that their cultural identity negotiations are shaped by the historical context and by gender and racial ideologies (Moriizumi, 2011).

Asian Indian-White couples also experience thoughtful negotiations in cultural and systematic challenges such as familial/societal reactions to the marriage; raising bicultural children and discrimination; whose language to speak in the family; and which spouse’s ritual and cultural traditions to follow. However, it is found that they both develop understanding and a sense of belonging to each other’s culture, resulting in a blended ‘cross-cultural identity’ (Inman et al., 2011).

Falicov (1995) affirmed that through the process of mutual adaptation and accommodation, intercultural couples could gain increased understanding and tolerance, which leads to ‘personal transformations that could be compared to a process of mutual acculturation’ (p.234). In supporting Falicov’s argument, by examining the conjugal life of mixed-racial couples in marriages between Western women and Palestinian men, Roer-Strier and Ezra (2006) highlighted the complexities of cultural adaptation of the intermarried couples, which is shaped by social power relations, in-laws, and the political situation. Roer-Strier and Ezra stressed the mutual cultural adaptation process in intermarriage, in which not only the partner who belongs to the minority group but also the one who belongs to the dominant group undergo a process of personal transformation.

1.2.4 Children’s identity

Interruption is considered by some to be the final stage of an assimilation process in which the ethnic identity\(^6\) of the minority disappears and the minority are absorbed into the

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\(^6\) *Ethnic identity* refers to ‘one’s sense of belonging to an ethnic group, that is, a group defined by one’s cultural heritage, including values, traditions, and often language’ (Phinney & Ong, 2007, p. 274). Phinney
culture of the dominant group (Gordon, 1964). However, another explanation is that assimilation is not a one-way process but ‘a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life’ (Park & Burgess, 1921, p. 396). Jiobu (1988) emphasized that assimilation has two possible outcomes: ‘(1) the minority loses its distinctiveness and becomes like the majority. In this process, the majority does not change; (2) the ethnic minority and majority groups blend homogeneously. Each loses its distinctiveness and a unique product results, a process called the melting pot’ (Jiobu, 1988, p. 6).

Previous scholars have found that transmitting identity heritage in interethnic marriage involves a process of consideration and negotiation influenced by multiple factors such as gender, living context, and power relations. Rodríguez-García (2006) highlighted the main protagonists of social actors in processes of sociocultural transmission and adaptation. In studying mixed marriages between Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand, Harré (1966) found that it was usual for the couple to tend towards transmitting Pakeha cultural values and behaviour to their children. It is explained that with the identification of Pakeha culture, the economic future of their children would be enhanced (p.99). Some families with Maori husbands emphasize the Maori background of their children by giving them Maori forenames. This decision was accounted for in terms of the patrilineal emphasis in the traditional Maori kinship system (Harré, 1966).

Barbara (1989) found that mixed couples face an endless stream of questions when they become parents. As soon as children are present, couples have to make numerous negotiations and decisions. Choosing a name for the child involves a lengthy process of discussion, negotiation and compromise between the partners and also their respective families, since the names will indicate the identity of the children, which will significantly affect their lives. In another study exploring the personal name of mixed children, Edwards and Caballero (2008) found that in choosing a name for their children most parents wanted

and Ong also emphasized that ‘ethnic identity is a sense of self as a group member that develops over time through an active process of investigation, learning and commitment’ (Phinney & Ong, 2007, p. 279). ‘The components of ethnic identity most widely studied were self-identification as a group member, a sense of belonging to the group, attitudes about one’s group membership, and ethnic involvement (social participation, cultural practice and attitudes)’ (Phinney, 1990, p. 503).
names that symbolised their children’s heritage(s) and were concerned about how this name positioned their children in wider society and in particular might intensify the risk of prejudice. The first names given by the parents symbolised parents’ hopes and aspirations regarding who their children are and will be, and to whom and to what they are connected.

The linguistic element in identity transmission will always be an important one, because the children are likely to identify with and belong to the culture of the language which they speak most fluently. An analysis of the role of the wider community in supporting or undermining family language practices is particularly important in the case of minority/dominant bilingual contexts since individuals’ values and practices are intimately shaped by wider power relations and ideology. Generally it is assumed that the children or grandchildren of minority-language speaking parents will be influenced by their exposure to the wider societal environment to eventually lose facility in their parents’ language and shift to the dominant lingua franca of their social milieus. An influential study of non-English mother tongue language retention among the children of mixed marriages in the US shows that non-English languages disappear between generations as patterns of social interaction widen to include intimate associations outside of the non-English-language community, and outside of the ethnic descent group (Stevens, 1985, p. 74).

Nevertheless, most studies have shown that the language spoken by children tends to be influenced by the socialization environment in which young children are immersed. Practically speaking it is often grandmothers and mothers who oversee this phase of socialization, hence children develop facility in the language of the female kin who rear them (Potowski, 2008). Kamada demonstrated that children of mixed couples in Japan whose mother was from the minority group ended up being more proficient bilinguals than those with minority fathers (results of a 1997 study, cited in Potowski 2008, p. 203). Another study that supports these findings demonstrated that Welsh-speaking mothers rather than fathers played a more significant role in the early Welsh language socialization of their children as it was generally the mother (even if she also worked outside the home) who was the child’s primary carer, spending more time than the father in one-to-one interaction with the child (Morris & Jones, 2007).
In studying the ethnic and racial identification of biracial children of African American-White, Latino-White, Asian American-White, and American Indian-White couples in the USA, Qian (2004) found that the choices of racial and ethnic identification are not random and are determined by several interrelated factors. First, given the importance of the patrilineal line of descent in US society, children’s race/ethnicity is most often identified with that of the father. Second, the mixed-ancestry spouse may feel that it is easier to grow up in American society as a White rather than as a biracial or a minority individual and may have the desire to raise his or her child as a White. Third, minority identity is stronger for intermarried couples in which the minority spouse is native born than those in which the minority spouse is foreign born. The study also points to the importance of external factors in shaping children’s racial identities. Intermarried couples living in areas where there are more minorities tend to identify their children as the race/ethnicity of the minority spouse (Qian, 2004).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Findings from these comparative studies on intermarriage in various contexts have helped to generate the key research questions and hypotheses for this thesis. Similar to the case of Maori and Pakeha intermarriages in New Zealand, whose occurrence was restricted by the different status position of these two groups, and by unfavorable stereotypes and cultural differences (Harré, 1966), multiple barriers hinder Khmer and Kinh from forming intimate relationship, including historical tensions, socioeconomic gaps and stereotypes, as well as cultural differences between Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups. But this type of interethnic marriage is real and may be increasing, as the Khmer elderly man reported at the beginning of this chapter, noted to me. How can this type of marriage possibly occur? What factors drive this type of marriage? Is modernization, which increases geographical mobility and increases contact of people from different social backgrounds, a facilitating factor of Khmer-Kinh marriage? Are Kinh people becoming more educated and accepting of the culture and status of the Khmer minority in their midst? Or are Khmer people climbing up the social ladder in education in parallel with Kinh people, and increasingly matching them in educational attainments as Kalmijn (1991b) suggested, making achieved status homogamy more significant than ascriptive homogamy?
How do Khmer-Kinh couples experience their intimate relationships? This type of marriage involves an intimate encounter with difference from the very outset. It is a combination of two individuals who may differ not only in terms of perceived innate characteristics, but also socially and culturally. The dynamics of mixed unions have been described as producing a complex space, an ‘in-between’ space’, conflicts or clashes may emerge from the intersection of differences in terms of ethnicity, class and gender (Bhabha, 1994; Killian, 2001). In line with previous discussions on the challenging encounters experienced by interethnic couples (Frame, 2004; Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008), in Vietnam, differences in cultural practices and social positions of the majority and minority group as well as legacies of historical tension and unfavorable stereotypes may be present and cause conflicts and tensions in the journey which Khmer and Kinh spouses go through together. Previous scholarly researchers also highlight multiple ways of negotiation and adaptation that interethnic couples made to cope with many challenges, including familial and societal pressures, class and cultural differences to keep their marriage possible (Inman et al., 2011; Killian, 2001; Moriizumi, 2011), I assume that the marital life of Khmer and Kinh couples would be a dynamic process of negotiation and adaptation to differences, to keep their marriages viable.

And finally, what can be learned about the ethnic identity of the children of such unions? Does the ethnic identity of the minority Khmers disappear and are their children absorbed into the culture of the majority Kinh group, in keeping with Gordon’s hypothesis about intermarriages (1964)? Or does the transmission of ethnic identifications, culture and heritage to the children involve a process of deliberation and negotiation in the context of wider power relations, disparate living situations, and specific class and gender variables, as has elsewhere been noted (Barbara, 1989; Edwards & Caballero, 2008; Morris & Jones, 2007)?

This thesis examines the circumstances and experiences of interethnic Khmer-Kinh marriage and the multiple negotiations in the marital journey of Khmer-Kinh couples. It sheds light on the obstacles that impede marriage between these two ethnic groups, and how couples meet and get married, describing also couples’ experiences of living with differences and how they transmit their ethnic identity to their children. I argue that even
though the memory of historical tensions, cultural stereotypes and a wide socioeconomic gap may play a role in impeding the formation of Khmer-Kinh intimate relations, certain factors enable them to overcome such barriers to get married. I show that a series of conflicts and tensions in the marital life of couples need to be negotiated to ensure their marriage is viable and harmonious and demonstrate that identity transmission to their children also involves a dynamic process of negotiation between couples under the influence of family, socialization practices, practical benefits, class and gender issues. In the process, I demonstrate the value of qualitative research as an appropriate approach in understanding the marital experience of these interethnic couples. The rest of this chapter will present the methodology adopted in this study and the outline of the thesis.

1.3. Methodology

1.3.1 Data Collection

I applied a qualitative approach in this study to explore the marital experiences of Khmer and Kinh couples, since qualitative research helps the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of people’s experiences, perspectives and histories by collecting detailed, rich and complex data (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Patton, 1990; Spencer et al., 2003). The main data collection method used in this study is the in-depth interview. In-depth interviews are particularly appropriate in research on marriage because they help to understand people’s experience of their marital life through their own words and interpretation (Minichiello et al., 1995). In addition, the marital relationship between minority and majority people in Vietnam is quite a sensitive topic, since it implicates concerns about cultural identity preservation, ethnic loyalty and status anxieties, and hence the in-depth interview is a useful method to collect data on delicate topics of this nature. In an in-depth interview, the researcher is able to develop rapport and build a relationship with the participants so the participant feels more willing to describe their personal experiences and express their perspective on their own life (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008).

A semi-structured interview method was used in this study because it is flexible and it allowed me to explore deeply the participants’ perceptions and experiences (Robson, 2002). I went to the field with a list of predetermined questions, which was developed around
general areas of interest and enquiry that I wanted to explore. However, the order of the questions was not fixed and I could start my conversation with the respondent on whatever topic was most appropriate to the real situation. Of course, I was at liberty to ask additional questions when I met resourceful respondents, which allowed for the exploration of insights that were unexpected and seemed important, or were meaningful to the participants. I interviewed the individual spouses both together and separately. I originally had intended to interview them separately to explore personal perspectives that they might not be able to speak about in front of their spouse. In reality, in some cases the husband and wife were both at home when I came by and I had a conversation with them together, thereby obtaining a public or consensus view of the relationship. After that I made the effort to contact each spouse separately in order to dig for thoughts and feelings that might not have been shared in their partner’s presence.

It was not usual for people to tell his/her marital life story to a stranger, so most of the interviewees were quite hesitant when I first approached them. To begin with I explained the topic and purpose of the research and my status as a research student, in line with the ethical protocols of my university, in order to acquaint my intended interlocutors with my reasons for questioning them and to seek out their informed consent for participating in the research. However, such statements alone did not serve to dispel the uncertainties and doubts that my interlocutors had about my identity and objectives and so I needed to build trust in other ways. To build a close rapport with the Khmer spouses in my rural and semi-rural field sites, I was accompanied by a local Khmer woman or man to create a first impression about myself as a person who was connected to them in some important respects and subject to local protocols and social restraints. In addition, I introduced myself as a Kinh person who was married to a Khmer spouse from their local area and that I sought to get to know more about marriages such as my own in order to put my experiences into comparative context. Thanks to being able to demonstrate my accountability, identity and reasons for my interest in their lives in this way, and owing to the fact that I was in a similar situation to them, the participants felt more sympathetic to express their feelings and thoughts about their personal marital experiences.
The interviews were conducted like a conversation in which both participants and I shared our own experiences in our marriages. The interviews focused on spouses’ narrative accounts of how they got acquainted; the reactions of their family, friends and larger society to their relationship; how they overcame these barriers to get married; the challenges or tensions they experienced in their marital life and how they negotiated and adapted to these challenges; and the transmission of their ethnic identity and heritage to their children. I wrote notes following the interviews to capture important themes, ideas and observations.

In addition, interviews were also conducted with key informants. They included the local officers in the Ethnic Affairs Department at provincial and district levels and the judicial staff at the commune level, plus the parents of the couples, Khmer customary specialists (Ta Acha) and Khmer and Kinh elderly. In-depth interviews with these key informants gave me information about trends in interethnic marriage in the local area, the historical context of interethnic marriage between Kinh and Khmer, and their point of view toward Khmer-Kinh intermarriage.

During the interviews, a tape recorder was used with the respondent’s consent so that I could concentrate on the interview, which could ensure the accuracy of data collection and create a more natural conversation environment. In the meantime, my Khmer assistant acted as note-taker and observed the couple’s house setting, economic status, the language used in the interactions of the interethnic couple’s family members, and their worship practices. My Khmer assistant played a role as a link and ‘insider’ to the community rather than exclusively as translator, since almost all of my Khmer interviewees were able to communicate in Vietnamese, except for three Khmer elderly persons. Most of the interviews were conducted in participants’ houses but in some cases, we had our conversation in a cafeteria close to the participant’s workplace as it was the most convenient daytime meeting point for the interviewees. Each interview lasted about one to two hours. In this study, pseudonyms were used to conceal the identity of respondents to avoid breaching the privacy of my interlocutors.

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7 I had two Khmer assistants, one male and one female. Believing that gender difference could create a barrier to conversation with the male Khmer spouse, my male Khmer assistant helped me to build a closer rapport with the male spouse by accompanying me on the days when I interviewed male spouses.
I knew I would gain a closer understanding of the marital experiences of my research interlocutors if I stayed in the village and small town settings where most of them lived, but I had a small child in my urban hometown (also one of my field sites), who needed my care. Hence I decided to travel and do my research in the rural and semi-rural localities during the daytime when my child attended a childcare center and returned home to my child at nighttime. It took more than one hour to ride my motorbike from my house in Long Xuyen City to the rural study areas. I often left my house at 6.30am and had breakfast on the way and started meeting respondents after 8am, when they had eaten breakfast and were ready for a working day. As it was quite hot in the study sites and villagers often had a short nap after lunchtime, I also had a break in a nearby coffee shop after lunch for about an hour before visiting another person in the afternoon. I often set off back to home at about 5pm when people needed to rest and prepare dinner for the family. Unluckily for me, nearly half of the road from my house to the study areas was under construction at that time so the journey was very dusty and rough and it was even harder travelling on wet days.

I went to the rural and semi-rural field sites two to three days per week. On the other days I worked on the recording and note-taking to pick out interesting stories from the respondents that need deeper investigation and follow-up. In addition, in some cases when I felt it was too abrupt to jump right into sensitive topics such as tensions or conflicts in their marital life in my first conversation, I left these sensitive topics to be discussed in a follow-up conversation once we had achieved closer rapport. Normally, I talked with each respondent two to three times. After I returned from the field I read and reread my data and looked more critically at what I had seen and heard in the field to identify themes.

Importantly, my methodology included drawing on my own experiences as a ‘native anthropologist’ (Narayan, 1993), with intimate insights into the culture and the society under research. Being in an interethnic marriage myself provided me with the opportunity to experience and understand firsthand the dilemmas experienced by many of my research interlocutors. My participation in such a marriage enabled me to closely observe and investigate the attitudes and reactions of my own natal and in-law families and those of friends, school peers and professional colleagues. This experience and access enabled me to
generate many of the questions pursued in this research and to thereby confirm that some of the issues I had personally experienced were not unique to me but were widely shared by people in interethnic marriages. However, by deliberately widening the research sample so that it included people whose experiences differed greatly from my own, I was able to escape the trap of assuming that my own experiences were typical and gained awareness of the diversity of experiences and the challenges faced by men and women in circumstances markedly different to my own. Additionally, by working closely with bilingual research assistants and drawing on advice and explanations from my Khmer in-laws, I was able to explore the distinct perspective of Khmer spouses in interethnic marriages, and thus counter the bias of exploring such marriages from an exclusively Kinh-centric perspective.

In addition, contradicting my expectation that it would be easier for me to conduct my research with couples living in my hometown, a Kinh-dominated urban area, I encountered problems in approaching prospective urban interlocutors. Even though they lived very close to me, it was hard and took me much time to make contact with them for the first meeting. In some cases I failed in convincing people to be involved in my study, finding they were still unwilling to meet me even after I contacted them by phone three times. Through my husband’s network, I contacted the Khmer spouses first and usually I needed to call them at least two or three times for a meeting as they were always busy. From them, I contacted their Kinh spouses, who knew of me and my research purpose from their spouse, so they were glad and enthusiastic to meet another Kinh breaking the ethnic barrier in getting married to a Khmer spouse. Unlike Kinh spouses residing in the rural Khmer area and semi-rural ethnically mixed area who suffered a lot of tensions, these Kinh urban spouses seemed to be satisfied with their socially successful Khmer spouses and were interested in experiencing the ‘new taste’ of Khmer culture. Similar to me, Kinh spouses living in the city were frustrated by existing stereotypes and the curious and surprised attitudes from their friends and neighbors and families.

One experience in approaching a Kinh urban female spouse ‘like me’ was initially frustrating. Kim Loan’s Khmer husband was so busy that I could not make an appointment with him. Therefore, I went directly to her clothes shop following the directions of another interlocutor but she seemed to be very suspicious of me and mistrusted my intention in
asking about her marital life. To build a closer rapport with her, I first introduced myself as ‘similar’ to her and shared interesting stories in raising my son, linking it to questions about her own child. She then warmed up to me when sharing interesting stories about our sons. Only from that point on was I able to broach with her questions about her marital life.

1.3.2 Sampling

I first accessed my rural and semi-rural fieldsites by contacting local officials and then Khmer and Kinh community authorities and elderly people. This enabled me to get an overview of the situation of Khmer-Kinh intermarriages, the marital trends in these areas, and the community’s point of view about interethnic marriages. From these key informants, I was introduced to a few intermarried Khmer-Kinh couples in these local areas and also a number who had migrated to my third field site, the provincial capital city. A snowball sampling technique was used to select participants, according to which I started with the few cases introduced by community leaders and also the cases known by myself and then used referrals from the people I initially contacted to meet other people known to them through their networks. This technique is of value in research with marginalized rural people and ethnic minorities, since social referrals are an important method by which the trustworthiness of outsiders is assessed, making the participants more open to being involved in a research project implemented by a complete outsider (Liamputtong, 2009). Moreover it helped overcome the problem that the subjects of this research had no clearly identifiable geographical or communal focus, representative body, or spokesperson, but were instead found dispersed in households in many different localities. However, not all cases identified through the networks of my interlocutors were chosen for research, since they often were from the same social background while I sought to include a diversity of marital experiences.

Purposive sampling was combined with snowball sampling to select participants who meet the criteria of different geographical and class backgrounds. Qualitative research is

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8 ‘Purposive sampling is a valuable kind of sampling in exploratory research or in field research. It used the judgment of an expert in selecting cases or it selects cases with a specific purpose in mind. Purposive sampling is appropriate to select unique cases that are especially informative. Purposive sampling occurs when a researcher wants to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation’ (Neuman, 2006, p. 222).
concerned with in-depth understanding of the issue under examination. It relies heavily on individuals who are able to provide rich accounts of their experiences. Therefore, purposive sampling is very useful to select information-rich cases. Information-rich cases are individuals, events or settings which offer in-depth understanding and insights into the findings instead of empirical generalizations (Liampertong, 2009, p. 11). ‘The power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth, from which the researcher can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus purposive sampling’ (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

Assuming that location had much influence on marital experience, geography was the first criterion in selecting samples. To constitute my sample, I selected interlocutors from three areas: a Kinh-dominated urban area, a Khmer-dominated rural area, and an ethnically mixed semi-rural area. Gender also was assumed to be an important factor so I tried to balance the gender of participants in three areas. In addition, I hypothesized that socioeconomic status had an impact on the marital life of the couples so I selected couples from various socioeconomic statuses (based either on education, income, or occupation) (see the appendix for detailed demographic characteristics of the interviewed couples). In addition, the participants must have been married for at least five years and have had at least one child because I wanted to learn not only how they had met, and why they had married, but also what the experiences of interethnic marriage had been for them, as well as to see how cultural identity was transmitted to their children. This study is a qualitative study and the sample does not purport to represent all cases of interethnic Kinh-Khmer marriage but it can provide insights into commonalities, diversity and complexities in the marital experiences of spouses from different backgrounds and perspectives.

The divorce number in An Giang province in 2014 is 468 cases so it is reasonable to assume that Khmer-Kinh marriages also may sometimes end in divorce. I also heard from my interlocutors of the divorced Khmer-Kinh couples but I could not find them or contact them. It is hard to identify people with this experience may be because of the shame and stigma attached to divorce so this issue is uncovered. Without exploring the situation of the couples whose marriages ended in divorce, it is hard to know how representative the successful marriages reported in this study are of Khmer-Kinh marriages in general. Those
whose marriages terminated in divorce may conceivably embody significantly different characteristics or come from quite different backgrounds from those researched in this study, thus the failure to include them in the study may limit its descriptive and explanatory scope. The conflicts and tensions in such marriages may have been of a different kind or of higher magnitude than those reported in this study but I lack the ability to specify with issues caused the most conflict or which ones were considered decisive in precipitating the divorce.

Only intact marriages were selected in this study on the purpose to explore the dynamics of marital experience of interethnic marriage. The findings would be rich in portraying the marital picture of successful Khmer-Kinh marriage, but the study may fail to address directly the frequent issues of failed Khmer-Kinh marriages. Nevertheless, by making conflict, tension and the reasoning processes of dissatisfied couples an explicit focus of this study I am able to shed some light on some of the risk factors that under certain conditions may precipitate marital separation.

The number of interviewees of different types is summarized in the below table 1.1:

**Table 1.1 The number of interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intermarried couples</td>
<td>Kinh-dominated urban area</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnically mixed semi-rural area</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khmer-dominated rural area</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key informants</td>
<td>Ta Acha⁹</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judicial official</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnic affairs official</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khmer elderly</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kinh elderly</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents of interethnic couples</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁹ Khmer custom specialist.
1.3.3 Field Sites

Map 1.1 Location of An Giang Province, Vietnam
Khmer minority people in Vietnam mainly reside in the Mekong Delta in the south of the country. An Giang Province has the fourth largest population of Khmer people in Vietnam and the province has a border area connecting with Cambodia. An Giang Province was selected as the study area because the majority of its Khmer residents live in predominantly Khmer-inhabited rural areas and moreover still keep a strong connection with Khmers in the adjacent borderlands area of Cambodia, meaning that their sense of cultural distinction is very strong. Meanwhile, its capital 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 addition, negative stereotypes about the Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups rooted in the border war that broke out between Cambodia and Vietnam in
the late 1970s are still strong in this province, so it is interesting to explore how Kinh-Khmer couples in this area experience their marital life in the context of such perceptions. I assumed that different living settings and social backgrounds have a determining effect on the marital experience of Khmer-Kinh couples. Hence, I conducted my study in three socially and ethnically distinct settings in An Giang Province. They were Long Xuyen City (a Kinh-dominated urban area), Tri Ton Town (an ethnically mixed semi-rural area) and O Lam and Co To Communes which are in a Khmer-dominated rural area.

Long Xuyen City is the center of administration, commerce, services and education of An Giang Province. It is located approximately 190 kilometres to the southwest of Ho Chi Minh City, and is situated on a busy major channel of the Mekong river delta. Long Xuyen is predominantly inhabited by Kinh people, occupying 99 percent of the population (275,894 Kinh among a total population of 278,658) and Khmer people in the city number only 562 (Statistic Department of An Giang, 2013). An Giang University, which is located in Long Xuyen City, is the only educational center in the province providing undergraduate education.\(^\text{10}\) It has attracted students from different areas in An Giang Province as well as from neighboring provinces. One can easily observe the diversity of students from different social and ethnic backgrounds on campus. Khmer students have migrated from their village to Long Xuyen to pursue higher education and are present in every field of study in An Giang University. In addition, highly educated Khmer people also hold lecturing positions in different departments in the University. In addition, a concentration of provincial departments and centers, banks, garment factories, and other servicing agents are located in Long Xuyen. The city is also the site of the Long Xuyen market—the biggest wholesale market in An Giang—where local agricultural products are collected and other products from different areas are distributed. In recent years, Long Xuyen has become more animated with an increasing number of supermarkets and fast food stores and young Khmers have begun migrating to Long Xuyen City in search of work. Some highly educated Khmers have also been employed in many provincial departments in Long Xuyen. However, most of these rural-urban migrants work in manual jobs.

\(^\text{10}\) It was established in 2000 from the base of Pedagogy College, formerly a teacher training college, but was upgraded to become a university by a directive from the prime minister in 1999. It is the second largest university, just after Can Tho University, in the Mekong Delta.
Tri Ton Town is the municipality and capital of Tri Ton District, which is located about 52 kilometres west of Long Xuyen City. This small, quiet town is the center of administration and commerce for Tri Ton District. Tri Ton Town, with 2,850 Khmer residents among its population of 14,911 people, was selected as the ethnically mixed semi-rural area in this study (Statistic Department of Tri Ton, 2013). The diversity of ethnicity can be easily seen in Tri Ton market, where Kinh and Khmer are present as either sellers or buyers and many can communicate in both Vietnamese and Khmer language. Besides daily retailers in the market, many Khmer farmers also sell their agricultural products in the market on occasion. Goods and foods sold in the market are also various, serving both Kinh and Khmer traditional practices. The ethnic mixture of the staff in the administrative offices in this area is readily discernible. Tri Ton Town is also the only place in Tri Ton District providing a high school education so local students from the surrounding mostly Khmer communes must travel to Tri Ton Town to receive a high school education. By long-term interaction, Kinh and Khmer locals have absorbed each other’s culture and enriched their

11 Tri Ton district is one of the two mountainous districts in An Giang Province.
own cultural values. Most local residents celebrate traditional festivals of both Kinh and Khmer people and are able to communicate with each other at certain levels. The Svay-ton temple, a Khmer temple recognized as a national architectural monument, is located at the center of Tri Ton Town. In Khmer traditional festivals, the temple receives groups of Khmer and Kinh pilgrims.

![Figure 1.2 Tri Ton market in Tri Ton town](image)

Co To and O Lam communes in Tri Ton District were selected as the Khmer-dominated rural areas in this research. 97.40 percent (11,521 among 11,829) of O Lam’s population are Khmers and 38.78 percent of Co To residents are Khmers (4,298 Khmers among 11,084 total population) (Statistic Department of Tri Ton, 2013). Co To Commune is about 5 kilometres to the south of Tri Ton town and from there, I rode my motorbike about 8 kilometres further southwest to reach neighboring O Lam Commune. Travelling to these communes gave me a completely different impression of life from that in Long Xuyen City and Tri Ton Town. They are truly ‘rural’ with rice fields along the two sides of the road and I could smell the ripe rice when travelling on this road at harvest time. However, the land is
very dry during the dry season. Sugar palms are grown in groves along the raised edges of rice terraces. Local people often reside in groups of households of extended family *(phum)* while some neighborhoods are close to a temple *(wat* in Khmer) and a main road. In addition, the local speed of life seems to be slower and local life seems more peaceful and quiet than in Tri Ton and Long Xuyen. The main livelihood of the local residents in these communes is farming. But in recent years, because of the negative profit from farming and the loss of farming land, more young Khmers from these Khmer communes have migrated to the city for another source of income. Some local people also do small trading in the local markets but the markets are small in scale, serving only local needs, and operating only in the morning. A few women sell some daily necessities at the front door of their house to serve their neighbors’ needs. One particular distinct character of Co To is the operation of rock mines, which provides work for local labors as well as Kinh migrant labors from other areas. Nothing in these communes is as aesthetically spectacular as their several Khmer temples *(wats)*.

Figure 1.3 Mountainous massifs in O Lam commune
One unplanned study area arising during my field study is that of Ba Chuc town. The hometown of many of my interlocutors, its historical and social setting generates distinctive experiences. Besides Tri Ton town, Ba Chuc is the only town in Tri Ton district and its living standard is more developed than other communes in the district. Travelling along the mountain massif, we can discern its distinctively urban development. It can be considered as a semi urban Kinh-dominated town with its slight percentage of Khmer, only 5.44 percent (877 Khmers among a total population of 16,108). Except for some locals who carry out small trading in local markets, the main livelihood of local people is also agriculture. In contrast to the intercultural interaction and exchange in Tri Ton town, Khmer and Kinh people in Ba Chuc town remain separate and still hold strong prejudices toward each other due to the historical hostile tension from the Khmer Rouge war.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis explores the interethnic marriages of Khmer and Kinh people in An Giang Province. It discusses the diversity of life experiences of Khmer-Kinh couples from prior to their marriage to after having children, illustrating the backgrounds and circumstances of people in this type of marriage and describing their experiences of adjusting to each other’s cultures and negotiating marital problems and tensions. This introductory chapter has outlined the arguments of the thesis based on a discussion of the relevant scholarly literature on interethnic marriage. I examined literature on four main themes: the barriers hindering interethnic marriage; the factors driving intermarriage regardless of the barriers; the marital experiences of these interethnic couples; and how they transmit their identity and heritage to their children. Then, I described the research questions and methodology used in this research and the three different research study areas.

The second chapter gives a historical and social overview of the research setting and of the two ethnic groups involved in the study. It provides a brief history of An Giang Province in the western Mekong delta and discusses some of the differences between Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups. It explores how ethnic difference has been socially, culturally, and politically constructed and transformed over history. It also discusses exchanges between these two
groups, such as the collaboration of Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups in land pioneering in the Mekong Delta, national defence, and cultural exchanges over history.

Chapter Three addresses the multiple barriers which may hinder the formation of intimate relationships between Khmer and Kinh, including the gap in socioeconomic status between Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups and the persistent stereotypes these two groups have toward each other. This chapter also explores the range of factors and processes which have mitigated against such gaps and which facilitate Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage.

Chapter Four examines how Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples have negotiated the obstacles to getting married. It sheds light on the factors that facilitate the formation of their intimate relationships. It describes the specific contexts in which Khmer-Kinh couples first meet each other, and how they overcome the existing barriers to form their interethnic union. The respective spouse’s experiences of ideological struggle in breaking the ethnic boundary and how they overcame opposition from their parents, family members and community are also described in this chapter.

Chapter Five unpacks the dynamics of the intercultural encounters arising in Khmer-Kinh intermarriages and explores how the couples experience and adjust to the kinds of cultural differences they confront in such marriages. It demonstrates that differences relating to locality, class, education and personal experience, rather than cultural differences that stem solely from their divergent ethnic backgrounds, are important factors accounting for the tensions they experience in their marital life. This chapter also shows how social stereotypes can affect the quality of the marital bond in interethnic marriages and also may aggravate tensions that arise from other factors.

Chapter Six uncovers the cultural conflicts that Khmer and Kinh couples experience in their marital life, highlighting variation in the reasons for cultural conflict according to spousal characteristics and geographical location. It highlights that not all cultural conflicts are related to differences in ethnicity, but some stem from the clash between different urban-rural cultural models of spousal relations. In addition, the chapter also analyzes the differential capacity of spouses and their families to cope with cultural differences. Gender
expectations and practical utility were also found to be influential factors shaping a spouse’s capacity to cope with cultural and linguistic difference.

Chapter Seven discusses the transmission of language, identity and heritage to the children of ethnically mixed Khmer-Kinh couples. The chapter describes the process of negotiation that couples undergo in order to transmit identity and heritage to their children. By examining which language is transmitted to children and how children are named, and which ethnicity is selected for the children, the chapter shows that the transmission of identity and heritage to their children is not decided upon unilaterally by the couples themselves. Instead, it shows that this process was strongly shaped by macro-level socioeconomic factors and structures, including gender, socialization practices and social status as well as being influenced by respective family groups.

Chapter Eight is the conclusion, where I summarize and integrate my findings. Drawing together the findings from previous chapters, it highlights the obstacles, tensions and conflicts that Khmer-Kinh couples encounter in their pre- and post-marital life. It emphasizes that marriage between a Khmer and Kinh couple involves a dynamic process of negotiation and adaptation to a variety of differences that enable the couple to keep their marriage viable and to transmit their identity and heritage to their children. It highlights what the thesis has contributed to knowledge about Khmer-Kinh relationships, and indicates some directions for future research in this area.
Chapter 2

The Background Setting of Khmer and Kinh Ethnic Groups in An Giang

2.1 The Study Area

Geographical location of An Giang

An Giang Province lies in the southwest of Vietnam, where the Mekong River initially flows into Vietnam’s territory. The province shares a border of approximately 100 kilometres with Cambodia to the northwest and borders Dong Thap Province to the east and northeast, Can Tho City to the southeast, and Kien Giang Province to the south and southwest. With a total area of 3,536.76 square kilometres, An Giang is the fourth largest province out of 13 provinces of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta. Administratively, An Giang is divided into 11 units, including Long Xuyen city, Chau Đoc city, Tan Chau town and eight districts, namely An Phu, Phu Tan, Cho Moi, Chau Phu, Chau Thanh, Thoai Son, Tinh Bien and Tri Ton. Long Xuyen city is the administrative, economic and cultural and trading center of An Giang province. In addition, sharing a borderline with Cambodia accords An Giang such benefits as international relations and economic and cultural exchange with Cambodia. National and international border gates—Vinh Xuong (Tan Chau), Tinh Bien, Khanh Binh (An Phu) and Vinh Hoi Đong (An Phu)—allow locals to trade agricultural products to neighboring countries. Waterway transport also plays a significant role in the trade of local agricultural products to Phnom Penh, Hochiminh city, and other provinces in the Mekong Delta.\(^\text{12}\)

Located in the upstream part of the Mekong Delta, the geography of An Giang province is very diverse, having both plains and mountain landscapes. With the large Tien River and Hau River going through the province, the area receives an abundance of water which offers rich agricultural possibilities. However, it is extremely challenging for local habitation and livelihoods in the flood season (annually from September to November).

\(^\text{12}\) The Mekong Delta can be called either Dong Bang Song Cuu Long or Mien Tay.
Taylor (2014b) described An Giang as among ‘the most challenging sites for human habitation in the entire Mekong basin’ owing to its situation within the Mekong River’s high floodplain. In the rainy season, a large area is under deep inundation (p.162). Most of the plain is regularly under meters of water for about five months in a year. During the flood season, the livelihoods of local residents are compromised by high floods that can wash away roads and even children, and swamp settlements (Brocheux, 1995, p. 2; Taylor, 2007, p. 32).

In addition, a massif of several closely clustered mountains stands in An Giang Province. The presence of mountains in Thoai Son, Chau Doc, Tinh Bien and Tri Ton districts, distinguishes the ecological character of An Giang province from other regions in the Mekong Delta. Composed mostly of granite, the height of these mountains from the surface of the delta varies from 300-700 meters, except Cam Mountain, which reaches a height of 710 meters (DARD, 2014; Taylor, 2014b, p. 7). For travelers, the most impressive landscape vista of this region may be the inundated plains with an abundance of rice fields surrounding the foothills of this mountainous massif.

**Demography**
An Giang has been a multi-ethnic society for centuries. Khmer, Vietnamese (who are called either Viets or Kinh), Hoa (or Chinese) and Cham people have been settling in An Giang for a long time. The present prosperity of An Giang province is attributed to the contribution of all these inhabitants. The diversity of ethnic groups generates the diversified cultural characteristics of An Giang province. The presence and amount of each ethnic group in this frontier area has varied across historical periods. At present, the Kinh ethnic group is dominant in the province, occupying 94.74 percent of the population and the Khmer represent the second largest group in An Giang. There are 90,271 Khmer ethnic people, occupying 4.2 percent of the population in An Giang (see Table 2.1).
Table 2.1 Population divided into ethnic groups in An Giang, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Both male and female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,142,709</td>
<td>1,064,483</td>
<td>1,078,226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>2,029,887</td>
<td>1,009,307</td>
<td>1,020,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>90,271</td>
<td>43,984</td>
<td>46,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cham</td>
<td>14,209</td>
<td>6,977</td>
<td>7,232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoa</td>
<td>8,075</td>
<td>4,074</td>
<td>4,001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Vietnam Institute of Ethnology

Like other areas in Southern Vietnam, An Giang has long been an ideal destination for migrants from different regions. It was historically recorded that during Nguyen Dynasty (1260-1367), Chinese migrants were found residing in the Mekong Delta when one Chinese General Chau Dat Quan went to Angkor through waterways. Later on, in 1679, a group of about 3,000 Chinese loyal to the Minh dynasty fled the Manchus and migrated to this new land. They reclaimed and resided in My Tho, Bien Hoa and Ha Tien under their own governance but paying tax to a Nguyen lord. In 1789, Nguyen Anh allowed them to form their ‘Minh Huong’ villages. These Chinese migrants were named ‘Minh Huong people’ (Huynh Ngoc Trang & Truong Ngoc Tuong, 1999, p. 33).

Since the eighteenth century, An Giang has been home to many different ethnic groups, and today the province officially is depicted as being home to four ‘ethnic siblings’: Kinh, Hoa, Khmer and Cham. They have been active in opening new settlements—improving wild land and turning swamps into present fertile land. Khmer people mainly reside in mountainous areas in Tri Ton and Tinh Bien, Chau Thanh and Thoai Son districts and practice Theravada Buddhism. Their main livelihood is agriculture. Cham people gather in

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14 One of these exiles, Mac Cuu cleared the land and created the port for maritime commerce on the coast of Gulf of Siam in Ha Tien. The port flourished and became an autonomous region. However, with the threat of invasion from Siam, Mac Cuu placed himself in the service of the King of Vietnam and this southern base was later integrated into Vietnam’s territory (Brocheux, 1995, p. 11).
An Phu, Chau Doc, Chau Phu and Tan Chau, and Islam is their religion. Their main livelihoods are petty trading, silk weaving, fishing and farming. Viet and Hoa predominantly inhabit the plains or town regions. Hoa people have been in An Giang for a long time. Regardless of where they reside—either city or rural area—they mostly work as traders. Owing to long-term interactions and the socially dominant status of the Kinh, Vietnamese has gradually become a common language for the other ethnic groups. The phenomena of bilingualism or multi-lingualism are quite common in mixed Viet-Khmer, Khmer-Hoa, Viet-Cham, or Viet-Hoa areas. Cultural exchange between groups can also be observed in local cuisine and dressing practices (UBNDAG, 2007, pp. 389-390).

*Cultural characteristics*

The unique environmental conditions of the Mekong Delta have given rise to a distinctive culture: *the waterways civilization* (Son Nam 2005a, 2005b). Most inhabitants of An Giang reside along the rivers and canals, creating a distinct form of residence. The waterways system facilitated the early development of trading, and the waterways culture of the western delta can be observed easily in the floating markets in Long Xuyen city and in Cai Rang town. Even though local markets and supermarkets have been developing rapidly in recent years, one can still see people selling agricultural products from their rowboats along the rivers and canals.
A large population of Mien Tay people reside in rural areas and work in farming: growing rice and various types of vegetables, culturing fishes, and animal and poultry husbandry. Farming is the dominant profession for both Khmers and Kinh. Besides the Hoa, Kinh people are also dominant in trading in both wholesale and retail markets. The low skilled workers are concentrated in manual work such as construction, transport and service industries and factory work. In contrast to Khmer’s limited presence in official and state occupations, Kinh are dominant in state and official sectors.

Worshiping gods and spirits is quite strong in An Giang society and An Giang is a multi-religious area. Explanations for this region’s high religiosity have contended that in reclaiming this border and remote region, the migrants (luu dan) suffered high risks, natural disasters and abuses from feudal authority. Having no ally to rely on, these migrants prayed to gods, the Buddha, the spirits, and dead ancestors for their blessing to avoid misfortunes and receive more fortune (Huynh Ngoc Trang & Truong Ngoc Tuong, 1999; Son Nam, 2005a, 2005b). Beside popular religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam and Cao Đàiism, An Giang is the birthplace of some of the Mekong Delta’s most
influential religions: Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, and Hoa Hao. The mostly Buddhist Khmers of An Giang follow both the Mahanikay and Thommayut sects of Theravada Buddhism. These diverse religious groups and their institutions are valued for their social services—such as schooling, health care, forums for women, child support, aged care, the provision of material assistance for the poor, public feasting, and collective funerals—that their religious institutions collectively provide (Taylor, 2007, p. 44).

The region’s biggest religious festival is the festival to the goddess Ba Chua Xu, which is annually celebrated on 26th April in the lunar year in Vinh Te village of Chau Doc town. This festival attracts tourists and pilgrims from different regions in the South, ranging from farmers, traders, retailers, wholesale distributors, transport and service industry workers, creditors and also debtors (Taylor, 2007, p. 33). Another important religious festival in An Giang is annually organized on 18th May in the lunar calendar by the Hoa Hao sect to memorize the organization of Hoa Hao sect. On this day, Phu My town (formerly Hoa Hao village) receives numerous Hoa Hao followers from different regions.

In my hometown of Long Xuyen, a busy and modern city, the urban inhabitants still spend much of their time in religious observances. I often observe different religious groups practice their religions actively: every weekend Christians go to the church which is located in the center of the city, and every week for seven weeks after the death of a co-religionist, groups of Hoa Hao followers and Buddhist and Cao Dai followers do requiem. I also observe groups of people from different age groups going to pagodas nightly and different groups of Buddhists undertake pilgrimages to different pagodas every few months.

Livelihood
Owing to favorable natural conditions—alluvial soil and fresh water—An Giang is renowned as a typical agricultural province in the country. Thanks to the abundance of water, An Giang plays a significant part in the nation’s record of rice export and is home to freshwater fish industries. Like other areas in the Mekong Delta, rice cultivation is the main livelihood of inhabitants in An Giang since the reclamation period. Under French governance, existing canals were reconditioned and new ones were dug to foster rice cultivation and increase the production of rice for export. Floating rice was introduced to
Chau Doc province in the 1920s and it was widely sown in the flooded expanses of Chau Doc province and in the northern part of Long Xuyen (Brocheux, 1995, pp. 52-57). During the period 1975-2012, land area for rice cultivation in An Giang has tripled, from 210 thousand hectares in 1975 to 625 thousand hectares in 2012. Rice production increased 2.95 percent annually in the period 1976-2012, from 2.2 tons/ha (1975) to 6.3 tons/ha (2012), higher than the average national rice production of 5.5 tons/hectare (DARD, 2014). In 2013, 454,397 tons of rice was exported from An Giang province (Statistic Department of An Giang, 2013).

**Figure 2.2 Rice harvesting**

Besides rice cultivation, the fish industry, mainly ‘ca tra’ and ‘ca basa’ (pangasius catfish), has flourished in An Giang, which is known as the center of the capital-intensive catfish export industry and a large freshwater capture fishery (Taylor, 2007, p. 32). Processed pangasius catfish products can be seen in the supermarkets in many countries in the world. In the Mekong Delta, An Giang led the country in aquaculture production during the period 2000-2009, but in the period 2010-2012, fell to second position, after Dong Thap (DARD,
170,079 tons of aqua products was exported from An Giang in 2013 (Statistic Department of An Giang, 2013). The seafood processing industry, mining industry and tourism are also promoted in the province.

