

Interethnic Relations – The Case of Khmer in Tra Vinh Province

Nguyen Thi Hue



Abstract: In Tra Vinh province where groups of ethnic living together for hundreds of years, the Khmer keep a major role in social development. With the aim of showing how strong of interethnic relations in here, this paper provides a review of ethnicity theory, in which ethnic study approaches are the focused. Besides analyzing primary documents of Khmer ethnic in Tra Vinh such as population, current living conditions, there are interviews to assess Khmer's opinions about interethnic relations. It is important to examine diversity in relation to living conditions that may influence how Khmer respond to the ethnic diversity within Tra Vinh context.

Index Terms: Ethnic, interethnic relations, Khmer, Tra Vinh

I. INTRODUCTION

Diversity brings both advantages and risks. In Tra Vinh context, it is a multicultural society based on peoples' living in harmony and peace. To see how currently the living conditions of ethnic people (Khmer), and their respond to the living diversity is necessary for the people themselves a strong attachment feeling to the land, policy makers and government leaders find the better approach for improving people's life.

II. CONTENT

1. Theoretical Background and Methods

Vietnamese perceptions of ethnicity, ethnic and nation, ethnic minority, internal/external ethnic relations, transnational ethnic relations are derived from ethnicity theories.

Ethnicity

The social group a person belongs to, and either identifies with or is identified with by others, as a result of a mix of cultural and other factors including language, diet, religion, ancestry, and physical features traditionally associated with race. Increasingly, the concept is being used synonymously with *race* but the trend is pragmatic rather than scientific.

Social relations are multi-dimensional. There can be a racial dimension alongside dimensions of class, gender, religion, ethnic origin, and so on. Kenneth Little (Kenneth Little, 1971) meant *race* as "the physical characteristics which distinguish, or supposedly distinguish one group of people from other groups in society", According to the Oxford English Dictionary

(<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/ethnic>), the expression "ethnic group" entered the English language in

1935 when Huxley, J. and A.C. Haddon recommended it as a substitute for one of the senses of the word *race*.

Ethnic minority group

According to Vietnamese anthropologists, the ethnic relations in Vietnam today are mainly: 1) The relationship between all ethnic groups with the nation - Socialist Vietnam; 2) Relationship between majority and minority groups; 3) The relationship among minorities within the country and abroad; and 4) Inter-ethnic relations, including: internal relations between people in the country and relationships with people of the same ethnic group and relatives abroad.

Vuong Xuan Tinh and Nguyen Van Minh (Vương Xuân Tinh và Nguyễn Văn Minh, 2009) when studying interethnic relations in the Northern Uplands, North Central Coast, Central Highlands, and Southwestern regions, explore the relationship among ethnic groups with the political and political system and ethnic-national system.

There are four main theoretical approaches that underpin the study of ethnicity. The evolution of these approaches is closely linked to the development of theories underpinning thought in the social sciences: from cultural evolutionism, through structural functionalism, to conflict theories, and postmodernism (Wan, E. and Vanderwerf, M., 2009). A number of key debates run through these four areas. The key idea is how to integrate the social and psychological dimensions of ethnicity, the importance attached to the cultural 'content' of ethnic identity, and the relationship between the state and ethnicity.

The primordialist approach to ethnicity

By the 1970s ethnic studies based on the primordialist (<https://bulletin.ids.ac.uk/index.php/idsbo/article/view/2722/html>) were popular. Ethnic identity is recognized as innate, stable and permanent. Each individual born into an ethnic or 'tribal' group - the term often used until the 1970s - is considered a culturally defined unit. This led to later tribes and ethnic groups being classified according to aspects of their material culture in addition to biological and territorial characteristics. The primordialists imply that ethnic identity serves the basic human need for a sense of belonging. Basic cultural differences and distinct values among ethnic groups inevitably lead to a 'cross-cultural clash' and the rise of ethnic violence.

The instrumentalist approach to ethnicity

Barth (Barth, Fredrik, ed, 1969a.) disagrees with primordialist theorists. He argued that ethnic groups are distinct units with innate cultural characteristics. Instead of focusing on the cultural characteristics of ethnic groups, he believes that individuals self-selectively select forms of cultural difference that are important to them. Maintaining ethnic boundaries occurs through the interaction between 'us' and 'them' on a group boundary.