![Figure 2.3 Feeding fish](image)

Looking back through history, the sea-trading economy has developed in An Giang since ancient times—a pre-Khmer civilization called Funan or Oc Eo culture. Under the Nguyen Dynasty and French governance, the cultivation of rice was encouraged for the purpose of trading. Besides rice trading, seafood and agricultural products were also exported under American governance (Nguyen Cong Binh, 1990, p. 21)

In addition, having a long area connecting with Cambodia is advantageous for those locales engaging in dynamic cross-border trading. A cattle trade in the border area in Nui Sam has been bustling since 1935. However, border areas are also the home of gambling and burglaries. A casino located in the border area on the Cambodia side has attracted many Vietnamese gamblers from not only An Giang but other provinces as well, causing social crime and family indebtedness.
History

The ancient history of the western Mekong delta has attracted much interest from scholars. Biggs (2010) emphasized the association of these areas to a pre-Khmer civilization called Funan or Oc Eo culture by providing archaeological references suggesting the relation of the remnants—wooden piers, gold jewelry, Buddhist and Hindu statues, brick foundations, and traces of major canals—in Ba The Mountain to a pre-Khmer civilization called Funan or Oc Eo culture. Based on the remaining traces, these mountains and hills were assumed to be points for an ancient network of sea trading between India and China (p.16). The history of this site also appealed to Taylor’s concern. Taylor (2014b) reviewed previous archaeological research suggesting that human settlement can be traced from Angkor Borei, in Cambodia to the northwest of the Tri Ton massif for over 2,000 years and showing the connection of these locations to each other and with an ancient empire, the ancient kingdom of Funan, Southeast Asia’s earliest Indic polity and a pre-Khmer empire (p.164).

An Giang official press recorded that in 1757, Chan Lap’s King Nac Ong Ton offered the land Tam Phong Long to Vietnam’s King Nguyen Phuc Khoat for military support. The present An Giang province was then a remote and border part in the land Tam Phong Long. The name ‘An Giang’ was first used to name a province when Minh Mang King changed ‘Ngu tran’ to ‘Luc tinh’. The boundary of An Giang was much larger then and its administrative name and boundary have been continuously changed over history and the present An Giang province was officially established in 1976 (UBNDAG, 2007, pp.384-385).

Being a border area, An Giang suffered lots of bloody historical events over history. With an important strategic location, Chau Doc (present Chau Doc city in An Giang province) was selected by Nguyen Cu Trinh to be one of three defense sites from Xiem, a strong imperial country at that time. With ambition of expanding its country’s territory, Xiem repetitively invaded Ha Tien and Chau Doc areas in the 1770s and 80s and again in the 1830s (Son Nam, 2005b, pp. 165-171)

For settlement and strategic purposes, the Thoai Ha and Vĩnh Tế canals were designed to move Vietnamese settlers into the borderlands with Cambodia and protect the delta from
future Siamese incursions. In 1817, Nguyen Van Thoai was ordered to command building Thoai Ha and Vinh Te Canal. Thoai Ha Canal was dug in 1818, from the top of Long Xuyen branch to the top of Rach Gia branch. Digging Vinh Te Canal, connecting Chau Doc to Ha Tien (98,800 meters in length) took five years from 1819 to 1824. Hard and abusive working conditions on the canal exacerbated tensions for thousands of conscripted laborers, causing several Khmer-led rebellions (Biggs, 2010, pp. 66-67).

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the mountainside region in An Giang again became the revolutionary bases of communists and patriots fighting against French and American governance. Soon after the departure of the Americans in 1975, the inhabitants in this mountain massif again suffered a brutal border war that erupted in the late 1970s. The lives of the inhabitants in this locale were devastated and Khmer communities especially were torn apart in this conflict (Taylor, 2014b, p. 163). Traveling through the border town of Ba Chuc, visitors can easily see a monument (Nha Mo) between Tam Buu pagoda and Phi Lai pagoda commemorating the massacre of civilians perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge army in April 1978.

2.2 Kinh and Khmer in An Giang

The Kinh

The Kinh ethnic group (dan toc Kinh), known also as Viets, or sometimes ethnic Vietnamese, are the majority ethnic group in both Vietnam and in An Giang. The identity, origin myths and history of this ethnic group have been strongly shaped by popular and official histories. Since the 17th and 18th centuries, the first Vietnamese to reside in An Giang and in the Mekong delta generally are said to have migrated from the North and Centre of present Vietnam, mostly from the Thuan-Quang areas. They can be described as economic, social, cultural, political and environmental refugees, who migrated to the relative freedom of the southern periphery to escape overpopulation and natural disasters in the north and center of Vietnam, flee civil warfare during the Trinh-Nguyen conflict, and

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15 ‘In April 1977, Cambodia’s genocidal leader Pol Pot ordered his Khmer Rouge forces across the Vinh Te canal to attack ethnic-Vietnamese villages. After a Vietnamese counterattack on the Khmer Rouge bases, Pol Pot sent his troops to destroy the village of Ba Chuc on Vinh Te Canal’ (Biggs, 2010, p. 233). It was recorded that from April 20 1978, the massacres led by Pol Pot killed more than 3,000 innocent people in ten days (Son Nam, 2005b, p. 375).
escape the oppressive social hierarchies, customary burdens and harsh rule of the feudal courts. They included debt and tax deserters and those exiled to the border area for their opposition to the dynasty (Do Thai Dong, 1992; Son Nam, 2005a; UBNDAG, 2007, p.385).

These first Vietnamese in the South, commonly called ‘luu dan’, are depicted as adventurous and courageous pioneers who cleared new lands, endured hardship, suffered illness, and defended themselves against wild animals and the sea in reclaiming wild, unpopulated and ungoverned lands in the frontier area (Son Nam, 2005a, p. 29). These migrants had to cooperate to survive in the new land, which built up their distinct personality: relationships with neighbors as close as that between relatives, readiness to help each other even daring to sacrifice themselves to save others, repaying favors (on đen nghia tra), clearing favors from enmity (an oan phan minh) and using definite statements and frank expression (noi mot la mot, hai la hai) (Son Nam, 2005a, p. 36; UBNDAG, 2007). Owning to the natural abundance of the land, the fertility of the soil, the adequate water supply, the abundance of natural foods and the land’s relative under-population, southerners did not have to struggle for survival like Vietnamese living in the harsh, infertile and overpopulated northern and central areas in Vietnam. They are said as a result to have became more relaxed, easy going and hospitable and became known for taking things one day a time (chi lam du an hang ngay) (Son Nam, 2005a, p. 79).

The easy life in the new land offered inhabitants more freedom from the conventions of traditional society in centers Ha Noi and Hue16 (Biggs, 2010, p. 9). By interacting with other ethnic groups in the new land, Vietnamese society in the south varied considerably from that in the north—settlements were dispersed along the river in the Mekong Delta instead of nucleated as in the northern and center region; gender egalitarianism in the kinship system was greater; southerners became increasingly individualistic, easy going, open to new ideas and more trusting than those from areas characterized by tight clans, lineage and community solidarity (Hickey, 1957; Mac Duong, 1991; Rambo, 1973). Also

16 When the Nguyen court attempted to tighten its rule (new official titles, modes of dress, state rituals, etc…) here, southerners rebelled against the feudal court. When Le Van Duyet—Sagon-based viceroy—died in 1832, Minh Mang appointed new governors and dismissed most of the veterans instead of recognizing Duyet’s adopted son—Le Van Khoi—as a successor. Fighting against the Nguyen lord’s harsh dominance, Khoi and these ousted officials allied themselves with the Siamese King Rama III to organize a rebellion against the court (Biggs, 2010, p. 68).
in the context of an open commercialized trading society southerners became adjusted to
the market economy long before northerners (Taylor, 2001, p. 96). Since the late 1600s
trading posts along the main river in the Mekong delta were established by Chinese settlers
and rice exportation from this new land was fostered under French colonialism (Biggs,
2010, p. 56).

Another distinct feature of ‘Mien Tay’ (the Mekong Delta) is its regionally peculiar cultural
character, which differs from the Vietnamese elite culture of Ha Noi or Hue. Most
Vietnamese immigrants to Nam Bo were from the Thuan-Quang area of Central Vietnam
so the Indianised culture of the Chams living in the central provinces of Thuan-Quang was
influential in forming the basis of Nam Bo culture. As these migrants were mainly non-elite
and poor, their cultural heritage was the folk culture of the central Vietnamese provinces
(Taylor, 2001, p. 98). This strain of folk culture was dominant in Nam Bo until the
appearance of Confucianism after the Nguyen Dynasty set up administrative rule in this
new land (Huynh Ngoc Trang & Truong Ngoc Tuong, 1999). These new Vietnamese
settlers even enriched their culture by adopting many practices and technology already used
by local Khmers and Chinese (Biggs, 2010, p. 61).

In addition, even though the kinship system is also important to social relationships in rural
areas, descent through lineages, and the patrilineage in particular, does not play a strong
and determining role as in the North (Hickey, 1964, p. 282). ‘Neighborhood’ relationships
play an important role for residents in exchanging information about new production
technology and helping each other sustain a productive life in a rural area.

However, despite these social, cultural and psychological transitions, the Kinh people of the
Mekong delta were patriotically Vietnamese. They rallied together in defense against
foreign invaders: Siam, French, and Americans. Especially in the colonial period, southern
Vietnamese society became politically, economically and socially disordered, with a small
number of rich landlords who owned much of the land and the majority of Vietnamese
living as landless tenants. In this context a number of religious groups arose, principally
among the Kinh of the south, that were communal and millenarian in nature. To overcome
the instability, hardship and injustice of life in a highly unequal colonized southern society,
Vietnamese acted together for mutual assistance, practiced charity, and followed a number of messiah figures whom they believed could liberate them from injustice. Such movements were unknown in the north of the country where the traditional social structure was more intact and society was less turbulent (Son Nam, 2005b, p. 225).

The mountainous massif in Tri Ton area in An Giang province was the focal point of Vietnamese movements of resistance to French colonization. The first victory of the French over Southern Vietnam was on Feb 17, 1859. After conquest, the French brought significant changes to the delta’s landscape and economics. During French governance, multiple wars against its oppressive rule erupted. One of the leading figures of resistance against French governance was Tran Van Thanh. In 1867, the French occupied An Giang. Tran Van Thanh and his insurgent troops moved to Rach Gia to directly participate in Nguyen Trung Truc’s rebellion against the French in 1868. Being hunted, Tran Van Thanh withdrew to build a secret base. By promoting the spirit ‘Trung quan ai quoc’ (Confucian filial piety and loyalist identification with the pre-colonial Vietnamese stet) of ‘Buu Son Ky Huong’ (Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountain) doctrine of Đoan Minh Huyen (known as Phat Thay Tay An), Tran Van Thanh could gather militia from other areas to conduct the Tran Van Thanh uprising (often known as Bay Thua uprising) against the French. ‘In 1873, he was besieged by the French in his fortified estate of Lang Linh and he was finally killed’ (Brocheux, 1995, p. 14).

After that, the ‘Tu An Hieu Nghia’ religion also played a significant role in the resistance against the French. Ngo Loi (often named Ong Nam Thiep) gave birth to the ‘Tu An Hieu Nghia’ religion in Tượng Mountain in Ba Chuc in 1870. Practicing a similar spirit of ‘Buu Son Ky Huong’, Ngo Loi gathered patriotic people and militia from other areas to establish An Định village. In 1885, ‘Tu An Hieu Nghia’ followers in combination with Khmer militia affiliated to Khmer Prince Si Votha conducted an uprising against the French (Son

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17 Projects for improving and completing the canal network between Saigon and the Mekong Delta and building the roads were promoted for human settlement and boosting rice exportation (Brocheux, 1995, p. 22).

18 In 1849, ‘Buu Son Ky Huong’ was founded by Đoan Minh Huyen (known as Phat Thay Tay An) at Long Kien (Cho Moi).
Nam, 2005b, p. 238). In 1939, the Hoa Hao Buddhist sect\(^{19}\) was founded, which also played a significant role in resisting French governance. The mountainous massif along the Cambodian border still serves as the symbolic and spiritual focal point for the Hoa Hao religion (Taylor, 2014b, p. 184).

After the Japanese overthrew the French, Southern Vietnam was separately controlled by the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao sect, and the communists. The autonomously-controlled area of the Cao Dai was in Tay Ninh; the Hoa Hao sect controlled territory in the western Mekong region; while the communists controlled the Dong Thap and U Minh areas. French troops re-conquered much of the delta in 1946 but never wholly reconquered the South. The Southern region was then temporarily governed by different groups—the French, the Caodaists, the Hoa Hao, and the (communist-controlled) Committee of Resistance and Administration of Nam Bo—each of which had influence over its respective territory (Biggs, 2010, p. 136; Brocheux, 1995, p. 199).

Early in the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) period,\(^{20}\) President Ngo Dinh Diem succeeded in his attempt to incorporate these largely Vietnamese-speaking religious sectarian groups as part of the RVN. The sectarian armies were disarmed, their leaders imprisoned or executed.\(^{21}\) The sectarians continued to practice their faith but now increasingly were going to Vietnamese state schools, learning the state’s official version of the history of Vietnam and were conscripted into the South Vietnamese army to join the fight against the communist-led resistance. They joined many Catholics, also ethnic Vietnamese, but of northern origin, who had migrated into An Giang from the northern provinces of Vietnam.\(^{22}\) All of these disparate religious groups were subordinated to the state’s secular identification of them as ethnic Viets \((\text{người Việt})\), or simply Vietnamese. At this time, many peasants in the Mekong delta were concurrently fighting against the RVN under the

\(^{19}\) The Hoa Hao sect was founded by a twenty-year-old named Huynh Phu So (often called Duc Thay), in Hoa Hao village (Phu My town at present), Phu Tan, An Giang, conveying a message of apocalypse and collective salvation. After 1943, the Hoa Hao sect grew stronger and played a significantly political role in resisting French colonialism. The Hoa Hao sect gathered a hundred thousand adepts of whom thousands were militarized. The Hoa Hao sect was dominant in the delta, especially in the Hau Giang region (Biggs, 2010, p. 136; Brocheux, 1995, p. 189; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 1983).


\(^{21}\) Ngo Dinh Nhiem suppressed the Hoa Hao sect and famous Hoa Hao sectarians such as Ba Cut and Tran Van Soai reacted against their incorporation into the Vietnamese national army (Brocheux, 1995, p. 205).

\(^{22}\) In 1954, the Ngo Dinh Diem government set up \(\text{khu dinh dien}\) (planned agricultural settlement) in Cai San for the settlement of about 100,000 refugees from the North, mostly Catholics (Brocheux, 1995, p. 205).
leadership of the Vietnamese communist-led resistance or ‘Viet Cong’, who were fighting for their own vision of a free and independent Vietnamese nation (Brocheux, 1995). During the ‘Vietnam War’, the mountain massif in Tri Ton was again chosen as a revolutionary base. Owing to the quantity of bombs dropped on it by the American airforce, Tuc Dup hill was known as ‘one million dollar hill’. This hill, located to the northwest of Nui To, with a height of about 200 meters, had many caves and tunnels in a two kilometer area that were advantageous for the guerrilla war against America (Son Nam, 2005b, p. 374).

One of the effects of the war was to greatly accelerate the pace of urbanization in Southern Vietnam. The town of Long Xuyen had been a relatively minor trade, transport, military and administrative hub since the pre-colonial period. During the boom years under French colonialism it expanded as a provincial capital and was one of many Mekong river ports that grew in importance as a trading, transport, rice milling and administrative hub. During the colonial and post-colonial era, many ethnic Chinese and ethnic Vietnamese or Kinh worked in towns such as this as traders, transporters, small shopkeepers and administrators (Brocheux, 1995, p. 92). During the French war and the later ‘Vietnam War’ in which the US and its allies were involved, tens of thousands of peasants, rich and poor, fled the rural areas which had become battlefields for the safety of the cities. Being peaceful places, the population of Long Xuyen and neighboring provincial centers such as Chau Doc and Can Tho, along with smaller district centers such as Tri Ton and Thot Not, swelled with war refugees. District capitals such as Tri Ton also became bases for a significant concentration of RVN soldiers (Mac Duong, 1991; Son Nam, 2005b, p. 230).

The gap between the cities and the countryside yawned wide during this time. During the war, the cities were islands of peace and security whose residents had access to markets, consumer goods, and schooling, jobs and business opportunities. Meanwhile the countryside fell behind owing to the poor security situation and the lack of services, infrastructure and economic opportunities. Those who followed the communist-led resistance led precarious lives, constantly under attack. The remaining rural residents were concentrated into fortified residential areas called strategic hamlets (ap chien luoc) and were surrounded by barbed wire and guards in the attempt to prevent the residents being recruited by or giving their support to the communist resistance forces. During this time the
government strongly propagated its ideology of anticommunist Vietnamese nationalism among urban residents, who learnt in their school texts books, civic rituals and political campaigns to identify themselves as proud descendants of an ancient Vietnamese national tradition. Compared with the socialist regime that replaced the RVN in 1975, there was relatively little emphasis on Vietnam being a multi-ethnic nation. The insistent message of RVN government ideology was that all citizens were culturally Vietnamese, regardless of whether they may have been of Chinese, Khmer or Cham origin (Mac Duong, 1991; Phan An, 1991; Taylor, 2014b, p. 184).

After the war ended and Vietnam was unified, the label given to ethnic Vietnamese by the new government was ‘Kinh’, following conventions already in place in the North. After a decade of attempting socialist collectivization, the government switched to a socialist market economy under the policy called Renovation (Doi Moi). From this time on, Kinh people in urban and rural areas were set on a new path towards prosperity and economic development. In a climate of market-oriented policies, many aspired to improve themselves through education, business and private sector employment and identified with wealthy market driven societies like Singapore and Japan that had not been held back by war. The government instigated socialization policies (chinh sach xa hoi hoa) that retreated from the state welfare emphases of the socialist era and encouraged citizens to take responsibility in contributing materially to social services for their own education, health and old age support, for example by participating in social insurance schemes (Taylor, 2007, p. 20).

In the context of such developments, many Kinh people who saw themselves as on the road to a modern, industrialized, urban future tended to define themselves contrastively with the Khmers whom they often viewed as resistant to development. The Khmers were seen as predominantly residing in the countryside, as backward and poor, and lacking in the ability to improve their lot (Taylor, 2007, p. 6). Many witnessed the significant support the government was pouring into Khmer communities to develop them. While not resenting the support that the Khmers were receiving from the government, urban and middle class Vietnamese tended to define themselves by contrast as responsible, competent and self-reliant people. As a result of targeted government campaigns to assist the Khmers with free schooling, healthcare, housing, loans and other assistance, many Kinh held the view that the Khmers were by definition poor and miserable, unable to help themselves and perhaps
lazy and undeserving. These perceptions of ethnic difference were relatively new and were very much the product of the ethnically-based premises of government poverty and development discourses.

**The Ethnic Khmer**

Khmer people in Vietnam reside mainly in seven different geographical locations: coastal dune belt (Tra Vinh and Vinh Long), coastal river-dune complex (Soc Trang and Bac Lieu), freshwater rivers (Vinh Long, Can Tho and Hau Giang), saltwater rivers (Ca Mau and Kien Giang), flooded mountains (An Giang), oceanside mountains (Kien Giang), and northeast uplands (Tay Ninh and Ho Chi Minh city) (Taylor, 2014b, p. 11). Khmer people traditionally gathered together into hamlets, called ‘*phum*’,23 which are very close to their cultivated land. Theravada Buddhism is for almost all Khmers their only religion, which strongly influences and rules over almost all aspects of their life, including production, material and spiritual cultural aspects, as well as their traditional social institutions. Each hamlet (*phum*) has a pagoda, which plays an important role in the social and mental life of the Khmer community. Pagodas are not only places for religious activities but also cultural centers where the young people can learn Khmer language and human morality. Pagodas are also centers where Khmer skills in architecture, woodworking, art and sculpture are practiced and on display (Vo Cong Nguyen, 2008, p. 116). In addition, Khmers in the delta of Mekong are also under the strong influence of folk beliefs—in a land where nature is still powerful and mysterious, people believe in powerful magic and spirits—and Brahmanism and spirit worship.

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23 Since or before French times, Khmers have gathered in hamlets (*phum*), each consisting of 50-60 households. Their own elders represented the residents of each hamlet (Brocheux, 1995, p. 94).
In An Giang, Khmer people settle in five districts but most of them reside in Bay Nui area (Seven Mountains) in Tri Ton and Tinh Bien districts while a small number of them live in Chau Thanh, Thoai Son and Chau Phu. They are mainly concentrated in rural areas along the mountain slopes in the border area or along the waterways. The cultural identities of Khmer people in An Giang province have been shaped in the context of rice production, mountain-based livelihoods, Khmer mythological thought, and the influence of Theravada Buddhism (Taylor, 2014b, p. 163). The main livelihood of most Khmer people is agricultural production. The main incomes of most Khmer households are from growing rice and other crops, animal husbandry (the raising of pigs, cows, chickens and ducks) and seasonal work for hire. Some also make a living from handicraft production—Palmyra sugar, pottery and textile products. Many young Khmers have been migrating to cities in search of work in recent years: mainly to work in factories, for few can get official jobs. Various forms of socioeconomic cooperation and exchange and cultural integration exist between Khmer people and Vietnamese, Chinese and Cham people that have a long history.
A popular depiction of the Khmers as ‘backward’ and ‘poor’ and ‘deficient’ can be found in most development reports. And their poverty is widely accounted for in terms of their remoteness and insularity and their technically backward and primitive agrarian livelihoods (Phan An, 1991). Rarely have any explanations for their poverty been related to external factors such as the impacts of wars and the changing policies of different authorities over history, which repeatedly unsettled Khmers livelihoods. In the Gia Long Reign (1802-1820), the basic policy of the Vietnamese court toward the Khmer people emphasized Khmer self-governance and coexistence. King Gia Long’s aim was to keep Vietnamese and other ethnic groups separate, ensure that ethnic groups kept their own autonomy and preserve peaceful coexistence among ethnic groups. The relationship between Vietnamese and Khmer people was stable during this time and both Khmer and Kinh people helped each other to clear a lot of wild land in South Vietnam (Wook, 2004, p. 34).

However, the relations of Khmers and ethnic Vietnamese people entered into a phase of ethnic hostility during Minh Mang Reign (1820-1841). Minh Mang initiated strict reforms on such issues as tax collection, education, and land management across the country. Different from the policy of Gia Long reign, to conduct his assimilation policy,24 Minh Mang withdrew the rights to self-governance of Khmer people and relocated Kinh and Hoa people to live close to Khmer communities. Such assimilation policies led to constant rebellions and insurrections of Khmer toward Vietnamese authorities from 1838 onward (Biggs, 2010, p. 69; Brocheux, 1995, p. 12; Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, 1992; Wook, 2004, pp. 138-152). Under Minh Mang’s reign, Khmers were brutally maltreated by Nguyen’s troops. Their lands were stolen, their pagodas were destroyed and even Khmer monks were subjected to violence. During this period, relations between Khmer and Vietnamese were tense. Khmer people hated Vietnamese on the one hand and Vietnamese severely disparaged Khmers on the other. So conflicts between Vietnamese and Khmer are sometimes traced to the Nguyen’s Dynasty assimilation policy to Khmer people (Mac Duong, 1991, p. 49). In addition, the harsh treatment of Vietnamese authorities to Khmer workers during the digging of the Vinh Te Canal is recalled in a common folk belief among

24 Believing that Confucianism was the proper doctrine under which to organize the state and society, Minh Mang made efforts to Vietnamize the delta population. Under the Minh Mang reign, all delta inhabitants in Cambodia and in Southern Vietnam were forced to dress like the Vietnamese, to learn the Vietnamese language (Khmer language learning was banned) and be named as Vietnamese. Family names such as Chau, Danh, Kim, Son, Thach replaced Khmer names (Phan An, 1991).
Khmer people, that after being defeated in the insurrections, Khmer leaders were buried alive. Three Khmers would be buried alive up to their necks with their heads close together in a three-cornered arrangement that was used as a stove to cook rice or boil water for tea (Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, 1992).

During the French colonial era, French administrators maintained a ‘divide and rule policy’ by stressing the differences between ethnic groups and emphasizing a governance policy of maintaining the original ethnic status quo (*Duy tri xa hoi nguyen trang*). The existence of a civilizational divide between the ‘Annamites’ (today’s Vietnamese or ethnic Kinh) and the ‘Cambodians’ (today’s ethnic Khmers) was stressed. Vietnamese were depicted as dynamic and expansionist and the Khmers as passive and insular (Malleret, 1946, cited by Taylor, 2014). In addition, French scholars observed that the Khmers preferred to withdraw into isolated places such as the mountains and coasts with limited contact with the outside world in order to protect their tradition and preserve their identity (Aymonier, 1901 cited by Taylor, 2014). Such an ethnic and cultural division helped to justify the French presence in Indochina and its role in maintaining cultural distinction of Khmers and protecting the weaker and threatened Khmers against the more assertive and assimilationist Vietnamese (Brocheux, 1995, p. 137; Mac Duong, 1991; Phan An, 1991).

Besides stressing the ethnic divide between Khmer and Vietnamese, the French also strengthened the ties between the Khmers in the Mekong Delta and Cambodia through education and religion (Edwards, 2007). History books published in French times about the decline of the Khmer Empire triggered Khmers to struggle against Vietnamese to dispute for the land in the Mekong Delta and build their own autonomous society. Since 1950, the French used more Khmer troops and trained Khmer junior officers to attack Vietnamese resistance areas in the South West (Mac Duong, 1991, p. 53). During the wars of decolonization in the Mekong Delta, Kinh and Khmer people rallied together in collective resistance against the French. However, the relationship between Khmers and Kinh in many areas was often hostile and violent. Various rival nationalists groups arose fighting against each other as well as against French colonialism. They included a Khmer nationalist group that pursued a vision of Khmer independence and Viet Minh who sought Vietnamese national independence. Many Khmers rallied behind local leaders to fight local rivals such
as the Hoa Hao for power and there were a number of serious clashes. Amidst the fighting there were persistent rumors of massacres and counter massacres by Kinh against Khmers and vice versa that led some Khmers in this region to consolidate a sense of themselves as under siege and at risk of losing their land to the Vietnamese and disappearing as a race. French authorities were able to rely on such myths and resentments to secure the alliance of the Khmers against Vietnamese nationalism (Mac Duong, 1991; McHale, 2013; Taylor, 2013).

After 1954, Ngo Dinh Diem’s government attempted to suppress Cambodian nationalism among the Khmers by grafting the Khmers of the Mekong delta onto the Vietnamese as 'Vietnamese of Cambodian Origin' (Người Việt gốc Mien). Conducting an assimilation policy similar to that of the Nguyen Dynasty, the government closed Khmer language schools, forbade the study of Pali and required Khmers to study in the Vietnamese state school system, conferred Vietnamese citizenship on the Khmers, limited their religious practices and initiated compulsory military service. During this period, their settlement was seriously disturbed, many hamlets (phum) became strategic hamlets and many hamlets were demolished by RVN troops forcing Khmers to migrate to safer areas in the cities. Many Khmers served in the RVN armed forces thus tying them more closely to the Vietnamese national project (Brocheux, 1995; Le Huong, 1969; Phan An, 1991; Taylor, 2014b, p. 184).

 Soon after Vietnam gained independence and unification in 1975, Khmer nationalist sentiments flared up again in the western Mekong delta with the rise of the Khmer Rouge in neighboring Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge army invaded Vietnam across the border, killing thousands of border dwellers and kidnapping many Khmers and bringing them back to Cambodia with the apparent intention to liberate the Khmers of the Mekong delta from the Vietnamese. It is probable that a few Khmers with Khmer nationalist thought in An Giang also somehow supported the Khmer Rouge, some voluntarily following the Khmer Rouge to Cambodia. The exact numbers are unknown, however, it is known that the Khmers from Vietnam who were relocated to Democratic Kampuchea either met their deaths or suffered terribly during that time (Taylor, 2014a, p. 60; 2014b, p. 185).
These attacks had the effect of consolidating anti-Khmer sentiments among Kinh border dwellers at this time and the view that the ethnic Khmers of the Mekong delta were not really Vietnamese at all. They were mistrusted as supporters of the Khmer Rouge and as harboring intentions to reclaim the Mekong delta from Vietnam and wipe out all its Vietnamese residents. At that time, the ethnic Khmers were regarded as ‘Cambodians’ or as Khmer Rouge and hence as a threat to the ethnic Vietnamese (Taylor, 2014a, pp. 60-61).

In 1978, the residents of the mountain massif in Tri Ton suffered more brutal attacks by Khmer Rouge troops. In September 1978, all surviving locals of Khmer background were removed from this border area by the Vietnamese government and deported to Hau Giang, Soc Trang and Tra Vinh provinces in the eastern Mekong Delta. Among the deported Khmers this policy gave rise to resentment, feelings of being neglected and mistrusted, and led to significant suffering and displacement. With limited supplies from the Vietnamese government, the displaced Khmers had to set up their living again in unfamiliar and wild areas, which were called New Economic Zones. Suffering harsh living conditions for one to two years, they were glad to be allowed to return to their homeland. Sadly, they lost their homes and farmlands as they had been occupied by newcomers in their absence. This issue resulted in a land dispute between Kinh and Khmer people lasting for many years. Until now, some Khmers still have not recovered all of their lost land (Taylor, 2014b, p. 186).

During the subsidy period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, like all other Vietnamese citizens, Khmers were forced to contribute their time, labor and land to public irrigation works and collectives while their original land was shared equally to landless people. After being given their land back in 1986, the lives of the Khmer locals were again transformed by agricultural intensification, infrastructure and economic development programs of the government. Their traditional cultivation, floating rice, was put to an end because of flood

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25 Settlements across the border were constantly attacked and both Khmer and Vietnamese residents were killed. In 1978, Phnom Tuk (Ba Chuc town) was occupied for over a week and it was estimated that more than 3,000 locals were killed. Thousands of Khmer locals were forced to follow Khmer Rouge troops to Cambodia and coerced to do canal digging, road building and communal agriculture. Many of them had died, mainly of starvation and disease, before the failure of the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea in early 1979 (Taylor, 2014b, p. 185).

26 When Khmer residents were removed to Hau Giang, many Vietnamese, mostly from the urban center of An Giang, migrated to this area. Some were officially assigned to work on agricultural development but most were spontaneous migrants who took over the homes and lands of Khmers when they were away.
control systems. Instead, new rice breeds with shorter growing season and higher productivity were introduced to the Khmer locals. In the mid-1990s, the local government also constructed water systems for the dry-season irrigation of newly introduced rice breeds. However, Khmer farmers frequently experienced losses and fell into debt and poverty because of the high investment costs of such new forms of agriculture (Taylor, 2014b, pp. 187-188).

2.3 Cultural Exchanges between Groups

It is historically recorded that the first formal interaction between Cambodia and Vietnam was the elite interethnic marriage of King Nguyen Phuc Nguyen’s daughter, Ngoc Van princess, and King Chey Chettha II of Chan Lap Dynasty in 1620. With the political purpose of seeking a powerful alliance from Nguyen Dynasty to prevent Thai influence, King Chey Chettha II asked Lord Nguyen to marry his daughter. This interethnic marriage marked a new chapter in Vietnam-Khmer relations (Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, 1992; Son Nam, 2004; Truong Luu et al., 1993). In this arranged marriage, King Nguyen Phuc Nguyen also had an underlying purpose to encroach Chan Lap’s territory in a peaceful way. This is considered as a remarkable event, leading the spread of Kinh people to the present day Southern Vietnam. With the help of the Viet queen, settlement of Kinh people (peasants, artisans, or merchants) took place in the present-day Southern Vietnam (Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, 1992). It is recorded that in 1625, King Chey Chettha II allowed 4,000 Vietnamese households settling in the present-day Southern Vietnam (Truong Luu et al., 1993). In the harsh time of wild land reclamation, Khmers and Vietnamese peacefully helped each other in their settlements and collaborated in their efforts as land pioneers in the Mekong Delta.

Since the eighteenth century, an ethnically blended society was a distinct peculiarity for the Mekong Delta in general and An Giang in particular. The Mekong Delta was described as ‘an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous world’ of Chinese, Khmer, Cham and Vietnamese residents. Its diversity was further intensified in contact with Western culture through trading interaction and colonization. Any mixture of languages, including Chinese, Vietnamese, French, English, Malay and Thai might be heard spoken at a market or
worksite and the ethnic mixture could even be traced in families themselves (Biggs, 2010, p. 16; Huynh Ngoc Trang & Truong Ngoc Tuong, 1999; Nguyen Cong Binh, 1990, p. 21).

Brocheux analyzed the heterogeneous features of ‘Mien Tay’ (the Mekong Delta) as shaped not merely by the juxtaposition of ethnic groups but also by mutual interaction through economic tasks. Their interaction is structured in a solidly established social division of labor—a close association between Vietnamese or Khmer peasants, fishermen, and woodcutters, on the other hand, and Chinese merchant-landers and transporters on the other (Brocheux, 1995, p. 92).

As discussed in previous sections, the relationship of Khmer and Kinh people has been through several episodes of conflict since the late eighteenth century. Their tension was rooted in the assimilation policy of the Nguyen Dynasty and Ngo Dinh Diem’s government and the ethnic ‘divide and rule policy’ of the French colonialists (Mac Duong, 1991, p.55). Regardless of tensions and hostility, Khmers and Kinh people often have been close and mutually assisted each other to overcome difficulties. The ethnic unity of Vietnamese and Khmer in their revolutionary struggle against exploiters, feudalists and foreign oppressors has been emphasized in official history. This history has shown that Khmers and Kinh always cooperated in fighting against local class oppressors, the French colonialists and the Americans.

Vietnamese scholars have argued that Khmer people cooperated with Vietnamese in many resistance actions against French occupation in many localities across the South. The Southern uprising in 1940 rallied a cooperation of Khmer and Vietnamese but the uprising failed and thousands of Khmer and Vietnamese soldiers were killed. In addition, a number of Khmer laborers and intellectuals also were involved in the August Revolutionary Uprising in 1945. Many Khmer localities in Cuu Long, Hau Giang, Kien Giang, and Dong Thap became resistance bases, home to patriotic forces in the South (Mac Duong, 1991; Phan Thi Yen Tuyet, 1991). Under French governance, to escape from the hardship in their hometown, some Khmers traveled from their hamlet to seek a better livelihood and settled among Vietnamese in inhabited zones in the provinces of Rach Gia and Bac Lieu. Settling among the Vietnamese, Khmer customs were sometimes abandoned. Women were
observed to wear their *sampots* (traditional skirts) only on feast days and they also adopted Vietnamese language and customs (Brocheux, 1995, p. 94).

The collaboration of Khmer and Kinh people was also seen in their participation in the fighting against the American-backed government in South Vietnam under the party’s leadership, especially in guerilla warfare and mass protests. Many revolutionary bases were located in Khmer localities. Khmer locals were the major suppliers of food, medicines and ammunition to the communist troops in their localities (Mac Duong, 1991; Phan Thi Yen Tuyet, 1991).

In 1985, the operation of rock mining in the district became a pull factor attracting many unemployed Kinh males to migrate to Tri Ton district in search of work in the mining industry. Meanwhile Tri Ton district capital has been the central hub of administration and commerce in the region, sectors which are primarily staffed by Kinh men and women. This mountainous region has been home to a mixed Vietnamese-Khmer population, in which Vietnamese prevails as the language of trade, administration and intercultural interaction so it is hard for Khmer to avoid adopting Vietnamese language and culture even though Khmers strongly value and maintain their culture and traditional practices. For future accomplishment in the Vietnamese language-dominated nation, most Khmer youths attend Vietnamese schools and rarely attend their traditional Khmer literacy classes held in temples for children during the school holidays. However, via frequent interaction, the children of Vietnamese migrants also learn some spoken Khmer picked up in classes, in the playground, and at temple festivals (Taylor, 2014b, p. 188). We can also observe that Vietnamese and Khmer living in the mountain massif celebrate both Tet Nguyen Dan (Vietnamese New Year) and Chol Chonam Thomay (Khmer New Year) festivals.

The most notable interethnic mass phenomenon in this area in recent times has been the migration of young low socioeconomic status Khmers to the big cities of Vietnam’s southeast in search of work in factories or enterprises. In the 1990s, different sources of foreign investment capital were attracted to Vietnam and invested in industrial zones in and around the big cities. Owing to landlessness and the lack of work opportunities in their rural home villages, many young low-educated Khmer people have gone to Binh Duong or
Ho Chi Minh City to work in the industrial zones. This phenomenon has appeared in the study area since 1990 but it has become more popular since 2003.

The other interesting intercultural phenomenon taking place in An Giang in recent years has been the rise of interethnic marriages between people of Kinh and Khmer backgrounds. This phenomenon has occurred in tandem with the intensification of agrarian production, economic exchanges, rural development programs and new migration streams that have been associated with this province since the market reforms of the mid-1980s. However, unlike these other developments, such marriages have received almost no attention in the media and in scholarship. Consequently little is known about the people in these interethnic marriages, how and why they get married, or what their experiences of married life and family are like. Investigating this under-researched topic is taken up in the rest of this thesis.
Chapter 3

Bridging the Gaps

One of the puzzles that makes the study of interethnic marriages so intriguing is that these relationships represent a union of the most intimate kind between individuals and families from often strikingly disparate ethnic, cultural and social circumstances. Comparative studies of interethnic marriage have devoted considerable attention to exploring the variety and extent of the ‘gaps’ or divides that exist between the spouses in such marriage and the obstacles that stand in the way of developing viable and high quality marital relationships. These gaps include differences not only in respect of ethnic identification but also substantive cultural differences such as differences in the language spoken by partners in such marriages and/or their families (Barbara, 1989; Gordon, 1972; Harré, 1966; Higgins et al., 2002; Kalmijn, 1998). Scholars have pointed to the fact that such marriages often involve unions between people from disparate geographical backgrounds, be that from distinct ethnic enclaves in the same city or, in the case of transnational marriages, from different countries with widely differing cultural, social and institutional contexts (Klein, 2001; Lee, 2006; McFadden & Moore, 2001; Williams & Yu, 2006). Many studies explore interethnic marriage as very often implicating the bridging of substantive social divides; with distinctions of class, education, occupation and status often seen as comprising the true essence of the divide that exists between the partners in such marriages (Barbara, 1989; Biesanz & Smith, 1951; Bystydzienski, 2011). Finally and sometimes most significantly, researchers have pointed to the way that prejudice, or stereotypes about the alien, disreputable and/or incompatible characteristics of the ethnic other—often imagined in racially essentialist ways as biologically innate or culturally ineradicable—can significantly impinge upon the viability of such unions (Harré, 1966; Inman et al., 2011; Jackman & Crane, 1986; Lee, 1988; Lee, 2006).

However, in the effort to resolve the puzzle of interethnic marriage, the comparative literature also explores the range of factors, contexts and processes that mitigate against
such gaps and facilitate interethnic marriages. For examples some studies discuss the marriage market, the contexts such as workplaces, schools and neighborhoods (and today the Internet), that facilitate the development of unions between people from different geographical, occupational or social backgrounds (Golden, 1959; Houston et al., 2005; Kalmijn, 1998; Klein, 2001; Muttarak, 2004). Other studies discuss modernization processes—including migration, education, social integration policies or positive discrimination policies—that act to bridge the geographical, social, or cultural divides between groups and overcome the barriers to marriage between ethnic groups (Bystydzienski, 2011; Geertz, 1963; Huntington, 1968; Williams & Yu, 2006). A major vein of research has been attention to the social backgrounds of spouses in interethnic marriages, examining facilitating social factors such as the educational, occupational, class or status homogamy that exists between individual spouses. Such factors have been found to mitigate against the broad sociocultural differences between groups that tend to constrain the incidence of contact between them (Fu, 2001; Kalmijn, 1991b, 1998). Finally, factors such as personal experience and education have been shown to have an ameliorating effect on the cultural and racial stereotypes that may inhibit interethnic marriage (Clark-Ibáñez & Felmlee, 2004; Cohen, 1977; Kalmijn, 1998; Lee, 1988; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

In the specific case of interethnic Kinh-Khmer marriages in An Giang, we can readily see the interplay between these two sets of issues. On the one hand, the geographical divide can hinder Khmer and Kinh people from meeting and forming close relationships. In addition, the gaps in socioeconomic status between Khmer and Kinh groups are very significant. Disparities in educational level, occupation and economic status between these groups are significant barriers impeding them from developing close and intimate relationships. Furthermore, social stereotypes that have emerged over history can also be a substantial obstacle to the viability of such marital unions. On the other hand it is clear that several factors and processes serve to soften or constrain the effects of such differences and make it conceivable possible for marriages between Khmers and Kinh to take place. They include the modernization process, especially migration for education and work, which has bridged the geographical gap and facilitated their proximity. In addition, state policies to support ethnic minorities further close the socioeconomic gap between Kinh and Khmer groups.
Social integration policies and positive discrimination policies have the effect of eliminating mutual mistrust and the stereotypes these groups have towards each other.

This chapter will discuss this dynamic by first presenting an account of the significant socioeconomic gaps between Khmer and Kinh groups and the lingering social stereotypes they have toward each other that act as barriers hindering them from developing close personal relationships. Following that, in the next section of this chapter, I will highlight some of the facilitating factors that have bridged the gaps between these two groups and have enriched their mutual understanding and reduced their prejudices toward each other. I then present some evidence about the incidence of Kinh-Khmer marriages in recent history, drawing largely on oral history. A fluctuation in the incidence of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage in recent times is recounted, recalled through the memory of elderly Khmer interlocutors and my own personal experiences. Finally, to give a sense of the contemporary incidence of such marriages, original data on Khmer and Kinh intermarriage in Tri Ton district will be presented at the end of the chapter.

3.1 Socioeconomic Differentiation

\textit{Educational Disparities}

Vietnam has significant disparities in educational participation between ethnic groups. Official development reports routinely note the comparatively low level of education of ethnic minority groups such as the Khmer. For instance, the Vietnam office of the Save the Children Organization as recently as 2015 reported that the gap between ethnic minority and majority groups in terms of enrolment rate is still wide:

The primary school enrolment rate among [the] Kinh ethnic group is as high as 95%, while the rate remains much lower among ethnic minority groups: About 71% of Dao children, 72% H’mong children and 86.4% of Khmer children attend primary school.\textsuperscript{27}

The disparity in school completion rates between minorities and the majority in Vietnam increases sharply at higher levels of education. A UNICEF report dated 2010 noted that the

primary completion rate for Kinh students was 86 per cent, while the rate for ethnic minority children was only 61 per cent.\textsuperscript{28} Using the latest available statistics from the 2006 Living Standards survey, Baulch and colleagues report that by high school, the gap in enrolment levels between Kinh and Khmers has widened further. In 2006, almost sixty percent of Kinh children attended upper secondary school, compared to just under ten percent for the Khmer (Baulch et al., 2010, p. 18). Like their other ethnic minority counterparts, comparatively few Khmers make it to post-secondary schooling. Baulch and his co-authors note that young people from the ethnic minorities nationwide ‘make up just 2.5 percent of all post-secondary students (compared to their population share of approximately 16–17 percent)’ (Baulch et al., 2010, pp. 22-23).

A substantial gap exists in the literacy rate between Khmer and Kinh groups (Figure 3.1):

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3_1.png}
\caption{Literacy rate of Khmer and Kinh ethnic group aged 15 and older, 2009}
\end{figure}

Source: UNFPA, 2011

It is obvious from this figure that the literacy rate of Kinh is much higher than that of Khmer (95.9 percent compared to 73.5 percent). Importantly, the literacy rate of female Khmers is very low, only 68 percent, suggesting that the opportunity and conditions in accessing the education system for female Khmer may be less favorable.

In comparison to the average educational level of Vietnamese, the educational level of Khmer is quite low for a variety of reasons. Taylor (2004b) analyzed that even though Khmers are favorably provided free of charge education, and reduced requirements in school and university admission, Khmer students still struggle with a curriculum taught in an unfamiliar language (teaching is delivered in Vietnamese) (p.262). In addition, the inconvenient and poor living conditions in the border and mountainside region of Khmer people is not attractive to Vietnamese teachers, and the teaching staff in Khmer localities is inadequate in quantity and poor in quality, which strongly impacts on the quality of education offered to Khmer students (p.244).

**Occupational Differentiation**

Most Khmer people are farmers; they have been making a living through agricultural production, mainly rice growing, since the land reclamation. Khmers in An Giang’s mountainous massif cultivate rice on two types of field, upper paddy fields and lower paddy fields. Before 1975, land ownership had existed among Khmer community. Individuals privately owned their land, which was reclaimed by themselves, or they inherited the land from their older generation. Some lands were owned by the temple and referred to as ‘Temple land’. After 1986, especially since the early 1990s, Khmer people in An Giang have been encouraged to change their farming methods to adapt to the ecology of the flooding area and increase agricultural production. With advice from local agricultural officials and researchers, they now sow many new rice varieties in the upper fields and the lower fields as well, and they also used fertilizer together with animal manure and pesticide to achieve an abundant harvest. As a result, the productivity and yield of rice have been noticeably higher. In addition, the expansion of irrigation systems with canals supplying water for fields of the Khmer people in An Giang, has helped them to expand the cultivating area and increase the annual number of crops from one crop a year to two to three crops per year. Their income has increased significantly as a result of greater production. However, Taylor (2014b) argued that the new farming method, which entails high input costs for intensive hired labor and pesticide and fertilizer, frequently returns a

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29 The upper paddy fields are normally located at the foothills, as only one crop is cultivated annually on the rainwater-dependent upper paddy fields.
30 The lower paddy fields can be called wet rice fields and are located in areas which are submerged by floodwater for some months annually.
loss and is associated with a growing number of officially recorded landless Khmer households (pp.187-188).

Corn, sweet potatoes, peas, cucumber and cassava are also grown as additional crops after the rice season. Khmer farmers have also cultivated fruit trees, such as mango, jackfruit, cashew and banana. Sugar palms are normally grown along the edges of rice fields and harvested and processed for multi-products. Apart from farming, Khmer people in An Giang also raise domestic fowls (such as chickens and ducks) and animals (such as cows, buffalos, pigs and horses) in order to use them for work (such as drawing plough/rakes and carts) associated with agricultural production, rural mountain transportation, to provide food for daily needs of residents as well as to serve their trade. Several Khmer families have been living on the cattle trading business with dealers from other areas for generations. Some families manage small house-based stalls for selling daily necessary items and some Khmers work as mobile traders, traveling with their goods from house to house using bicycles, motorbikes and carts. In addition, Khmer also collect herbal medicine ingredients from the forested mountain slopes and sell them to plains-based wholesalers as well as to local stallholders (Taylor, 2014b, pp. 168-183).

In addition, locally available materials are used to make handicraft products to meet the needs and requirements of the community. Until now, pottery-making, weaving and Palmyra sugar-making are processed by applying production techniques from previous generations. Trading and business activities in this mountainous region are mainly dominated by Hoa or to some extent by Vietnamese. However, Khmers are also involved in some trading and commodity exchange of their crops, domestic animals and handicraft products and exploited natural resources in the local markets. In addition, they also have long-term trading interactions with Cambodians across border gates. In other words, Khmer people in An Giang Province have successfully integrated themselves into the market economy to ensure stability in the household economy and contribute in part towards local socioeconomic development (Vo Cong Nguyen, 2008, pp. 101-114)

In recent years, many young Khmers have proven their capacity in official education and more Khmers intellectuals are now present in state economic sectors at provincial, district
and communal levels. However, the number of Khmer staff in the state sector is very limited in comparison to Vietnamese. During the last few years, I observed an increasing number of young Khmers migrating to the Kinh-dominated city not only in search of education but also jobs. More young Khmer intellectuals are present in the state division but many of these migrants work in enterprises or factories.

Similar to Khmers, a large population of Kinh in An Giang reside in rural areas and work in farming: growing rice and various types of crops, animal raising and poultry husbandry. In addition, in recent years, many farmers have also invested in fish culturing, mainly catfish. Besides Hoa, 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 service industries and factory work. In contrast to Khmer people’s limited presence in official and state occupations, Kinh are dominant in state and official sectors, and even in the mountainside region of Khmer people, Kinh dominate the offices of administration. The disparity of their involvement in economic sectors can be seen in the following table (See Table 3.1):

**Table 3.1** Percentage of working population of Kinh and Khmer groups by economic sectors, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic sector</th>
<th>Kinh</th>
<th>Khmer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household enterprises</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>85.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative/collective</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private enterprises</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign invested enterprises</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNFPA, 2011

We can see from Table 3.1 that the Khmer ethnic group mostly work in the household enterprises sector. The percentage of Khmer minority people’s participation in private enterprises, and state and foreign invested enterprises is much lower compared to the Kinh.
ethnic group. Such difference can be explained by the disparity in educational level. Because of the low educational level and low technical qualification, the participation of Khmer people in economic activities is also limited. In addition, language barrier may also hinder their access to this sector.

**Economic status 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 Khmers have been identified as over-represented among Vietnam’s poor. Development reports continue to declare the Khmers as poor, uneducated, remote, backward 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 3.2)

**Table 3.2** The percentage distribution of population of Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups by socioeconomic condition, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Poorest</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Rich</th>
<th>Richest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entire country</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNFPA, 2011

It can be seen from Table 3.2 that most Khmer people are in the poor and poorest groups: 69 percent of their population. In contrast, 52.5 percent of the Kinh population is in the rich and richest groups. The reasons for the poverty of the Khmer people are popularly attributed to their geographical and cultural ‘remoteness’ as well as their religious orientation (Taylor, 2007, p. 9). The reasons for Khmer poverty have been officially and internationally analyzed to be rooted in the Khmers’ characteristics as uneducated, incapable, and inferior and of lower status. Ironically, positive official assistance to support and uplift the Khmers in various poverty alleviation projects consolidated among Kinh a
sense that the Khmers were incompetent, uneducated, incapable of self-help and thus needing special government assistance (Taylor, 2014a, pp. 77-79).

3.2 Stereotypes

The previous section portrayed the relation of Khmer and Kinh groups varying from cooperation to hostility and tension over history. This section further presents different depictions Khmer and Kinh people have toward each other grounded in their historical relations. The relations of Khmers and Vietnamese were very tense and hostile under the Nguyen Dynasty. The Nguyen’s Dynasty’s maltreatment of Khmers saw Khmer people build up a hatred toward Vietnamese, calling them _yuon_ (barbarians of the north) and in turn the Khmer were discriminated as ‘stupid’, ‘ignorant’ and ‘lazy’ and were called _tho_ (men from the earth) by Vietnamese (Brocheux, 1995, p. 95; Phan An, 1991).

Recently, the common discourse in official development reports is that Khmers are ‘overwhelmingly poor’, ‘backward’ and ‘deficient’ compared to the ethnic majority. Their poverty is pervasively linked to their primitive agrarian livelihood, insularity and marginality. Their economic activity, which is small-scale, mono-cultivation, non-diversified, technically backward and strongly dependent on nature and not adapted to the modern market economy is also said to be the result of poverty (Phan An, 1991, p. 109; Taylor, 2014b, pp. 14-15). Taylor (2014b) also points out common views held by Vietnamese of their Khmer neighbors as lazy, earn their living for their immediate needs and live day by day, lack calculation and foresight and never save their earnings or making provision for the future (p.117). Reflecting this kind of socially pervasive discourse, Mr. Ly, one Khmer elderly living in the center in Tri Ton district, also described Khmers as not as competent as Vietnamese neighbors in making productive investments or doing business as Vietnamese are more civilized/advanced and adapted/integrated into mainstream society. He further explained that language barrier and low cultural level limited Khmers from accessing and applying new cultivation techniques in their agricultural production. To him, being too honest was the reason for their failure in doing business. I expressed my uncertainty of his explanation for I saw many Khmer dealers in the town market and even
many of them had lived from the profits of their business for decades. Mr. Ly explained that to some extent most of these people had nuptial relationships with the Hoa (ethnic Chinese)—an ethnic group well known for their competence in trading.

Official reports also explain Khmer’s religious orientation and superstition as the roots of their poverty. As the temple plays an important role in the life of Khmer people, they spend a lot of time, energy and money on their temple refurbishments. Khmers are also depicted as wasting time and money on community festivals and ceremonies. Their livelihood would be much better if they save these resources for productive investments (Phan An, 2008; Taylor, 2007, pp. 9-10). In line with Taylor’s analysis of the pejorative stereotype from the majority toward Khmer, Mrs. Ngan, a former provincial official who had long-term work experience in development programs with the Khmer community often told me that her main impression of the Khmers was their low educational level and overwhelming poverty. Despite her unfavorable comments to Khmers as ‘incapable in schooling’ (*hoc khong noi*) she did not analyze the reasons for their failure in the Vietnamese state school system. She attributed Khmer people’s poverty to their laziness in earning a living/production, to their habit of spending excessive time and money on many community festivals, and to their tendency to look to the government for financial support. Even though Vietnamese neighbors underestimate Khmers as lazy and unintelligent, they also appreciate Khmers for their knowledge and power in magic and esoteric knowledge of medicinal plants and ask for amulets and other forms of magical protection from Khmer monks (Taylor, 2004a, p. 62).

In the Kinh-dominated city where I live and work, I often heard from Kinh elderly residents that Khmers were very ‘aggressive’ and ‘violent’. Many of them recalled Pol Pot’s war when talking about Khmer. Even though I have been married to a Khmer man for more than ten years, the mother of my high school friend still worried for my security. On an occasion I visited my friend, her mother was very curious about my family. She asked constantly ‘How is your family-in-law?’ and ‘How are they treating you?’, ‘How often do you visit them?’, ‘Were you scared when you were in a Khmer community?’. She also advised me to be careful as Khmers were very brutal and reminded me of Pol Pot’s war. Even though I explained that my family-in-law were very kind, that I was well treated
every time I visited them and that the Khmer community was very placid, she still advised me to be careful when I was in Khmer community and if something happened, tell them that I had a marital relationship with Khmers.

However, not all Vietnamese have harsh comments about Khmer’s poverty. Some Vietnamese also expressed their sympathy and compassion toward Khmer’s poverty. Once when I went to her shop to buy some groceries, I had a chat about charity with Mrs. Tien, a small retailer in a market in Long Xuyen city. Mrs. Tien told me that Khmer’s livelihood was so miserable (kho lam) (toi lam) and overwhelmingly poor (ngheo lam) and we should do some charity to help these minority people in the border and mountainous areas. I asked her if she did anything to help these people, she told me that she contributed money to one representative to buy rice and they distributed rice parcels to the most deficient households through a local Khmer temple.

In addition, some Vietnamese also value the ideal life of the Khmer people living in mountainside regions as less crowded, closure to nature and simpler, being away from the influences of the complicated, competitive and crowded cities of the southern plain (Taylor, 2014b, p. 177). In addition, Khmer people are also highly esteemed for their moral richness—being faithful spouses and self-controlled, hard-working employees (Taylor, 2007, p. 28). Mrs. Nhung, an elderly Vietnamese woman with a Khmer spouse, cheerily expressed her normal but ideal life in her Khmer in-law village. She enjoyed the simpler life in her Khmer husband’s hometown because local Khmer people were very honest (thiet tinh), and she could stay away from the complicated and crowded cities that were full of cheating and rationality. In contrast to the pejorative stereotype that Khmers are very aggressive and hate Vietnamese, and her relatives’ warning that Khmer aggression could result in them beheading (cap duon) any one, women or children, Mrs. Nhung told me that local Khmers were very placid (hien lam) and she was beloved by her Khmer neighbors. Even though she could not speak Khmer, her Khmer neighbors tried to communicate in Vietnamese with her when they approached to her.

In turn, Khmer people mistrust and stereotype Vietnamese as ‘dishonest, disloyal and too calculating’ so they are hesitant and very careful in economic transaction with Vietnamese
(Taylor, 2004b, p. 263). However, they also admire their calculating capacity and are attracted by the white skin color of Vietnamese. Even though he had worked in the Kinh-dominated city for many years, Mr. Ri frankly expressed his mistrust toward Vietnamese. During the conversation, it seemed to me that Mr. Ri had a negative attitude toward Kinh people. Even though he knew that I had married a Khmer spouse, Mr. Ri, showed his distrust of Vietnamese. To him, Vietnamese are rational in everything even in selecting a spouse. He was dubious of the reason for Kinh people marrying a Khmer spouse and recalled King Nguyen Phuc Nguyen’s underlying purpose to encroach Chan Lap territory in a peaceful way through his daughter’s arranged marriage. He further stated that educated Kinh men migrating to the mountainous region married well-off or educated Khmer women, not a Khmer farmer, in order to get profit from their wealthy in-law family. He further expressed his disappointment:

> The arising current trend is that socially successful Khmer men prefer having a Kinh wife to a Khmer wife because Kinh women are more beautiful with their white skin, cleverer \([lanh loî]\) and subtler \([ma giao]\) while Khmer women are so naive \([chat phat]\).

### 3.3 Modernization and State Policies on Modernization

The previous two sections have illustrated the socioeconomic gaps between two groups and the stereotypes they have toward each other, which have contributed to preventing them from developing intimate relations. This section will present some facilitating factors bridging the gaps between them.

One significant, influential factor is the government’s reform in 1986. The Sixth Party Congress in 1986 and subsequent congresses issued many policies to bring about ‘the new life’ for Khmer ethnic people. After the Sixth Party Congress, a series of decisions and policies were issued with the aim to support the socioeconomic status of the minority ethnic people. Specifically in the Vietnam Constitution (1992), state policy for ethnic minorities emphasizes equality, solidarity, mutual assistance among ethnic groups, and prohibits all acts of ethnic discrimination; conserves the right to use their own language, ethnic customs,
In addition, Resolution No.22-NQ/TW (27-11-1989) also proposes many state policies to develop the socioeconomic status of the ethnic minority in the mountainous area. Among these policies, priority policies in education for the ethnic minority in mountainous areas are also proposed. Minority people are 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 are to be expanded and strengthened. Priority policies in entrance university examination and grants for ethnic minorities are also proposed in the Resolution.

In addition, two big supporting programs 135 and 134 have been carried out with the aim of hunger eradication and poverty reduction in the ethnic minority people. Program 134 aims to support productive land, residual land, and house and water for the poor ethnic minority households living in difficult material conditions. Program 135 is a development program for the socioeconomic development of communes located in mountainous and remote areas. Especially the program of rural modernization—the mechanization of agriculture, rural electrification and infrastructure programs, and improvements to irrigation, drainage, and flood control—has changed significantly the living standard of Khmer people. With improved infrastructure, Khmer can access electricity and clean water. Importantly, Khmers can widen their knowledge of wider society through media technology and have easier mobility with built roads in their areas connecting with neighboring locations. In addition, Khmers are also provided with free medical care so their health is more regularly checked and treated.

Besides these general supporting policies, specific supporting policies for Khmer ethnic people are defined clearly in Direction 68-CT/TW (18-04-1991). Following on from this policy, a Boarding School was established in Tri Ton district in 1992. The school was established with the first name ‘The Tri Ton Khmer Secondary Boarding School’ for Secondary Khmer students and in 1996, the school was expanded for both secondary and high school students and its name changed to ‘The An Giang Khmer High Boarding School’. The ethnic students studying in the Ethnic Boarding School are given monthly
grants, exemption from paying tuition and many other incentives such as providing belongings, learning tools and transport costs to visit family at New Year and on traditional holidays. The Boarding School for ethnic people has brought the new life to Khmer people in the area. The education level of the Khmer people in the area has been improved significantly. The Ethnic Boarding School has been the place where many generations of Khmer students have received training and many of these students have become leaders, senior professional staff, high educated and qualified officers.

![The An Giang Khmer High Boarding School](image)

**Figure 3.2** The An Giang Khmer High Boarding School

Ethnic minority people are exempt from school fees, have lowered school entry requirements, and are provided free access to boarding schools. Under the priority policy of lowered school entry requirement, Khmer students are selected to attend preparation study and are appointed to study in the university without taking entrance examination. Thanks to the state supporting policies, a lot of Khmer students can gain access to higher education and become leaders, professional officers in different sectors. However, Taylor (2007) argued that exemptions can be counterproductive, as low funding available to schools may result in larger than average class size, poor facilities and poor quality teachers.
Under these supporting policies, the Khmer became aware of the world outside of their settlements but it may threaten the survival of their language, identity and traditions as young Khmers prefer to learn Vietnamese in school, which can ease their future work in Vietnamese society. On the other hand, Khmer students struggle with the official curriculum taught in an unfamiliar language, and live with the perception of being at a ‘low intellectual level’ (trinh do dan tri thap) and have little knowledge and awareness of the wider society (Taylor, 2007, p. 20).

In recent years, besides the program of rural modernization, new farming techniques, new seed varieties and breeds, and agricultural extension have been introduced and applied with the aim of increasing the productivity of rural areas and stabilizing living conditions for farmers. These reforms have resulted in dramatically increased food production which has enabled alleviation of hunger and elevation of the country to become a significant exporter of rice. However, the level of landlessness in the Khmer region has also increased rapidly because of the declining rice price and increasing costs of inputs—fertilizer and pesticide, mechanical and labor services—which has decreased profitability or even resulted in a negative profit ratio. Limited harvest income has to defray various essential expenses such as daily consumables, health and education costs, community festivals and life-cycle ceremonies. As a result, to cover the expenses of the family, they have to sell their plots of land and many Khmers become hired laborers working their former owned land which is now possessed by others. A recent phenomenon is the flow of young Khmers leaving their home land to migrate to unfamiliar cities in search of work due to the lack of jobs in their original village (Taylor, 2004b, 2007).

In general, these policies have eased Khmer’s mobility geographically and socioeconomically. Easier mobility facilitates more interaction with Kinh people. In addition, they also accelerate their movement up the socioeconomic ladder, which narrows the gaps between Khmer and Vietnamese and facilitates their intimate relations.
3.4 Life History of Khmer-Kinh Marriages

This section will present how the occurrence of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage has fluctuated influenced by changes in recent history. The fluctuation of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage over time will be presented through life histories of Khmer elderly and my own personal memories.

Khmer elder’s recollection of the incidence of Khmer-Kinh marriage

Interruption between Kinh and Khmer people has become an emerging phenomenon in recent years. When I was young, this type of interethnic marriage was not accepted. Khmer-Kinh marriage was not popular in the past, especially after the Khmer Rouge war. I also fell in love and wanted to get married with a Kinh woman in my hometown but my mother and my relatives strongly opposed my intimate relations with a Kinh person. My mother reminded me of the hardship we suffered when we were forced to leave our homeland and were relocated to an inhabited region: especially when we lost our land and house when we were allowed back, a year later. My mother threatened to renounce me if I maintained my relationship with my Kinh girlfriend (Mr. Rang, a Khmer elderly man residing in Tri Ton).

The Khmer Rouge war of the 1970s left a legacy of hatred between some Khmer and Kinh that has taken a long time to resolve. The Kinh people I spoke with often thought of the thousands of Vietnamese killed during the Khmer Rouge’s massacre while Khmers remembered how they were maltreated after the border war. At that time, their life in their mountainous hometown was very unsettled and their relationship with Vietnamese was very tense and Khmer-Vietnamese intermarriage was opposed in family and social contexts.

Mr. Ut, an 80 year-old Acha in Co To commune, recalled that Khmer-Kinh intermarriage in his community had fluctuated over the course of his life. He related that Khmers had married Vietnamese before Liberation in 1975. Normally, at that time, Khmer men who were conscripted into the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam were based in Kinh
areas, and, as a result, quite a few fell in love with and married Kinh women. However, for many years after Pol Pot’s war, he rarely heard of the intermarriage of Khmer-Kinh people. Things changed in 1985, when the operation of rock mining attracted many Kinh young men to migrate to this area to work in the mines. Owing to frequent interaction with local Khmer women, Khmer-Kinh marriage occurred again. Especially, in recent years, more young Khmers have left their homeland migrating to Kinh-dominated cities in search of higher education or income earning opportunities. Khmer people were given increased access to higher education and high education provided Khmer people more opportunities to acquire better jobs in the cities along with Kinh people. The gap in socioeconomic status between Kinh and Khmer has been narrowed, which has changed Kinh people’s attitude to Khmer. In addition, their contact with Kinh people helped them to understand each other more clearly and their stereotypes toward each other therefore has been getting softer.

The decline in Khmer-Kinh intermarriage after Pol Pot’s war was rooted in the ethnic tension from both Kinh and Khmer groups. Kinh people were obsessed by Khmer Rouge’s massacre, in which more than 3,000 people were killed and they believed that local Khmers had relations with Pol Pot and local Khmer were very aggressive and could behead (cap duon) other people when they are angry. This belief made Kinh people very scared of Khmer people and widened the distance between Kinh and Khmer people. The occurrence of Kinh–Khmer interethnic marriage during and after this time was very limited not only because of the persons themselves but also because of social pressure. Mr. Khang, a Khmer elder in Tri Ton district told me:

During the period from 1977 to 1984, the marriage occurrence between Kinh and Khmer people temporarily reduced due to the impact of the Khmer Rouge war in the border area. This war impacted greatly on the life of Kinh people and many Kinh lost their family in the war. They thought Khmer in the local area and Khmer Rouge were the same so they had a strong prejudice toward Khmer people. Particularly in Ba Chuc commune, in the past, the local people had a frightening slogan “See any Khmer, kill them all”.

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On the other hand, Mr. Ly, a Khmer elder living in the Khmer-dominated area, recalled that during the border war, Khmers in the border areas of An Giang province were moved to Hau Giang, a Kinh-dominated area, for about one to two years. Their living conditions were very hard in this unfamiliar and inhabited region. During the period Khmer people were away in Hau Giang, this area was inhabited by many Kinh people who came and resided in the empty land of Khmer people. When the war was over, Khmers were allowed to return to their homeland, but Kinh newcomers had occupied their houses and land. Some Kinh people moved to other places but some continued to occupy Khmer’s land. So they lost their houses as well as their land owing to the state collectivization policy at that time. Each returning Khmer household was given land based on the number of household members, not based on what they previously had owned. The life of Khmer people was very hard during that time. Beginning in 1986, Khmer people were given land back according to the Central Government Order. Since then, the relationship of Kinh and Khmer people has become less tense.
Mr. Ly provided an explanation for the recent increase in occurrences of Khmer-Kinh intermarriage:

In the past, Vietnamese did not approve of their children marrying Khmers as they undervalued Khmer due to their poverty and low education. Because of having this prejudice that Khmer were less educated, Khmer people were not included in the mate selection of Kinh people. Many male Khmer dreamed of loving Kinh women in Long Xuyen city but because of the prejudice that Tri Ton district was less developed and impoverished the Kinh party refused. Now Khmers have proven their capacity in education and occupation so the prejudice has becoming softer. In addition, living context also impacted on the occurrence of marriage. For example, working in Long Xuyen city helped male Khmers to interact more with female Kinh, but less opportunity to meet female Khmer so it is very natural for them to fall in love and get married with Kinh people in the city.

Many Khmer elders I talked to shared Mr. Ly’s assessment of the recent phenomenon of Khmer-Kinh intermarriage in their community. Many of them shared the same view of the increasing trend of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage. They explained that in the past, Khmer-Kinh intermarriage was uncommon, since Khmer people mainly resided in their own community ‘phum’ but now Khmer’s mobility was greater and more young Khmers were migrating to Kinh-dominated cities in search of higher education and better income sources so they had more opportunities to develop close relationship with Vietnamese women in school campuses or workplaces. In addition, many young Khmers had successfully climbed the social ladder and narrowed the socioeconomic gap with Vietnamese, which indirectly acted to break the social stigma of Khmers as ‘low-educated’ or ‘poor’.

These elderly Khmer people’s recollections suggest that a fluctuation in the incidence of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage has occurred in tandem with changes in the tenor of ethnic relations in this province.
My own personal memory of Khmer-Kinh marriage in my urban hometown

Being born after the year of Pol Pot war in 1978 and residing in a city away from this multi-war suffering mountainous region, I do not fully feel how much tension and hardship these border residents suffered. What I learned of this border war from schooling and from the elderly is the bloody massacres caused by the cruel and aggressive Khmer Rouge to the mountainous locals which killed more than 3,000 people, including Vietnamese and Khmers. Living in a Kinh-dominated city, I knew very little of the Khmer community and met no Khmer people in my urban hometown when I was young. I guess some Khmer may have migrated and worked somewhere in my hometown then but I may have been too young to be aware of that. The rare chances I met Khmer in person was when my family and I travelled to their mountainous region for the Lady Festival. There, I saw some mobile Khmer women selling sugar palm juice for the pilgrims and travelers. Travelling through their Khmer villages along the mountain massif, my first impression of these mountainous Khmer locals was that their skin was so dark and their living conditions were so ‘poor’ and ‘backward’.

When I grew up and graduated from university and got a job as a teacher in a high school in Thoai Son district—one of five districts having Khmer residents in An Giang province—there were two Khmer students in my class so I had the chance to interact more closely with Khmer people. In contrast to what I had heard of Khmer as aggressive, both of them were very gentle and studious. I was not sure that they were Khmer since their skin was lighter than the Khmer people I had seen in the mountains and they looked not very different from their Vietnamese classmates. I really did not know they were Khmer until looking at their schooling report.

Soon after that I got to know my husband, a Khmer man working in my hometown. He came from a Khmer-dominated commune in Tri Ton district but he could communicate in Vietnamese quite well and he was also well educated and kind. He had been living near Kinh people for many years before meeting me—three years for his high school in ethnically mixed Tri Ton town, four years in a Kinh-dominated city for his under-graduate study, and about three years working in my hometown. Even though we were not in the same workplace, we shared the same occupation sector so we could share funny stories
from our workplaces as well as exchange advice to overcome difficulties in our work. Especially, he shared my view of life and future orientation so I had no ethnic-based motivation against dating or getting married to him.

However, I felt that my intermarriage was somehow unusual when my friends showed their surprising and curious attitudes when I invited them for my wedding ceremony. Another experience I may never forget was my neighbors’ curious attitude during my wedding ceremony, I saw some of them gathered together looking curiously and discussing my marriage. Of course I did not know what they were discussing about my marriage and I did not care what they were thinking of my marriage but I felt that it was unpleasant to some extent. Regardless of what they were discussing of my marriage, this was my marriage and he was my husband who I will be living with so the most important criterion was that we shared the same view of life, not his ethnicity. At that time, I was not aware of whether Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage existed in my urban Kinh-dominated hometown but I heard of no other Khmer-Kinh couples in my hometown. This may be the reason my marriage seemed to be ‘quite strange’ and attracted people’s curiosity.

Through my husband’s network, I got to know two Kinh-Khmer couples residing in my hometown before I did my research. I conducted my field study in 2012 and, through the introduction of these two couples, I was introduced to six more Khmer-Kinh couples in my hometown but I was only able to access four couples (one couple was always busy and I did not get the chance to talk with them). Like my husband, the Khmer spouses in these marriages were all highly educated and had good jobs in the city. Being in the same type of interethnic marriage, these couples were openhearted in sharing their marital stories with me.

Most of these couples had been married for two to six years when I approached them. Talking to these Kinh spouses, it was interesting that some of them had gone through similar experiences to me: experiencing the curiosity of their neighbors to their intermarriage, dealing with the language barrier in visiting in-laws and the limited transmission of Khmer language to the children. Two elderly couples living in the city had married even before me although I was not aware of it at the time. One of them, Mr. Ut, a
retired Khmer official, married a Kinh woman in 1981 soon after the Pol Pot war when the relationship between Khmer and Kinh group was very tense. Mr. Ut recalled that he was assigned to work in the Kinh-dominated city and he got acquainted with his Kinh wife in the same workplace. He told me that both sides of the family supported their marital relationship, but I heard from his friend that his family opposed his marriage so he organized his wedding ceremony by himself with the support of his organization.

It was quite hard for me to find Khmer-Kinh couples of low socioeconomic status in the Kinh-dominated urban area of Long Xuyen. I tried to get information from different sources but I found no couples. Mrs. Ngan, a former provincial officer, told me that most of the Khmer migrants in Long Xuyen city, my hometown, were highly educated people. They all had finished their undergraduate study in An Giang University or Can Tho University and were employed in official jobs in Long Xuyen city. By contrast, most of the low-educated Khmers who migrated from the Khmer rural areas of An Giang went to the big southeastern cities to work in factories or enterprises. I eventually found just one Khmer-Kinh couple in Long Xuyen whose occupational circumstances were unstable.

During Vietnamese New Year (Tet) in 2015, when I went home to visit my family, I had the chance to have dinner with one intermarried couple and a Khmer elder in my hometown whom I previously had interviewed. I learned from them that there were now more Khmer-Kinh intermarried couples in my hometown since I finished my field study. Similar to the interviewed Khmer spouses, the newly wed Khmers are also highly educated and have official jobs—reminding me of what the Khmer elders and officers had predicted about the increasing trend in Khmer-Kinh intermarriage.

### 3.5 Official Data on the Incidence of Khmer-Kinh Intermarriage

Seeking to get the official data of the incident of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages, I went to the provincial and district offices and I found that the data of Khmer-Kinh intermarriage was not officially recorded.\(^{31}\) I got a similar response from the provincial and district offices.

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\(^{31}\) There are no statistics on Khmer-Kinh intermarriage available from the recent Vietnamese censuses or nationally representative surveys.
officers, that only the annual total number of registered marriages was officially recorded, but the records included no ethnic information.

Facing this obstacle to getting access to this data, I remembered that in marriage registration the ethnicity of each spouse is shown in the marriage certificate. Subsequently, I asked the district justice official if the copy of people’s marriage registration was kept in that office. He advised me to go directly to the commune-level justice offices at which people register their marriages. He gave me a list of contact numbers of the communal justice officers in Tri Ton district. I contacted them one by one asking for this data and explained my research purpose. I got the same answer as the provincial and district—that the data of Khmer-Kinh marriage is unavailable—but they said they could search for this data by reviewing the registered marriage books.

As appointed, one afternoon I met one communal justice officer and asked her for the data of Khmer-Kinh intermarriage in the last ten years. Unfortunately, she was not sure how many marriage registration books were available since the archive was not well managed and state officers were continuously circulated: she, for instance, had been assigned to work in that job for just three years. Having no other choice, I was happy to get whatever data were available. She was enthusiastic about reviewing the registered marriage book and searching for my required data but she was continuously interrupted by other responsibilities so I asked if I could search the data by myself. Luckily, she was happy to give me six most recent registered marriage books and let me sit in one corner of the office to search for the data by myself. I was so happy that I could get the archive and what I then did was very simple but time consuming. Each book comprised the complete demographic information of marriage registrations within a 12-month period. What I did was go through each page and record the ethnicity of the couples so that I could get the number of Khmer-Kinh intermarriages among the total number of marriage of this commune in each year. I went through the same process in other communes in Tri Ton district to get the statistical data of Khmer-Kinh couples for the whole district. The collected data of registered Khmer-Kinh marriage in Tri Ton district from 2007 to August 2012 was presented communally in the following tables:
### Table 3.3 Luong Phi commune

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of registered marriage</th>
<th>Number of Registered Kinh-Khmer marriage</th>
<th>Sex of Kinh</th>
<th>Sex of Khmer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1 male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>1 male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3 male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>141</td>
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<td>2.13</td>
<td>1 male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2 male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>76 (Aug)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2 male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3.4 Le Tri commune

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of registered marriage</th>
<th>Number of Kinh-Khmer couples</th>
<th>Number of Kinh</th>
<th>Number of Khmer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>2.94</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>64</td>
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<td>1.56</td>
<td>1 male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>41 (Aug)</td>
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<td>0</td>
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</tr>
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### Table 3.5 Chau Lang commune

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of registered marriage</th>
<th>Number of Kinh-Khmer couples</th>
<th>Number of Kinh</th>
<th>Number of Khmer</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
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<td>89</td>
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<td>4.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>6.16</td>
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</tr>
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<td>5 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Total number of registered marriage</td>
<td>Number of Kinh-Khmer couples</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Number of Kinh</td>
</tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>64</td>
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<td>6.3</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>83</td>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>6.98</td>
<td>4 male</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>3 male</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012 (Aug)</td>
<td>56</td>
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Table 3.7 Nui To commune

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of registered marriage</th>
<th>Number of Kinh-Khmer couples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 (Aug)</td>
<td>92</td>
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Table 3.8 Ba Chuc town

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of registered marriage</th>
<th>Number of Kinh-Khmer couples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
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</table>

89
### Table 3.9 Co To commune (lost marriage registration book in 2007, 2008, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of registered marriage</th>
<th>Number of Kinh-Khmer couples</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number of Kinh</th>
<th>Number of Khmer</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>169</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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### Table 3.10 O Lam commune

<table>
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<th>Number of Kinh-Khmer couples</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number of Kinh</th>
<th>Number of Khmer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1 female</td>
<td>3 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
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<td>3 male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 female</td>
<td>1 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>110</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>2 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>171</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>4 male</td>
<td>4 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1 male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3.11 Tri Ton town

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of registered marriage</th>
<th>Number of Kinh-Khmer couples</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number of Kinh</th>
<th>Number of Khmer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>6 female</td>
<td>7 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
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<td></td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>13 male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>13 female</td>
<td>5 female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We can see from the tables that in an ethnically mixed area, Tri Ton town, and its neighboring commune, Nui To, the incidence of interethnic marriage is quite high. As previously discussed, these are areas where Kinh and Khmer people have had mutual interactions for a long time, so their social relations and cultures are mutually engaged and intimate relationships between Khmer and Kinh people are also socially accepted. Co To commune, which is about 6 kilometers from Tri Ton town, also has a high incidence of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage. Co To commune is a Khmer-dominated area but the operation of rock mines since 1985 has attracted many Kinh manual migrants. As a result of close and direct interaction between these Kinh migrants and local Khmer women, the incidence of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage in this area is quite high. In comparison to other areas, the number of local Khmer females in Co To marrying Kinh spouses is much higher. In other Khmer-dominated communes such as Le Tri, O Lam, the rate of Kinh-Khmer marriage was very low because of their limited interaction with Kinh people. Importantly, Ba Chuc commune—where local people in their lifetimes experienced the massacre by the Khmer Rouge and Khmer people became stigmatized by Kinh residents—had a very low rate of interethnic marriage.

The accuracy of the marriage data is questionable in these ethnically mixed areas because if there are no cultural and social barriers, just based on the relative numbers of Khmer and Kinh in these areas (19.1% Khmer in Tri Ton town, 38.8% Khmer in Co To commune, and 66.6% Khmer in Nui To commune), the proportion of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage might have been higher than the roughly 10% of marriages that were recorded. The reason can be partly be accounted to the under-recorded data of marriage because some of the marriage would have been recorded somewhere, and some are not recorded at all. Chau Lang and An Tuc communes are also Khmer-dominated (Chau Lang commune is 65.6% Khmer and An Tuc commune is 70.8% Khmer) but the proportion of interethnic marriage
in these communes is comparatively high as these communes are quite close to Tri Ton town so they are more exposed to multi-cultural context.

The findings are consistent with the study conducted by Muttarak & Heath (2010) on the trends and patterns of intermarriage among different ethnic groups in Britain that ‘opportunity structures affect intermarriage propensity in which individuals in more diverse residential areas having higher likelihood to form majority/minority partnership’ (p. 275). The data also goes in line with Nagaraj’s findings (2009) on the interethnic marriage in Malaysia that the probability of interethnic marriage is related to the ethnic diversity of the community.

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 and recalled through my own personal memory. In addition, many Khmer-Kinh couples may register their marriages with the local justice office in the Kinh spouse’s hometown32 so the data I collected may not fully record the real number of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages in the district. Furthermore, the justice officers complained to me that some couples did not officially register their marriage so the data of marriage they had was under-recorded.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the variety of major barriers hindering Khmer and Kinh people from developing close relationships. The significant gaps in educational level, occupational sectors and economic status between the two groups can act as obstacles to developing their intimate and marital relationship. In addition, persistent prejudices towards the ethnic other can significantly impede the possibility of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage. The chapter goes further in shedding light on the significant factors lessening such gaps and barriers and facilitating their interethnic marriage. It has shown how modernization, specifically through migration for education and occupation, eases the interaction between them. The effect of social integration policies on easing Khmer’s mobility geographically and

32 In legal terms, the newlywed couple are required to register their marriage in the local justice office of either husband or wife’s side.
socioeconomically and bridging the socioeconomic gaps between Kinh and Khmer people has also been specified.

In addition, a fluctuation in the incidence of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage in recent history was recalled through the memory of the Khmer elderly and my own personal experiences. The evidence of incidence of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage in recent years was illustrated through original data on Khmer and Kinh interethnic marriage in Tri Ton district.

Having set the broad context for this research, it is possible to now turn to the specific case studies. In the following chapters I describe in depth the experience of interethnic marriage through the stories of the thirty-five couples whose cases I researched. I first investigate how the spouses in Khmer-Kinh marriages met, the societal reactions to their marriages, and the couples’ experiences of deciding to marry out. I then explore what has made their marital life viable and yet also problematic under the pressure of socioeconomic disparities, pervasive stereotypes and substantive cultural differences. Finally I examine how their cultural identity is transmitted to the next generation. These questions are explored and taken up in the subsequent four chapters.
Chapter 4

Overcoming the Barriers to Interethnic Marriage

‘May xau qua chi ga duoc cho Soc tho’
(You are so ugly, you will have to marry into the sroc [marry a Khmer person])

When I was young, I often heard my neighbors jokingly teasing a young homely girl this way, indicating her low value in the Kinh community and indirectly conveying their low estimation of Khmer people. Born and raised in a Kinh-dominated city and having no contact with the Khmer community, at that young age my only image of Khmers was of people who were ‘black and ugly’, influenced by the common depiction in my hometown toward Khmers as ‘backward’, ‘poor’ and ‘black’. However, about fifteen years later, I got acquainted with a Khmer man working in my home town and, through frequent personal interaction, I found he was as well-educated and polite as any Kinh man, contradicting the common depiction of Khmer people. Having some similarity in occupation, point of view and future orientation, our intimacy gradually developed and we decided to get married, experiencing no opposition from either family side. However, I still remember my friend’s reaction when he looked at my wedding invitation, a reaction which showed that the prejudice among the Kinh community toward Khmers was still strong. My friend guessed my husband’s ethnicity by looking at his name on my wedding invitation; he stopped smiling and asked me indirectly why I did not select a spouse from the city, but instead chose a spouse from a rural area.

The relationship of Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups has been investigated by many scholars, who have highlighted the inter-group enmity of these two groups since the Kinh people settled in present Southern Vietnam (McHale, 2013; Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, 1992; Thach, 2004; Wook, 2004). The legacy of historical tensions has led to the development of pervasive stereotypical judgments toward each other’s ethnic group, which further widens the distance between them. The socioeconomic disparity of the two groups has also been discussed intensively in previous development studies (Baulch et al., 2002; Scott &
Spatial separation is also an obstacle to their relationship. As mentioned in the previous chapters, Khmer ethnic people have a tendency to reside in ‘phum’, within their own ethnic community, and keep separate from other ethnic groups.

It is likely that such factors have impeded the formation of intimate relationships between these two groups. Research cross-culturally on interethnic marriage shows that there exist multiple barriers that can impede interethnic unions. The prejudice or racial discrimination from the dominant group toward the subordinate group has been analyzed to be an important factor hindering close interethnic relationships (Inman et al., 2011; Jackman & Crane, 1986; Lee, 1988). Culture also has been indicated to have significant influence on marriage. Research has shown that cultural differences can explain different conceptions of romantic love and psychological intimacy in marriage (Dion & Dion, 1993; Higgins et al., 2002; Xu & Burleson, 2001). In addition, people can be prevented from getting married exogamously by third parties such as their family, best friends and the larger society (Huijnk et al., 2010; Inman et al., 2011; Kalmijn, 1998; Killian, 2001; Pue & Sulaiman, 2013). However, research also provides explanations for why individuals marry across the barriers of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic difference and cultural prejudice. Propinquitous factors such as commercial transactions, occupational proximity, education, recreation, and work in organizations with an ethnically diverse composition are the possible enablers of cross-race sociability and interaction. And through mutual interaction, long-standing stereotypes can be eroded and meaningful relationships can be developed (Aldridge, 1978; Clark-Ibáñez & Felmlee, 2004; Golden, 1959; Houston et al., 2005). In addition, demographic factors—such as an unbalanced sex ratio within one group—has also been found to be a facilitating factor inducing people to seek mates outside the group (Aldridge, 1978; Klein, 2001). Furthermore, many scholars have also pointed to social-economic exchange theory to explain the incidence of interethnic romantic relationships. That is, members of a lower-status group are more likely to marry members of a higher-status group if they can gain a higher socioeconomic status to compensate for their lower racial status (Aldridge, 1978; Fu, 2001; Kalmijn, 1998).
With respect to relations between ethnic Kinh and Khmer people, it would appear that factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic difference and cultural prejudice may have played a similar role in hindering the formation of intimate relations. Research into couples who have married across this ethnic divide has the potential to shed light on the factors that may impede such unions and reveal something about the experiences of couples attempting to marry out of their ethnic group. At the same time, the very existence of these unions shows that these barriers are not strong enough to impede Khmer-Kinh intermarriages. Hence, research on such marriages can also reveal how Khmer and Kinh people get married in spite of such obstacles, what factors facilitated their union, and how they negotiate the various barriers to getting married.

This chapter examines how Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples have negotiated the obstacles to interethnic marriage. The chapter explores these questions by presenting evidence from a number of couples who have married across the ethnic divide. In-depth analysis of the case studies enables me to identify the complex set of sociological and cultural barriers to marriage that the couples faced and uncover the factors that facilitated their interethnic marriage. By looking at the specificity of individual cases it shows how couples negotiated and overcame the obstacles to their marriage. It describes the contexts in which Khmer-Kinh couples first encountered each other, and that enabled them to overcome such barriers as spatial and class differences and stereotypical perceptions. Looking at the role of subjective factors in such marriages, it describes spouses’ experiences of ideological struggle in breaking the ethnic boundary and how couples overcame opposition from their parents, family members and community.

4.1 Circumstances of Meeting

How Khmer and Kinh meet and get acquainted is interesting to examine, since scholarship and popular belief frequently mention the spatial segregation between Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups, with Khmer ethnic people traditionally living in their own rural communities in ‘phum’, gathered around the pagoda, and separated from Kinh people, while Kinh people often concentrate in towns and along well-connected thoroughfares (Truong Luu et al., 1993). Khmer and Kinh ethnic people are said traditionally to have resided in their own
communities, communicating together in their own separate languages, following their own religions and maintaining their own cultures, raising the question of how it is possible for them to meet each other and marry.