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Moreover, the cultural characteristics drawn in this interaction are not fixed; They are determined by situation. In this way, Barth emphasizes the relational, interactive and situational characteristics of the ethnicity. The Manchester School sees the primary function of ethnicity as an informal political organization. The academic works of Barth and the Manchester School have brought about a fundamental change in the theoretical foundations of anthropology. Their research is at the heart of the critique of structural function, promoting anthropological change from tribal analysis as a social structural unit to a process of social organization.

The materialist approach to ethnicity

The materialistic approach considers ethnicity to be a form, or outcome, of class relations. Violence between ethnic groups is due to economic inequality and intellectual exploitation. Marx argues that the importance of nation, religion, and race will diminish with the development of capitalism (a modern socio-economic system). In his vision of the modern world, there is no place for ethnicity. Nationalism was seen as a reactionary force, an ideological weapon to maintain the social, political and economic domination of the capitalist class (Tiskhov, Valery, 1997a). The exploited working classes are concerned with local particularisms and nationalism by uniting into an international working class.

The constructionist approach to ethnicity

The focus of the constructionist theory (Dodeye Uduak Williams, March 2015) drawn from instrumentalist theory, is formed from social life. However, unlike the concept of the instrumentalist theory, the ethnic was 'built' and implemented continuously through social interaction, between the upper classes and the common people. This approach has initiated a change from what is the concept of ethnicity to the process of ethnic formation. Constructionist theory holds that the formation or dispersion of a cultural system essentially leads to ethnic differences. However, such arguments have received criticism for being quite in contrast to the primordialists when describing culture as a constant central force for ethnic grouping. Relating to ethnic conflicts, constructive theories see whether the conflict target comes from nature. They cannot explain the diversity and extent of ethnic violence globally. When theorizing about ethnic conflicts, these constructionists argue that modernization can lead to ethnic conflicts. They mention that modernization leads to 'convergence of aspirations,' which explains why ethnic conflicts occur.

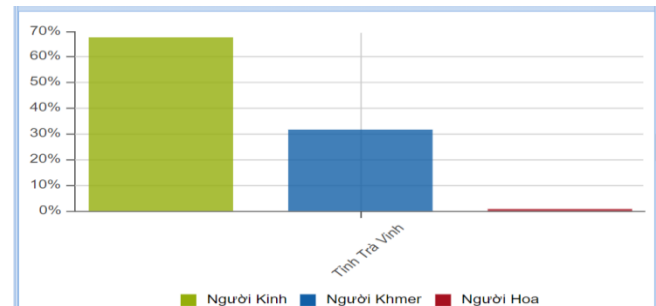
Attachment theory (Inge Bretherton, 1992): English psychologist John Bowlby (1907-1990) considered the first person to bring the concept of "attachment" into psychology. Attachment is defined by him as sustainable psychological connections between people. Attachment is described as a lasting psychological connection with a significant person. This causes pleasure while interacting and calming up stressful times. The quality of attachment has an important impact on development and has been linked to various aspects of positive function, such as psychological health.

Interdependence theory (Van Lange, P. A. M., Rusbult, C. E., Drigotas, S. M., Arriaga, X. B., Witcher, B. S., & Cox, C. L., 1997): in order to maintain their personal relationships over the long term, individuals may find it necessary to forgo behaving in a selfish manner over the short term.

Resource exchange theory (Foa, U. G., & Foa, E. B., (1974): The give and take or reciprocity of tangible resources (i.e., money, goods, services, and information) is characteristic of impersonal and personal relationships, whereas the reciprocity of intangible resources (i.e., affection and respect) is generally limited to personal relationships.

2. Ethnic Khmer in Tra Vinh

Tra Vinh is a coastal province in the Mekong Delta region between Tien and Hau rivers. The natural area is 2,341 square kilometers. There are three main ethnic groups being the Kinh, Khmer, Chinese; of which the Khmer ethnic group accounts for 31.5% of the provincial population, with more than 320,000 people.



Graph 1. Ethnic population in Tra Vinh (Vietnamese, Chinese and Khmer). Source: Tra Vinh Statistics, 2017.

The green block shows the Kinh (Viet) population, blue one is for the Khmer and red one is for Chinese). The majority is the Kinh (approximately 70%); over 30% are Khmer and Chinese are very minor. Tra Vinh is one of largest Khmer population provinces in Vietnam.