The findings from interviews with thirty-five couples reveal diversity in the circumstances by which the couples got acquainted. In line with the sociological literature about marriage markets (Kalmijn, 1998), three key contexts—the workplace, school setting and proximate residential areas—provided the most significant facilitating conditions for interethnic dating between these Kinh and Khmer people. The findings show that these three settings are places where most romantic relationships between Kinh and Khmer respondents have begun. In addition, social networks of friends and relatives are also mediators for initiating Khmer and Kinh intimate relations.

**The workplace**
The workplace is found to be a significant marriage market for the Kinh and Khmer couples in this study. Eleven of the thirty-five interviewed couples got acquainted through their workplace. The workplace is commonly a setting for diverse cultural and ethnic interactions to take place through obligational exchange.

I got to know Aly, a Khmer female working in a state agency in Tri Ton town, through the mediation of my female Khmer student. Aly’s younger sister is my student’s colleague so my student could easily persuade Aly to share her account of interethnic marriage. Because Aly was busy working during the daytime, she gave us an appointment one Wednesday evening. As per our appointment, my Khmer student and I arrived at Aly’s natal house where she was residing at around 7pm that evening but Aly was out with her son. We sat and talked with Aly’s sister about her job for about ten minutes before Aly returned home. I briefly introduced myself and the intention of my research, and it was lucky that Aly was very warm and shared her personal story with an open heart.

I was surprised to know that Aly and Thanh, her Kinh husband, were both residing in the same small town, but they did not meet each other until they started working in the same workplace. Her husband was born in an exclusively Kinh area. His father was assigned to
work in a state agency in Tri Ton town in 1985 and his family accompanied him to his new posting one year after that. It seemed to me that Thanh’s family did not highly appreciate the surrounding Khmers due to the gap in terms of education and occupation. Even though they had lived close to Khmer neighbors for more than twenty years, his family still limited their interaction with Khmers, and Thanh spoke no Khmer words to his Khmer wife and in-laws.

Aly and Thanh had not met each other until they started working in the same place in an enterprise in Tri Ton town. Obligatory exchanges at work meant that they had daily interpersonal interactions. In addition, extracurricular activities organized by their company for staff provided more chances for their intimate relationship to develop. Aly gladly recalled how her intimate relationship flourished:

After eight months of working together, my husband began to invite me out for coffee. It was funny that he was too timid to invite me alone so he invited a whole group of our colleagues to come along each time for the coffee. Later on, he came to my house almost every night to have a talk with me and my family members.

It is interesting to see that even though Thanh had been influenced by his family to limit his interactions with Kinh people, daily compulsory interactions in his workplace broke the barrier built by his family toward Khmers. In addition, the working environment brought him autonomy to develop his own friendship and even helped him to break his parents’ control and develop an intimate interpersonal relationship with a Khmer woman.

My field study found that 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 for its teachers, which has facilitated 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 remote 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 Toan, her Kinh husband, both migrated to Long Xuyen city to pursue their education in An Giang University but they were not acquainted as they pursued different fields of study. They first met each other when they were assigned to teach in the same high school in a remote Khmer village. One sunny weekend afternoon, I approached the school where Neang Pho and Toan were working and the school was very secluded and quiet then. I could easily find the school boarding house where they were living because it was built on the left-hand side of the school, right beside the school’s entrance gate.

Neang Pho and Toan 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 understand each other’s work and support each other easily. Both were living far from their family so the support they could give to each other was mutually appreciated. Being away from their community of origin and the weak control of mate selection from their respective families also may have facilitated the development of their intimate interethnic relationship. Toan, the Kinh husband, recalled how his intimacy developed:

At that time we were assigned to teach in the school, this commune was still deserted and there was no recreation 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. It is very hard to say exactly when my love toward my wife rose; I just remember that after having frequent interactions in the school setting for nearly two years, we really started dating.

My study sheds light on the fact that besides white-collar office settings, other manual workplaces such as rice fields and mining and construction sites also serve as a facilitating marriage market for Kinh-Khmer couples in rural areas. Specifically, in my study area, since they were established in the 1980s the mines in Co To commune—a Khmer-dominated area in Tri Ton district—have become an attractive destination for unemployed and itinerant laborers, including both Kinh and Khmer people, who come from all over the
country in search of jobs. As described above, Tri Ton town is a mountainous area so it was chosen to exploit the rock from the mountain. In Co To commune, there have been five rock mines since the 1980s but only three rock mines were still in operation when I did my field study and they have attracted many local and migrant workers. Many Kinh male laborers have migrated to Co To commune to work in these mines with local Khmer people. Three Kinh males interviewed in my study met their Khmer spouses through migrating to Co To to work in rock mining.

Figure 4.1 Rock mining in Co To

Thang, a Kinh migrant working in the rock mines in Co To commune, came from Can Tho city more than twenty years ago through his aunt’s help. Because Co To commune is a Khmer-dominated area with no Khmer language, Thang’s social interaction with the local Khmer community was very limited. His social network was mainly restricted to his aunt’s family and his coworkers in his work place. Having neither skill nor experience in mining, Thang was assigned work in the stage of breaking the big rocks up into smaller ones. He met his wife in the mining setting one year after that. Her task was to collect the broken
rocks, so their tasks provided them opportunities to work near each other daily. Thang cheerfully told his love story:

During break time, we often had tea and chatted together. We sometimes misunderstood each other during the first stage of our acquaintance since I could not communicate in Khmer while my wife’s Vietnamese capacity was very limited. However, daily personal interaction with my wife gradually linked us together. Seeing our arising romantic relationship, our co-workers sometimes teased us that they would present us with 100,000 VND if we got married.

This study shows that exposure to ethnically diverse workplaces such as this provides 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 they may support each other in their daily job, 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 about 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.

It is worth noting the finding that some couples did not develop their romantic relationship directly in the workplace but in the context of their work responsibilities. Such was the experience of Tam: his home town is the Kinh-only commune of Phu Tan but when he graduated in 2002, he was assigned to teach in the all-Khmer commune of O Lam. It is interesting knowing that during his initial time in Le Tri, he was very scared of Khmer local people because of the history of the massacre by Pol Pot33 so he limited his contact with the Khmer local people. His story about his early days in O Lam and how he encountered his wife shows how his attitudes were transformed:

33 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 short-hand way by which the government and citizens refer to the Khmer Rouge regime of Democratic Kampuchea.
I was very fearful of local people, especially when seeing groups of young Khmer men in a deserted area; I tried to find another way to go. However, one of my occupational obligations was to go to villagers’ houses to encourage their children to go to school. I gradually found that Khmer local people were also friendly and I became less fearful and had more contact with Khmer local people. Having frequent drinks with my wife’s uncle, I saw my wife was very beautiful so I made acquaintance with her.

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 created by their work-related interactions.

Migration for work in ethnically distinct frontier areas has increased these people’s interactions and 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 still 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 and not exclusively within the workplace. Furthermore, such migrants are also increasingly independent of their parents so parents have less direct control over the choices that their children make. One additional significant factor that should be mentioned is the unbalanced sex ratio in a migrant group in the destination area, which may induce the migrant to seek a mate outside his or her ethnic group. The unavailability of a mate in the same ethnic group also impacts on the decision to date persons outside of one’s own ethnic group.
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 and 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 have a more individualistic attitude and broad view on life (Kalmijn, 1998).

Consistent with Barnett’s discussion on the impact of increased contact between students of different nationalities on intermarriage occurrence (Barnett, 1963), this study reveals that with the state supporting policy in education for minorities, increased enrolment of Khmer students into state school and colleges has facilitated contact between Khmer and Kinh students. Highly educated Khmer people are also fluent in Kinh language so they have no barrier in communication with Kinh people.

In addition, in terms of the demographic aspect, as not many Khmer ethnic students are able to pursue higher education, those that do are surrounded by a high concentration of Kinh people; they have less opportunity to find a mate at the same educational level in the same ethnic group. In addition, the schooling environment brings more status-equivalent contact with persons of other races or ethnic groups. In line with previous discussion by O'Leary and Finnäs (2002) about the consequence of education on dating, five couples interviewed in this study became acquainted and dated at their school and while their dating was not made directly in a schooling setting, educational institutions indirectly provided them with public and leisure activities such as sporting and music in which many people can join together.

Khang, a Khmer teacher in Tri Ton town, met his Kinh wife when they were both students at An Giang University. Khang’s hometown is O Lam commune, a Khmer-dominated area
in Tri Ton district and his wife, Loan, came from Nui Sap town in Thoai Son district. Even though they were in different classes, they both lived in the university dormitory so they got acquainted by joining the after-school activities. One late Saturday afternoon, I arrived at Khang’s house as appointed but only his wife and his daughter were at home. His wife was very enthusiastic, inviting me in for a glass of coffee and she called Khang to tell him I was there. After I talked with his wife for about thirty minutes, Khang came back home from a coffee shop with his friends. He kindly shared his love story:

Fate brought us together. We first met in very incidental circumstances. My friend, not me, daily kicked a shuttlecock with a group of university students. Once day, he was sick and I replaced him in the group and I met my wife there. Interestingly, my wife also did not usually play with the group but just went with her friend on that day. It may be because our fate has tied us together.

Similarly, Linh’s hometown was in Ba Chuc commune while Chuong, her Khmer husband, was in O Lam commune, a Khmer-dominated area. Linh and Chuong also got acquainted by migrating to Tri Ton town to pursue their education. Linh studied in Nguyen Trung Truc high school while Chuong was in the Ethnic Boarding high school, but they got acquainted since Linh lived with her aunt’s friend whose house was next door to the house of her husband’s aunt where he was living. Because Linh had grown up in a commune that had experienced the massacre by Khmer Rouge troops and her family had a prejudice toward Khmer people as ‘aggressive’, ‘dirty’ and ‘backward’, Linh also kept a distance from Khmer people. By virtue of living close to her husband in Tri Ton town, they had a chance to chat daily so her prejudice toward Khmer gradually lessened. Linh told me that her romantic relationship gradually developed during their time studying in Tri Ton and their love was deeper when they both went to An Giang University to follow their higher education.

It is worth describing the marriage market role of An Giang University. The intermingling of students of different socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicity can easily be seen in this educational institution. As An Giang province is one of four provinces in the Mekong Delta, and Vietnam has a large population of Khmer people, Khmer students can be easily found across An Giang University campus. I observed that Khmer students were present in
every faculty of the university but the highest densities of Khmer students were in the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Agricultural and Natural Resources. Khmer students were found in almost every class in these two faculties. An Giang University, therefore, is an ideal marriage market for Kinh and Khmer students. In my own experience when teaching in a Rural Development class, I observed that four Khmer students in a forty-two student class integrated very well into the Kinh-dominated class. In contrast to my expectation that Khmer students would form their separate group, all four Khmer students in this class had very active interaction with Kinh students. Talking with one female Khmer student about her experience in this Kinh-dominated institution, she said she experienced no discrimination from her Kinh friends but her classmates were jealous about the benefits she got, such as school fee exemption and a monthly stipend.

Figure 4.2 An Giang University
**Geographical and social proximity**

Residential locality comprises the third important marriage market for Kinh and Khmer couples. Propinquity in residence has long been recognized as a factor influencing both in-marriage and intermarriage incidence and selection. Proximity by residence elevates the chances and raises the ease and frequency of interaction for the young, leading to long-term partnership and marriage. They have many chances to meet and develop an intimate relationship. This finding may be surprising as it is common for Kinh and Khmer people to live separately in different areas. However, in the mixed-ethnic setting of Tri Ton town, Kinh and Khmer ethnic people have had long-term interaction through their daily activities and trading. By virtue of frequent interaction, they can absorb each other’s cultural practices and bilingualism is also quite common in this mixed area.

Close residence was found to facilitate the intimate relationship of Tin and Kha. Tin, a Kinh male, resides in Tri Ton town and Tin’s family business has given him the opportunity to have frequent interaction 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. Having frequent interaction with Khmer through his family’s business, he saw no difference between Kinh and Khmer people. Tin noticed Kha, his Khmer wife, who was also living in the same town, through frequent chances of contact. Kha sold rice soup every morning in front of her house. Tin recalled that when passing her selling place every day, he noticed how hard she worked so he often took the pretext of having breakfast there to talk with her. Seeing that Kha was very hard-working and good natured, he gradually became acquainted with her. Furthermore, by virtue of close residence, he acquired a good sense of her family’s socioeconomic status. They courted for nearly two years before getting married.

In line with much research about gender and mobility (Bonney & Love, 1991; Hoang, 2009; Shauman & Xie, 1996), this study also found that both Kinh and Khmer women are limited in their geographical mobility compared to men. Limited migration of females may be explained by their limited social network or their family constraints or responsibilities. In this study, almost all migrant spouses are either Kinh or Khmer males; only two female
cases 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 males have been geographically mobile to a destination where many members of another ethnic group reside, which increased their contacts with members of ethnic groups other than their own. In addition, their parents’ control is also reduced because of the geographic distance from their parental home. Their 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 group is very small while the other group is quite large so they are less likely to meet potential spouses from their group, and it is more likely that they will enter into an interethnic marriage with a local resident.

In addition, social networks including friendship network, parents’ social ties, high school friends and neighbors may bring people together and facilitate interethnic dating among young adults. The findings from this study reveal that some couples got acquainted through the mediation of their friends’ and parents’ social network. Such social networks expanded their opportunities to find a partner from a different ethnic background, and they also gained more support from their social networks for dating across ethnic boundaries.

### 4.2 Socioeconomic Differences: Homogony and Exchange

**Homogamy**

Another factor that has the potential to magnify or cut across the presumed barrier to marriage posed by ethnicity is class. This question has been intensively explored in scholarship highlighting the significance of homogamy in mate selection, in which people have a tendency 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 (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004; Guttman et al., 1988, p. 763). In addition, Kalmijn (1998) pointed out that ‘Socio-economic resources is the common criteria people
consider in selecting their spouse. Socio-economic resources are defined as resources that produce economic wellbeing and status. People maximize their income and status by searching for a spouse with attractive socio-economic resources. Competition for socio-economic resources on the marriage market thus leads to an aggregate pattern of homogamy. Socio-economic homogamy is measured by education and occupation’ (Kalmijn 1998, pp. 398-399).

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. As illustrated in the Report on Ethnic Groups in Vietnam (UNFPA, 2011), regarding the literacy rate of the population aged fifteen years and over, the majority Kinh ethnic group has the highest rate at 95.9 percent while the literacy rate of Khmer minority ethnic group is much lower at only 73.5 percent. In addition, Khmer have very low enrolment rates for higher education.

Besides the educational gap, the disparity in the socioeconomic conditions of these two ethnic groups can also be seen in the table below:

**Table 4.1** The percentage distribution of population of Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups by socioeconomic condition, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Poorest</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Rich</th>
<th>Richest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entire country</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNFPA, 2011

Why do Khmer and Kinh people still get married regardless of the significant gap in socioeconomic status? Is the homogamy theory inapplicable to Khmer-Kinh couples in this
study? My hypothesis is that there are dynamics and types of situation that do not go along with the homogamy theory.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the state’s supporting policy in education for minorities has made easier the pursuit of higher education by Khmer youths. Many Khmer youths have proven their capacity in higher education along with their Kinh friends. Linh and Chuong are a couple who were brought together through education. Linh, a Kinh high school teacher in a Khmer-dominated setting, told me that when she migrated to Tri Ton town to pursue her high school study, regardless of her prejudice toward Khmer people, she very much enjoyed talking with her husband after school time. Linh recalled that as she resided close by his accommodation, they often sat in the front yard in the late afternoon and talked. They often shared their funny stories from their classes and also problems they met in their study. Sharing and supporting each other gradually tied them together. In addition, being away from her family’s love and care, Linh highly appreciated Chuong’s care for her.

Equal educational level can be considered as a factor that facilitated Linh’s development of an intimate relationship with Chuong. When I asked Linh if she was concerned about ethnic differences in selecting a Khmer spouse, she confided her personal consideration:

I also thought of the backwardness of Khmer people but even though my husband was a Khmer, he was as educated as me and we had the same view of life. We shared similar goals for the future; to study hard in order to achieve a good career. Importantly, I was impressed with his politeness toward all of my relatives.

Linh recalled that during their time studying in Tri Ton, they were in love but they were still too young to think of a future plan. When they both followed high school with graduate study in An Giang University, they were mature enough to orientate their future life. People of the same educational level often have interests, goals, outlook and values in common, which is a crucial criterion for long-term marital life.
Besides similarity in education, homogony in occupation is also found to be a notable feature in many interviewed Khmer-Kinh couples. The presence of educational and occupational homogamy is very strong in interethnic Kinh and Khmer couples in this study (Appendix 2). Many interviewed 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 homogony brings them more opportunities for interaction and enriches their mutual understanding. This finding is consistent with Kalmijn’s observations about intermarriage in American society in the 1950s and 1960s. He concluded that ‘the degree of education homogamy was found to be stronger than the degree of social-origin homogamy in marital homogamy among partners’ (Kalmijn, 1991a, p. 521). The findings also go in line with Kalmijn’s conclusion (1991b) in exploring the status homogamy of couples in the United States that ascriptive status homogamy has declined its role as a boundary in spouse selection and the presence of the achieved status homogamy is very significant among Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples.

**Socioeconomic exchanges**

Many Khmer males migrating to Long Xuyen city are of a high educational level. Their high education provides them greater opportunities to get official jobs in the city. However, high education and stable official jobs do not guarantee their opportunity to find spouses of the same socioeconomic status. In this study, three Khmer educated officers got acquainted with girlfriends of lower socioeconomic status.

Different from the above couples who are homogenous in either education or occupation, Chau Thi, a highly educated Khmer man with a high-status position in a state agency married a low-educated Kinh garment worker. It is hard for me to explain how Chau Thi and his Kinh wife, Kim Ngan, fell in love and married considering the difference in their respective education and occupation. Being in a management position, Chau Thi was very busy with his work but was happy to talk with me and my Khmer friend one Saturday morning. As appointed, myself and my Khmer friend went to a coffee shop to meet Chau Thi but he was almost thirty minutes late. During our conversation, he often glanced at his watch as he had work to do that morning. Chau Thi’s home town is in Chau Lang and he migrated to Long Xuyen city, a Kinh-dominated area, in search of a job. Through the help
of a relative he was lucky to get a good job in a state agency. Thinking of settling in Long Xuyen city for the long term, Chau Thi thought that having a Kinh wife in Long Xuyen rather than a Khmer wife in his home town 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. During their dating, he saw how hard Kim Ngan made efforts to develop a close relationship with his family so he believed that Kim Ngan would be a prospective wife and daughter-in-law.

About one week later, I contacted Chau Thi again to ask to meet with his wife. Luckily, Kim Ngan had a small child and was on maternity leave so she was free to talk with us. It was quite hard for me to find her house as she lived in a suburb around seven kilometers from Long Xuyen city. After calling Chau Thi three times to ask for directions to his house, I finally arrived there. As both her parents had passed away and Kim Ngan is the youngest child in her family, she and Chau Thi resided in her parents’ house with her older single sister. To both Kim Ngan and Chau Thi, living with her family is very convenient for them as they did not have to pay rent and childcare as her sister helped them with caring for their child when they were at work. I could see how proud Kim Ngan felt of her husband’s good occupation. Kim Ngan 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 Ngan, 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 is appropriate to account for Chau Thi and Kim Ngan’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 Ngan by exchanging his high socioeconomic status for the dominant ethnic group status of his wife and vice versa, which is consistent with the statement of Kalmijn (1998) ‘Minority men are able to compensate for their lower “ethnic prestige” by offering white women a high occupational status and income’ (p. 412).

4.3 Encountering and Overcoming Stereotypes
One important aspect that should be analyzed when discussing the interethnic group relationship is their social stereotype. Social stereotypes can be the reflection of prejudices that individuals hold toward groups of people and it can also represent varieties of social relationships existing between people and between ethnic groups in wider society. Hosokawa (1980) illustrated the functional roles of ethnic stereotypes in maintaining social solidarity and cohesiveness among whites in American society by doing three things: ‘they maintain the status quo, they create and maintain social roles and they provide an occupational structure for determining job distribution’ (p.15).

One function of stereotypes related to this study is that ‘they can create and maintain social roles in a society, such as the subordinate-superordinate roles, formal-informal roles, and insider-outsider roles’. For example, Hosokawa found that in the US, African Americans were tarred with the stereotype of being lazy, childish, criminal, and overly aggressive, which locked them into a subordinate role in US society, while the creators and propagators of such stereotypes could remain in a superordinate role. Consequently, both groups learned to dislike each other through superficial contacts, and both groups used negative stereotypes about each other to justify their mutual avoidance (Hosokawa, 1980, p. 21).

In this study, the findings also reveal the stereotypical judgments of the ‘Other’ that exist in both Kinh and Khmer groups. The overt conflict and the tense relations of these two ethnic groups since the settlement of Kinh people in present Southern Vietnam have been informed by ethnic stereotypes held by each ethnic group toward the other. A common harsh depiction of Khmer from ethnic Kinh majority members of the lower Mekong Delta community is that the Khmer Krom are lazy, unintelligent, and simple-minded (Taylor, 2004b). In addition, the perception of Khmer as backward and overwhelming poor, superstitious, and poorly educated is entrenched in the wider society (Taylor, 2007). My field study reveals that the existing social stigma toward Khmer as ‘aggressive’ and liable to ‘behead’ their enemies is very widespread among the Kinh community. The Khmer Rouge massacre in the 1970s has left social stigma toward Khmer among Kinh people and this bloody history is passed on by Kinh people from one generation to the next. Talking to either old or young Kinh people, their first thought about Khmer is this social stereotype. Kinh people assume that Khmer ethnic people in Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge are the
same so they are very scared of Khmer people, but they also express their admiration for Khmer people’s capacity for physical hard-work, and their honesty and moral characteristics.

While Khmers are attracted by the white skin color of the Kinh and positively value their calculating capacity, Khmers also are very careful in economic transaction with Vietnamese, who will stop at nothing for economic gain, including theft, cheating, lying, or even selling their own daughters and they have stereotypical judgments toward Kinh as ‘dishonest, disloyal and too calculating’, which makes them doubtful of building close relationships with Kinh people (Taylor, 2004b).

Because of limited personal interaction, the only understanding Khmer and Kinh had of each other’s ethnic group was from pervasive stereotypes. The social stigmas toward each other have created a boundary distancing Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups. However, despite the pervasive stereotypical judgments toward ‘the Other’, Kinh and Khmer do break the social stereotypes to end up married. How and why do Khmer and Kinh break down the beliefs that have been ingrained in them for a long time? The study sheds light on some factors facilitating and increasing their mutual understanding, which contribute to breaking down their ingrained stereotypes of each other.

During my field study, I found such extreme stereotypes common in both Khmer and Kinh communities. Neang Pho, a fourth-year undergraduate Khmer student in An Giang University, has very active interaction with her Kinh classmates but I was very surprised at her distrust toward Kinh people. Even after many years interacting with Kinh friends from her study, her stereotype of Kinh as ‘dishonest’ is still firm. I teasingly asked her if she was dating any Kinh boyfriend and her intention toward Kinh-Khmer marriage, Neang Pho expressed her doubt about developing intimate relationship with Kinh people:

I definitely will not marry out with a Kinh man as I do not trust Kinh people. In my family, we believe that Kinh people get married with Khmers not out of real love but because of the socioeconomic status of their Khmer spouse.
Her distrust toward Kinh people must be very strong, otherwise she would not express her negative view to me, her teacher, and also a Kinh woman having a Khmer husband. To avoid hurting me, Neang Phuong emphasized that I was the only Kinh woman that she has ever seen getting married to a Khmer man out of real love. Neang Phuong even gave as evidence for her statement the fact that her cousin has gone mad since his Kinh wife exploited all his property and belongings and left him. I convinced her for me to have a talk with her cousin but she denied with the reason that he was drunk all day and got crazy talking about his marriage.

On the other hand, the existing social stigma toward Khmer as ‘aggressive’ and as ‘cut-throats’ [cat co] is pervasive in the Kinh community. The cross-border raids and massacre of Vietnamese citizens by Khmer Rouge troops under Pol Pot’s leadership in the late 1970s has left strong social stigma toward Khmers and the bloody history of the massacre in Ba Chuc in April 1978 is told among Kinh people from generation to generation.

It is worth discussing the discourse depicting the Khmer among the Kinh community in Ba Chuc town, whose residents directly experienced the Khmer Rouge’s massacre. The barbarous action of Khmer Rouge soldiers has left a deadly memory among Kinh residents in Ba Chuc. Mrs. Hoa, Linh’s mother, recalled her own experiences:

The PonPot [Pol Pot] group killed anyone they met. We hid on the mountain when they arrived but they also went to Phi Lai pagoda and killed everyone there. Fortunately, they did not go up any higher otherwise we also would have been killed. They also killed Khmer people, not only Kinh people. From the mountain, I saw dead bodies in the rice field as numerous as the farmers that you normally see working in the rice fields. I know some Khmers in the village followed and worked for PonPot. Therefore, after the withdrawal of PonPot, Kinh people were very scared of Khmers and we limited our interacting with them.

Going through such deadly experience, Mrs. Hoa’s impression of Khmer is very unfavorable. She was therefore displeased with her daughter’s decision to get married with a Khmer man. Even if she accepted a Khmer son-in-law, past history still made her worried
to leave her daughter living in a Khmer area so she advised her daughter, ‘Be careful, don’t go out at night otherwise your head will be cut off’.

Such strong stereotypes from both Kinh and Khmer community can prevent their interaction, so why and how do they get married? How do they meet and their stereotypes weaken? As discussed in the previous section, there are some circumstances enabling Khmer and Kinh couples to get acquainted. In these settings, schooling, workplace, and network provided Khmer and Kinh with facilitating contexts for their mutual interaction. These settings are found to be facilitating factors breaking out the existing stereotype in these couples to develop intimacy and end up getting married.

The study uncovered a complex of psychological dynamics in the spouse’s personal experience toward interethnic marriage that varied significantly according to locale. Different localities provide individuals different degrees of exposure to interethnic relations in their early lives and a variety in personal perceptions of marrying out can be seen clearly in my three study areas (a mixed Kinh-Khmer small town, a predominantly Khmer rural area, and a large Kinh-dominated city).

Tri Ton town was selected as 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 could be observed clearly in Tri Ton market. Both Kinh and Khmer people were found to be either sellers or buyers in the market and I was interested to learn that most Kinh and Khmer people in the market could communicate to some degree of proficiency in either Kinh or Khmer language. Long-term and frequent mutual interaction has enriched their knowledge of each other’s culture so cultural difference was not a barrier to them. In addition, they were also found to 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 popularity and social acceptability of marriages between Kinh and Khmer people in Tri Ton town for generations. Therefore, the individuals I interviewed in Tri Ton town did not feel they were breaking ethnic endogamy rules in marrying members of an ethnic group other than their own.
Spouses in the Kinh-dominated area and Khmer-dominated area I researched, however, have more variety in psychological dynamics. The social stereotype Khmer people often hold toward Kinh people is that Kinh people are not honest or faithful. Such perceptions have hindered and discouraged Khmers, both male and female, from getting involved in interethnic marriage with Kinh people. Chau Thi, whose hometown is from Chau Lang, a Khmer-dominated area, had many years interacting with Kinh friends from his schooling before migrating to Long Xuyen, a Kinh-dominated area. Chau Thi held a good position in a state office in Long Xuyen city and had many years interacting with the Kinh community but it is interesting to learn how careful he was in getting acquainted with a Kinh female. He was very shy to recall that he was suspicious of his wife’s motive when first meeting his wife, a Kinh female in Long Xuyen city:

It is very funny that when I first encountered my wife in a restaurant and we exchanged our contact details, I thought I was being cheated as I am from a rural area and she is from the city. In my mind, it is very deceiving in the city and especially Kinh people are very cheating. That evening, I thought I may be cheated as I could not believe I could get acquainted with my wife so quickly. The following morning, I phoned the telephone exchange to ask for information on the phone number that my wife gave me. It was the phone number of the same enterprise that my wife mentioned. Then, I believed on my wife so I phoned her for a date.

Chau Thi, later on, had more frequent dating with his Kinh wife. He also visited her family to get a sense of how her family is and invited his wife to his family in his rural Khmer home town to build close understanding of each other. Seeing that his wife and her family were not ‘cheating’, as was the common depiction, his trust gradually built up. He said the most determining factor for his decision to marry her is her good characteristic of respecting his parents and her friendliness to his relatives. It can be seen that the depiction of Kinh people as ‘dishonest’ and ‘unfaithful’ is firmly stuck in the existing stereotype and has created a barrier preventing Khmer people from developing romantic relationships with Kinh people. Even though Chau Thi’s romantic relationship did not arise in his work place, his occupation provides him with a complete Kinh working environment. His personal interaction with Kinh people in his work place and in the wider Kinh setting has given him
Neang Pho, a Khmer teacher, went through a continuous process of personal negotiating in falling in love with a Kinh boyfriend. Similar to Chau Thi, Neang Pho was also influenced by the stigmatization of Kinh as ‘dishonest’ and ‘disloyal’ so she was very cautious in developing an intimate relationship with her Kinh husband. As mentioned above, both Neang Pho and Toan, her Kinh husband, were assigned to be teachers in the same school in a rural Khmer commune at the same time. The area of this remote commune was very secluded and there was no recreational activity so the teachers just had drinks and chatted among themselves. In addition, they lacked the intimate care from their family; mutual moral support from each other was highly appreciated.

Through daily interaction, Neang Pho felt that Toan was not like the common depiction of Kinh by Khmer. She told me that Toan was very nice and friendly to all his colleagues and especially she was impressed by his care of her when she fell sick and his enthusiasm to participate in Khmer ethnic traditional practices by accompanying her to the temple on every Khmer ritual occasion. In addition, she believed that his effort in maintaining their intimacy and convincing both families to consent to their romantic relationship for years must derive from his real love. She even emphasized that not all Khmer were ‘bad’ as depicted, and not all Kinh were ‘good’; there are both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ people in every ethnic group.

On the other hand, the historical relations between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups are also a concern for both Kinh and Khmer spouses. The interethnic relations of Kinh and Khmer groups are tense across history but the most mentioned historical concern is Pon Pot’s massacre in Tri Ton town in the 1970s. This recent tension still leaves a strong impression on Kinh people toward the Khmer community.

Having experienced the Khmer Rouge massacre, the Kinh community in Ba Chuc town, especially families who lost relatives in the massacre, still have a strong social prejudice toward Khmer people. As a result, Kinh spouses from Ba Chuc town experience psychological tension in getting married to a Khmer spouse. Linh, a Kinh high school
teacher, first met her Khmer husband when she studied at high school in Tri Ton town as I mentioned in the above section. Linh told me that before getting acquainted with her husband, she limited contact with Khmer people as she heard they were very aggressive and saw their way of living in her home town as not clean. She said that there was a Khmer community in her hometown but they mainly lived in ‘sproc’ and their way of life was very backward while Kinh resided on the main street with a more modern way of life.

However, frequent interactions with her Khmer husband every afternoon gradually changed her mind; she found he was as good-natured and educated as her so her intimacy gradually developed. Linh emphasized their similar views of life and future orientation. Being migrant students in Tri Town town, both encouraged each other in schooling for a bright future. Similar to Neang Pho, Linh’s best impression of her husband is his respect demonstrated to her relatives. Even though some of her aunts showed their opposition towards their intimate relations, he still politely greeted all her relatives every time he visited her family.

These findings are fairly consistent with the argument of Clark-Ibáñez and Felmlee (2004) that ‘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’ (p. 294). A diverse cultural environment in a schooling context enriches people’s understanding about 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 become more open-minded in crossing the ethnic barrier in having a girlfriend or boyfriend from a different ethnic group. It is also important to note that greater individualism may be created and their ethnic boundary and family control loosened by studying in a city far from their hometown.

Besides work place and schooling, networks and personal positive thoughts are also found to be significant factors in breaking down people’s existing ethnic stereotypes. Neang Phuong, a Khmer teacher in a kindergarten in Long Xuyen city, a Kinh-dominated area, came from Tri Ton town. She had migrated to Long Xuyen city with the help of her
grandma’s sister almost twenty years before meeting her Kinh husband. Through Mrs. Thone, one of my interviewees, I learned that Neang Phuong also broke the ethnic barrier to marry a Kinh man. As her work is to take care of the children during the daytime in the kindergarten, I went to her school at the closing hours. The school was very crowded then, full of parents coming to pick up their children. I asked one school administrator which class Neang Pho was in charge of and went to her classroom as directed. Even being quite surprised with my presence and my purpose, Neang Phuong was very glad to talk with me. Because she was busy that evening, Neang Phuong made another appointment with me the next Thursday evening.

As appointed, I went to her school a bit later than last time but there were still two children waiting in her class as their parents had not picked them up yet. I waited for her in the school yard for about fifteen minutes, and she was glad to talk with me despite being very tired after a whole working day. Neang Phuong was shy recalling her romantic relationship. She and her Kinh husband got acquainted through the matchmaking of her friend. Asking Neang Phuong if she was hesitant to date a Kinh man, she cheerfully acknowledged that she was delighted to marry a Kinh man. I expressed my surprise, saying that many Khmers were very careful in interacting with Kinh people. Neang Phuong agreed that she and her family were also doubtful of Kinh cheating. However, her long-term interaction with Kinh local people in Long Xuyen city changed her mind; she herself received much help from her Kinh classmates in her schooling and her Kinh colleagues from work. Another reason for her positive thoughts about Kinh people is that her younger sister had a very good Kinh husband. Seeing her sister’s happy marital life with Kinh people and that her Kinh brother-in-law was very responsible for not only his own nuclear family but also the bigger extended family, allayed her concerns about marrying into a Kinh family and assuming similar responsibilities as an in-law of Kinh people.

The findings uncovered that marriage decision is not always smooth for Kinh and Khmer spouses. The decision to marry involves a process of calculating, thinking, doubting and struggling. Especially, the pervasive stereotypes toward each other’s ethnic group have created a firm barrier impeding spouses from developing a close and intimate relationship. The study highlighted that some factors, such as work place, schooling, network and
personal positive thought, have facilitated frequent mutual interaction and increased the mutual understanding between members of both groups, which gradually broke down their existing stereotypes. In addition, one strong reason assisting Khmer-Kinh relationships and breaking the stereotypes is ‘class’. As discussed in the previous section, many Khmer young people have proven their intellectual capacity in education and occupation, which may indirectly break the Kinh’s depiction of Khmer as ‘poorly-educated’ and ‘backward’.

4.4 Overcoming Family and Community Opposition

I did not understand what a risk-taker [lìeu] my daughter was until she fell in love and wished to get married to a Kinh male. She should have learnt from neighboring Khmer-Kinh couples that Kinh spouses are cheating and disloyal. In addition, many previous cases have shown that being a daughter-in-law in a Kinh family is full of hardship and tension. Therefore, I strongly opposed her intimate relationship with her Kinh boyfriend, worrying that my daughter would get stuck in a similar miserable state. (Mrs. Neang Bane)

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. Even though for more than six years her daughter had been married to a Kinh husband, who also had a stable job as a high school teacher, I could sense her dissatisfaction and uncertainty toward her daughter’s intermarriage during our conversation. She unhappily told me that regardless of her opposition toward her daughter’s intimacy with a Kinh man, her daughter had kept maintaining her romantic relationship and for years kept trying to convince her to consent to it. Seeing her daughter getting older and older but still in a romantic relationship with a Kinh male, she reluctantly approved their marriage.

Besides her mother, Neang Pho said her older brothers also had raised their concerns about the relationship, saying that they did not trust Kinh people. Their view was that Kinh were ‘dishonest’ (khong that long) and ‘cheating’ (gian doi). One of her brothers pointed out other interethnic couples in her hometown, indicating that these Kinh husbands were very bad, drinking and gambling; resulting in the couple separating. He did not want her to be in
the same situation. Notably, even after her marriage, some of her relatives still asked her how she could live with a Kinh spouse.

Neang Pho and her Kinh husband (Toan), who first met when they both were assigned to teach in the same high school in a rural Khmer-dominated area, as I described in the previous section, had the additional dilemma that their intimate relationship was also opposed by Toan’s family. Toan’s parents (Neang Pho’s parents-in-law) were concerned that cultural differences between the two ethnic groups could negatively impact on their son’s marital life. However, the greatest opposition was from his aunts and grandmother who were living in Ba Chuc town. As discussed above, Ba Chuc residents had a negative impression of the Khmer community so having a Khmer relative was totally unacceptable to them. They even discouraged Toan’s parents from allowing his interethnic marriage.

Neang Pho confided that she had discussed with her husband about quitting their relationship to please both families but her husband did not agree so their strategy was to maintain their relationship until they obtained the support of their respective families. To get the consent of both families, the couple tried to create more personal interactions between the two families with the purpose to enrich mutual understanding of each other’s culture and develop better relations with each other relatives.

It can be seen that marriage is not a mere combination of two individuals but a union of two bigger families. Spouse selection, therefore, is often decided by a discussion process involving the whole family rather than by individuals. Over the years, individuals have developed more freedom in selecting their own spouse and parental influence on their marital choice is less. My study shows that most interviewed individuals were economically independent when they decided to get married but they all asked for their parents’ consultation and consent in the marriage decision. Individuals could ignore their parents’ opinion and their parents’ wishes in selecting their spouses but they did not get married until obtaining their parents’ approval.

It is common for parents to prefer that their children-in-law come from similar social and cultural backgrounds to their own children. What makes the individuals in this study
interesting is that they all broke the ethnic boundary to marry out. Some parents in this study raised their voice to object 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.

As previously discussed, a gap in terms of socio-economic status exists between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups in which the Kinh ethnic group is more dominant, so I argue that Kinh spouses may experience stronger tension from their family and community as compared to Khmer spouses. In terms of gender, my hypothesis is that because of the socially expected role of maintaining cultural identity females may experience stronger opposition from their family toward their marriage.

The field study, however, uncovers that not only Kinh but also Khmer families express their opposition to their children’s marriage decisions. The study also finds that both men and women in this study encountered strong opposition from their family because of different ethnicity and stereotypes toward each other. Strong parental tension at the prospect of marriage is especially found in families who have little personal interaction with another ethnic group.

Similar to Neang Pho and Toan, Kim Ngan and her husband also encountered many familial obstacles toward their intimate relationship. Kim Ngan, a Kinh woman from Long Xuyen City, about 60km from Tri Ton town, married Chau Thi, a Khmer man from a Khmer-dominated village in Tri Ton District. Their families had no prior personal interaction with members of the other ethnic group. Kim Ngan was then working in an embroidery enterprise in Long Xuyen and her Khmer husband-to-be had a more stable job in a state department in Long Xuyen. Kim Ngan recalled that on the day she first introduced her Khmer husband to her family, her father welcomed her husband very warmly but once her husband left, her father immediately expressed his opposition:

Khmer people are very aggressive and your husband could behead [chat dau] you if you make him angry. You may not be able to keep your whole body if you get married to a Khmer man.
Without her father’s support, Kim Ngan decided to say good-bye to Chau Thi but he kept contacting her and their love was so strong that they could not separate. To convince her father, Chau Thi frequently visited her family to increase mutual understanding. Seeing that Chau Thi was highly educated and had a stable official job, her father finally changed his opinion. However, it was unfortunate that after getting her father’s consent, the couple then faced opposition from Chau Thi’s mother. Kim Ngan sadly recalled on one occasion when meeting his parents in a restaurant by accident, she felt very depressed by his mother’s attitude. Seeing Chau Thi’s parents, Kim Ngan politely greeted them but his mother said no word and averted her eyes with an unpleasant look on her face. She even responded loudly in Khmer language to his father as he reminded her to greet Kim Ngan. Knowing that his mother did not approve of their relationship, Kim Ngan disconnected from Chau Thi for almost two months until her girlfriend arranged a meeting between Kim Ngan and Chau Thi to explain their misunderstanding.

Chau Thi gave me an explanation of his mother’s disapproval:

My mother was very easygoing but she strongly opposed my intimate relation with a Kinh woman for a number of reasons. Firstly, language barrier made her concerned about communicating with my wife and my wife’s family. Secondly, seeing other interethnic Kinh-Khmer couples in my hometown in which the Kinh daughter-in-law treated the parents-in-law badly, my mother did not want to be in a similar situation. Importantly, I was the most successful child in my family so my mother was afraid of losing me if I married a Kinh woman in Long Xuyen City. She was worried that my wife would keep me in Long Xuyen and would not let me visit my family in my hometown.

To build up his mother’s trust in Kim Ngan, Chau Thi frequently took Kim Ngan to his hometown to visit his family. By frequent contacts, Chau Thi’s mother saw that Kim Ngan got along well with all family members and especially her interest in learning the Khmer language and learning to cook Khmer dishes really pleased Chau Thi’s mother.

These two cases reveal the different concerns both Kinh and Khmer parents have toward their children’s interethnic intimate relationship. Because of the limited interaction, the only understanding of each other’s group is from the pervasive stereotype. The social
stigmas toward each other’s group have created an ethnic boundary distancing Kinh and Khmer. These above cases reveal that even though the Khmer Rouge massacre of Vietnamese took place more than three decades ago, impressions about Khmer people’s dangerous nature 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. Hesitations and concerns in Khmer families are found to derive from social prejudices toward Kinh people, namely, that Kinh people are ‘dishonest’ and ‘cheating’.

The results are, in large part, in agreement 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 (Kalmijn, 1998). In line with previous scholarly studies (Killian, 2001; Luke & Luke, 1998), Khmer-Kinh couples claimed to have encountered reactions, either an initial wariness or resistance to the choice of mate from another ethnic group, from at least one of their families of origin. Similar to the finding by Inman et al. (Inman et al., 2011) that some Khmer-Kinh couples encountered initial resistances from their family toward their marriage decision for fearing of failure in transmitting the cultural values to the future generation, the most common concern I heard referred to ‘losing the ethnic root’ (mất gốc), but more predominantly related to socially pervasive stereotypes and their parents’ concerns over the social status of their spouse. In addition, the finding is similar to Black-White couples in the study conducted by Killian (2001), in that both Khmer and Kinh spouses expressed that familial disapproval led to questioning of their own decisions, but they negotiated and worked around this disapproval in order to maintain the relationship. However, the study found no evidence to support Marcson’s statement that ‘religion functions as the chief basis for channeling mate selection’ (Marcson, 1950).

This study did find, however, that families having more personal interaction with other ethnic groups are more open-minded toward their children’s interethnic marriage. People living in Tri Ton town, an ethnically mixed area, are exposed to diverse culture; they have frequent social contact and mutual exchange so interethnic marriage between Kinh and
Khmer is more easily accepted. In addition, people in Tri Ton town 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 of origin toward their decision to marry out.

Chau Dinh, who is a teacher in Tri Ton town, gladly told his love story with his Kinh wife when I met him. He was born and grew up in Tri Ton town, where his mother managed a fabric shop in Tri Ton 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 barrier was not her problem. In addition, residing in a mixed ethnic 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. In addition, 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.

Talking to elderly Kinh and Khmer in my field study, the rejection of interethnic marriage was found in both the Kinh majority and Khmer minority communities. This study has similar findings to the argument by Huijnk et al. (2010) that the majority showed high resistance toward interethnic marriage. I was surprised to learn of the discriminatory attitude to the Khmer group from Mrs. Hang, a Kinh female official who had experienced long-term interaction with the Khmer community through her job. To her, about two to three decades ago, Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage was strongly opposed by Kinh families because of the gap in educational level. Reflecting the common depiction discussed by Taylor (2004b), Mrs. Hang said Khmer people are widely underestimated as ‘low-educated’, ‘unintelligent’ and ‘simple-minded’. She further explained that some Kinh families recently changed their attitude and approved their child getting married to a Khmer spouse as Khmers were more educated and more knowledgeable and got good official jobs, so the social gap between the two ethnic groups was narrowing.