Generally, Tra Vinh people are good representatives of southern culture, influenced by Khmer culture and Theravada Buddhism so they are gentle and simple. Life is not rich, but they are not pursuing much, are easily satisfied with life and always feel happy. And due to the similar cultural and religious traditions of the Theravada, the people here are known to be close with Lao and Cambodia people. Khmer ethnic often congregate on high mounds (Khmer call phum) into settlements and organize them into autonomous social units, with two institutions: phum and srok. Theravada Buddhism has long had an important place in Khmer life. It not only affects the culture, psychology and practice but also governs the traditional social management structure of the Khmer. At each srok, there is a Khmer pagoda built in high places, usually in the middle of a small forest of star trees, surrounded by families who are also close to the residence of the resident community. The pagoda is the most important architectural complex in the residence area of the Khmer. It is a center of religious, cultural and social activities, a place where preserves and transmits cultural values passed from generation to generation.



In Vietnam, ethnic relations are areas of great interest to the Communist Party and the Government. Therefore, in the struggle to liberate the nation and protect the country, the ethnic minorities have stood side by side with the majority, making great contributions. When entering the period of national construction, carrying out the process of industrialization and modernization, the policies of the Party and the Government have focused on the solidarity, equality and mutual assistance among the peoples.

How Khmer are differently to other people? Do these differences still make sense in today living? The interethnic relations are becoming positive in which aspects? What do Khmer think about the impact of cultural diversity to their life?

As a cultural identity, ethnic Khmer in Tra Vinh show their own traits. Culture creates the identity of the Khmer. An illustration of this is the system of 143 pagodas in Tra Vinh province, respectively, formed and maintained. The temple maintenance team must first mention the monks, the temple management and especially the Buddhist people. Rituals and ceremonies are performed every day, albeit alternating with Chinese or Vietnamese.

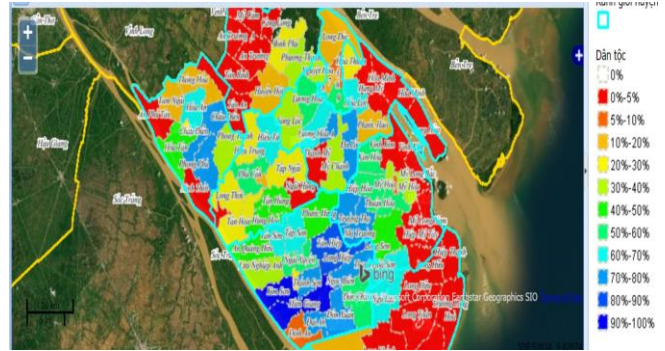
It is hard to tell the physical appearance between ethnic groups in Tra Vinh. Because of sharing neighborhood, their daily routines, eating habits become similar. In a certain way, only culture (religious practices) is the Khmer's identity.

In such context of ethnic groups living together, even though they have different origins, their ethnic diversity is heading towards a harmony. It is difficult to say that this is an integration because more or less they still have very specific religious practices. It is worth noting that the three main ethnic groups in Tra Vinh are all the same religion: Buddhism.

The theory of derivatives resulting from mixed ethnic groups is needed, and in particular, these ethnic groups are friendly and side by side. State guidelines, policies and guidelines always draw them together into a strong pool in the sense of each ethnic's unique identity.

The context of Khmer Tra Vinh is hard to tell due to differences in class or social differentiation, but the difference in ethnic nature is mainly due to the differences in daily living habits and languages. It can be said that the Khmer ethnic group originated from ancient Cambodia, but after coming to the South of Vietnam to live in, adapting to life with other ethnic groups such as Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham in the South, in general and Tra Vinh in particular, has formed a very separate ethnic Khmer of Vietnam, bringing more color to the multi-ethnic picture in Vietnam.

The map (Nguyen Thi Hue, 2017) below shows the Khmer density in Tra Vinh province. The density of Khmer ethnic people in Tra Vinh is mapped through colors of increasing from red to dark blue. Looking at the distribution map of the Khmer ethnic group in Tra Vinh province, people live intertwined with each other, there is only one small concentrated area of Khmer people (the corner along the Southwest River, bordering Soc Trang province).



Map of Khmer distribution in Tra Vinh.

Source: The result of "Tra Vinh's ethnic peoples and languages mapping" research of Tra Vinh University in 2017.