However, the argument by Jiobu (1988) that minority groups might also reject interethnic marriage is relevant to this study for the Khmer community did not totally
support and encourage Khmer-Kinh marriage but they also doubted and distrusted Kinh people. Similar to Mrs. Hang, even though Mr. Ri, an elderly Khmer, had worked with Kinh people in a Kinh-dominated area for nearly twenty years, he still possessed a harsh attitude toward Kinh people. He expressed his doubt about the real reason for Khmer-Kinh marriage:

I do not think their marriage comes from real love. Most Kinh people get a profit from their Khmer spouse’s family, as I observe that they just select Khmer spouses from well-off families or with high education and good occupation, not a Khmer farmer. On the other hand, educated Khmer men prefer to get married to Kinh women as Khmer women are not as beautiful and subtle as Kinh women.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the contexts and factors that have been conducive to the formation of marital unions across the ethnic divide between Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups in An Giang Province. As established in the previous chapters of this thesis, the divide between these groups is substantive and multi-dimensional. The residue of historical tensions between the two groups, pervasive stereotypical judgments about ethnic others, geographical separation and the socioeconomic disparity between the two groups are among the obstacles hindering Kinh and Khmer ethnic people from developing close and intimate relationships. The premise of this chapter is that these obstacles are significant enough to warrant the need for an explanation for how it is that individuals from different groups transcend them and form interethnic unions, as they indeed do.

By presenting evidence about the circumstances of a range of interethnic couples, this chapter has shed light on the complex factors inducing the incidence of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage. The workplace, school setting and spatial and social proximity were found to provide facilitating contexts in which Khmer-Kinh couples first encounter each other and build a close relationship. The chapter also explores how it is that unions form despite the significant socioeconomic divide between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups, uncovering evidence that suggests the relevance of the homogamy theory and the exchange
theory, which explain how couples who marry out overcome the socioeconomic disparity between ethnic groups. Furthermore, by focusing on subjective barriers to such marriages, the study describes individuals’ experiences of ideological struggle in breaking the ethnic boundary and highlights how individuals’ stereotypes toward each other’s ethnic group were broken down. Finally, the chapter examines the factor of parental refusal, describing the reaction of the parents of prospective couples, and showing how the couples negotiated for parental consent towards their unions.
Chapter 5

Living with Differences:
The Marital Relationships of Khmer-Kinh Couples

Marriage is a socially sanctioned sexual and economic union between men and women in which a wife and husband share many activities and duties. Married life can be full of harsh constraints and demands to which newlyweds must adjust. It is common for tension or conflicts to arise in the marital life of any couple, as spouses have to engage with each other’s practices and personality. Conflicts may be related to personality differences or disputes over the sharing of responsibilities or to underlying socioeconomic or power asymmetries. Interethnic marriage is even more complex as the interethnic couples may encounter additional conflicts rooted in different cultural values. Almost all couples experience specific challenges in their marital life; however, couples from different ethnic backgrounds may encounter more challenges because of different cultural expectations and values. Therefore, interethnic couples have to make greater efforts to learn and understand different and even contradictory cultural practices (Durodoye & Coker, 2008; Frame, 2004; Luke & Luke, 1998; Schafer, 2010).

‘Intercultural marriage is not simply a merging of two unique individuals, but also individuals from ‘two different worlds’, such as dissimilar countries, racial and ethnic groups, religions, and/or socioeconomic backgrounds’ (Bystydzienki, 2011, p. 46). The dynamics of mixed unions have been described as producing a complex space, an ‘in-between space’ of difference and identity, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. In this ‘in-between space’, conflicts or clashes may emerge from the intersection of differences in terms of ethnicity, class and gender (Bhabha, 1994; Killian, 2001). Hence, given that interethnic marriage may be a combination of individuals who are ethnically and socioeconomically heterogeneous, in examining the dynamics of the marital life of interethnic couples we should take into account the multifaceted nature of their differences.
Considering that Khmer and Kinh spouses have grown up in culturally different ethnic milieus, it is likely that their expectations, behavior and thought have been shaped by different cultural factors. In addition, these Khmer-Kinh couples may be also socioeconomically heterogeneous. Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples may be expected to have difficult or even unsatisfying romantic relationships because of dissimilar expectations and socioeconomic disparities. Problems may arise in their marital life but which factors can account for the problems? In this chapter, by examining a number of conflicts in the marital life of thirty-five interethnic Khmer-Kinh couples, I explore the most significant factors conditioning the marital relations of interethnic Khmer-Kinh couples in Vietnam. In addition, this chapter also explores how Khmer-Kinh couples negotiate and adapt to their differences and resolve any conflicts that may occur in their marital life.

Previous studies have showed that while class difference is one of the troublemakers in intercultural marriage, similar social background (similarity in education, attitudes, tastes, and manners) is an important ingredient in any marriage (Romano, 2008, p. 96). In addition, education is found to influence people’s values, making them more open-minded and having a more universalistic view on life than lesser-educated persons, enabling them to adapt well to different culture and customs (Cohen, 1977; Kalmijn, 1998; Lee, 1988; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). My argument is that sometimes or most of the time we may find that differences in ethnicity account for the tensions in Kinh-Khmer marriages, but if one takes a closer look, other factors such as education, knowledge and experience may be more important or interact with the ethnicity factor in shaping the tensions arising in Khmer-Kinh marital life and the ability to resolve them.

5.1 Cultural Awareness and Adaptation

One important cultural difference that interethnic couples encounter early in their marital life is divergence in the nature of their traditional wedding rituals. A wedding is more than simply the expression of happiness that newlyweds and their families feel about a marriage; it also serves to socialize both the bride and groom’s relatives, friends and neighbors to the marital status of the individuals (Kalmijn, 2004; Trinh Duy Luan, 2011). The wedding
ceremony is also one of the rituals that represents the traditional practices of each ethnic group and varies across ethnic groups. Differences can be easily observed in how Kinh and Khmer weddings are celebrated and it would seem likely that dissensions and negotiations over divergent cultural beliefs and practices in their wedding rites could occur among Khmer-Kinh interethnic spouses and their relatives. As shall be shown below, some Kinh spouses and their relatives raised concerns about alien cultural practices in their interethnic weddings, however, they also showed their respect toward Khmer wedding rituals.

Before going to the findings I should underline two sets of hypotheses. First, persons who are close in status can share similar tastes and values but interethnic marriage by nature is a combination of individuals of different status. My assumption is that when individuals are of high educational status, they may appreciate the experience of cultural difference in their wedding rites. Similarly I assume that disappointment and tension in adapting to customary differences in such rites would be less evident when spouses are close in educational level or when individuals have developed understanding and awareness of their spouse’s culture as a result of mutual interactions.

Second, the nature of the cultural encounter that interethnic couples experience in wedding rituals has been shaped to a degree by modern attitudes and reform policies. The findings uncover the influence of official exhortations to ritual frugality as well as socioeconomic change in modernization, which have led to the simplification of both Kinh and Khmer wedding rituals.34 Nevertheless, even though Khmer wedding rituals have been shortened and simplified to one day rather than employing the traditional lengthy and costly practices, which lasted three days, Khmer wedding rituals are still rather elaborate and ritualized; they are marked as ‘traditional’ and are even seen by some of my interlocutors as wasteful and outmoded. By contrast, Kinh rituals are more simplified and streamlined and hence are thought by many interlocutors to be more in keeping with ‘modern’ standards.

The findings highlight that individuals who are more highly educated value and appreciate the different rituals of their spouse. Two highly-educated couples expressed their openness

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34 Under the government reform program in 1986 in Vietnam, many social changes have affected the family system and one of them is the replacement of the old systems of rituals (wedding ritual is one of them) with new ones which are less costly (Pham Van Bich, 1999).
and interest in experiencing cultural difference in their wedding rites. Bon (a Khmer male) and Ngoc (a Kinh female) were a highly-educated couple who both worked as officials in the mixed area. Khang (Khmer male) and Loan (Kinh female) both were teachers in the mixed area. Speaking with Ngoc and Loan, the two well-educated Kinh female spouses in this pair of couples, I could sense their interest in experiencing cultural difference in their weddings. Even though Ngoc and Loan did not know in advance any details about the wedding rites of their Khmer spouses and they had to play the ‘main character’ in these strange rituals, they expressed their interest in ‘tasting the otherness’. Instead of complaining about the lengthy and complex rituals, Loan gladly recalled funny stories during her wedding ceremony:

One of the important Khmer wedding rites that we underwent was chanting, in which the monks chanted and blessed our marriage. However, I did not understand what the monks were chanting and blessing. So what I did was look at them and my husband and whenever they smiled, I smiled as well, as if I understood what was going on.

In addition, both Ngoc and Loan showed off their wedding photos in which they wore Khmer traditional dress. They looked very glad when speaking about how many people had praised their charming appearance when wearing Khmer traditional dress. They even expressed their pity for me, knowing that my own wedding ceremony had been so simple, saying that their weddings had been an interesting experience of tasting a new culture. Bon and Khang, the two male spouses in this pair of couples, also expressed their appreciation of their spouse’s Kinh wedding customs. They said that they had seen these rituals as a result of their long-term interaction with the Kinh community but this time they played the main role in the rituals so they were quite nervous. However, they said, they found it interesting to experience two cultures on their important days.

In addition, personal experience owing to exposure to cultural difference is also found to be a factor helping individuals cope with the different culture of their spouse. Khon and Lam were both from a low social class background—being low-educated and working in the same rock mine—when they fell in love and got married. They reached a consensus on how
to celebrate their marriage. Lam, a Kinh migrant, told me that by interacting with the Khmer community before his marriage, he was aware of the length and cost of Khmer wedding rituals. Lam confided that as his family was in economic difficulty they could not support his wedding financially so he considered simplifying his wedding. However, thinking that a person experiences a wedding just once in his/her life, he thought it was worth having an elaborate wedding. Khon, Lam’s Khmer wife, also shared her husband’s view on the arrangements, thinking that a wedding is very significant to a woman so it should be carefully celebrated. Khon showed her pride about her marriage saying that her husband had worked very hard to save money for their elaborate and costly wedding, emphasizing that her wedding was lots of fun with many rituals and was very crowded, with nearly two hundred guests.

In each of the three cases above, the location of the couples in Khmer populated areas had a significant bearing on the nature of their wedding rites. Owing to their long-term interaction with the Khmer community as a result of their migration, the Kinh spouses in the above three examples were aware of the elaborate nature of Khmer rituals before their marriage so they raised no significant objection to going through these rituals. Another relevant factor is that being migrants residing in a Khmer area, these Kinh spouses each had to adapt to and adopt local Khmer cultural practices in order to be accepted as ‘insiders’ in the local Khmer community. My explanation for their willingness to be involved in the elaborate Khmer wedding rites is that being an ‘outsider’ in a local Khmer community, they needed to show their respect for local rituals and participate in them to build up trust and consolidate social relationships both with their in-laws as well as the wider community of neighbors.

Interestingly, a different pattern of adaptation was evident in the urban area. There, spouses were under greater pressure to simplify their wedding rites owing to a variety of factors. These included the greater expense of living in the urban area, which made it difficult to come up with the savings to conduct a costly complex wedding. Added to this was the fact that most of the resources of the urban-dwelling couples had been devoted to their education and building up their careers. The work rhythm in the city was different to the countryside. The scarcity, routinization and commodification of time in urban areas meant that guests were unable to be present at weddings during the weekdays and the time
devoted to the rites themselves was much shorter. As a result, urban living itself had a
tendency to efface the cultural complexity of wedding rites, and thus reduce the need for
spouses and their families to adapt to the culturally distinct customs of their partners’ ethnic
tradition. These trends can be demonstrated by two cases.

Couples in the urban area tended to celebrate their wedding in shortened, condensed and
modernised wedding forms. This was the experience of Neang Phuong, who worked as a
teacher in a kindergarten in Long Xuyen city and got married to Ty, a local Kinh man, who
worked as a security guard in a company in Long Xuyen. Since her husband’s parents had
passed away, she and her husband had to prepare and organize their wedding by
themselves. They decided to celebrate their wedding in a simple way, just serving to
socialize their relatives, friends and neighbors to their marital status. They followed a
streamlined mixture of Khmer and Kinh traditional customs in their wedding rites. Their
wedding was celebrated in only one day in their house in Long Xuyen city on a weekend
day. This fits the common present trend that almost all weddings in the city are celebrated
on weekends to accommodate the couples and their families as well as the participants.

Neang Phuong recalled that one day before her wedding, her mother prayed at the ancestral
altar in her family house in Tri Ton town asking for their permission to celebrate her
daughter’s wedding in Long Xuyen before travelling to the city to join the rites. In the early
morning on the day of their wedding, the couples did formal but simplified traditional ritual
practices in their city home. They bowed and invited Neang Phuong’s mother, her uncles
and her husband’s uncles to a cup of wine thanking them for their care and instruction and
receiving their best wishes for their marriage. And then the banquet was held with the
dishes prepared by professional banquet caterers to treat the couple’s relatives, neighbors
and friends. One day later, Neang Phuong and her husband accompanied her relatives to her
family house in Tri Ton town to pray before the ancestral altar in her family house and visit
her relatives and neighbors as well as to pray to Buddha in the nearby Khmer temple for
luck in their marriage. The couple then stayed with her family for two days before going
back to Long Xuyen to resume work.
Another example was Van (female Kinh) and Thi (male Khmer) who are homogamous in their high education and occupation in Long Xuyen city and their middle-class family background. By virtue of culturally diverse interaction in their schooling and occupation, they both valued each other’s cultural heritage and wanted to display their ethnic culture in their wedding celebration. However, after careful consideration and discussion, they saw that it would be a waste of money to draw on two traditional practices in their wedding. Their income was not sufficient enough for them to conduct the traditional lengthy practices and they did not want to leave this burden to their parents, who had financially invested in their schooling. They both shared the view that how they maintained the happiness in their marital life was more significant than displaying a magnificent wedding ceremony. They discussed with their parents celebrating their wedding in simplified form instead of with lengthy and wasteful traditional customs. As both Van and Thi worked in Long Xuyen city, their wedding celebration was conducted on a weekend in Long Xuyen to facilitate the participation of their friends and colleagues. Quite similar to Neang Phuong’s wedding ceremony, their wedding was celebrated in Van house. Early that morning, Thi’s parents and relatives arrived at Van’s family home and the couple went through formal customs: praying at the ancestors’ altar and bowing and inviting their respective parents and uncles and aunts to a cup of wine, thanking them for their care and instruction and receiving their best wishes for their marriage. And then a banquet was held to treat the couple’s relatives, neighbors and friends, which lasted until late afternoon.

Such a simplified form of wedding ceremony was not unique to the urban couples. Many other couples in the rural Khmer-dominated area and the semi-rural mixed area celebrated their wedding in similarly condensed form. These couples and their corresponding families preferred this simplified form as it was more economical and less wasteful than old-style (Kinh or Khmer) weddings and they considered the simplified ceremony a sign of civility and progress in a modern, industrial and commercial society.

As such, one finding of this study is that differences in customary wedding practices did not loom large as a source of tension between couples in interethnic marriages because in a great many cases the couples themselves preferred simpler rites that were stripped of much of their cultural specificity and distinctiveness. In line with Le Nhu Hoa (1998) description
about the variation in marriage rituals in Kinh and Khmer communities in present times, my field study found that many lengthy traditional marital procedures in the study area have been hybridised and replaced by simpler and more condensed rituals. Such changes are influenced by cultural exchanges and long-term interaction between ethnic groups. Many Khmer people, both young and old, expressed their support and encouraging attitude toward condensed and simpler forms of marriage ceremony. The previous traditional rituals were so lengthy and costly that in many cases families became indebted after their children’s marriage ceremony so the more economically practical and simpler forms were preferred. Similarly, the patterns of the wedding ceremony of Kinh people in this province have also been changing to a simpler form owing to the influence of official exhortations to ritual frugality as well as socioeconomic change—developments similar to that observed in northern Vietnam (Malarney 2002).

5.2 Adjustment Problems in Non-homogamous Marriages

The previous section suggests that education, homogomy, residential location and modernization are key factors influencing couples’ ability to adjust to and harmonize their culturally distinct ritual traditions and enjoy conflict free and mutually satisfying wedding celebrations. However, the only significant case of tension I came across is worth examining in detail for it too sheds light on the significance of education and homogomy in facilitating adjustment to cultural differences in interethnic marriages.

Tensions may arise in cases where couples are dissimilar in educational level, meaning that they do not share tastes, understandings, and views on life; or where a spouse lacks any personal experience or understanding of his or her spouse’s culture. Such a hypothesis flows from studies which show that class difference (educational and social status) creates problems in intercultural marriages, since social background determines not only manners or behavior but also attitude of a spouse toward many things (Romano, 2008, p. 96). In studying the marital relationship of Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand, Harré (1966) highlighted that the cause of many conflicts arising in mixed marriage was often associated with the degree to which the couple had shared group memberships and interests before
marriage as well as the idea each spouse had of the other and his or her group (p. 91). The following case enables me to explore these assumptions.

Thane’s hometown is in Chau Lang, a Khmer-dominated rural area, and he migrated to Long Xuyen city, a Kinh-dominated area. He worked as a government official and was the only highly educated member in his family so his voice was highly appreciated in his family. His Kinh wife, Yen, was a low-educated local resident and a garment worker in the city to which Thane had migrated. After some months of dating, Thane introduced Yen to his family and his mother asked for Yen’s horoscope to see if her horoscope was in concord with Thane’s, checking that the combination of the elements and the signs would lead to harmonious and fertile marriage. Satisfied that their horoscopes matched well, Thane’s parents supported formalization of his intimate relationship with Yen.

Normally, decisions about wedding ceremonies are considered the prerogative of parents and senior family members but Thane said that he was economically independent and mature enough to make his own decisions on his wedding rites. Having for many years interacted with the Kinh community during his higher education, Thane was aware of the divergent customs of the two ethnic groups. Hence he thought carefully about how his wedding rites should be celebrated. He consulted with a Ta Acha and also asked for Yen’s opinion about the wedding rites before discussing the plans with his parents. Their wedding ceremony is an example of a wedding that draws on both Khmer and Kinh traditional customs. In the following pages, I describe the wedding in detail to show how each of them adapted to the culturally distinct ritual traditions in this wedding.

As scheduled with Yen’s mother [normally, the father is the head of the household but Yen’s father had passed away so Yen’s mother was the representative of the family], in the ‘preliminary discussion’ rite [le cham ngo], Thane and his parents were accompanied by

35 The Khmer traditional marriage process goes through three stages: the preliminary discussions (le cham ngo), the betrothal (le hoi) and the wedding itself (le cuoi). Each stage is preceded by offerings of betel leaves and areca nuts. During the preliminary discussions, all details are probed, bargained about, and agreed upon. The girl’s horoscope has to concord with the boy’s to ensure that the combination of the elements and the signs would lead to harmonious and fertile marriage. The two families discuss the formalities for the betrothal ceremony, in particular, the amount of betel and areca and tea that the suitor’s family is to bring on the day of the ceremony. The betrothal ceremony is organised to take place on an auspicious day, with the two sets of
ten of his Khmer and Kinh colleagues as the representatives of the groom’s side coming to Yen’s house in Long Xuyen city. Due to the language barrier, Thane had his colleagues accompany him to help with translation during the preliminary discussion rite, since his parents were very limited in Vietnamese and Yen’s family did not speak Khmer. On the bride’s side, Yen’s grandfather, mother, uncle and aunt and Yen acted as the representatives.

As had been discussed beforehand with Thane and Yen, the two families expressed their desire to maintain and practice their own traditional customs in the wedding ceremony and they decided to hold separate traditional ceremonies for each spouse’s side of the family. In addition, Yen’s mother also gave Yen’s date of birth to Thane’s parents to ask for the help of the Ta Acha to dictate the date and the exact timing of the wedding rite, which could bring luck and happiness to the couples. One indispensable topic discussed in the ‘preliminary discussion’ rite was the bride price (thach cuoi).36 Yen told me that her mother did not request an exact amount of bride price but left it to the capacity of the groom’s family. In addition, because neither family was wealthy they decided to exempt the betrothal costs (le hoi) to lessen the expense. After getting the date and the exact timing of the wedding rite from the Ta Acha, Thane and his parents came to Yen’s house again to present the amount of money to the bride’s family to buy necessary things for the wedding (tien dong) and inform them of the date and the exact timing of wedding rites.

As planned, the wedding banquet was held on the bride's side one day with the groom present to welcome the invited guests. The wedding banquet was held in the bride’s house with the food prepared by professional banquet caterers. The couple welcomed the invited guests at the table near the entryway and all arriving guests wished happiness to the couple and placed their envelope of cash into the wedding barrel. The guests were mainly Yen’s neighbors, her coworkers and her mother’s coworkers. No traditional ritual was practiced parents meeting to discuss the wedding day, as well as the presents that the boy’s family must offer: money, jewellery, furniture, silk bolts, and so forth (McLeod & Nguyen, 2001, pp. 137-138).

36 Practised in both Khmer and Kinh customs, bride price (tuc thach cuoi) involves the bride’s side seeking a certain quantity of money, gold jewellery and other items from the family of the groom. As the bride price can be seen as a reflection of the moral values of the bride, the bride’s parents may demand an excessive bride price. Bride price custom is applied flexibly as no exact amount is regulated; it varies dramatically across disparate socioeconomic families.
on this day; the wedding banquet played a role as the public face of the couple and their families. Without a banquet, there may have been gossip from neighbors and friends about the reasons for their failure to organize a wedding banquet—which is particularly significant to women.

On the following day, the important Kinh traditional rite ‘the bringing of the bride’ (*le ruoc dau*) was conducted. The groom’s side came to the bride’s house in two cars around 8:30am. They queued in orderly fashion headed by the side of the groom’s chief representative (Khmer: *Maha*), followed by Thane’s parents and relatives, Thane, and four young men and women carrying trays of betel nuts and gift trays. They waited until 9:00am, the time dictated by the Ta Acha, then the side of the groom’s chief representative and the man carrying a ceremonial tray of wine went into the bride’s house to ask for the permission of the bride’s parents for the groom’s representatives to come into the house (*nhap gia*). With the bride’s side’s permission, the groom’s side, led by the groom’s parents and the representatives of the groom’s side, entered and commenced the rituals. After presenting all the gift trays, including a pair of candles, wine, tea, and fruit for the bride’s side, the groom’s side’s representatives were invited to sit at one side of the table to have tea (the representatives of the bride side sat on the opposite side). Then Thane’s parents presented the bride price for Yen, including a pair of rings, a pair of earrings and a necklace, all made of gold. Yen and Thane exchanged rings for each other’s ring finger and the earrings were placed in Yen’s ears by Thane. In this rite, Yen wore a Kinh traditional dress (*ao dai*) while Thane wore a Western suit. Rites of respect to the bride’s family were then coordinated by the head representative of the bride’s side. Firstly the couple was asked to pray at the bride’s ancestral altar and then the couple bowed and invited her parents and

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37 ‘The bringing of the bride’ (*le ruoc dau*): On the wedding day, at the fixed hour, the groom—accompanied by his father, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends—form a procession heading toward the bride’s house in a ceremony known as the ‘bringing of the bride’ to her husband’s house. Upon their arrival, all are invited to sit and are served tea; meanwhile, the bride’s father (or the eldest representative) invokes the souls of the departed at the ancestral altar to inform them of the marriage. The groom, followed by the bride, lights incense at the altar and bows down three times to his wife’s ancestors to announce his taking the bride home. Both groom and bride perform obeisance to the bride’s parents, who acknowledge them in turn by presenting the couple with their gift (in cash or kind) and their wishes for long life and numerous progeny. The same ceremony is performed upon the entry of the bride into her husband’s home, which then becomes hers as well (McLeod & Nguyen, 2001).
grandfather and her aunts to a cup of wine to thank them for raising her and the couple received best wishes from their relatives.

Then the family representative of the groom side’s (Maha) asked for the permission of the representatives of the bride’s side to bring Yen to the groom’s family house. Yen was ‘farewelled’ (dua dau) by her parents, her aunts and uncles and the family representative of the bride’s side. It took them more than an hour to reach Thane’s rural home by car. The couple was asked to change their suits to Khmer traditional dress to perform the ceremony. They were then invited to sit at a designated place in the middle of the living room. Offerings were made to the groom’s ancestors and the Maha conducted the ritual of cutting areca flowers (cat hoa cau). Then, before the wedding banquet was celebrated, the Maha danced to a traditional Khmer tune symbolizing that the two families officially allowed Yen and Thane to become a couple. During the wedding banquet, Yen wore a Western-style wedding dress to welcome the invited guests, but when the wedding banquet was over, she changed her costume back to Khmer traditional dress for the ceremony. Yen and Thane went through many Khmer wedding rites, including ritual haircuts to symbolize their new married status and binding the couple's hands with a red thread to ensure the long-term happiness of the couple. Only those guests who were already married were allowed to bind the thread for the new couple and they also gave them valuable gifts with best wishes. Then, the couple was allowed to go into the bridal chamber (buong tan hon); the bride went ahead and the groom followed, holding the flap of his wife’s dress. In addition, the monks were also invited to chant and bless the new couple.

The complexity of these wedding rites illustrates the length that Thane was prepared to go to in order to respect traditions and appease both sides of the family. As the wedding’s principal organiser, he was concerned to ensure that the culturally distinct ritual traditions of both Kinh and Khmer sides of the family were faithfully incorporated into the wedding rite so as to accommodate the customs of both Khmer and Kinh relatives and keep them onside. However, Yen’s attitude was markedly different. Yen complained to me that even though she had learned of the different customs in advance, she was still shocked and tired at the lengthy and complex Khmer wedding traditional customs. She told me that while submitting to all of those rituals that were so strange to her, she had not understood what
people were doing or saying. She even complained that the chanting was so long that she could not stand up after it was over as her feet had stiffened and fallen asleep.

Figure 5.1 Binding the hands of the couple with a red thread in the Khmer custom
In the aforementioned case, the tensions over wedding rituals arose partly as a consequence of the difference in educational level and cultural awareness between the individuals. In the case of Yen and Thane, we might attribute the tension—manifested in Yen’s frustration at her wedding’s ritual complexity and strangeness—in part to Yen’s relatively low level of education and lack of middle-class cosmopolitan willingness to sample exotic ‘ethnic minority’ customs as a distinction-making component of her wedding. In addition, owing to her life-long residence in a Kinh-dominated area, Yen was totally unequipped for her encounter with Khmer cultural traditions, which helps explain her dissatisfaction and feelings of discomfort toward her spouse’s alien wedding rituals. By contrast, her Khmer husband, a highly educated person who was successful in his occupation in a Kinh-dominated area moved more easily between the two cultural worlds. Moreover, Thane’s wedding provided an opportunity for him to display his high status and ethnic pride by scrupulously following traditional Kinh wedding rites, followed immediately by an elaborately staged ‘traditional Khmer’ wedding.
5.3. Parental Adjustment in Interethnic Marriage

In marrying a person, an individual has to live with not only his/her spouse but also his/her in-laws, who have great authority and influence on their marital relations. In Chapter Four, I highlighted the strength of some parents’ reaction to their child marrying across ethnic lines, with some of their greatest concerns rooted in social stereotypes. What is their attitude to their ‘outsider’ in-law after their marriage? Do they adjust their attitudes or maintain a negative attitude toward their in-law? Previous scholars have emphasized the significant influence of education on people’s values, which may make them more open to accepting and adapting to differences (Cohen, 1977; Kalmijn, 1998; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). In addition, increased geographical mobility from modernization processes may serve to increase contact and mutual understanding between people of different groups and sweep away the cultural barriers between them (Bystydzienski, 2011; McFadden, 2001; Williams & Yu, 2006). I argue that parents who are highly educated or understanding of the circumstances of their children’s spouse will have a better relationship with their ‘outsider’ in-laws.

The findings show that in some cases Kinh migrant spouses suffered a lot of tensions from their Khmer parents-in-law. Their negative judgments, distrust, or disrespect towards their child-in-law were based on their social stereotypes toward Kinh people. Even though having been convinced to approve of their children’s interethnic marriage, once married, the deeply ingrained judgments of these Khmer rural parents toward the Kinh group influenced their attitudes toward their child-in-law.

Neang Pho (a Khmer teacher) and Toan (a Kinh teacher) in a Le Tri commune encountered strong familial opposition to their intimate relationship for many years. Even after getting their familial approval to break the ethnic boundary and get married, traditional customs posed a further obstacle to the evolution of their relationship. Neang Pho raised the dilemma posed by traditional customs prior to her marriage ceremony. As it had taken her and Toan almost six years to get their respective families’ approval on their spouse choice, Neang Pho was very worried that the traditional custom of bride price (tuc thach cuoi) could upset each other’s families. Both Neang Pho and her boyfriend’s families were in an
average socioeconomic situation, but Neang Pho was one of the few female Khmers in her hometown who was highly educated and had a respected occupation. As a high school teacher, she was considered to be highly worthy in the Khmer community. To her mother, her value had been symbolically enhanced by the fact that some Khmer men had asked to marry Neang Pho when she was still in school. Understanding that her mother would expect a valuable bride gift, Neang Pho was very worried that demands for a large bride-price would impose hardships on the groom’s family. To avoid the possible tensions that might even put an end to her marital relationship, she spent much time persuading her mother not to demand a large bride-price but to just accept whatever the bridegroom’s family would present. To please Neang Pho, her mother did not demand an exact bride price and left it to the groom’s side to make their offer according to their own judgement and capacity. However, she was very sad and ashamed about the small bride price that eventually was given, as it showed that Neang Pho was not highly valuable. This feeling was especially acute during the wedding rites when the amount of the bride-price presented to Neang Pho was, in keeping with custom, announced loudly to her relatives and community.

In this case, being a high school teacher, Toan was considered a good candidate and a good match for Neang Pho and, as she later told me, they were expected to have a bright future together and be a model couple for the local community. However, due to her lack of understanding, Neang Pho’s mother did not value his education. Instead, her greatest concern was the amount of material wealth that Toan could present to Neang Pho at the wedding to show off Neang Pho’s high value to the community.

The following case also illustrates tense relations with in-laws. Linh, a high school teacher residing with Chuong, her Khmer husband, in O Lam commune, also suffered tense relations with her parents-in-law, which was rooted in the latter’s distrust toward their Kinh daughter-in-law. On the day I reached Linh and Chuong’s house at noontime, their family was celebrating the one-month birth anniversary for their second daughter. Luckily, Chuong’s family warmly welcomed an unexpected guest like me to join the party. The anniversary was celebrated only at the family level and only Linh and Chuong’s relatives were at the party. But I was quite surprised that Chuong’s parents left the anniversary very
early after the formal rituals were concluded even though their house was within close walking distance of Chuong’s house. To avoid making others upset, they said that they had a backache so they needed to rest.

During the party, Chuong was busy chatting and drinking with his male relatives so I talked to Linh, Chuong’s wife, a Kinh high school teacher. My first impression was that I guessed she had a very happy marriage with her stable socioeconomic status. However, I was curious about why she had her mother from another commune come to help with caring for her children after they were born in spite of living nearby her parents-in-law’s house. I expressed curiosity as to why Linh did not ask for help from her mother-in-law in taking care of the children, since it was more convenient. Sitting nearby, Linh’s sister-in-law deftly responded that her mother was not healthy enough to look after a grandchild.

With Linh’s sister-in-law present, we just gossiped about Linh’s daughters and Linh’s schoolwork. Fortunately, after talking for a while, Linh’s sister-in-law had to leave to do preparation for her food trading on the following day so I could develop a free conversation with Linh. Knowing that I am also in an interethnic marriage like her, Linh was happy to talk with me after the ceremony was over even though she was quite tired. Talking about her children and her job for a while, I asked Linh about her marital experience, particularly any difficulties arising in living with cultural differences. The first suffering in her marital life Linh thought of was the harsh relationship with her in-laws. Linh recalled her tense relations with her in-laws during the time she had lived under the same roof as them. Since Chuong was the youngest son in a quite well-off family in the village and his only two sisters had moved out, he was expected to live in the same house with his parents to take care of them. Linh was psychologically prepared and glad to live with her parents-in-law as she thought that being a daughter-in-law in a Khmer family would not be as harsh as in a Kinh family and also considered that her own family was not wealthy enough to support a living place for her and her husband. Unexpectedly, her tension with the in-laws arose soon after her marriage ceremony. Linh was very sad, saying that:
After my marriage ceremony, my parents-in-law asked my husband to give them all the “wedding gold” (*vang cuoi*)\(^{38}\) for them to keep safe. Even worse, my husband also obeyed their suggestion of giving them all his monthly salary to keep. I confided a lot with my husband; we are a couple so we must trust each other and we needed to have our own savings. After some months, my husband convinced his mother of his desire to have our small family’s savings and gave his salary to me to keep.

Chuong’s father belongs to a wealthy Khmer family in O Lam. He had been a communal official in the commune and his wife had a small stall serving breakfast in the local market. Both had regular and stable incomes so their family was quite well off in comparison to other local villagers. Traditionally, endogamous marriages in wealthy Khmer families are very common, largely for the purpose of property holdings, which strengthen the family’s status, in economic, social and prestige terms. Despite the range of prohibitions against close-kin marriage, this type of marriage practice is still a common occurrence in middle-class Khmer groups in the contemporary Khmer community. Well-off Khmer families seek for a prospective spouse for their son/daughter among their close kinsfolk to avoid ‘the loss of property to the outsiders’ (in Vietnamese: *người ngoại an cua*). However, in Linh’s case, her family background was from a lower socioeconomic status: her father worked as a construction worker and her mother was a housewife so their income was very unstable and limited, which made Linh’s parents-in-law worry that they may be economically exploited and their daughter-in-law may take their family’s economic resources to her natal family.

Similar to Neang Pho’s mother, Chuong’s parents also emphasized the economic status rather than the human capacity (being well educated and having a stable and high-principled job) of their daughter-in-law. Their distrust towards Linh was also associated with the pejorative social stereotype among the Khmer community toward Kinh as ‘calculating’ and ‘dishonest’, which increased the suspicion of Linh’s parents-in-law toward Linh as a person from an untrustworthy group who potentially might rob them of their hard-earned wealth.

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\(^{38}\) The wedding gold (*vang cuoi*) is one part of the bride price that the groom’s family gives to the bride in marrying their son. It is the tradition of both Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups that the groom’s family has to give the gift to the bride for marrying their son.
In both of these cases, residing in a rural Khmer-dominated area, the Khmer parents-in-law of these Kinh spouses lacked the education and opportunities for personal interaction with Kinh people that might have provided them with a more open-minded attitude towards Kinh people. As a result their judgment toward their in-laws was mainly based on ingrained social stereotypes. However, one of the Kinh spouses, Linh, also lacked a multi-cultural upbringing. She grew up in Ba Chuc town\(^\text{39}\) where there is a small Khmer community, but since the Khmer Rouge massacre in the 1970s Kinh people in that area have maintained a strongly negative judgment toward Khmers and keep separated from Khmer community. Despite her educated status, her lack of familiarity with Khmer practices and concerns made it difficult for her to understand her in-laws’ point of view or resolve the tensions arising between them.

However, in examining another case in which a Kinh wife also lived with her Khmer husband’s family in a Khmer rural area, I found no significant tension related to in-law relations. Similar to Linh and Chuong, Dung and Kha are both highly educated and Dung worked as a high school teacher while Kha was employed as a communal official. As Kha was the only son in his family, after their marriage the couple resided in Kha’s house. Dung shared with me that she felt quite comfortable living with her parents-in-law. Dung gladly said that Kha was the only son so he was in his parents’ favor, and she too was also well treated. Her most favorable comments about her parents-in-law was the support they gave her in criticizing her husband’s over drinking. She recalled that her marriage almost broke up due to her husband’s frequent heavy drinking. Being the Secretary of the Youth Union in a commune, Kha spent most of his time in outside social activities and social relationship building, which also involved frequent drinking. During this crisis period, Dung told me, her parents-in-law were always with her in convincing her husband to limit his drinking.

Although both Linh and Dung lived under the same roof with their in-laws why did Dung not suffer the same tense relations with her in-laws as Linh? Their harmonious relationship can be attributed to the intercultural capacity of both Dung and her in-laws. Dung was born and grew up in a Khmer community so she was familiar with Khmer culture and had a

\(^{39}\) Ba Chuc town is much more developed and affluent as compared to other communes in Tri Ton district. It can be considered as a Kinh-dominated area as Long Xuyen city with 877 Khmers comprising 16.108 per cent of its total population (Statistic Department of Tri Ton, 2013).
positive attitude toward Khmer people. Owing to her interactions with the Khmer community over a long period, Dung could understand the Khmer language and could speak simple Khmer statements so she did not suffer the same language barrier as Linh. Moreover, her parents’ house was in close proximity to her in-laws’ house so her parents-in-law understood her own family’s situation quite well. In addition, Dung was a classmate of her husband’s sister, and she had often visited her parents-in-law’s house before their marriage, so her parents-in-law were well aware of her characteristics, which can account for their positive attitude toward Dung.

By examining these cases, the study reveals that a lack of intercultural understanding intersecting with ethnic stereotypes may intensify the strains and tensions between a couple and their in-laws. These findings are in agreement with prior research which shows that intercultural couples’ relationships are deeply influenced by external actors/agents, especially by their family, and that the dynamics of the couples’ relationship were strongly mediated by each partner’s parents and extended families (Luke & Luke, 1998; Werner, 2004). As in many marriages of this kind, marital tensions in Khmer-Kinh couples were also found to arise most markedly in their relations with their in-laws (Durodoye & Coker, 2008; Polek & Schoon, 2008). In addition, this study reinforces findings from comparative studies on intermarriages that the problem of tense relations with in-laws is experienced primarily by the wives (Schnepp & Yui, 1955).

5.4 Admiration and Disrespect

As discussed in Chapter Four, personal experience dynamically shaped the perceptions that many spouses had of each other, leading them to marry across ethnic lines, regardless of the negative ethnic stereotypes held by their families or in the wider society. Looking deeply at the marital life of these Khmer-Kinh couples, I found that how these individuals value or judge their spouses significantly shaped their marital relations. While some degree of ethnic stereotyping was evident in comments made by all of the couples I interviewed, rarely did I encounter entrenched negative attitudes that seemed to threaten the viability of the marital bond.
I heard from local villagers in Co To commune that Lam and Khon were a successful and happy Kinh-Khmer couple, which made villagers believe that interethnic Kinh and Khmer marriage was possible and viable. Lam’s hometown was in the North of Vietnam but he was assigned to service in a military zone in this Khmer locality. After finishing his service in the military, he did not go back to his hometown but worked in a rock mine in O Lam, since life in his hometown was very hard. In this workplace he met and fell in love with Khon, a local Khmer woman. During our conversation in their house, Khon and Lam were very glad chatting with me but Khon was the main interlocutor as Lam often went to the back of the house to make food they would sell the following morning. Khon’s pride in her husband could easily be observed from her face. She repeatedly praised her husband’s good characteristics: hard-working, caring for the family, and not drinking or smoking like other local men. She recalled that since both of their families were in economic difficulty, her husband had worked very hard during the daytime and even nighttime to cover the numerous expenses of their wedding, which was celebrated in Khmer customary style. She emphasized that:

In contrast to common stereotypes that Kinh men are dishonest and unfaithful, my husband has continued working hard and caring for the family since our marriage. He cares for our children’s schooling a lot and often reminds them of our hardship and lack of opportunity to pursue our own schooling. I think there are good and bad persons in both the Khmer and Kinh community. I am lucky having a good husband.

Similar to Khon, Loan, who was a kindergarten teacher in Tri Town town, conveyed many positive judgments toward her Khmer husband. Loan and Khang fell in love when they were students in An Giang University and after their marriage they both became teachers in Tri Ton town. Even though having an undergraduate degree is qualification enough to be a teacher in a high school, Khang was very studious and had just finished his postgraduate degree when I conducted my field study. Hence his postgraduate qualification distinguished him in this locality. Loan expressed her admiration at her husband’s high education; she proudly told me:

My husband’s family was so poor that his mother could not cover his study expenses. My husband was very passionate in pursuing higher education so during the years studying in
An Giang University, he worked as a tutor to cover his expenses in the city. He was very studious so he received a monthly scholarship for being a good student.

Loan further added that another character of her husband she appreciated was his filial piety to his mother (his father died when he was young). During the time studying in Long Xuyen, he saved some money to send back to his mother monthly. Loan said that since their marriage, her husband kept sending some money to his mother monthly. When I asked if she felt sad when her husband cared so much for his mother, Loan changed her voice recalling that it was quite a struggle in the early years of their marriage especially in the two years her husband went to Can Tho University for his postgraduate study, but it is the responsibility of a child so she totally supported her husband.

Despite individuals having overcome social stereotypes in this way, this study found that in some cases, how individuals judge their spouse is to some extent shaped by deeply ingrained social stereotypes. I relate the two cases where I encountered negative perspectives that did appear to contribute to serious tension in a couple’s intimate interethnic relations.

Tension rooted from social stereotype can be found in Ngan’s case. After wandering O Lam market chatting with local people about Khmer-Kinh intermarriages in this area, I went to Ngan’s house at noontime as directed by local people. Luckily, Ngan and her husband were both at home and warmly welcomed my visit. Surprisingly, Bon, Ngan’s husband, quickly went to the back of the house after greeting us and Ngan was the sole representative of the family talking to the new guests in her living room. During our conversation, Bon sat in the lobby close to the living room where we were seated but he never got involved in our conversation. Unexpectedly, Ngan was almost crying when speaking of her parents’ opposition to her spouse selection and of the misery she had felt at her husband’s mistreatment of her when she had a conflict with her in-laws. However, Ngan was swiftly cheerful again and expressed pride in her decision to select her Khmer spouse and her present marital life. She further indicated how rational she had been in selecting her spouse: ‘It is true that Khmers are gullible (kho) and not as intelligent as Kinh people, but they are very honest and hard-working’. Ngan’s stereotype toward Khmers is
deeply ingrained and she attempted to be seen as the ‘dominant’ spouse in her family, and was the decision-maker for the family’s economic activities and the representative of the family, giving the reason that Khmers are not good at calculating.

One week later, when I again talked with her husband without her present he revealed that their marital tension was mainly rooted in her attitude toward him and his family. Looking down on her husband, she even scolded him when he did not follow her decisions and even scolded his sister when they were in conflict. Her disrespect made her husband very angry so he left her for some months after she gave birth to their first child. Why did she get married to a man she looked down upon? Talking with her neighbors helped me uncover the reason. Despite her high level of education, her social status in the Kinh community went down after she married and divorced prior to getting married to her present Khmer husband. As a result of her divorce, and limited opportunities to find another spouse in the Kinh community, Ngan married a Khmer man even though she undervalued Khmer people. The tensions in their family demonstrate how social stereotypes can lead to expressions of disrespect and anger that damage the viability of a couple’s inter-personal bond.

Marital tension rooted in social stereotypes was also found in another couple living in Long Xuyen city. Even though Phong and Lin were living in my hometown, finding them was quite hard and took me much time. While many Khmer migrants in Long Xuyen city are highly educated, Lin, a female petty trader, was not part of their social networks. With my purpose of recruiting a couple of low socioeconomic status in Long Xuyen city, I wandered three local markets for many days looking for Khmer petty traders. There were only two to three Khmer traders in each market and all of them were daily migrants from Tri Ton district. Unfortunately, none of them knew any Khmers married to a Kinh spouse. Having almost given up, I fortuitously met a Khmer mobile rice trader whose sister had married a Kinh husband in Long Xuyen.

Following her directions, I finally found Lin’s house after some hours of searching. It seemed to me that there was nothing stable in this couple’s circumstances. Both Lin and Phong were from families of low socioeconomic means and neither had a stable job.

40 They travel to Long Xuyen city daily to sell some specialties from the mountainous areas of Tri Ton.
Through matchmaking by the wife’s sister, they got acquainted and lived together as husband and wife without a marriage ceremony and out of official wedlock. Their post-marital residence was also unsettled; they lived with Phong’s family for some months and then they lived with Lin’s family for some months. As both couples had no stable job, they earned just enough for daily consumption. Unhappily, their marital instability was further compounded by Lin’s mistrust of her Kinh husband which was rooted in the social stereotype of Kinh people as inherently ‘dishonest’ and ‘disloyal’. Besides having no stable job, Phong confided that his greatest unhappiness in his marriage was his Khmer wife’s disregard of his opinions:

My wife is very conservative. She does not trust me, she only trusts her sisters. I think spouses must trust each other since we are in a family while her sisters have their own families. However, in any discussion, she never follows my opinion; she just follows her sisters’ ideas.

On the other hand, his Khmer wife, Lin, also expressed her disappointment toward her marital life, speaking with her husband present:

I thought that by having a husband my life would be better but now my life is even worse. Now we have a daughter, so how I can leave him? I do not know how Khmer women can live with their Kinh husbands; some previous Khmer-Kinh couples in my village eventually separated.

She seems to have no trust in her marriage and when talking with her I learned that she doubted her husband’s loyalty. My sense is that their marriage is unsettled and the stability of their marriage is uncertain. Their mutual distrust may be rooted in personal circumstances and behaviors, but it also resonates with negative stereotypes each hold of the other’s ethnicity: that Khmer people are conservative, while Kinh people are dishonest and disloyal.

The findings highlight that in living with ‘otherness’, disrespect and disappointment may arise, however, the tension may not be related to cultural differences, but rooted in social circumstances and stereotypes. In Ngan’s case, her disrespect toward her Khmer husband
caused much tension in her family and her disrespect was mainly rooted in their disparity in social status. In Lin’s and Phong’s case social stereotypes contribute to the tensions arising in their family from their precarious living circumstances.

These findings are in line with a study on Maori and Pakeha intermarriage, in which Harré (1966) showed how racial stereotypes sometimes are raised and complicate the resolution of disputes between a husband and wife that may have arisen from some other cause. Similarly, in this study, ethnic stereotypes also were invoked when couples were in conflict, which further put their marriage in danger. For such couples, widely held stereotypes continued to be espoused, regardless of their long experience of living together. This rigidity can be attributed to deeply ingrained prejudices (Hosokawa, 1980) and points to the limits of seeing intimate interethnic relationships as inherently positive arenas for forging new respectful understandings that inevitably will challenge the prejudices of the wider society.

**Conclusion**

By examining the marital life of thirty-five Khmer-Kinh couples, this chapter has unpacked the dynamics of the intercultural encounters taking place in Khmer-Kinh marital life and it has explored the relative importance of factors affecting the marital relationships of these couples. It looks not only at cultural differences based in ethnic heritage but also differences relating to locality, class, personal awareness and social stereotypes, showing that all exist as potential roots of tension or conflicts in the marital life of Khmer-Kinh couples. The findings are mostly consistent with the argument of Bhabha (1994) and Killian (2001) that intercultural marriage is a dynamic and complex space of difference or an ‘in-between space’, in which clashes or conflicts emerge from the intersection of difference in terms of ethnicity, gender and social class.

The chapter has shown that residential locality matters, perhaps even more so than ethnic origin, in throwing up substantive cultural differences to which spouses in Kinh-Khmer interethnic marriages find themselves contrained to adjust. In the urban and semi-urban area examined in this study, where wedding rituals and customs have been streamlined and
simplified, couples confront few significant demands to adjust to the unfamiliar cultural practices of their spouses. In the rural area investigated in this study, which is a Khmer-dominated area, the Kinh spouses must adjust to the complex rites and practices of their Khmer spouse’s local community, for such cultural elaboration remains strong in this rural area and is tied up in the nature of rural sociality. The ability and willingness of a spouse to embrace such difference is influenced by their prior knowledge and experience. Those Kinh spouses who have had experience interacting with rural Khmer culture – many of them long-term residents in the Khmer rural locality in question – adjust readily to such demands, whereas those who have little familiarity with rural Khmer culture may find the encounter strange or unpleasant.

The findings reveal that personal experience, educational level and the presence of social stereotypes are significant reasons for the tensions that arise in interethnic marital relationships. High levels of education or substantive intercultural experience on the part of the partners and/or their families have the capacity to promote more tolerant and understanding attitudes and orientations towards cultural difference. Conversely, a lack of education or intercultural experience may lead to marital experiences that are marred by mistrust and dissatisfaction. Tensions may arise from multiple causes but can become intractable when interpreted through the lens of negative stereotypes. The study also is in line with previous research that shows class difference to be one of the pitfalls in intercultural marriage because people from different social backgrounds (i.e., social class, job positions, and educational attainment) often have different behaviors and attitudes towards many things (Romano, 2008, p. 99). The chapter shows that although spouses of homogenous class status frequently are able to find common ground that transcends ethnic differences, conflicts can arise in relations with in-laws who have divergent conceptions of the social value and status differences between ethnic groups. This study hence has affirmed that locality, class, education, experience and preconceptions—and often the intertwining of all of these issues—are key factors leading to both tensions and the ability to surmount them in interethnic marriages (Bystydzienski, 2011; Rodríguez-García, 2006; Strauss, 1954).
The previous chapter has uncovered that locality, class, educational level, personal experience and social stereotypes are significant factors in accounting for the tensions arising in Kinh-Khmer interethnic marital relationships. This is because such differences frequently lead to conflicting attitudes, orientations and expectations on the part of the partners as well as their extended families and social networks. This chapter will further explore how cultural differences affect the quality of the conjugal bond between Khmer and Kinh couples, focusing in particular on the capacity of spouses to adapt to cultural differences they confront in localities with different cultural, social and demographic characteristics.

Many social scientists have stressed that our behaviors, thoughts, desires and expectations do not naturally exist but they are molded by the larger society and broader culture of which we are members (Barbara, 1989; Henslin, 1992). Falicov (1995) assumed that in intercultural marriages, couples could experience cultural clashes, and possible conflicts ‘with the other’s norms, values, meanings, and rituals in a manner akin to the dissonance that accompanies migration and cultural change’ (p.234). From this perspective, one might expect Kinh or Khmer spouses to have developed their own conventions of behavior and expectations corresponding to their ethnic heritage and social setting, which may directly or indirectly influence their intimate life. In line with previous scholarly studies about intermarriage (Durodoye & Coker, 2008; Frame, 2004; Luke & Luke, 1998; Schafer, 2010), I suggest that interethnic Khmer-Kinh couples may also encounter unfamiliar cultural expectations and have to ‘work’ hard to adapt to the culturally different expectations and practices of their spouses and their families.

What are the grounds for the kinds of cultural difference that couples face? One, as already mentioned in the previous chapter, may be cultural differences that are class- or education-
based. As Romano notes, similarity in spouses’ social backgrounds, and hence affinities with regards to attitudes, tastes and manners, is an important ingredient in any successful marriage (Romano, 2008, p. 96). I therefore assume that class-based differences in attitudes, tastes and manners between the people involved in Khmer-Kinh marriages might be among the factors influencing the quality of their conjugal bond. It should be stressed in addition that most Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages in this study implicate a diverse combination of people—including spouses, their extended families and peers—who span a great variety of circumstances. Under the one roof typically may live individuals who span the rural-urban divide, come from different places of origin, and have inculcated significantly different expectations for appropriate behavior formed under different conditions in disparate living settings. Such diversity suggests that one of the critical capacities for making interethnic marriages work is the ability to negotiate the considerable complexity in cultural expectations that is associated with marriages of this kind.

What factors shapes spouses’ ability to cope with such differences? One of the key factors explored in this study is the particular intercultural capability that comes from a position of minority status. Since the Kinh group is the majority ethnic group among the fifty-four ethnic groups in Vietnam, their culture holds a mainstream status in Vietnam. For this reason, almost all ethnic Khmers in Vietnam, to a greater or lesser extent have some substantive familiarity with the dominant Kinh culture. I found in this study that many Khmer spouses already had adjusted at least to some degree to the Kinh majority culture prior to marriage and in that sense were already bicultural. Therefore they were better equipped than their spouse to understand their spouse’s culture and their Kinh partner’s perception of the world. Most of the Khmer spouses in this study had spent much of their time studying or living close to Kinh people and exploring and practicing elements of Kinh culture so adapting to their Kinh spouse’s culture was not problematic for them. By contrast, Kinh spouses frequently lacked Khmer cultural capital owing to their weak level of exposure to this distinct cultural tradition. As a result, I assume that Kinh spouses would experience more hardship in adjusting to their partner’s distinct culture and social milieu.

By examining the marital life of Khmer-Kinh couples in three different locations, this chapter highlights the challenges individuals face in coping with the unfamiliar social
expectations, customs and language to which they are exposed as a result of being in an interethnic marriage. It shows that while the individuals in interethnic marriages may share common values, capabilities and expectations with their spouses, they may not necessarily share or understand the cultural practices and expectations of their spouses’ families, social networks or milieus. I further expect that an individual’s ability to cope with such cultural differences may vary in accordance with their intercultural capacity and degree of prior exposure to the culture of their spouses, as well as with the specific social and cultural conditions in the locations where they live. Differences in gender expectation and socialization also shape a spouse’s capacity in coping with cultural differences. Practical utility is also an important factor motivating individuals in adjusting to the culture of their spouse and their wider milieu.

6.1 Competing Spousal Ideals in a Rural Setting

A number of participants in this study reported that the quality of their conjugal bond was negatively affected by the expectations and the demands placed upon their marriage by their spouse’s peers and families. Contrary to my expectations, I found that the most conflictual relations I encountered did not implicate the notoriously vexed relationship between the daughter-in-law and the Kinh mother-in-law, which previous studies have addressed (Luong Hy Van, 2003; Ngo Thi Ngan Binh, 2004). Rather, the most tense relations were between individuals and their spouse’s Khmer in-laws and peers. In particular, I noted that the most serious conflicts of this kind took place in families where the spouses were living in a Khmer rural area and involved perceived negative influence that Khmer in-laws and peers in this setting had on the quality of the conjugal bond. In this section I explore the factors behind conflicts of this kind. Based on the evidence available from this study, I ask whether such tensions stem from differences in ethnicity or other factors and explore why such conflicts are particularly prevalent in rural areas.

To air the main hypotheses driving this section, it may be possible that when participants in interethnic marriages encounter conflicts with their in-laws or their spouse’s peers over the issue of spousal behaviour, they are experiencing a clash in expectations that arise from distinct models for conjugal relations. However, rather than link this clash to ethnic
differences, I contend that the focus on the quality of a conjugal bond may in fact be a culturally-laden criterion for marital satisfaction that reflects a relatively new emphasis on conjugal intimacy that is not necessarily associated with any given ethnic group. Theorists of the changing family in Asia have noted the ‘rise of congugality’ and the related notion of the ‘companionate marriage’ in urban settings and among the educated middle classes in modernising societies of Asia (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2008; Hirsch & Wardlow, 2006; Nilan, 2008; Yan, 1997, 2011). Pham Van Bich (1999) description of ideal marriage in modern Vietnam is one in which individuals choose their own marital partners and romantic love plays an important role. When conjugal quality is perceived to be threatened by the demands of a couple’s peers or family, at stake may be less a matter of ethnic differences than of differences in taste, education and social milieu that are of relatively recent origin.

The case of social drinking
In this study, many wives, both Kinh and Khmer, reported that the most serious marital tensions they experienced were rooted in their husbands’ involvement in peer-bond drinking and participation in social life with peers outside the household. I found that male spouses are generally expected to spend a great deal of time socialising with their male cohort, and this demand was in conflict with the expectation that they spend time with their wives at home.

Tam, a Kinh male residing in his Khmer wife’s house, adapted to Khmer culture quite easily. Tam had been a Kinh migrant teacher in O Lam commune for more than three years before meeting Chanh Da, a local Khmer woman. Tam had gained familiarity in Khmer culture as a result of living with the Khmer community over this time. By the time he met his wife, Tam was able to communicate with Khmer locals at a basic level. In addition, he also got used to Khmer dishes and Khmer rituals. Tam was proactive in building his social network in the Khmer community. His cultural capacity and social network had been built up even before getting married to Chanh Da so he did not experience cross-cultural conflicts after his marriage. He got along well with his Khmer in-laws and the Khmer community. Being a migrant in a completely Khmer commune, he made a great effort to build his social network with his school colleagues and Khmer local villagers. When I
conducted my field study, Tam was very successful in his occupation and held the position of Dean in a school in O Lam commune. Chanh Da, Tam’s wife, was a home-based petty trader and much inferior than her husband in terms of education. Chanh Da was very proud of her husband's high and respected position and especially his good relationship with her relatives and local community.

On the day I came to her house, even though I was a stranger, Chanh Da warmly welcomed me and my Khmer friend when we expressed our desire to meet her husband. As her husband was at work, she gladly invited us to have a seat and called her husband announcing our presence. While we waited for Tam, we had a fun conversation about how she met her Kinh husband and their relationship with their in-laws. She was pleased telling us they both had good relationships with their respective in-laws and that her husband received special love from her mother:

My mother has only two daughters and my husband is the first son-in-law so he gains her special love. Every time my mother visits us, she brings presents only for my husband, not for me.

In addition, she was delighted about the villagers’ respect and love toward her husband:

All neighbors and his colleagues are very affectionate toward him, so many neighbors and his colleagues spent days or even nights to help us farm during the rice harvest season. We, therefore, did not have to hire labor for harvesting the rice.

It seemed that she was satisfied with her marriage, and especially proud of Tam’s social status and his relationship with her relatives and neighbors. However, it was in fact Tam’s highly active community involvement that caused tension in their family. Our conversation was interrupted when Tam arrived home. Greeting him and expressing my curiosity as to why he worked on the weekend, Tam greeted us and explained that he was overwhelmed with his leadership responsibilities so sometimes he had to work on weekends to meet a deadline. He glanced at his wife saying that his wife often complained about his frequent going out. I observed Chanh Da’s attitude instantly darken when talking about Tam’s outside relations. She sadly said her marriage’s only tension is rooted in Tam’s drinking;
she expressed her unhappiness with her husband’s continual absence. In Tam’s presence, Tam’s wife unhappily complained that having a large social network, Tam also spent a lot of time drinking with his friends and left her and her children alone often. I then carefully glanced at Tam to see his attitude toward his wife’s complaint. It seemed that he was aware of his fault for leaving his wife and children so often, and explained that he was in a dilemma in that it was hard for him to refuse his friends’ invitation, since it is important for a man to have external social communication for his social network. In working hard to build social relationships, Tam spent much of his spare time outside with his friends or neighbors and left the responsibility of taking care of children and doing household chores to his wife.

Many female interviewees in my study expressed their displeasure and complained of their husband’s overly active social life with his friends. A common tension of most couples stemmed from the husband’s drinking habit. Under the social pressure of being active, it is quite popular in Vietnam for males to gather together to drink wine or beer after working hours, for many different reasons. This led the female spouse to express dissatisfaction and complain about the negative impact that her husband’s drinking was having on their marriage.

The problem was so serious for one couple that they nearly separated due to the husband’s excessive drinking. I recall the case mentioned in the previous chapter of Dung, a Kinh female high school teacher who was married to Kha, a Khmer officer in a Khmer-dominated commune. Being the Secretary of the Youth Union in a commune, Kha spent most of his time in outside social activities and social relationship building, which also involved frequent drinking. Following Dung’s directions, I went to her husband’s workplace one Friday morning. Kha was very glad greeting me but he could not talk with me as he was going to have a meeting and suggested that I return in the afternoon.

As appointed, I went back to his office but he was not there. Asking for his contact number from his colleague, I phoned him reminding him of our appointment, Kha instantly apologized and said that he would be back immediately. As promised, he was present fifteen minutes later but he was a bit drunk. He apologized and explained that after the
meeting, he and his colleagues went for lunch and had some drinks so he forgot about the appointment. Kha further explained that working in the Youth Union, he was expected to be proactive in socializing. Siding with Dung, I teased him about how his wife would react to him spending so much time outside. Kha said he was aware that going out so often to socialize and drink made his wife sad but it was very hard for him to refuse his friends’ invitation. Kha recalled how his social life threatened his marriage:

During the first and second months after our marriage, our relationship was very unstable. We were often tense after I went out for drinking with my friends and my wife left me and returned to her natal house many times. To keep our marriage, we talked a lot to try and find some mutual understanding and I also tried to limit my drinking. Now, every time I go out for a drink, I ask for my wife’s permission in advance.

I encountered complaints of this kind from female spouses in all three study areas. However, it was in the rural area where tensions arising from husbands’ drinking were most apparent. The complaints offer a window onto a crucial aspect of sociality and masculinity in rural Vietnam. Drinking forms a key component of sociality in community festivals and rituals in rural areas of Vietnam and is a crucial component of male bonding and the expression of status and gender identities (Luong Hy Van, 2003; Malarney, 2002; Rydstrøm, 2003). Rydstrom notes that male involvement in social life outside the household may be accounted for by the gender ideology concerning the typical young ‘male character’ (tinh nam], which defines ‘masculine’ as being ‘active’ (hieu dong), and hard to ‘control’ (kiem), and correlates with categories such as movement, outwards, exteriority/superiority and upwards (Rydstrøm, 2003). In rural areas of Southern Vietnam much socialising goes on with one’s neighbors for in addition to a predominance of kin-linked households, there also are non-kin households in some of the clusters, and consequently proximity sometimes overtakes kin ties as a basic for strong social bonds (Hickey, 1964, p. 282).

For men involved in government service, the pressure to drink in order to make connections, conduct business, seal deals and cement relations with colleagues is
particularly strong (Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, 2002). As in other countries such as Japan, workers in Vietnam often drink with fellow workers after work in order to cement good relations with colleagues. As Allison notes, in these interactions, the worker is made to feel more human and these feelings of humaness build the ties needed between those who work or do business together (Allison, 2009). The role of alcohol in building trust is particularly evident in situations when complete strangers must build effective work relations. For instance a group of foreign researchers in rural Vietnam noted that their young male interpreters who were keen to work diligently ‘would often find it difficult to refuse to join in invitations to drink, particularly if they wanted to continue to work in the area and needed to build good relations with local officials and community leaders’ (Scott et al., 2006). In addition, some research suggests that drinking may be particularly heavy in multi-ethnic frontier contexts. Male migrants in such contexts should be good at drinking to show their hospitality, and willingness to expand and strengthen their network with local males. They therefore are drawn into sometimes competitive displays of drinking to show their ‘masculinity’ and to establish relationships with local community (Vu Hong Phong, 2008). Such findings are particularly pertinent to the rural area in the present research where male migrants and officials in particular are under heavy pressure to drink to establish good relations with members of the local community,

As noted in my case studies these demands placed on men to drink with their neighbors and colleagues were considered problematic by their wives. The fact that both Khmer and Kinh female spouses raised this issue as a problem suggests that the tension is not necessarily rooted in ethnic differences between Kinh and Khmer ideals for spousal behaviour. I suggest that the class and educational backgrounds of the spouses may be pertinent contributing factors. Notably the two couples whose cases are described above involve well-educated couples who live in a rural area. In both cases the spouses have been exposed through education to contemporary ideas about companionate marriage and conjugal relationships as ideally based in gender equality, emotional intimacy, companionship and love.

Significant changes have occurred in Vietnam as a result of modernization processes, such as the influence of individualist and feminist ideologies in the colonial and post-colonial
period and owing to the egalitarian emphases of the socialist revolution (Luong Hy Van, 2003; Marr, 1981; Werner & Belanger, 2002). Nowadays, husbands have more involvement in sharing responsibilities for the care of the family and for raising the children. This emphasis is especially evident in the cities and among the educated middle class (Earl, 2015). In recent years, many state agencies in Long Xuyen city have launched the campaign for the happy family to promote gender equality in which the labor union encouraging their male employees to facilitate the ‘double work roles of men’ (Phu nam hai gioi) alongside the campaign ‘Good at working for state and sharing in housework’ (Gioi viec nuoc, chia se viec nha), which was aimed solely at female employees in the past.

In the urban area, the field study shows that male spouses are aware of sharing housework and childcare with their wives. Yen was proud that even though her Khmer husband, Chau Thane, was busy with his office work, he dropped off and collected their daughter at childcare every day and also looked after their daughter while his wife was busy with housework. During the dinner in which I talked with Yen, Thane politely took their daughter outside when she interrupted our conversation. Similarly, Neang Phuong and Tinh was another couple who demonstrated ideals of conjugal and companionate marriage. Neang Phuong said that despite having no child, she was satisfied and happy with her Kinh husband’s love and care. Being unable to ride a motorbike, Neang Phuong had cycled to her workplace on week days but after getting married, her husband took her and picked her up from her workplace on his motorbike. Since her husband’s retirement the previous year, he prepared dinner in advance before picking her up so that she did not have to prepare meals after a hard working day. This, and singing karaoke together at night made her very happy about her marriage.

The two couples living in the rural area whose cases are reported above had been exposed to similar ideologies of conjugal and of companionship and cooperation in marriage. However, these couples resided in a rural area where personal relationships are strongly structured by generational hierarchies, and the person is enmeshed in relations with extended family, neighbors and age and gender peers. Such demands were at odds with the expectation held by the female spouse that their male partner spend time at home nurturing their conjugal relationship. This finding has led me to postulate that the cause of conflict
around drinking may be based in a cultural clash between different models of spousal relations. The conflict is between members of a younger educated generation who espouse ideals of companionate marriage and the culture of a rural setting where spousal relations are mediated by multiple competing extra-conjugal social relations. Educated spouses residing in the rural Khmer-dominated area may have experienced this cultural clash with particular intensity.

*The problem of rural in-laws*

This clash of cultural models of the family can be illustrated with another case, involving an educated Kinh spouse who had a conflict with her Khmer parents-in-law. Linh, a Kinh female living under the same roof as her Khmer parents-in-law, encountered problems with the expectations of her in-law family which clashed not only with her own values but also with her preconceptions about Khmer family relationships. As noted in the previous chapter, Linh’s hometown was Ba Chuc town, where the standard of living was more developed than other communes in Tri Ton district, but where patriarchy in the family was still strong. Linh was taught by her family how to be a good woman and wife, by adhering to the four virtues (*tu duc*) expected of traditional Vietnamese women: labor (*cong*), physical appearance (*dung*), appropriate speech (*ngon*) and proper behaviour (*hanh*).

However, Linh’s view of marriage changed as a result of studying in Long Xuyen city. There, Linh learned about gender equity from schooling, and from official gender equity campaigns and she was also exposed to city life in which women could gain recognition for their social achievements in line with that of men. Linh could observe how women were treated equally in wider society and the family and how much men were involved in sharing household tasks with their wives. Being a modern and educated woman, Linh was aware of gender issues and had some expectations of gender equality in her future family, for instance that her husband would share household tasks and appreciate her personal achievements. Her transformation is consistent with what scholars have found in researching determinants of individual modernity in developing countries. Such determinants include the nature of one’s work, the degree to which one had participated in formal schooling, one’s degree of exposure to the media and mass communication and residence in urban rather than rural areas (Inkeles, 2013; Inkeles & Smith, 1974),
Linh also told me that she had expected to experience gender equality with her husband since she had picked up from social discourses that gender relations in the Khmer family were far less patriarchal than in the Vietnamese family. Linh said that, contradicting her preconception about Khmer families, she was disappointed to find that her Khmer parents-in-law turned out to be very conservative and patriarchal. Her misunderstanding caused tension and disappointment during her time living under the same roof as her parents-in-law. Linh’s unhappy and tense relations with her in-laws was related to her misunderstanding about the expectations for feminine behavior in Khmer families. Having a Khmer husband, Linh expected she would escape from the traditional Vietnamese social expectation of feminine virtue. Instead, she was exposed to gender expectations from her Khmer parents-in-law that were, for her, shockingly patriarchal.

During three years living under the same roof as her Khmer parents-in-law, Linh told me she was expected to fulfill the domestic duties of a daughter-in-law, exactly as would have been expected in a traditional Kinh family. This expectation made her tense and depressed. She said that sometimes she was overwhelmed with doing both her preparation work for school and her household tasks and wished her husband would help her out. However, she said, her husband did not dare give her a hand in the presence of his parents for her parents-in-law strongly emphasized the role of the daughter-in-law in domestic work and never let any female relatives give her a hand with the household tasks. She recalled the highest point of tension with her father-in-law:

Once day, I was busy preparing my lesson plan for inspection and could not help my sister and my mother-in-law with the household tasks. My father-in-law scolded me that I was

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41 Vietnamese have been deeply imbued with Confucian dogma. Even in contemporary Vietnam, while Confucianism has loosened its hold, Confucian ideals are still entrenched in the social life of the Vietnamese. The tradition of patrilineal ancestor worship is still maintained in contemporary Vietnamese society. Typically, a new bride is expected to move from her family to live with her husband and his parents, and is responsible for the bulk of household work in her husband’s family (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh, 2004). Women’s four virtues (tu đuc) remain highly valued in Vietnam society and these traditional values are particularly expected in a good daughter-in-law. Ngo Thi Ngan Binh (2004) analyzed how women’s four virtues (tu đuc) were treated and expected differently in the natal home and the patrilocal home in Vietnam society. In contemporary times, these values are not strictly emphasized in the natal home of the daughter as most mothers would exempt their daughters from the burden of household work so that their daughters can concentrate on academic pursuits. However, the daughter experiences contradictory expectations when they move to the patrilocal home, where the four virtues (cong, dung, ngon, hanh) are still strongly expected of a daughter-in-law.
acting like a ‘mother-in-law’, not a ‘daughter-in-law’ in both Khmer and Vietnamese languages.

Her father-in-law may not have been aware of the preparation requirements associated with her teaching job or he may have mistakenly believed that she was ignoring household tasks, in violation of the gender-based division of labor, or, she speculated, in order to gain advantage over her husband’s family. To restore order in the household, her father-in-law spoke very rudely to Linh to make her stop her violation immediately.

From my observation, I found that the gender expectations of Linh’s in-laws were not exceptional in the Khmer community, but that gender-based roles were assigned clearly in the Khmer rural community. I noted that both males and females were involved in economic activities but it was mostly males who represented the household in socialization activities whereas females were socially assigned to be in the domestic sphere, responsible for doing household work, caring for family members and keeping the household budget. In addition, boys also received special preferences in that the family would, where possible, invest in their sons’ schooling for their social achievement, whereas girls were given less support for their schooling and participation in wider public life and taught to do household work and care for family members.

This finding is in line with Ebihara (1968, p. 397), who analysed that in Khmer Buddhism women occupy a ‘lower religious status than men’ because ‘their sex presumably reflects a limited amount of merit in the previous incarnation’. Ebihara (1974) also emphasized the multiple responsibilities of women in marriage, bearing the primary responsibility of domestic tasks and the care of children, a necessary coworker in the rice field, and an active participant in Buddhist and other ceremonies. In addition, in analyzing Khmer conceptions of gender, Ledgerwood (1990) stressed the link of the status of women to ‘proper behavior’. Women are taught to be virtuous through performance of Khmer literary works. They are also taught how a woman should serve and respect her husband and how she should keep peace in the house (p. 64).
Chuong, Linh’s Khmer husband, was also caught up painfully in this gender rules-based conflict. Although raised in his natal family and familiar with its expectations, like Linh, he also had become more open-minded under the influence of urban life and his education in Long Xuyen city. Chuong was aware of gender equality and valued his wife’s education and occupation, and was willing to share housework with his wife like other modern couples in the city. However, residing in a rural patriarchical area, where the gender-based roles were obviously divided, Chuong could not go against the popular gender-based roles division in his community to please his wife as he would be criticized as spineless or feminine-oriented. More significantly, his parents strongly emphasized and expected their daughter-in-law to fulfill her responsibilities so Chuong was put in dilemma between his parents and his wife. He was aware of the burden of his wife’s economic work and although he may have wanted to help his wife with domestic work, dared not openly help her in his parents’ presence.

After that tense confrontation, Linh’s marital life was in a fragile state and Chuong too experienced a dilemma of whether to side with his parents or his wife, which lends support to Werner’s statement that the tense relation between the wife and parents puts the husband in an ambiguous status as the son/husband in between (Werner, 2004). The tense relations with Linh’s in-laws greatly complicated the couple’s relationship and influenced the couple’s marital quality and stability during that time. Even worse, Linh underwent psychological tension during that time as she could not confide her unhappy experiences to her natal family because they had not originally supported her choice of spouse. Linh even expressed her intention to divorce her husband as she could not stand the tense relations with her in-laws, but she fell into a dilemma because her marriage had been against her own family’s advice so she was very ashamed to end her marriage. Finally, she was very determined to move out to avoid the influence of her in-laws on her marriage. The main root of Linh’s conflict with her father-in-law was related to her misunderstanding of Khmer conceptions of gender relations and her parents-in-law’s misunderstanding of Linh’s behavior.

The findings reaffirm my assumption that differences in culture affect the quality of an interethnic marriage. I found that couples residing in the rural Khmer-dominated area
encounter tensions and problems of cultural adjustment. But the basis of that conflict is not so much ethnic differences as a clash between rural and urban cultural models of spousal relations. Specifically, the tension stems from differences in expectations between a traditional rural society where generational and gendered hierarchies and neighborly relations prevail and those of educated spouses whose ideals of companionate marriage, marital intimacy, and gender equality reflect the cultural expectations of a modern urban milieu. The examples reveal that both male and female and Khmer and Kinh spouses experienced conflict and difficulties in adjusting to the expectations of the rural milieu, which mitigates against the assumption that these conflicts stem from differences in gender or ethnicity per se. Such tensions are particularly prevalent in rural areas, I contend, because in such areas, personal relationships are strongly structured by generational hierarchies and communal sentiments. I suggest that the conflicts experienced in the rural area are particularly acute for highly educated and urbanised spouses owing to the fact that rural ideals for spousal relations clash with the model of conjugal life. The residents of this city may be more open-minded and less culturally conservative than their counterparts in rural areas, in common with other urbanising contexts in East Asia where individualism and freedom are highly valued (Kipnis, 2012). In addition to the economically and socially competitive environment of the city, parents in the urban area tend to emphasize their children’s own individual social and economic achievements rather than their subordination to the prerogatives of the elderly or the extended family network. Indeed, given how hard it is to earn a living in the urban area, some parents helped the young couples in transporting their children to and from school. One couple even obtained help from their sister-in-law, who was single, to care for their daughter during their working hours.

On the other hand, no serious cultural clash between spouses and in-laws was noted in Long Xuyen city. One explanation may be that social relations in this urban area are more diffuse and atomised, so intergenerational interaction is infrequent; generational hierarchies have been loosened; and the older generation has less influence on their children’s conjugal life. In addition, the residents of this city may be more open-minded and less culturally conservative than their counterparts in rural areas, in common with other urbanising contexts in East Asia where individualism and freedom are highly valued (Kipnis, 2012). In addition to the economically and socially competitive environment of the city, parents in the urban area tend to emphasize their children’s own individual social and economic achievements rather than their subordination to the prerogatives of the elderly or the extended family network. Indeed, given how hard it is to earn a living in the urban area, some parents helped the young couples in transporting their children to and from school. One couple even obtained help from their sister-in-law, who was single, to care for their daughter during their working hours.
Another likely reason for the lack of serious adaptation conflicts among interethnic couples in the urban area is that urban-resident Khmer spouses in this research pragmatically value the work and educational opportunities in the city and also the egalitarian, achievement-oriented values of urban life. The Khmer spouses in this study appear to have adapted to urban living easily. Although I suggest more research needs to be done on this important topic, none of my urban-based Khmer research respondents expressed to me the view that adapting to urban social mores had placed them in fundamental conflict with their own cultural values.

The findings highlight that cultural expectations vary according to individual living experience and residential location, which in some cases may lead to a clash in points of view and expectation between the elderly and their children. The cultural clashes illustrated in this section between the couple themselves or between the couples and the in-laws were not so much a product of ethnic differences as related to differences in social structure and cultural expectations between urban and rural areas.

6.2 Language

Communication is a significant aspect in daily life and particularly in marital life. As Romano has noted:

Good communication is perhaps the most essential ingredient in a successful marriage, and it is probably the most difficult to achieve. In an intercultural one, it is just that much harder, not only because the words may not come easily or accurately as a result of linguistic differences, but because of fear that the partner may not understand what is said and/or will interpret or judge it negatively from a culturally different perspective (Romano, 2008, p. 126).

A common language functions to strengthen the marital bond and facilitates communication in any relationship. Language is a very important component in the experience of ethnicity and culture, and also in the sharing of this experience with others (Usita & Poulsen, 2003). As mentioned by Barbara (1989), linguistic misunderstanding in
daily communication can cause countless ambiguities and even conflicts to varying extents. I thus assumed that lack of a common language may be the biggest issue for Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples. In addition, Vietnamese, the language of Kinh people, is the national language so I assumed that Vietnamese would be the dominant language in the mixed Khmer-Kinh family. My field study found out that the language barrier caused countless issues for Kinh spouses in communicating with their Khmer in-laws. In addition, diversity of experience in linguistic ability varied across different places of residence of the interethnic couples. The findings highlight variation in adaptive capacity in coping with the language barrier, which is shaped by gender and practical utility factors.

Being a Kinh migrant in O Lam commune, a Khmer-dominated rural area, Tam, whose relationship with his Khmer in-laws and community was described above, has had a very successful and happy life. During my field study, I could tell that his wife was proud of him and also noted the local Khmer community’s respect and admiration for him. My strongest impression of him was his Khmer language capacity. During our conversation, I was impressed with how naturally and fluently he communicated with my Khmer research assistant and his Khmer grandmother-in-law. Tam was very surprised that I also had a Khmer spouse but was unable to communicate in the Khmer language, I embarrassingly explained that residing in an almost exclusively Kinh urban area, I had no motivation to learn the Khmer language. On the contrary, Tam was a migrant in a Khmer-dominated area so he had to learn Khmer language to adapt well to the local Khmer community.

Since O Lam is a Khmer-dominated area,⁴² the Khmer language is the main means of communication in the community and some old Khmer villagers are even unable to communicate in Vietnamese. Tam recalled that during his early time in O Lam commune, he experienced much hardship in teaching his pupils and communicating to local Khmer villagers. Some of his Khmer pupils were very weak at Vietnamese so they could not fully grasp his ideas. In addition, some local villagers did not encourage their children to go to school so Tam’s supplementary responsibility was also to visit these local villagers and convince them of their children’s need for schooling. However, his lack of Khmer language

⁴² In this commune, more than 97 percent of the population is Khmer people.
limited his close interaction with local villagers. He recalled one of the amusing consequences of the language barrier he faced:

Being very lonely in a new land, I and my Khmer colleagues often gathered for drinking on weekends. It was funny that when we all got drunk, my Khmer colleagues could not control themselves and communicated solely in Khmer language so I was left out of the conversation.

The language barrier limited his teaching efficiency and communication with the local community so Tam made a great effort to learn the Khmer language to ease his teaching and communication with the local residents. Tam was highly motivated to learn the Khmer language for his occupation and integration into the local community. Being a primary teacher in a mostly Khmer pupil school, Tam may have been encouraged by his school or education department to learn the Khmer language to carry out his job effectively, or he may have been aware of the necessity of learning Khmer to ease his teaching. He took notes on every word he learned and reviewed them frequently. He learned the Khmer language from different sources: from his wife, friends and even from his pupils. It was a pity that I could not understand the Khmer language so that I could confirm just how fluently he spoke Khmer but I could see he had a very natural and friendly conversation with his grandmother-in-law and my Khmer research assistant. In general, the findings lend weight to the conclusions drawn by Stojanova, who observed:

Even though the language by itself does not determine the belonging to a particular ethnic group, its complementarity can act as a symbol of belonging or foreignness. Ignorance of the language most directly causes problems in everyday communication. Thus, the fluency of the language of the concrete community can be considered as one of the basic integrative or disintegrative elements that determine an individual belonging to a particular group (Stojanova, 2013, p. 288).

The language barrier is a major problem for many Kinh spouses, especially those who, like Tam, reside in Khmer-dominated areas. Linh, a Kinh high school teacher, residing in her

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43 The Education Department organizes Khmer language classes for Kinh migrant teachers every school holiday in Khmer-dominated areas to ease their communication and augment their teaching qualification.
husband’s predominantly Khmer commune also encountered difficulties with the language barrier. On the day I came to Linh’s house, Linh’s relatives and her relatives-in-law were gathering for Linh’s daughter’s one-month anniversary. Flexibility in language usage in communication was observed in her house on that day: Vietnamese was the common language among family members since all her Khmer in-laws were capable of communicating in Vietnamese. However, Khmer language was still the main means of communication among her husband and his Khmer relatives.

Even though Linh had lived in O Lam commune, a Khmer-dominated area, for more than seven years, on the day I visited her house she spoke no Khmer words with her husband and his relatives. She explained that long-term interaction with Khmers has given her much exposure to the Khmer-speaking environment. She could get the general gist but not the details of what her husband and his relatives were talking about. Even though Chuong, Linh’s husband, often encouraged Linh to learn Khmer, Linh did not make an effort to learn the Khmer language and she never tried to speak Khmer as she was shy of making mistakes and also it was not indispensable to her as all her Khmer in-laws could communicate to her in Vietnamese. This attitude certainly hindered Linh trying to learn the Khmer language. This calls to mind Sr Marie Tran Thi Nien’s observation, that ‘Vietnamese women tend to be overcareful, for fear that, if they make mistakes in their speech, they could be laughed at or they might offend people’ (Sr Marie Tran Thi, 1995, p. 83).

One explanation for Linh’s disinterest in learning the Khmer language is that Vietnamese is the official language in Vietnam. She may have assumed that Khmers should be able to communicate in Vietnamese, therefore it was not her obligation to learn Khmer language. Seeing no necessity to learn Khmer language, Linh was not motivated to make an effort in learning a new language. In addition, it is also possible that she saw the Khmer lifestyle and culture as backward, or even inferior to Kinh ones, so she had no motivation to learn Khmer language to interact linguistically with Khmer people. Another reason may be that acquiring a new language is a tough task and Linh was overwhelmed with her paid employment and domestic work. According to the analysis of Sr Marie Tran Thi (1995), of the reasons for female’s failure in language acquisition, the most influential obstacle may
be the traditional concept of the role of women in relation to her family, where her first priority is her duties as mother and wife.

I asked further if she experienced uncomfortable feelings when all other family members communicated in Khmer language. Linh told me that she did not mind what others were talking about; when they wanted to talk with her they would communicate in Vietnamese so Khmer language ignorance was not a big issue for her. However, misunderstandings also occurred between Linh and her mother-in-law even though Linh’s parents-in-law were capable of communicating in Vietnamese:

I did not have much difficulty in communicating with the in-laws since my parents-in-law were able to communicate in Vietnamese. However, it was very hard to understand my mother-in-law’s expression in Vietnamese so sometimes I misunderstood her. For instance, one day she instructed me how to cook braised pork but I misunderstood her and cooked it in a different way. She asked me to cook it again; she was very fussy in eating.

Limited language capacity causes misunderstanding between individuals and their in-laws, which indirectly builds up the internal tension in the Kinh spouse. It is common that relations with in-laws often are not very close in many marriages but in interethnic marriages, the language barrier has created a further distance between Linh and her in-laws.

In contrast to Linh’s neutral stance, Ngoc, an official worker living in Tri Ton town, expressed her psychological tension related to her Khmer language ignorance when living in the same house as her family-in-law:

After marriage, we lived with my family-in-law but I felt so isolated that we moved out after six months. All the members in my in-laws’ family communicated with each other in Khmer while I understood nothing. Only when I asked them something, would they answer in Vietnamese; otherwise they all spoke in Khmer. I, therefore, felt like an outsider. Feeling so sad and depressed, I convinced my husband to move out to have a real family life.
It is quite understandable that in Ngoc’s situation, language is the core of communication so language limitations built a barrier against her developing a closer relationship with her in-laws. Home is an intimate place where family members share their stories after a hard working day but Ngoc did not have the feeling of being ‘at home’; her in-laws were inclined to insist upon the exclusive use of Khmer as the language in the home, she could not be involved in family conversations and she could not even understand what other family members were saying. Her in-laws’ bilingual abilities controlled and managed the conversations and she did not have a feeling of being a real member in the family, but instead felt like an outsider. Her internal tension gradually built up and she decided to move out.

Here, the language handicap caused an internal problem for the Kinh spouse, whose problems communicating with the extended family led to the experience of loneliness and isolation. This is in line with previous research on marriage, which has found the language barrier can negatively affect the quality of communication within the family, as well as contact with the outside world (Polek & Schoon, 2008).

In addition, the study also found gender disparity in acquiring Khmer language. I assumed that gender-based role expectations may be one barrier to language acquisition for many Kinh wives. Men are exposed to a wider range of social interactions, so Kinh husbands have more opportunities to speak the Khmer language. In addition, Kinh husbands also prefer outside interaction so they are motivated to learn the Khmer language to widen their social network; in contrast, women’s priority is taking care of family members and doing household tasks so Kinh wives are much burdened with their economic activities and household tasks and they do not worry about learning Khmer language.

Traditionally, Vietnamese women are responsible for domestic work so they are overburdened if they are also involved in paid jobs. Due to their heavy workload, Kinh women have very little spare time for relaxation so language learning is too much effort. On the other hand, a male character is socially expected to be active, mischievous, and difficult to control. A male character who is ‘wild’ and difficult to control is tied to expectations about a relaxed, expansive, and spatial way of using one’s body (Drummond
& Rydstrøm, 2004). Men, therefore, tend to occupy more physical and social space than do girls and women, reflecting the prototypes of a typical male, and this extends to being more active in learning a new language (Drummond & Rydstrøm, 2004). Male Kinh spouses’ dual language skills gave them access to the Khmer community of their Khmer spouse.

**Utility and coping strategies**

However, gender was not the only factor influencing spouses’ ability to adapt to the linguistic demands of an interethnic marriage. Going against the passivity of other Kinh female spouses, Loan, a Kinh kindergarten teacher in a Khmer-dominated area, was very proactive in learning Khmer language. Why did Loan, who, like Linh, also had migrated to a Khmer-dominated area following her marriage and was over burdened with her teaching job and household tasks, cope with the language barrier so well? The first time I met her was in her school at break time, I could observe most of the children in the schoolyard were Khmer and some even communicated to each other in Khmer language. I asked Loan how hard it was for her to communicate with Khmer children. Loan said that it was very hard during the first year, because many Khmer children were incapable of communicating in Vietnamese while she knew nothing of Khmer language. She often experienced a dilemma when she could not understand and respond to some Khmer children’s needs in her classroom so she had other Khmer children who were capable in both Khmer and Vietnamese to translate for her. Seeing the practical importance of Khmer language to her occupation, Loan was motivated to learn the Khmer language to ease her teaching task. She learned from her pupils and from her Khmer colleagues. At the time I met her, Loan had been teaching in this Khmer area for more than five years and was able to communicate in Khmer fluently. By contrast, Linh was teaching high school students, who had achieved some competency in the Vietnamese language, so it was not indispensable for her to acquire Khmer language. In contrast, Loan’s pupils were so young that they had no knowledge of Vietnamese language so Loan’s only choice was to learn Khmer to facilitate her teaching tasks. Besides her own motivation, I believed that, like Tam, Loan was also encouraged by the local education department to learn the Khmer language to facilitate her teaching role. In Loan’s case, the utility factor played a stronger role than the gender factor in shaping her coping with the language barrier.
The study found an interesting couple where both Kinh husband and Khmer wife made adaptations to the language barrier. Neang Bane and Thang became acquainted and fell in love when they were both working in a rock mine in Co To commune, Neang Bane’s hometown. Different from other Khmer spouses, Neang Bane’s Vietnamese capacity was very poor. She had learned Vietnamese by interacting with Kinh people since she worked in a rock mine, which had required her to communicate in Vietnamese, although she was able to do so only at a basic level. For his part, Thang had been unable to do more than exchange some basic greeting words in Khmer when he first met Neang Bane. After getting married, both Neang Bane and Thang encountered the language barrier and both needed to improve their language capacity to have more emotional expression in their intimate life. Thang humorously recalled the couple’s experiences in teaching each other their respective languages:

> It was very hard to learn a new language and we often mispronounced each other’s language, as our tongues had become hard. Hearing my wife’s mispronunciation in Vietnamese, I would ignore it at first to avoid making her shy and then on another occasion I would remind her so she could readjust her mistake. But my wife would often come straight out and tease me for mispronouncing Khmer words.