3. The survey

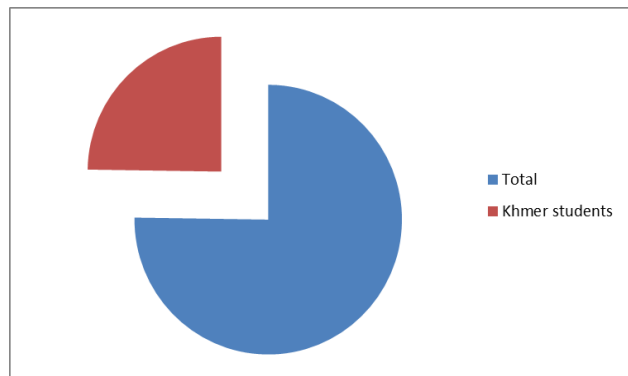
120 Khmer adults at any gender aged 45-50 are interviewed. They come from many different professions, from intellectuals to farmers, from urban to rural areas. They are selected randomly in river markets or in provincial supermarkets. They are invited to tea in a corner of the room, filling out the questionnaire. All information provided is confidential for their safety reasons and respects individual rights.

4. Some discussions

There are strong interethnic relations of Khmer Tra Vinh to others. These relations are demonstrated with the degree of their integration to the society.

Schooling

According to Report (Tra Vinh Department of Education and Training, 2018) No. 544/BC-SGDĐT dated November 1, 2017 of the Department of Education and Training of Tra Vinh, the school year 2017-2018 has 204,001 pupils, of which Khmer are 67,139 (32.9%) from primary to senior high schools throughout the province. Besides boarding ethnic school models where majority are Khmers, the other schooling institutions are well-mixed with ethnic groups in Tra Vinh and the region as well.



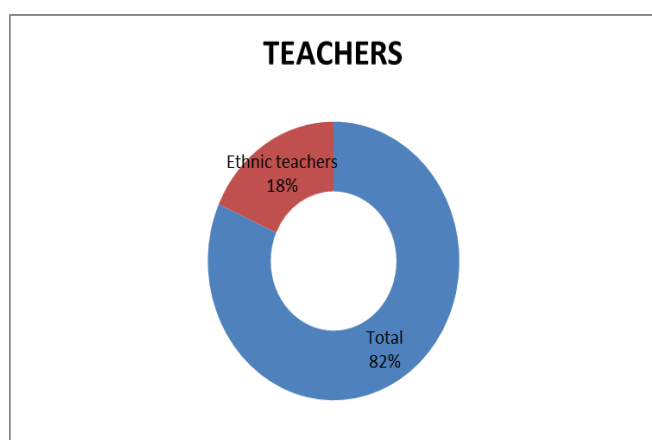
Graph 2. Khmer students in Tra Vinh.

Source: Tra Vinh Education and Training Department's annual report, schoolyear 2017-2018

The ethnic mixing classes seem popular here. Even though there are schools for ethnic students only, the Khmer parents are free to make their selection of school to send their children to. This explains the reason why Khmer language, culture becomes popular in Tra Vinh. Because of close contact from childhood, relationships between Khmer and Kinh people get stronger and firm.

Teachers

As educators of children's knowledge, skills, and attitudes, teachers are important and decisive in training people. In Tra Vinh, nearly 20% of teachers at all levels are Khmer. Not to mention, the monks are teachers of Khmer speech, writing and culture in almost all pagodas in Tra Vinh for local children nearby. It can be said that the large number of Khmer teachers in the public school system in Tra Vinh shows the attachment in the trust and respect status of the government and the local people here.

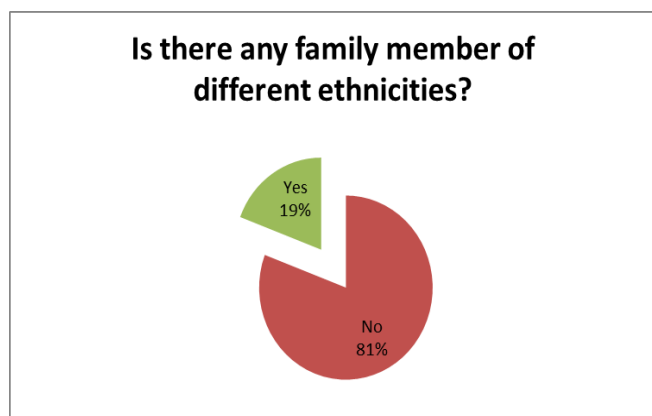


Graph 3. Khmer teachers in Tra Vinh.

Source: Tra Vinh Education and Training Department's annual report, schoolyear 2018-2019

Interviews

Is there any family member of different ethnicities: The obvious expression is the marriage relationship among ethnic groups. Living together, the neighbors are close by daily, so easily is leading to marriage between the ethnic groups here. Survey results in Tra