At the time I met them, they and their children were both able to communicate in Vietnamese and Khmer. In this case, we can see both Neang Bane and Thang were strongly motivated to learn each other’s language for practical utility. Thang’s wife and his parents-in-law were limited in Vietnamese so it was significant to him to learn Khmer language to ease their communication. In addition, Thang was a migrant in a Khmer-dominated area where his family would settle so it was indispensable for him to be able to communicate in Khmer to become part of the Khmer community and accepted as an ‘insider’ in the community. On the other hand, for the practical utility of Vietnamese in communicating with her Kinh husband, Neang Bane also made an effort to learn Vietnamese to build up a close and intimate relationship with Thang.
When the language barrier proved insuperable, couples were forced to make a major readjustment so as to preserve their marital bond. As already noted above in the case of Linh and Ngoc, limited language capacity causes misunderstanding between individuals and their in-laws, which indirectly builds internal tension in the spouse not sharing the language of their in-laws. Such was the experience of Thang during the period living with his wife’s family after their marriage. As Thang was not able to communicate in Khmer and his parents-in-law were also limited in Vietnamese language, misunderstandings often arose in their daily interactions:

It was very hard to communicate. I could not understand what my father-in-law was saying and he also did not understand what I was saying. Sometimes, he asked me to do some job but I did not understand him so he got angry. I was very sad and thought that I should move out otherwise more severe conflicts may arise.

Monolingual Kinh spouses residing in the Kinh-dominated area have somewhat different ways of adjusting to the problem of communicating with their Khmer in-laws. As they live in a Kinh-dominated area, they do not have frequent interactions with their Khmer in-laws, so the language barrier is not a serious problem for them. However, they sometimes experienced feelings of discomfort and even frustration in talking with their in-laws when they visited them. Mr. Ty, a retired Kinh husband living with his Khmer wife in Long Xuyen City, shared with me the problems he faced and the interesting coping strategy developed to resolve them:

It was a bit hard communicating when visiting my wife’s family. Hearing my wife’s relatives communicating in Khmer, I felt like I was deaf and dumb. I also wanted to interact and develop closer relations with my wife’s relatives but I did not understand Khmer while they did not understand Vietnamese, so we just used body language. Sometimes, I reasoned that at least they were not able to speak badly about me or scold me, since I could not understand them. If they scolded me it would have no effect since the words were meaningless to me. My Khmer brother-in-law often teased me to learn Khmer, to understand my wife, otherwise some day my wife might ask another person to behead [Khmer: cap duon] me.
Ty has developed a positive strategy to adapt to the language barrier. Instead of being depressed, he has a neutral view toward his language barrier. First, separate residence is a benefit for him, since he is not enmeshed in the day-to-day tensions of living in a dual-language household and only occasionally visits his in-laws. Second, apparently resigned to the inevitable existence of some minor tensions with his in-laws, he philosophically accepts his own language limitation to be a good thing, in that his in-laws can let off steam without injury, since he does not even understand what they say. The case also shows humor to be a method by which in-laws defuse tensions arising from the language barrier between them.

The findings reinforce the conclusion that in intermarriage, many difficulties could be traced to difficulties with language (Schnepp & Yui, 1955). Language is not a major barrier between the couples themselves, but is found to be problematic for the individuals in communicating with their in-laws and community. Since most young Khmers are able to communicate in Vietnamese, language handicap is mainly a problem for Kinh spouses. Some Kinh spouses expressed their internal tension in communicating with their Khmer in-laws. The language barrier causes severe internal tension especially to Kinh spouses living under the same roof with the in-law family. This problem was particularly acute for migrants in the Khmer-dominated area, because living with the in-laws after their marriage is the most convenient form of residence for Kinh spouses, particularly when they did not have enough financial resources to have their own house or it was too expensive for them to live in a rented house. As observed, in some cases, even though having a Kinh child-in-law in their house, Khmer families still communicate in Khmer with their family; they use Vietnamese only when they want to talk with the child-in-law. The language barrier caused much tension for the Kinh spouse in interacting with their Khmer in-laws, pushing them to move out. Unable to communicate in the Khmer language but living in a Khmer-speaking family, Kinh spouses expressed the feeling of being an outsider, isolated and depressed.

Being aware of the language barrier, many Kinh spouses have tried to learn the Khmer language to ease their communication with the in-laws and build a close relationship with them. Living in a Khmer-speaking environment increases the practical chances for the Kinh spouse to improve their Khmer language. Some Kinh spouses are able to communicate in Khmer but some are able to listen only, while being too shy to speak. It is interesting to
find that it is not only couples themselves who make adaptations and acceptance of language; some Khmer parents-in-law in this study were found to make the effort to speak more Vietnamese in order to have better and closer interaction with the child-in-law. In addition, the findings also reaffirm Stojanova (2013) conclusions that motivation and family and social surrounding are determining factors on the adaptation to a new language of their spouse.

6.3 Food

‘Food is important. There is in fact nothing more basic. Food indicates who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be’ (Belasco & Scranton, 2014, p. 2).

By looking at food and eating in anthropological perspective, Fox (2003) emphasized ‘the indispensability of food and eating in our daily life and the socialization role of eating. Food consumption is a core social activity—an occasion for the whole family members gathering and developing their mutual relationship’ (p.1). In addition, ‘what we eat becomes a most powerful symbol of who we are. Especially as the world grows smaller and communication more immediate, the world is in an exciting state of mixing and mingling and transferring of tastes and when various ethnic groups are forcibly thrown together, food identity becomes even more intensifying’ (Fox, 2003, p. 21).

In Vietnam, cuisine culture is quite diverse owing to assimilation to Chinese foods during the 1,000-year period of Chinese domination, and to Western foods over more than 150 years of exposure to French, American and global influences. At present, fast foods such as hamburgers and fried chicken are very widespread in big cities in Vietnam (McLeod & Nguyen, 2001, p. 117). In a pluralistic region such as the Mekong delta, exchange and fusion between the ingredients and food cultures of diverse ethnic groups have also long been observed (Huynh Ngoc Trang & Truong Ngoc Tuong, 1999; Phan Thi Yen Tuyet, 1993). In spite of the availability of multiple food options, traditional foods are strongly maintained in each ethnic group, where prescribed dishes are consumed in domestic, ritual and festive contexts, and serve as one of the fundamental markers of ethnic identity. How do Khmer-Kinh couples deal with different ethnic cuisines? Do different traditional foods
raise any issues for Khmer-Kinh couples? Which ethnic foods do Kinh and Khmer couples often have in their meals? My hypothesis is that by being exposed to a diversity of food culture, different ethnic cuisine is not a big deal to Khmer-Kinh couples, especially individuals having long-term interaction with each other’s culture.

My field study reveals that owing to long-term interaction with Kinh people, Kinh dishes are quite widespread and are adopted and consumed frequently in the Khmer community. On the other hand, many Kinh people residing in ethnically mixed areas and in Khmer-dominated areas also expressed their preference for the taste of Khmer food and some even told me that they loved to go to ‘sroc’ to partake in Khmer meals with their friends’ families but they complained that the preparation and cooking of Khmer meals is quite complicated and time consuming.

Being familiar with Kinh foods before getting married to Kinh spouses, Khmer spouses in this study expressed no difficulty with their spouses’ food. The following case illustrates how Kinh foods were consumed within the interethnic family. One day, after spending the whole morning wandering the market in O Lam commune to ask the local residents about Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage in the commune, I was directed to Tam’s house by a local person. Tam was still in school at the time I arrived but I was also welcomed by Chanh Da, his Khmer wife. She was preparing lunch for her family. Contradicting my expectation that she would be cooking traditional Khmer meals, she was preparing vegetables to cook canh chua (sweet and sour fish soup) and ca kho (claypot stewed fish), probably the most common combination of dishes for Kinh people in the western Mekong delta. I expressed my curiosity at why she cooked Kinh foods, was it because her Kinh husband could not consume Khmer foods? She said that cooking Kinh food was not to please her husband as her husband liked both Khmer and Kinh traditional foods and she could cook both but it normally took more time to prepare Khmer traditional dishes as they needed more ingredients and she was too busy with her small business so she cooked Kinh traditional meals more frequently.

Similarly, Neang Pho, a Khmer high school teacher with a Kinh spouse, shared Chanh Da’s reason for cooking Kinh meals more regularly. She said that her Kinh husband also loved
Khmer foods but she preferred cooking Kinh foods as it was more practical—being busy with teaching tasks, she did not want to spend so much time on cooking as she had plenty of other work to do. Just on special occasions, she cooked Khmer foods to treat her friends. She added that usually her mother treated them to Khmer cuisine when they visited her every two weeks.

Chanh Da and Neang Pho were not unusual in their adoption of Vietnamese food for their Khmer family but my field study shed light that Vietnamese foods have been consumed by the Khmer community for a long time through mutual cultural exchange. In-depth interviews with thirty-five Khmer-Kinh couples showed that Kinh meals were consumed dominantly within all families, including those living in a Khmer rural areas, not because of their high status but due to convenience. Many Khmer locals, not only Khmer with Vietnamese spouses, told me that Vietnamese food was normally consumed in their family because it was more convenient and less time consuming. Preparing Khmer foods was very time consuming and complicated, as it needed various ingredients to create its distinct taste. However, some ingredients were not available in the market and had to be collected from the tree. On the contrary, Vietnamese food used a simpler range of ingredients that were available everywhere. As a result, Khmer housewives preferred to prepare Vietnamese cuisine on normal busy days while complicated Khmer foods were sometimes prepared when housewives were free from work or on special occasions such as family gatherings or treating friends.

In contrast, Kinh spouses had more adjusting to do because of the alien-ness of Khmer food. Being accustomed to the taste of Kinh dishes since childhood, it is not surprising that Kinh spouses from Kinh-dominated areas—to whom Khmer food was totally ‘strange’—raised with me their uncomfortable feelings about eating unfamiliar Khmer dishes. For instance, Thang, a Kinh migrant working in a rock mine who married a local Khmer, recalled that his life had been quite hard so he was not a picky eater but that for a certain time after marriage he had experienced uncomfortable feelings eating Khmer food. To him, Khmer soup looked very strange and different: it was a combination of various types of vegetables and spices but by tasting it he found that its flavor was very sweet. He told me
that he was now addicted to Khmer meals and often asked his wife to cook Khmer meals for him.

Similarly, Loan—a Kinh teacher whose home town was from Thoai Son but she resided in an ethnically mixed area after her marriage—also got along well with her husband’s Khmer friends and neighbors. Both Loan and her husband are teachers so they were beloved and well treated by local villagers. Loan happily told me that Khmer locals often invited her family to have lunch or dinner and she particularly enjoyed their traditional cuisines and learned to cook Sim lo but she was not able to cook it as tastily as the Khmer locals who treated her. She repetitively expressed her pleasure at going to ‘sroc’ as locals there were very enthusiastic and gentle and their food was so tasty.

Kinh spouses residing in Kinh-dominated area also shared similar experiences. For example, Yen, who was living in Long Xuyen City with her Khmer husband, recalled how hard it was for her every time the couple visited her family-in-law in a Khmer village during the first year of their marriage. She did not like the taste of Khmer traditional meals so she had to prepare and bring her own food every time they visited her family-in-law. It seemed to her that the taste and ingredients of Khmer meals were ‘improper’. She recalled that her mother-in-law often cooked one type of traditional Khmer soup Sim lo whose ingredients were unripe jackfruit, fish and pureed toasted rice seasoned with mam prhoc to create a very distinctive taste. With its unfamiliar mixture of ingredients, Sim lo seemed very strange to Yen so she was very hesitant to try; her first impression of the soup was its strong smell and its overly-sweet taste. However, after several tries, Yen found Khmer meals to be delicious and gradually became addicted to them. Every time her family visited her in-laws, she called her mother-in-law in advance so that her mother-in-law could prepare Sim lo for them. She even started to learn to cook Sim lo from her mother-in-law so that she could cook it by herself in her own house. On the day I was in her rented house, she showed me different types of ingredients, such as dried bamboo sprout, mam prhoc, and pureed fried rice taken from her family-in-law to cook Khmer traditional meals.

The findings reveal that the frequency of consumption of Khmer cuisine by Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples varied according to location. Because of the unavailability of
ingredients and spices to cook Khmer food, Khmer spouses even female Khmers also rarely cooked Khmer food so on occasions when they visited their family in Khmer rural areas, they were often treated to Khmer meals. The busy and hurried life in the city also made them too tired to prepare complicated Khmer foods. Among seven cases from the Kinh-dominated area, only one Khmer female and two Kinh females brought home ingredients and spices from a rural Khmer area to cook Khmer meals at home in the city. Are these two Kinh females, Yen and Ngoan so interested in Khmer foods while other Kinh spouses in Kinh-dominated are not? Do they prefer Khmer cuisine over any other cuisine? It can be explained that their manual work is irregular so they have more free time for cooking Khmer food. But examining their wedding ceremonies, while all other couples went through simplified wedding forms, Yen and Ngoan both had elaborate, traditional Khmer weddings. I argue that Yen’s and Ngoan’s husbands, in an effort to promote Khmer identity, may have encouraged them to cook Khmer cuisine at home to show that they were not assimilated to Kinh dominant culture. They still maintain and even promote their minority culture to their Kinh spouses’ families. Another possible explanation may be that Yen and Ngoan, who are low class in terms of education and occupation, were very proud of their high class—highly educated and in official occupations—Khmer husbands and they may consider them as ‘treasure’ and made efforts to please these ‘treasures’.

The only case where no adjustment was made to a spouse’s food occurred in Aly’s family. Thanh, Aly’s husband, grew up in a Khmer-Kinh mixed area, but had limited personal interaction with Khmer neighbors. At the time of my field study, the couple had lived with Aly’s family for more than a year but Thanh still kept quite separate from his Khmer in-laws. Besides speaking only Vietnamese, Thanh also did not try Khmer meals. Aly told me that her husband could not eat Khmer foods so she had to prepare separate Kinh-style meals for her husband. It seemed to me that Thanh did not make an effort to socialize with surrounding Khmers due to the differences in their socioeconomic status. Thanh seemed to be trying to keep his status as a pure Kinh majority person and not mix with the Khmer minority ethnic group. Thanh’s case is quite similar to the American husband in the Philippine-American marriage described by Hunt and Coller (1957): the American husband tended to insist on a strictly American diet for himself, although he was usually happy for the rest of the family to eat most types of Filipino food. It was analyzed that this resistance
to cultural adjustment was determined by a desire to maintain prestige (Hunt & Coller, 1957).

The study sheds light on the fact that adjustment to different cuisines is mentioned to be a significant problem for Kinh spouses in the early time of their marriage. However, most of the interviewed couples, regardless of their place of residence, expressed their favor toward each other’s dishes after initial hesitation. Variation or combination of both Kinh and Khmer dishes are now commonly chosen in the meals consumed by all these families.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the cultural conflicts experienced by Khmer and Kinh couples in their marital life, highlighting variation in the reasons for cultural conflict according to spousal characteristics and geographical location. The study reaffirms Romano (2008) study on intercultural marriage, which contends that not all cultural conflicts are related to differences in ethnicity. This chapter finds that some conflicts stem from the clash between different cultural models of spousal relations, in particular the clash in marital expectations between the extended family model of rural society and the ideals of educated and urbanised spouses. The findings suggest that couples living in rural Khmer areas tend to encounter culturally particularist and socially traditionalist expectations that have a strong bearing on the quality of their marital bond. While urbanized and educated spouses encountered difficulties adjusting to the sociocultural context of the rural Khmer dominated area, those spouses living in the comparatively more modern, relaxed, and free urban Kinh-dominated area reported fewer marital problems related to cultural adjustment issues.

In addition, the findings also draw attention to the differential capacity of spouses and their families in coping with cultural differences. At the time of their wedding, most Khmer spouses already had years of exposure to the mainstream culture at some level owing to their schooling, intercultural exchanges in their neighborhood, migration for study, or working close to the Kinh community. Therefore they were better equipped than their Kinh spouses to cope with the cultural differences between ethnic groups. However, their rural-based family and social networks were less culturally adept than they, and some had serious
difficulties in relating to Kinh in-laws who settled among them. In contrast, except for Kinh spouses who had lived close to the Khmer community or migrated to Khmer-dominated areas prior to marriage, most Kinh spouses lacked Khmer cultural capital so they experienced more hardship in adjusting to their partners’ unfamiliar sociocultural setting. Meanwhile, Kinh families tended not to have problems of cultural adjustment with their children’s Khmer spouses for the latter tended to be highly culturally adept at adjusting to Kinh culture.

Gender expectations and practical utility were also found to be influential factors shaping the spouse’s capacity to cope with cultural and linguistic difference. Confirming Sr Marie Tran Thi (1995) discussion on language acquisition, this study found that gender-based role expectations may be one barrier to language acquisition for many Kinh wives. Men are exposed to a wider range of social interactions, so Kinh husbands have more opportunities to speak the Khmer language. But the study further finds that in some cases, the utility factor plays a stronger role than gender in shaping a spouse’s capacity to cope with the language barrier.

Supporting Roer-Strier and Ezra (2006), this study challenges Gordon (1964) argument that in interethnic marriages, the ethnic identity of the minority inevitably disappears and the minority is absorbed into the culture of the dominant group. Further, it adds support for the view that interethnic marriage involves mutual cultural adaptation, in which both minority and majority spouses have to make personal adjustments to cope with cultural differences. However, the adaptive challenges encountered in interethnic marriages often do not stem from ethnicity alone but may be related to the differences in social customs and cultural expectations between urban and rural areas. This finding is, nonetheless, of particular relevance to the quality of Kinh-Khmer marriages for so many of those interethnic marriages do involve relations between individuals who come from the widely differing societal contexts of the countryside and the city.
Chapter 7

The Transmission of Language, Identity and Heritage to the Children of Ethnically Mixed Families

This chapter discusses the transmission of language, cultural identity and heritage to the children of ethnically mixed Khmer-Kinh marriages in An Giang Province. Since ethnic Vietnamese or Kinh are the dominant ethnic group in this region, one might assume that transmitting minority Khmer cultural capacities and identity to the next generation is a problematic and vexed issue for couples in Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages. Because of the dominance and prestige of the Kinh majority group, Khmer-Kinh mixed couples may fail to transmit ethnic Khmer values to their children.

As discussed in the introduction chapter, Vietnam is a country of ethnic pluralism and multiculturalism whose national government expresses recognition that each ethnic group possesses and practices its own language and culture. Nevertheless, the Kinh ethnic group is the dominant and majority ethnic group with its population occupying 85.73 percent of the country’s total population (UNFPA, 2011). Kinh people’s language, Vietnamese, is the national language of Vietnam, which is used as the medium of instruction, economic activities, media and official communication, bureaucracy and paperwork. Immigration and development schemes, and ‘spontaneous’ migration processes additionally have brought large numbers of ethnic majority people to areas in which minority groups until recently were the demographic majority. For practical purposes of communication or for socioeconomic success, minority citizens in Vietnam, whatever his or her ethnicity, increasingly have no choice but to acquire the mainstream language, Vietnamese, besides his/her own ethnic language. Beyond language, people in such a context are required to make themselves culturally intelligible in a social milieu increasingly dominated by Vietnamese cultural conventions and standards. And they navigate in a strongly bureaucratised developmental context where official ethnic classifications have a large bearing on the opportunities and incentives open to people of minority status.
An Giang Province on the border with Cambodia, has a large ethnic Khmer population. They are nonetheless the minority in a province where the Kinh are numerically predominant and enjoy high socioeconomic status, and where the Vietnamese government has a strong administrative and developmentalist presence. Interestingly, all of the mixed couples I interviewed expressed their openness and respect for cultural diversity and many highly valued the benefit to their children of acquiring cultural influences from both of their parent’s ethnic traditions. Examining their practices, however, sheds light on if and how transmission of Khmer identity to the next generation takes place, and if and how the support espoused by ethnically mixed couples for transmitting the culture of both parents to their children is manifested in their identity-transmitting practices and decisions.

By examining how language is transmitted to children, how children are named and which ethnicity is selected for the children, this study found that the transmission of identity and heritage to children was not unilaterally decided by the couples themselves but this transmission process was strongly shaped by the macro-level socioeconomic structure, including gender, socialization practices and social status. Couples do not decide on these issues alone but the outcomes are strongly influenced by family, neighborhood and the official context. The chapter explores the factors which shape identity transmission and also documents the reasoning and processes of negotiation adopted by couples in this situation.

7.1 Language Transmission and the Influence of the Local Context

Owning to frequent mutual interaction with Kinh people in economic and official activities, bilingualism is quite widespread among the Khmer ethnic group in the Khmer-dominated rural area I studied and even more so in the ethnically mixed district capital that was my second study area. I assumed that by growing up in such a bilingual environment, the second generation in the Khmer-Kinh family would naturally become bilingual. However, the mixed children living in my third study area, a Kinh-dominated urban area, an almost exclusively Vietnamese-speaking setting, were at risk of losing the minority Khmer language. I argue that the ethnic concentrated setting is one of the determining factors on minority language maintenance and transmission to the second generation in interethnic Khmer-Kinh families. By looking at three different ethnic concentrated areas, Kinh-dominated area, Khmer-dominated area and ethnically mixed settings, the findings affirm
that regardless of their residence, all interviewed intermarried couples in this study encouraged their children to embrace both cultural identities and expressed their support and expectation for their children’s bilingualism, but how well the second generation acquired Khmer language varied a great deal across the socialization contexts.

It may be too hasty for me to assume that all Vietnamese citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, acquire Vietnamese for practical reason. My field study shows that in the Khmer-dominated areas, not all Khmer people, especially the elderly, were able to communicate in Vietnamese since Khmer language was still the main medium of communication within Khmer families and the community. Nevertheless, most Khmer people in these areas were bilingual, although whom they were speaking to and the context of their conversation determined which language they were using. During my field study, I observed that even though their main means of communication was Khmer, they sometimes borrowed Vietnamese words and developed their own hotchpotch of the two languages in their statements. It is interesting to see that some Kinh people who had frequent interaction with the Khmer community even learned the Khmer language to ease their interaction and business. Therefore, by living in these areas, most mixed children became bilingual in a ‘natural’ way.

Being a school dean, Mr. Tam (a Kinh husband in a mixed marriage) spent most of his time on teaching, school activities and social interaction. Therefore, his Khmer wife, Chanh Da, who conducted a small trading business in their house, was the primary care taker of their children and had a lot of intimate time with them so it was very natural for her to speak to her children using her mother tongue. Besides being exposed to Khmer language through their mother, the children also absorbed Khmer language through daily interaction with their Khmer relatives and other Khmer children surrounding their house. Especially, since their family was residing in a dominantly Khmer language setting, Khmer was the only language they heard and spoke when playing with their Khmer cousins and other Khmer children; Mr. Tam’s children therefore naturally acquired Khmer language. Even though Vietnamese was also spoken at home and delivered in their kindergarten, their Vietnamese language was still limited. Mr. Tam explained the reason why his children’s capacity in Vietnamese was so weak:
Even though Vietnamese was the medium of instruction in schooling, most of the pupils in
the school were Khmers so during the break, Khmer language was still the primary means
of communication among the pupils. It was natural for them to speak their mother tongue
and also their Vietnamese capacity was still limited. My children, therefore, had limited
chances to communicate and advance their Vietnamese. It is important for us to use
Vietnamese at home to strengthen my children’s Vietnamese capacity to ease their study.

Even while emphasizing use of Vietnamese at home, during the morning that I was in their
house I observed the variation in language use in their family. When I came to their house,
Chanh Da was alone at home preparing lunch for the family. Just after we greeted and sat in
the living room, her five-year-old son came home from his relative’s house nearby. Chanh
Da first asked her son wash his hands in Khmer language (Tau Lieng Dai) and then in
Vietnamese asked him to greet me and my Khmer research assistant but he was too shy to
greet us. Mr. Tam came home after we had been in conversation for about fifteen minutes.
We then had a conversation with Tam and Chanh Da together in Vietnamese but sometimes
Chanh Da asked my accompanying Khmer friend about his family in Khmer language. In
addition, Mr. Tam himself also communicated in Khmer with his grandmother-in-law, who
was living nearby, when she came to their house to ask if they had eaten lunch. Tam told
me that having been assigned as a teacher in a Khmer area for almost ten years and being
married to a Khmer wife for seven years, he had successfully developed his Khmer
language capacity to interact with the Khmer local community.

The determinant role of local community interaction on language development can also be
found in Mrs. Ngan’s children. One day while wandering in a Khmer commune, I was
directed to Ngan’s house by a local Khmer villager. Thankfully, Ngan was at home and I
was impressed with her bilingual capacity as she welcomed me in Vietnamese and my
Khmer research assistant in Khmer language. Ngan had acquired some simple Khmer
greeting phrases to aid her fish retailing business in a Khmer hamlet before meeting her
Khmer husband. Despite having some Khmer vocabulary, Ngan still experienced hardship
in understanding her Khmer in-laws during the early stage of her marriage. Ngan said that
since she lived with her Khmer family-in-law after her marriage, where all family members
communicated in Khmer language and also her husband’s capacity in Vietnamese was very limited, Ngan was motivated to learn Khmer language to ease her communication as well as to develop a closer relationship with her husband and in-laws. She learned a new language by asking the Vietnamese meaning of every new spoken Khmer statement from her in-laws and she gradually became competent in Khmer.

I observed her very natural conversation in Khmer with my Khmer research assistant when we were in her house. Interestingly, even though she had moved out of her family-in-law’s house to their own house, Khmer language was still the main means of communication in her own family. During the conversation with Ngan, her four-year-old daughter always sat nearby and sometimes interrupted our conversation. While Ngan talked in Vietnamese with her daughter, her daughter always answered in Khmer. As her daughter disrupted our conversation, Ngan asked her husband to take care of the child so that we could continue our conversation. When I expressed curiosity as to why her daughter did not speak her mother’s tongue, Ngan explained that as her husband was limited in Vietnamese, Khmer was the main medium of communication in her family and since her children grew up in a Khmer setting, they spent most of their time interacting with surrounding Khmer children; therefore it was natural for them to communicate in Khmer language rather than using their mother tongue.

I further asked Ngan why Khmer rather than Vietnamese was commonly spoken in her family. Ngan clarified that as they were living in a Khmer-dominated area, they were exposed to a Khmer-speaking community and their children naturally absorbed and spoke Khmer language through daily interaction with the surrounding Khmer children. Ngan further stressed that her thirteen-year-old son could even read and write Khmer as he was sent to a Khmer temple to study the Khmer language and his official school also provided a Khmer subject. Besides the ethnic socialization context, mixed children living in Khmer dominated areas are also given opportunity to acquire Khmer language through formal education in school and informal education from the Khmer temple.44

44 In the Khmer area, Khmer language is added as an extra subject to the national school curriculum from grade three. In addition, Khmer pagodas usually provide informal instruction of the Khmer language, which is delivered by the monks and is free to every Khmer child (parents voluntarily contribute through buying required stationery).
Similar to Mr. Tam, Ngan is concerned about her children’s limitation in the Vietnamese language for such limitation can be an obstacle in their formal schooling. When her son started his first grade, it was quite hard for him to follow the class since instruction was delivered in the Vietnamese language. Therefore, Ngan spent much time in the evenings for some years teaching him Vietnamese.

The Khmer capacity of Mr. Nam’s children further reaffirms the determinant role of the living context on language acquisition. About one year after their marriage, Mr. Nam, a Khmer man and prematurely-retired primary teacher, and his Kinh wife moved to a Kinh-dominated region to improve their livelihood. Their two daughters were both born in the Kinh-dominated area and their family lived on rice farming there until their oldest daughter reached seventeen. When his parents got older and more care was needed, they moved back to his Khmer hometown. Having lived in a Kinh-dominated area for almost twenty years, Vietnamese is the only medium of communication in their family. Surprisingly, Mr. Nam, who was more highly education than his wife, was responsible for helping their daughter’s education—but he did not teach them any Khmer words. My sense is that Mr. Nam’s attachment to Khmer culture is not so strong as he himself was born and grew up in a Kinh-dominated area until he reached eighteen years of age before his family moved back to their Khmer hometown. He, therefore, communicated only in Vietnamese until his family moved back to his Khmer hometown. He acquired Khmer language from the Khmer temple and through daily communication with the local Khmer community but Mr. Nam said that he is more fluent in Vietnamese than in Khmer.

Mrs. Nhung, Nam’s wife, expressed her surprise toward her daughters’ Khmer language acquisition. Mrs. Nhung recalled that she was not aware when and how her daughters learned Khmer but within just a year of residing in a Khmer village, her daughters were able to communicate with Khmers in Khmer language. Mrs. Nhung emphasized that even though her older daughter lacked formal education from schooling, she also quickly acquired Khmer simply through daily interaction with her Khmer friends and neighbors. Mrs. Nhung’s daughters quickly acquired the Khmer language as they were exposed to a
Khmer-only speaking environment so they had a strong motivation to learn Khmer in order to communicate with local villagers and become real members of the community.

During my conversation with Mrs. Nhun, her second daughter always sat nearby listening interestedly to her parents’ marriage story while her granddaughter, who was living nearby, sometimes came and interrupted the conversation talking with her and her second daughter in Khmer language. Her daughter and her grandchild all communicated in Khmer but Mrs. Nhun just answered them in Vietnamese. In addition, her daughter also had a very natural conversation in Khmer with her neighbor when she came to buy incense.

These three cases have reinforced the importance of the neighborhood and community context on language learning. These cases lend weight to the observation by Sr Marie Tran Thi (1995) that learning a language in a real situation together with the necessity to use that language motivates the learner in their learning. Motivation has a determining role on language acquisition (Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 2004) as does the surrounding social conditions and the chances of social interaction outside the nuclear family influences on children’s bilingualism (Hoffmann, 1991).

**Parental Influence**

Variation in minority language acquisition is also observed from family to family in Long Xuyen City, a Kinh-dominated area, where there is no formal instruction in the Khmer language. Lack of exposure to other Khmer speakers in this Kinh-dominated area is found to be the main barrier for Khmer language acquisition in the second generation in interethnic families. However, in this majority language-dominated region, in line with the discussion of Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson (2004), how much minority language the children acquire depends greatly on how much time the minority parent spends with his or her children. Gender disparities can be observed clearly in terms of the time the parents spend with their children. Similar to Cheng’s study (Cheng, 2003), which finds that gender-based roles may be a relevant aspect in language transmission—since frequently the mother is endowed with the duty of caring and the responsibility of language transmission to her children—this study also found a huge gap in the amount of time the father and mother
spend with the children, and that the gender of the minority parent can be a decisive factor in transmitting the minority language to their children. Morris and Jones (2007) also highlight that mothers played a more significant role than fathers in language socialization of their children because they are the primary carers of their children.

Particularly, in Vietnamese society, women’s role to educate their children is strongly expected and emphasized. Such expectation can be seen clearly in a common saying: ‘The mother is responsible for the spoiled child, the grandmother is responsible for the spoiled grandchild’ (Con hu tai me, chau hu tai ba). Being under such social pressure, Vietnamese women shoulder a double burden. Even though participating in economic activities, women are also the main carers in their family. Apart from housework, women are also socially expected to take care of family members and educate their children. Such social expectations may help to explain why in most interviewed families, the husbands, either Khmer or Kinh husbands, spend much time outside in developing their social network while the wives are responsible for taking care of children. Therefore, in the Kinh area, where the second generations in interethnic families do not have access to a facilitating Khmer-speaking environment, the gender of the minority parent plays a decisive role in transmitting the Khmer language to their children. Such gender role division can explain why all children of Khmer fathers living in the Kinh-dominated area are limited in Khmer language while those children with a Khmer mother are more capable in Khmer.

All the children of the five interviewed couples in the Kinh-dominated area with Khmer husbands are very limited in the Khmer language. The study shows that in addition to limited exposure to a Khmer-speaking environment, limited opportunities for intimate time with their Khmer father is also the reason for their limited Khmer capacity. Even though all these Khmer husbands expressed the hope that their children would have bilingual capacity, they admitted that they were too busy with their economic activities to teach their children Khmer. It is surprising that one Khmer male officer even told me that his wife knew some simple Khmer words so he asked his wife to speak these words frequently with their daughter.
Thane, a male migrant working in a state agency in Long Xuyen city, has been married to a local Kinh garment worker for six years and has a four-year-old daughter. Even though I had known Thane prior to my field research through a friend and we had a fruitful talk about interethnic Kinh-Khmer marriage, it was still hard for me to contact him again during my field study as he had changed his phone number and was often away on a work mission when I went to his workplace. I finally got his new phone contact through the security men in his workplace. Thankfully, I could contact him and arranged an appointment in a cafeteria one weekend evening. To break the gender barrier, I was accompanied by a male Khmer research assistant to ease the conversation. Even though he had been exposed to Kinh culture and community for many years on account of his education and occupation, Thane still emphasized the importance of maintaining and transmitting his ethnic identity to his daughter and stressed to me:

Deciding to marry a Kinh woman, I was aware that getting married across the ethnic barrier could disrupt my ethnic line. My ethnic identity is very important and I did not want to lose my ethnic roots [goc gac dan toc]. Especially, language is so significant to cultural identity so transmitting Khmer language to my daughter was one of my important tasks so as to maintain the ethnic roots.

However, I was a bit surprised to see that he communicated with us, even to my Khmer research assistant, only in Vietnamese during our conversation. When I asked him how well his daughter had learned Khmer, Thane told me that as his daughter was just four years old, and he often travelled away from home for work, he had taught her only some simple daily words. To know in person how well his daughter had learned Khmer, I asked for his permission to have a visit and talk with his wife in his house when she had free time. Two weeks later, one weekend evening, he called me saying that I could come to have a talk with his wife; luckily I lived quite close to his house so I could quickly ride my motorbike there. His family lived in a tiny rented apartment in a narrow alley close to his office. Yen, Thane’s wife, was busy preparing dinner for the family when I arrived but she was very hospitable and invited me to a glass of lemon tea. I had a conversation with Yen during her dinner preparation. I observed that Vietnamese was the only medium of communication in their family and the only Khmer word I heard Thane say to his daughter was ‘hot bai’ (please eat) to tell his daughter to have dinner. I immediately grabbed the opportunity to ask
if she could understand or communicate in Khmer language; Thane was disappointed saying that ‘hot bai’ was the only word his daughter had learned. He explained that his daughter grew up in an entirely Kinh-speaking environment and he was so busy that he was only able to take his family to visit his parents in his Khmer hometown on weekends every one or two months, which did not provide enough of a Khmer-speaking context for his daughter to learn his natal language.

Another similar case is found in the Khmer ability of Lai’s son. Lai was a Khmer doctor working in Long Xuyen city and got married to Kim Loan, a Kinh woman, who had no job but helped her mother manage a cloth shop. After getting married, the couple lived with Kim Loan’s parents as it was more convenient than living in a rented house. As he was a doctor, he was very busy with his job and it was very hard for me to ask for an appointment with him. After contacting him four times, he finally accepted to have coffee with me in a cafeteria one evening. He was accompanied by his wife and his son and as usual I was also accompanied by a male Khmer to break the gender and ethnic barrier. Growing up in a Vietnamese-speaking context, their son was not able to communicate in Khmer. Lai, however, said he was proud his ethnic root had not been lost since he had taught a Khmer song to his son. After talking for a while, Lai was proud to show off his son’s Khmer capacity by asking him to sing the song. Even through this single Khmer song, Lai felt very happy that his ethnic identity had been transmitted to his son.

It is seen in these cases that even though the transmission of bilingualism to their children is highly valued and expected, Thane and Lai failed to achieve their expectation successfully due to the lack of a facilitating socialization environment. In addition, gender-based roles may also be the reason why Thane and Lai did not make a great effort to teach Khmer to their children. It seems that their focus is on income earning and as their work requires them to travel frequently and they often go out with their friends to develop their social network, the responsibility for raising and caring for their children is left to their wives.

Another case in Kinh-dominated Long Xuyen city further demonstrates the influence of the minority parent’s gender on language transmission. Even though Mrs. Thone and her
husband grew up in the same Khmer hometown, they had to live far apart for livelihood purposes. Mrs. Thone and her two children lived in Long Xuyen while her Kinh husband worked in their hometown. Like Thane, Mrs. Thone also highly valued teaching the Khmer language to her children. Being the main and only caretaker and educator of her children, after working hours, Mrs. Thone spent all of her free time with her children so she had opportunities to transmit Khmer language to her children.

During the evening I was in her house, her fifteen-year-old daughter sometimes interrupted and talked with her in Khmer language. However, I heard her son communicating with his mother and his sister only in Vietnamese. Mrs. Thone told me that her fifteen-year-old daughter could communicate in Khmer in normal conversation but her seven-year-old boy was just able to understand and speak some simple Khmer words. When asked about her experience of teaching Khmer language to her children, Mrs. Thone told me that she did not teach her children Khmer formally but just taught them spoken language. In daily conversation, Vietnamese was still the main medium of communication in her house but she sometimes would use a Khmer phrase with her children such as ‘Bin, hot bai’ to ask her son, named Bin, to come to the table to eat. Her son would ask for the meaning of her statement and she would explain its meaning in Vietnamese to him so the next time she used it he could understand its meaning and could gradually use this phrase himself.

Mrs. Thone further explained that since her husband still worked in her Khmer hometown, she and her children often went there to visit him and her relatives. Frequent exposure to a Khmer environment every one or two weeks helped her children to develop their Khmer language. In the hometown, except for their father, all their relatives on their mother’s side communicated in Khmer with them so they were forced to learn Khmer to be involved in the conversation. In addition, playing with their Khmer cousins in their Khmer hometown also gave them a practical social setting in which to acquire and practice the Khmer language.

Interestingly, in the ethnically mixed area of Tri Ton town, children’s bilingual capacity in mixed families is totally unpredictable. The children’s bilingual capacity is not as uniform as in either the Kinh or Khmer-dominated areas. Overall, Tri Ton town is a mixed area,
with 2,844 Khmer people among a total town population of 14,881. It is observed that not all Khmer and Kinh people reside in ethnically interspersed neighborhoods; it is quite common for Kinh and Khmer to live together in their own ethnic group. It is, therefore, hard to predict the bilingual capacity of the mixed children in this mixed area; much depends on their direct neighborhood and their interaction with their relatives.

The Khmer language acquisition of Aly’s son provides another case. A Khmer officer working in a state agency in Tri Ton town, Aly married a Kinh colleague in her workplace. She and her husband both lived in Tri Ton town but, when I met them, resided in different neighborhoods. After first getting married, they had lived with the groom’s family, since he was the only son in his family. Even though her in-law’s family had lived in a Khmer neighborhood for more than twenty years, they still separated themselves from and limited their interactions with surrounding Khmer neighbors. By virtue of living in a Kinh-only speaking family and limited interaction with Khmer neighbors, Aly’s son had no opportunity to learn the Khmer language. Aly told me that in order to expose her son to a more facilitating Khmer-speaking setting she took him to visit her natal family every weekend, for her natal house was just a five minute motor-bike ride from her parents-in-law’s house. She said that, motivated by a desire to transmit her mother tongue to her son, when her son reached three years old, she had asked for her parents-in-law’s permission to allow her and her son to temporarily move to live with her natal family to take advantage of its facilitating Khmer-speaking environment. This was where she was living when I met her.

Since Aly was busy working during the day she was able to talk only in the evening. As per our appointment, my Khmer research assistant and I arrived at her natal house at 7pm, and sat and talked with Aly’s younger sister about her new job for about ten minutes before Aly arrived home. As soon as Aly sat down with us, her son cried out in Vietnamese asking to go out and play *(dan di choi)*. Aly asked, in Khmer language, for her mother’s help to take her son out. Aly expressed to me her disappointment that her son’s Khmer language was so poor. After one year living with her natal Khmer family, her son still did not speak any Khmer words. All he could do was to understand some simple Khmer words. Her family had made an effort to transmit their native language to Aly’s son by speaking only in
Khmer language with him and he interacted with other Khmer children. Aly said she was disappointed but concluded that he was maybe still too young to pick anything up, or he was slow in language acquisition.

Why did neither gender nor social context appear to be determining factors in Aly’s son’s Khmer acquisition? What were the reasons for his failure in Khmer language acquisition? I realized that while Aly had been the primary care taker for her son, she did not spend much intimate time with him. Aly and her husband were both state officers working eight hours a day, so they had to send their son to a childcare center from 7am to 5pm on weekdays. In the childcare center, Kinh children are normally predominant and the classes aremostly delivered by Kinh teachers. Undoubtedly, Kinh language is the main means of communication in the child care center so I assumed that Aly’s son was rarely exposed to a Khmer-speaking environment during week days.

In addition I had reasons to doubt that Aly made efforts to intentionally transmit Khmer to her son. I found out from my Khmer research assistant that Aly’s real reason for moving to her natal house was the tense relation with her mother-in-law. My doubts toward Aly’s effort to transmit Khmer to her son intensified when Aly told me that her close friends from high school were mostly Kinh people. Apart from her own family she rarely associated with Khmer people. In her conversation with me she made some adverse comments about Khmer people’s cultural level and she also appeared highly focused on improving her social status by her choice of social relations with Kinh people.

While Aly and her natal family spoke Khmer language to her son, her son was exposed predominantly to interactions with Kinh people, which can partially explain his slow progress in acquiring Khmer. In other words, his slow progress in Khmer language acquisition can be explained by the lack of a real Khmer-speaking context. Moreover, it seems likely to me, although it should be stressed that this is, in part, my own conjecture, that his mother was indeed influential in his language acquisition. As his primary parental caretaker she appeared focused on improving her social status, and that of her son, by deliberately limiting their exposure to Khmer people and intensifying her connections with Kinh-speaking social networks.
Generally speaking, besides the living context, the study found that the gender of the minority parent plays a decisive role in children’s language acquisition, particularly for families residing in the Kinh-dominated area, where the learner has no facilitating learning environment. As the mother often has more time for intimate conversation with her children, children of Khmer mothers can acquire Khmer language more efficiently. This finding seems to support the previous study by Morris and Jones that mothers rather than fathers played a more significant role in the early Welsh language socialization of their children because the mother spent more time than the father in one-to-one interaction with their children (Morris & Jones, 2007). It also is similar to the situation in Malaysian Chinese families, where the mother’s choice is seen to be a catalyst to language shift and maintenance and where the occurrence of language loss can be said to be determined by an important factor: ‘mother’s choice’ (Cheng, 2003).

7.2 Naming Children

The giving of a name at the time of birth is a process of consideration, discussion and negotiation involving the couples and their respective families. For a mixed couple, it also gives rise to a number of dilemmas as to what to name the children, since they have to take account of culturally different naming practices. The interethnic parents interviewed in this study are found to prefer the dominant/common naming practice adopted in their wider sociocultural milieu in order to ensure that their children’s names are unremarkable in that context.

One highly educated and highly respected Khmer-Kinh couple residing in a Khmer-dominated area encountered contradictory cultural practices in naming children. The Kinh wife, Linh, a high school teacher, expressed her astonishment toward the way Khmer people name their children:

It is very strange to me how the father’s name may or may not be the surname of their children. It seems that to them [Khmers], the family lineage is not highly considered in naming children. To us [Kinh], the children are named along patrilineal lines; the father’s
surname is very important and the father’s surname becomes the children’s family name, which is passed from generation to generation, to show that they come from the same root.

Her reply suggests that even though Linh got married to a Khmer man and had lived in a Khmer community for more than six years, she still kept separate from the surrounding Khmer community as evidenced in the distinction she made between ‘them’ and ‘us’. Linh looked displeased when talking about how her sister-in-law named her children:

It was unbelievable that her two children had two different family names. Her husband’s surname became their first child’s surname but her own surname was used for their second child’s surname. I was very worried that my husband or my parents-in-law would ask me to name my own children in this way.

Linh and her husband, Chuong, spent much time discussing their first child’s name right from the beginning of her pregnancy. I guessed that since both members of the couple were highly educated and economically independent from their parents, there was little influence from their parents on naming the child. As she expected, her husband’s family name was selected for her child’s surname. Since it was still too early for them to predict the sex of their child, both boy’s and girl’s names were drawn up in advance for their child. Their first-born, a daughter, was named Sa Phuong Anh. Her surname ‘Sa’ is Chuong’s surname and her given name ‘Phuong Anh’ is a Vietnamese name.

However, conflicts arose when the couple had theirie second child. Already at the waiting stage, when Linh was pregnant, Chuong suggested that they use Linh’s family name for the second child. As Linh sadly recalled, she reacted strongly to her husband’s suggestion. Linh emphasized the importance of family ties in the family name for ethnic Kinh people. Linh worried that their name would be remarkable to others and it would be shameful for her daughters if they had different family names:

You should not give your daughters different surnames. Imagine how their teachers and friends would react to them! Do they each have a different father? How would they answer why they have different family names? They would be too young to explain the cultural difference to their teachers and friends.
It is true that if a child’s family name is different from his/her father’s family name, it would be a curiosity for other people in Kinh society. Other people may suppose that they have different fathers, that their parents have divorced, or that there may be other conflicts in their family. To avoid such dilemmas for her children, Linh strongly disagreed with her husband’s suggestion and determined to give her children her husband’s family name. Finally, her husband was convinced and their second daughter was named Sa Trang Anh.

Another interethnic Khmer-Kinh couple was also going through negotiation in naming their daughter. Lin and Phong, the unsettled couple I mentioned in Chapter Five, were arguing over the naming of their daughter when I met them. Their daughter was already one year old, but her birth certificate still had not been completed for the couples had not reached agreement over which family name would be used for their daughter. The conflict is rooted in the different kinship systems between the Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups. The Khmer kinship system is ambilineal in nature while Kinh kinship is strongly influenced by patrilineal descent. In local Khmer tradition, the mother’s family name is used for their daughter’s family name and the father’s family name is used for their son’s family name while in Kinh tradition, the father’s family name is selected as the surname for all children, regardless of their sex. In my field study area, the most common naming practice in the Khmer community is to use ‘Neang’ as the surname for females and for males the surname ‘Chau’.

Owing to such differences, both Lin and Phong kept arguing over which of their family names to transmit to their daughter. When I asked about their daughter’s name, Lin, the Khmer wife, said that in Khmer culture, a daughter takes her mother’s surname so her daughter’s surname would certainly be named ‘Neang’, like her. Her husband interrupted immediately, saying ‘Children, regardless of their sex, must take their father’s surname’ and he further emphasized that his daughter was already named ‘Nguyen Thi Thuy Trang’ in the record of the birth document. I observed that they still were both displeased and in dispute about their daughter’s surname.

45 Tracing descent in which both male and female lines are recognized; it is up to the individual to choose between them.
46 The tracing of descent through the male line.
While the above two couples made decisions about their children’s names by themselves, in most cases grandparents have some involvement in naming their children. My expectation was that the young couples would be strongly influenced by their parents’ advice, in deference to the older generation. However, I discovered that education was a more significant factor than age or parental status in child-naming decisions in some instances, as witnessed in the following two examples. Mr. Tung, a Kinh husband and Mrs. Kha, his Khmer wife, had undergone much hardship owing to the opposition of Mrs. Kha’s parents toward their intimate relationship. After two years convincing her parents, the couple finally obtained their consent for their marriage. After marriage, the young couple lived with Mrs. Kha’s family and made a living selling food in front of their house every morning. Since they lived with Mrs. Kha’s family, I guessed that her Khmer parents were more dominant and their voice would be more highly valued. Instead, the couple lived in harmony with both sides and showed respect toward their parents on both sides.

When Mrs. Kha got pregnant, they invited Mr. Tung’s parents to their house to have a discussion with Kha’s parents on naming their child. Mrs. Manh, Kha’s mother, expressed her respect toward the Kinh people’s patrilineal custom so she left the authority to name them to Tung’s father. Tung added that since the children were his father’s first grandchildren, his father was very excited to be involved in naming them:

My father thought of beautiful names for his grandchildren in advance so there was no real discussion in naming our children. My father just offered his favorite names and explained their meanings. We all respected my father’s suggested names and in fact both of my children were named by him.

The older daughter was named ‘Phan Thi Kim Ngan’ and the younger boy’s full-name is ‘Phan Thanh Tam’, their family name being taken from their father’s surname. Their given names ‘Thi Kim Ngan’ and ‘Thanh Tam’ were Vietnamese names with cultural significance in the Vietnamese naming system.

Different from other interviewed Khmer-Kinh couples, Dinh and Ngoc, who were working in the same state agency in the ethnically mixed area, did not follow either standard Khmer or Kinh practices in naming their daughter. They did not take the wife’s surname or the
husband’s surname to name their daughter; instead, the husband’s first name was chosen as
the surname of their daughter. I expressed my surprise at their way of naming their child
since it is not the common practice in their area. When I asked them further why their
approach differed from the common one, Ngoc, the Kinh wife, explained:

This is the current trend in naming the children among highly educated Khmer people.
Khmer people in Cambodia always select the father’s given name for their child’s
surname.

Dinh, the Khmer husband, additionally explained:

Only those who lack understanding still use the surname ‘Chau’ for the boy and ‘Neang’
for the girl since they are not real surnames. The meaning of ‘Chau’ is similar to ‘Van’ in
Vietnamese [name particle indicating the male gender] and ‘Neang’ is like ‘Thi’ in
Vietnamese [name particle indicating the female gender]. More educated Khmers followed
the practice that Khmers in Cambodia use to name their children, according to which the
father’s first name would become the child’s surname.

As advised by their friends, the couples searched the internet for a beautiful first name for
their child and they selected a shortlist of boy’s and girl’s names in Vietnamese. They
finally chose the name Uyen Van as it seemed the most beautiful to them. Their daughter’s
full name was Dinh Le Uyen Van, in which Dinh, the father’s given name, was selected as
the daughter’s surname and Le, the mother’s surname, became the daughter’s middle name.

However, Dinh and Ngoc were under pressure from the grandparents in naming their
daughter. As the couple was highly educated and economically independent, they named
their daughter by themselves without asking for their parents’ advice, which made Dinh’s
Khmer mother unhappy about her granddaughter’s name when she first heard it. She
criticized him, saying:

She is your daughter so you name her. You can choose any name you like. You
have only yourselves to blame if it is not beautiful. You and your wife are both
educated but you do not even know how to name your daughter.
In spite of his mother’s displeasure and unhappiness, the couple went ahead and gave their daughter the name they already had selected. It seems to me that the couple was quite confident of their knowledge and they did not feel the need to take Dinh’s mother’s advice into account.

In line with Schneider’s discussion (Schneider, 1989), it is seen that the choice of a name for a child can require lengthy discussion and it is a matter of negotiation and even compromise between the partners and even their respective families. It is an attempt to make the child’s identity intelligible in the family and in the larger society. To ensure their children are unexceptional in the society in which they are growing up, most interviewed Kinh-Khmer couples named their children in the way that the Kinh majority practiced. The findings are mostly consistent with the study by Edwards and Caballero (2008) that in naming their mixed children, couples from different ethnic or racial backgrounds are concerned about how given names will position their children in the wider society.

All of the other couples I interviewed gave their children Vietnamese names. The couples generally agreed with each other that giving their children a Vietnamese name would make it easier on their children as they interacted with wider society. The Khmer spouse may have experienced the majority people’s negative reaction toward their ethnic name so preferred giving a Vietnamese name to avoid a negative experience for their children; avoid being treated as ‘different’ from the dominant. One Khmer female spouse living in the ethnically mixed area of Tri Ton told me her experience about the majority’s reaction toward her name. When she studied in Ho Chi Minh City, her classmates treated her as a ‘different person’; she was often asked how ‘remote and mountainous’ her hometown was.

Some couples also mentioned that having an officially recorded Vietnamese name would make it easier for their child as they navigated official paperwork since Vietnamese is the official language. A conversation with a civil servant in a Khmer-dominated area gave me a sense of how this factor influenced the way interethnic couples name their children. Ngoc Lien, a commune official who is responsible for marriage registration of commune residents and the child of a mixed marriage herself, told me that during her four years in this job, all of the interethnic Khmer-Kinh couples in the commune gave their children
Vietnamese first names. Ngoc Lien further explained that if these interethnic couples did not give their child a Vietnamese name, she would encourage them to vietnamize the name since it would make it easier on their child later on whenever they needed to do official paper work given that most officials are Kinh. She gave me an example of a common mistake in documenting Khmer names: instead of the name ‘Chau Sa Reth’, the official may change it to ‘Chau Sa Ret’, thinking that ‘Reth’ is a misspelling in Vietnamese. Another mistake is the change made to the Khmer male name ‘Chau Thida’, which is rendered in Vietnam as ‘Chau Thi đa’. As I mentioned above, the middle name ‘Thị’ is used to denote the female gender in Kinh naming customs so the official would automatically document someone with this name as ‘Bà/Cô Chau Thị đa’ (Mrs./Ms. Chau Thị đa). In other words, the Khmer-Kinh couples named their children for the practical purpose of making the name legible to officialdom, mindful of the power of official documentation processes over their lives.

In addition, the socioeconomic gap between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups may be also consciously considered. Khmers are widely depicted as ‘poor’, ‘backward’, ‘culturally insular’, and even dangerous in official and mainstream culture in Vietnam and are the target of continuous high-profile official programs to lift them out of poverty and raise their cultural ‘level’ (*trinh do van hoa*) (Taylor, 2007). It appears that the Khmer-Kinh couples may not want to flag their child’s membership of this low status group so instead they vietnamize their children’s names to evade this potential stigmatization. At the same time the Vietnamese name may be chosen for its auspicious or magical qualities that might bring to their child some measure of the prestige, power and wealth that is widely thought to attach to the ethnic majority group.

Another explanation is the recognition and appreciation of their children’s name in the wider society in Vietnam. As couples seek to select a culturally meaningful name for their children, naming children entails a lengthy process of discussion. In both Khmer and Vietnamese society, first names are selected for their culturally evocative character and are expected to convey a certain poetic, moral, religious, cultural or personal meaning. Such a name confers cultural citizenship and moral personhood upon the person so named and speaks to the cultured status of the parents and family who named them. To be recognized
as such, the first name must be meaningful, not only to the couples themselves but also to their respective families and the wider society. If the child is given a Khmer name, no one among his/her Kinh relatives or in wider Kinh society would appreciate the message it conveys about its bearer’s moral or cultural personhood, for the name has no meaning to them. For Khmer people who live in a milieu whose institutions and powerful socioeconomic networks are dominated by Kinh people, to give their child a culturally illegible name would be putting them at a significant disadvantage.

The dominance of the Kinh ethnic group was also found in the selection of surnames for their children. Except for the couple Lin and Phong who were still arguing about their daughter’s family name, all couples were found to practice the custom of patrilineal naming, which is the prescribed model in Kinh culture. As discussed above, in Kinh families, children are given the father’s surname. Such a patrilineal system is emphasized in the saying: ‘Con nguoi co to, co tong. Nhu cay co coi, nhu song co nguon’ (A person has a great-grandfather, a grandfather. Like a tree has a root, a river its source).

7.3 Selecting an Ethnic Identity for Children

Efforts to understand the dynamics of how interethnic Khmer-Kinh couples passed their ethnic identification to their children is the core of this section. In keeping with the official requirement to choose exclusively a single ethnicity on a birth certificate, the couples had to make choices about whether to assign the mother’s or father’s ethnicity to the child. It has been argued that in America, ‘symbolic ethnicity is not just something associated with generational movement. It is also very much dependent on social mobility. As long as racial or ethnic identity is associated with class stratification, ethnic identity will be much more complex than individual choice and familial enjoyment of tradition’ (Waters, 1990). Based on Waters’ argument, I assumed that Khmer-Kinh parents may act in a ‘rational’ manner to identify their children as ‘Kinh’ in order to minimize their exposure to social stereotypes of ‘Khmer’ as ‘backward’, ‘low-educated’ and ‘poor’ and also to enhance the children’s social status.

The findings indicated that the ethnic identification option for the mixed child in Khmer-Kinh families was a complicated process, which was constrained by the Kinh cultural
factor. In line with the argument of Waters (1989) that because the child is typically assigned his/her father’s surname, the ethnic identity is also traced to the father’s ancestry and the finding on Hispanic ethnic identification (Bernal & Knight, 1993) that the father’s lineage is preferred to the mother’s lineage and the father’s ethnicity will be selected for their children’s, the patrilineal kinship system was the foremost consideration of interethnic Khmer-Kinh couples in selecting the ethnic identity for their children. It is widespread knowledge that the Vietnamese family is deeply inclined to Confucianism in which the male is usually the head of the household and his surname is assigned to all his children and the significance of the patrilineal line of descent is strengthened by the identification of children’s ethnicity with that of their father.

Mr. Tung, a Kinh husband living in the ethnically mixed area, told me that there was not much discussion on selecting the ethnic identity for their children as he and his wife thought that their children should share the ethnic identity of their father. Therefore, there was no argument why he selected his ‘Kinh’ ethnicity for his children and also their names were vietnamized to allow their identification as ethnic Kin. Tung further recalled that no family member was aware of their interethnic identity until his oldest daughter reached secondary school.

The dynamic character of ethnicity was revealed when Tung found that there were two secondary schools in which his daughter could enrol in the town: one was the public school where all students have to pay school fees and afford their own stationery while the other one was The An Giang Ethnic Boarding High School (Truong Trung Hoc pho thong Dan toc Noi tru An Giang) in which only good students labeled minority ethnic identity could enrol. The An Giang Ethnic Boarding High School is located in Chau Lang commune, two kilometers away from Tri Ton town. This school was specially established for ethnic minority secondary students in Tri Ton district and for ethnic minority high school students of An Giang province. Students are selectively chosen basing on their study result from previous years. The ethnic students studying in the Ethnic Boarding School are exempted from tuition fees and are also given monthly grants and many other incentives such as belongings, learning tools, transport fares to visit their family at New Year and traditional holiday and even annual health insurance.
As Tung’s wife is a Khmer, a school officer advised him that his mixed daughter could apply for a place in the Ethnic Boarding School if her ethnic identity was documented as ‘Khmer’ in her birth certificate. He and his family were very regretful that their daughter lost such great opportunity because they had selected ‘Kinh’ ethnic identity in their daughter’s birth certificate. However, thankfully, his sister-in-law, who was working in the district office, advised them that the law permits them to be able to change their daughter’s ethnic identity to ‘Khmer’ whenever they wanted as their mixed daughter could be ethnically identified as either ‘Kinh’ like her father’s identity or ‘Khmer’ like her mother’s identity, and not necessarily be ethnically identified with the father’s ethnic identity.

For his children’s benefit in education, Tung made changes in the ethnic ‘identity’ of not only his daughter but also his younger son. Labeled ‘Khmer’ ethnicity, his daughter and his son could enrol in the Ethnic Boarding School and received lots of benefit during seven years in secondary and high school. The ‘Khmer’ ethnic identity even brought them more benefits after they graduated from the Ethnic Boarding School. Even though failing in the University entrance examination, under the priority policy his daughter was selected to attend preparation study for one year in Ho Chi Minh Preparation University and subsequently selectively chosen to a Banking university without taking the entrance examination. His younger son was attending Ho Chi Minh Preparation University at the time of my field study.

When I further queried Tung whether he would have made these changes to his children’s official ethnicity if there was no special priority for Khmer people, Tung strongly determined that he certainly would not make these changes as children’s ethnicity should be traced to the ethnicity of their father. Even though his children have not been officially identified as ethnic ‘Kinh’, I did not see any regret from him as Tung quickly expressed his delight and satisfaction that:

‘Khmer’ ethnic identity brought so much good luck to my children. During one year in the Preparation University and four years in the university, my children were also exempt from paying school fees and received a monthly stipend. Without this supporting policy, it
would be very hard for my family to cover their school fees and the expensive living costs in a big city as our earnings from food selling were unstable.

His relaxed attitude toward his children’s official ethnicity as ‘Khmer’ can be explained by virtue of the fact that Tung did not fear losing his ‘Kinh’ ethnicity in the next generation as ‘Khmer’ is merely his children’s official ethnicity which brings them educational benefits. Their children, in reality, still belong to his kinship lineage as their children are assigned his surname and their names are vietnamized.

However, Lam, a Kinh migrant husband living with his Khmer wife’s family after their marriage in a Khmer-dominated rural area, seemed unsatisfied with his children’s ‘Khmer’ official ethnicity. Lam’s family was quite well off compared to surrounding Khmer neighbors as the couple earned a daily income from their small food trading in the local market and a seasonal income from rice farming. Even though they were wealthy enough to afford their children’s education, they still changed their children’s official ethnicity to ‘Khmer’ (as their mother was Khmer) when their children reached secondary school to maximize their children’s benefit.

While Lam was the person dealing with the official paperwork in changing his children’s official identity, Tam’s internal conflict was exposed when he said that his children’s ethnic identity must accord with his own Kinh ethnicity as children must belong to the same kin group as their father, emphasizing the importance of the patrilineal line of descent. His attitude revealed his internal conflict in identifying his children for pragmatic purposes and his actual desire to identify his children as belonging to his ethnicity.

It is interesting to look back at Linh’s attitude in selecting ethnic identity for her children. Informed by her bias toward Khmer people, I predicted she would select ‘Kinh’ ethnic identity to keep her high social status ethnicity for her children. Even though distinguishing clearly between ‘them’ (Khmers) and ‘us’ (Kinh), Linh consented to her husband identifying their children as ethnic Khmer. Asking for her reasons of her selection and why she did not select the higher prestige ethnic identity ‘Kinh’, Linh told me that:
Children must follow their father as they are of the same root. Their father is ‘Khmer’ so they must be ‘Khmer’. In addition, ‘Khmer’ ethnic identity would bring many benefits for their future education. We, of course, must select which ethnic identity will benefit our children most.

Linh’s concordance with the patrilineal system is clear from the excerpt above. In her opinion, similar to naming her children, it is a ‘must’ that her children share the same ethnic identity as their father to demonstrate their common root. However, it seems to me that the benefit that ‘Khmer’ ethnicity could bring to her children acts as a stronger determining factor in her decision-making. While Tung, who was low educated and had limited contact with state officers, was not aware of the state supporting policies toward the Khmer ethnic group, Linh, in contrast, was a high school teacher in a Khmer commune so she was aware of the benefits received by her Khmer students. More importantly, her Khmer husband, who was working in the communal office, received much support during his own education. He attended the An Giang Ethnic Boarding School and studied one year in the Ho Chi Minh Preparation School before starting his undergraduate study at An Giang University. During these years, he received not only financial support but also easier assessment in his schooling. With such huge benefits, there was no reason for Linh and Chuong to select ‘Kinh’ ethnic identity for their children. In this situation, Linh happily selected the ‘Khmer’ ethnic identity of ‘them’ for her children.

As discussed by Bernal and Knight (1993) that the community in which mixed children lived appeared to be a powerful determinant of their identity transmission, I assumed that Khmer-Kinh couples living in a Kinh-dominated area may select the high social status ‘Kinh’ ethnicity for their children to avoid discrimination and being treated as ‘different’ from the dominant Kinh community. The finding shows that except for Phong and Lin who were still arguing over naming and selecting the ethnicity for their daughter, and one other couple without children, all of the other couples I interviewed in Long Xuyen city, either with Kinh husband or Khmer husband, identified their children with Khmer ethnicity. It seems to me that the benefits gained from the ‘Khmer’ ethnicity outweighed the prestige of ‘Kinh’ ethnic identity.
Mrs. Thone, a female Khmer working in an office in Kinh-dominated Long Xuyen City, who I mentioned above, told me that being aware of the benefits of the ‘Khmer’ ethnic identity, she convinced her husband to select ‘Khmer’ ethnicity for their children. It seems that while going against the patriarchal system of the Kinh tradition which determines that children must follow their father is a difficult consideration, Thone persuaded her husband to identify their children as ethnic Khmer in order to be eligible for these educational benefits:

Knowing that our children could get many benefits with ‘Khmer’ ethnicity, I convinced my husband to keep my Khmer ethnicity for our children. My husband seemed uncomfortable with my suggestion but for our children’s benefit, he agreed to select my ‘Khmer’ ethnicity for our children.

In exploring the ethnicity option faced by Khmer-Kinh couples in identifying their children, the findings indicate that the foremost consideration of Khmer-Kinh couples in identifying their children is to retain the father’s ethnic identity, in accordance with the patrilineal kinship system. It appears that this patrilineal kinship system is so strong that it is not only practiced in endogamous Kinh-Kinh marriage but also in Khmer-Kinh marriage, regardless of the ethnicity of the husband. This finding has reinforced previous scholarly study that that sex of the male spouse in interethnic marriage is a significant determinant on the child’s ethnicity as the paternal line is chosen to determine their ancestry (Qian, 2004).

However, the dynamic character of ethnic identification was apparent when the couples became aware of the benefits their children could get from identifying as ‘Khmer’. For those couples who had identified their children from birth with the ‘Kinh’ ethnicity of their fathers, the parents were faced with a complex situation when their children went to school and took exams. These parents all changed their children’s ethnic identity to ‘Khmer’ to ease and maximize their children’s education. At this point, their children’s benefit was placed ahead of the patrilineal kinship system.

Nevertheless, the way that interethnic couples selected the ethnicity for their mixed children and the way that they named their children suggests a paradox. Couples vietnamize their children’s names to avoid potential stigmatization yet flag their children’s official
ethnicity with this low status group. Are there any risks associated with their children being officially identified as ‘Khmer’? Why do the couples not feel as strongly about official ethnic identification as they do about naming? It can be hypothesized that while a child’s name is recalled frequently in everyday speech, official ethnicity exists in a bureaucratic and administrative context only—so couples are not bothered by it. In general, the study interestingly shows that the ethnicity passed from one generation to the next in Khmer-Kinh families is not random but is a complicated social process of conscious choices and strategies, which is shaped by cultural and socioeconomic factors.

Conclusion

Dynamics and variation in the transmission of language, identity and heritage to the children have been found in Khmer-Kinh families. The study clearly shows all interviewed intermarried couples in this study encouraged their children to embrace both cultural identities and expressed support and expectation of their children’s multicultural capacity. Generally, by exploring how children acquire the language, the ways children are named and the ethnicity option for the children in thirty-five Kinh-Khmer families in three different ethnicity settings, this chapter sheds light that the identity and heritage transmission to these mixed children are not only decided by individual choices or the familial preferences but determined by several factors.

The study sheds light that the inferior social status of the Khmer minority group and the Kinh majority group’s dominance and prestige are not the sole factors determining the transmission of ethnic Khmer values to the mixed children. Several other factors including gender, socialization context and socioeconomic factors are also found to be significant determinants on the outcomes of identity and heritage transmission. The study highlights the importance of the surrounding social conditions and the chances of social interaction on children’s bilingualism. In addition, the gender of the minority parent is also found to be a determining factor in children’s language acquisition. Naming children and selecting ethnicity for children is a complex and lengthy process of consideration, discussion and negotiation involving the couples and their respective families, and which is significantly shaped by socioeconomic and practical benefit factors.
Chapter 8

Conclusion

8.1 Main Findings of the Study

The aim of this thesis has been to gain an understanding of the factors, circumstances, experiences and negotiations entailed in Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages in An Giang Province of Vietnam. The specific objectives of this thesis were first, to shed light on the obstacles that may impede marriage between these two ethnic groups and to describe the factors that make such marriages possible. Second, it aimed to explore the couples’ experiences of living with and negotiating the variety of differences that may pose challenges in such marriages. Finally, it hoped to explore if and how the couples transmit their ethnic identities to their children. In this section, I will present a number of the key findings that emerged in my exploration of these lines of inquiry.

Context, barriers and facilitating factors in Khmer-Kinh marriages

In exploring the agents, factors, and conditions that have a bearing on the formation of interethnic unions, Chapter two presented the distinct characteristics of the Mekong Delta, the background context where Kinh and Khmer reside. The Mekong Delta has been an ethnically plural and culturally blended society of Chinese, Cham, Khmer and Vietnamese since the eighteenth century. Its heterogeneous features are shaped not merely by the juxtaposition of ethnic groups but also by mutual interaction through economic tasks. In addition, apart from the outbreak of ethnic tensions at certain junctures in history, the experience of ethnic unity and cooperation between Vietnamese and Khmer in revolutionary struggles, nation-building initiatives, commerce and religious life also must be emphasized as key themes in regional history.

The study highlights many gaps and tensions between these two groups that might act as an impediment to their marriages. As related in Chapter three, the divide between these groups is substantive and multi-dimensional and the gaps between Khmer and Kinh groups
are very significant. Their disparity in socioeconomic status, especially in educational level, occupational sector and economic status, are significant barriers influencing the possibility of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage. Geographical separation and the tense historical relations between the two groups can be obstacles hindering Khmer and Kinh people from developing close relationships. In addition, the findings show that the legacy of historical tensions has led to the development of pejorative stereotypical judgments towards each other’s ethnic group, which further widen their distance and negatively affect their prospects for forming marital unions across the ethnic divide.

However, this type of marriage occurs and the existence of unions of this kind suggests that these above barriers are not strong enough to impede Khmer-Kinh intermarriages. The thesis has examined the significant factors and processes that have surmounted such gaps and barriers and have enabled Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages to take place. They include the modernization process, especially migration for education and work, which has bridged the geographical gap and facilitated the proximity of Khmer and Kinh people. In addition, state policies supporting ethnic minorities have helped to further close the socioeconomic gap between Kinh and Khmer groups. Frequent mutual interaction in combination with the state’s social integration policies and positive discrimination policies are factors that have helped to reduce the negative stereotypes Kinh and Khmer hold towards each other. This finding is consistent with the classical modernization hypothesis that contends that processes of bridging geographical, social, cultural and psychological divides between ethnic groups can facilitate interethnic marriages.

Original research involving a sample of thirty-five Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples illuminated various key aspects of their marriages. Chapter four dug deeply into the specific contexts and factors that have been conducive to the formation of marital unions across the ethnic divide between Khmer and Kinh ethnic groups in An Giang. This chapter sheds light on the complex factors and conditions inducing the incidence of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage. In line with the sociological literature about marriage markets (Kalmijn, 1998), three key contexts—the workplace, school setting and proximate residential areas—provide the most significant facilitating conditions for interethnic dating between young Kinh and Khmer people. The findings show that these three settings are the places where many
Khmer-Kinh couples first encounter each other and where romantic relationships between Kinh and Khmer respondents often have begun.

Furthermore, by focusing on subjective barriers to such marriages, the study highlights how individuals’ stereotypes toward each other’s ethnic group were broken down by frequent personal interaction and shows how the couples negotiated for parental consent towards their unions. The findings demonstrate the relevance of the homogamy theory (Kalmijn, 1991b) emphasizing the socioeconomic matching of couples as well as the exchange theory in which ‘Minority men are able to compensate for their lower “ethnic prestige” by offering white women a high occupational status and income’ (Kalmijn, 1998, p. 416). This study highlights that despite the significant socioeconomic divide between Kinh and Khmer ethnic groups, most Khmer-Kinh spouses are individually close in education or occupation. It also shows that in some cases, Khmer men exchange their high educational or occupational status for the higher ‘ethnic prestige’ of their educationally or occupationally lower-status spouses.

**Living with differences**

Considering that Khmer and Kinh spouses can have different expectations, behaviors and attitudes because they come from culturally different ethnic milieus, cultural clashes may arise in their conjugal life. In addition, Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples also may be heterogeneous in socioeconomic status. Because of these dissimilar expectations and socioeconomic disparities, I assumed tensions and conflicts may arise in Khmer-Kinh interethnic marital life. By examining the conjugal relationships of thirty-five interethnic Khmer-Kinh couples, I explored their marital circumstances to determine whether these marriages were indeed characterized by conflict, or whether love or other relevant considerations allowed these couples to overcome their differences and tensions. As such, I explored some of the significant factors affecting the quality of marital relations of interethnic Khmer-Kinh couples in Vietnam. In addition, the thesis also explored how Khmer-Kinh couples negotiate and adapt to the differences and resolve any conflicts that may occur in their marital life. By examining the adjustment and adaptation strategies of these Khmer-Kinh couples, the study has shed light on how these couples negotiate to overcome their differences. By looking at not only cultural differences but also class issues,
and social stereotypes, the findings uncover several sources of the conflicts arising in the marital life of Khmer-Kinh couples. The research highlights two core factors accounting for the problems:

Class disparity
Chapter five analyzed intensively the main factor accounting for the problems arising in the marital life of Khmer-Kinh couples. The findings highlight the influential factor of human capital (specifically knowledge and experience) in shaping the tension arising in their marital relationships because educational differences led to different attitudes and orientation of the partners. The findings highlight that individuals, who are high in education, normally value and appreciate their spouses’ different rituals. In addition, personal experience through exposure to cultural difference is also found to be a determining factor helping individuals cope with the different culture of their spouse. In addition, lack of understanding, intersecting with ethnic stereotypes, intensify the strains and tensions between the couples and their in-laws.

These findings are in line with previous research which found that education influences people’s values, making those with high education more open-minded and universalistic in outlook than people of lower education, allowing them to adapt well to different cultures and customs (Cohen, 1977; Kalmijn, 1998; Lee, 1988; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). The study is mostly consistent with previous studies which show that class difference is a common pitfall in intercultural marriage because people from different social backgrounds often have different behaviors and attitudes towards many things (Romano, 2008, p. 99). This finding has reaffirmed that class differences rather than cultural differences, or sometimes the intertwining of these factors, are the main factors causing tensions and dissatisfaction in interethnic couples (Bystydzienski, 2011; Rodríguez-García, 2006; Strauss, 1954).

Coping with cultural differences
Supporting my assumption that cultural clashes may occur in the marital life of Khmer and Kinh couples, this study highlights variation in the reasons for cultural conflict according to spousal characteristics and geographical location. The findings in Chapters five and six reveal that the adaptive challenges Khmer-Kinh couples encounter in interethnic marriages
often do not stem from ethnicity alone but to a certain extent may be related to the
differences in social customs and cultural expectations between urban and rural areas. This
finding is, nonetheless, of particular relevance to the quality of interethnic marriages per se,
for so many marriages of this kind do involve relations between individuals who come
from the widely differing societal contexts of the countryside and the city. In line with
Romano’s findings about intercultural marriage, to the effect that not all cultural conflicts
are related to differences in ethnicity (Romano, 2008), the study demonstrates that some
clashes stem from different cultural models of spousal relations, in particular the clash in
marital expectations between the extended-family model of rural society and the ideals of
educated and urbanized spouses. The findings highlight variation in the nature and intensity
of the cultural encounters associated with these marriages. Couples residing in rural Khmer
areas tend to encounter culturally and socially traditionalist expectations that may conflict
strongly with the expectations of urbanized and educated spouses and affect the quality of
their marital bond. By contrast, those spouses living in the comparatively more modern,
relaxed, and freer urban Kinh-dominated area reported fewer marital problems related to
cultural adjustment issues.

In addition, the findings also shed light on the differential capacity of spouses and their
families in coping with cultural differences. As a result of their schooling, intercultural
exchanges in their neighborhood, migration for study, or working close to the Kinh
community, most Khmer spouses in this study already had years of exposure to the
mainstream culture at some level at the time of their marriage. Having adapted to the
mainstream culture prior to their marriage, Khmer spouses are more capable than their Kinh
spouses in coping with the cultural differences between ethnic groups. However, their rural-
based family normally had little exposure to mainstream culture so some had serious
difficulties in relating to Kinh in-laws who settled among them. On the other hand, most
Kinh spouses (except for Kinh spouses who had lived close to the Khmer community or
migrated to Khmer-dominated areas prior their marriage) lacked Khmer cultural capital so
it was much harder for them in adjusting to their partners’ unfamiliar sociocultural setting.
But their Kinh families did not confront significant problems of cultural difference with
their children’s Khmer spouses because their Kinh in-laws tended to be highly culturally
adept at adjusting to the Kinh culture.
The study further shows that gender expectations and practical utility were also influential factors shaping the spouse’s capacity to cope with cultural and linguistic difference. In line with Sr Marie Tran Thi (1995), this study highlights that many Kinh wives are limited in second language acquisition because of the barrier of gender-based role expectations. Meanwhile, men are exposed to a wider range of social interactions, so Kinh husbands have more opportunities to learn to speak the Khmer language. In addition, the findings suggest that in some cases, the utility factor plays a stronger role than gender in shaping a spouse’s capacity to cope with the language barrier.

**Children’s identity**

Motivated to learn if the ethnic identity of the minority Khmers disappears and if their children are absorbed into the culture of the majority Kinh group, I explored in Chapter seven the transmission of ethnic identity to the children of such unions. The study highlights the dynamics and variation in the transmission of language, identity and heritage to the children in Khmer-Kinh families, suggesting that all interviewed intermarried couples in this study encouraged their children to embrace both cultural identities and that their children’s multicultural capacity is both desired and situationally shaped. By examining how the language is transmitted to children, the ways children are named, and the ethnicity option for the children in thirty-five Kinh-Khmer families in three different geographical settings, this study shows that identity and heritage transmission to these mixed children is decided not only by individual choices or familial preferences but is shaped by several other factors.

Challenging the argument by Gordon (1964) that interethnic unions inevitably lead to the assimilation of a minority group’s culture and heritage into the identity of the majority ethnic group, the study demonstrates that besides the substantial gap/disparity in the social status of the dominace and prestige of the Kinh majority group and the Khmer minority group’s inferior social status, gender and socialization context and socioeconomic factors are also substantial determinants shaping the dynamic process of transmission of identity and heritage to the mixed children. The findings highlight the significance of the context of social interaction and the gender of the minority parent on children’s bilingualism. It also
shows that naming children and selecting an official ethnicity for children involve a complex and lengthy process of deliberation and negotiation by the couples and their respective families, which are significantly shaped by socioeconomic and practical benefit factors.

8.2 Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

This thesis confirms that Khmer-Kinh intermarriage is possible and viable in contemporary Vietnam, contrasting with the common perception of elderly interlocutors who speak of the impossibility or undesirability of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages, and in contrast to contentions made in the French colonial period that intermarriages between these two groups never took place because of the social, cultural, moral and psychological gulf between them (Bouault (1930). This study contributes towards a better understanding of the complexities of the circumstances and experience of interethnic Khmer-Kinh marriage and the multiple negotiations in the marital journey of Khmer-Kinh couples. It sheds light on the obstacles—the memory of historical tensions, cultural stereotypes, and a wide socioeconomic gap—that impede marriage between these two ethnic groups, and unpacks the multiple factors that enable them to overcome such barriers and form marital unions. The findings also support Kalmijn’s conclusion (1991b) on the declining role of ascriptive status homogamy in mate selection and highlight the frequent presence of achieved status homogamy among husbands and wives. The account describes in detail the conjugal experiences of interethnic Khmer-Kinh couples and the multiple negotiations around a series of conflicts and tensions that are experienced by Khmer-Kinh couples. And finally, it demonstrates that identity transmission to their children also involves a dynamic process of negotiation between the couples under the influence of family, socialization practices, practical benefits, class and gender issues.

Challenging Gordon (1964) argument that in interethnic marriages the ethnic identity of the minority inevitably disappears and the minority is absorbed into the culture of the dominant group, this study supports Roer-Strier and Ezra (2006) in the contention that interethnic marriage involves mutual cultural adaptation, in which both minority and majority spouses have to make personal adjustments to cope with cultural differences. In addition, the
findings strongly support the study of Rodríguez-García (2006), which concluded that a combination of socioeconomic, situational and personal factors, intersecting with cultural differences, shape the dynamic process of sociocultural adaptation and transmission in interethnic families.

Offering what can be described as a generally positive portrait of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages in An Giang, the findings of this thesis have revealed that, regardless of the socioeconomic disparities and cultural differences between Khmer-Kinh couples, such unions are formed and that conflicts within them do not always arise. When tensions do arise, most of the couples in this study make multiple negotiations and adaptations to their differences that enable them to make their relationships last. Often it is not only commonality with respect to background, lifestyle and shared values that hold their marriage together but also flexibility, negotiation and mutual understanding. In other words negotiation and adaptation to differences are crucial in making these interethnic marriages possible and viable.

8.3 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is among the first attempts to explore the conjugal relationship of Khmer-Kinh couples and has many limitations. More research needs to be done in order to obtain better understanding in this field. Drawing on the strengths of the qualitative method, the study has been able to uncover key issues, experiences and factors from the perspective of couples in different circumstances, tease out cultural meanings, and examine experiences in social context but it is limited in its capacity to make generalizations about patterns and trends in the population at large. Owing to the small sample of participants examined in this study, it is impossible to ascertain if the experiences of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriage reported on here are representative of all such marriages. More research employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, and on a larger scale, is needed to determine the representativeness and significance of these initial findings about Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages.
Another limitation is the possibly unavoidable bias arising from the researcher’s urban Kinh female perspective. Being a Kinh spouse may have eased my explorations of Kinh interlocutors’ deep experiences and perspectives, but it may have hindered me from accessing Khmer people’s unvarnished perspectives on their Kinh spouses, since my Khmer interlocutors may have been reluctant to reveal critical attitudes or frustrations that may also have implicated me, a Kinh person myself. Another limitation in exploring subtleties in Khmer spouses’ perspectives was the language barrier. Given that all Khmer spouses in this study could communicate in Vietnamese, I was eager to communicate with them in Vietnamese. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that the Vietnamese vocabulary of some of my Khmer interlocutors may not have been rich enough to express or share the detailed nuances of their intimate life stories and my use of an interpreter did not necessarily help me to bridge the language gap in exploring such subtleties.

With respect to gender bias, the interviewer’s gender background helped to generate research questions and create rapport with female spouses but may have limited my ability to access the husband’s point of view. Even though I was aware of the barrier of my being female in approaching male interlocutors and despite the fact that I worked with a male assistant to build a close rapport with them, I felt the gender barrier still affected our conversations. Most of the male interlocutors were passionate in talking about their children but they seemed awkward sharing information on their interspousal challenges, and I believe they might have been more open to sharing with a male researcher over some drinks. I remember how awkward some male interlocutors were when we had conversations about their marital relationships. They rarely looked at me; they just looked at my male assistant or somewhere else, which makes me believe that my research findings are richer with respect to women’s perspectives and stories than male ones.

In addition, by exploring only intact Khmer-Kinh marriage, the thesis could shed light the tensions and strains arising from class and cultural clashes the Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples faced in their conjugal life and how these couples successfully adapted to and dealt with these strains to make their relationship last. However, the shortcoming of the thesis is the lack of attention to broken Khmer-Kinh marriage, so the findings just highlight
successful marital stories and are unable to address if class and cultural clashes arising in interethnic marriage are the main determinants making the relationship ended in separation.

Given that the processes of modernization I have referred to in this thesis may lead to an increasing number of Khmer-Kinh interethnic marriages, I hope that the present study will stimulate further investigation into this neglected area of cross-cultural research. A large group of young low-skilled Khmers has migrated to Ho Chi Minh and Binh Duong cities to work in factories and enterprises. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of them also have married with Kinh spouses in their migratory destinations and their social status and circumstances—which differ significantly from that of the Khmer migrants in Long Xuyen City—may be associated with different conjugal experiences that need further researching. Future research could be conducted with divorced Khmer-Kinh interethnic couples to explore if conflicts over ethnic-based cultural differences were the core factors inducing their separation. In addition, this research gives rise to questions as to how mixed children subjectively experience their multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-social status: issues which call for further investigation.
Appendices

Appendix 1. Population size of ten largest groups in Vietnam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Total population (person)</th>
<th>Male (person)</th>
<th>Female (person)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entire country</td>
<td>85,846,997</td>
<td>42,413,143</td>
<td>43,433,854</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>73,594,427</td>
<td>36,304,095</td>
<td>37,290,332</td>
<td>85.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tay</td>
<td>1,626,392</td>
<td>808,079</td>
<td>818,313</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>1,550,423</td>
<td>772,605</td>
<td>777,818</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muong</td>
<td>1,268,963</td>
<td>630,983</td>
<td>637,980</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>1,260,640</td>
<td>617,650</td>
<td>642,990</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoa</td>
<td>823,071</td>
<td>421,883</td>
<td>401,188</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nung</td>
<td>968,800</td>
<td>485,579</td>
<td>483,221</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mong</td>
<td>1,068,189</td>
<td>537,423</td>
<td>530,776</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dao</td>
<td>751,067</td>
<td>377,185</td>
<td>373,882</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gia Rai</td>
<td>411,275</td>
<td>201,905</td>
<td>209,370</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNFPA, 2011
### Appendix 2. Demographic characteristics of Interethnic Kinh-Khmer couples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Edu</td>
<td>Occu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Miner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Hired labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Miner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Miner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Construction worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Retailer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Construction worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Miner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>First Group</td>
<td>Second Group</td>
<td>Occupation 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>Uni</td>
<td>Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Construction worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Hired labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Sec</td>
<td>Retailer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Hired labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Hired labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Construction worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Uni</td>
<td>Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>Sec</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>Uni</td>
<td>Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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| 26 | Khmer | College Officer | Kinh | College Retailer | Mixed area |
| 27 | Khmer | High Officer    | Kinh | Sec No           | Mixed area |
| 28 | Khmer | Uni Officer     | Kinh | College Officer  | Mixed area |
| 29 | Kinh  | Sec Hired labor | Khmer No | Hired labor | Kinh dominated area |
| 30 | Kinh  | Sec Manual worker | Khmer High Teacher | Kinh dominated area |
| 31 | Kinh  | College Officer | Kharmer High Officer | Kinh dominated area |
| 32 | Khmer | Uni Officer     | Kinh High Manual worker | Kinh dominated area |
| 33 | Khmer | Uni Officer     | Kharmer Sec Manual worker | Kinh dominated area |
| 34 | Khmer | Uni Doctor      | Kinh High Retailer | Kinh dominated area |
| 35 | Khmer | Uni Officer     | Kinh Uni Officer | Kinh dominated area |
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http://www.unicef.org/vietnam/girls_education.html


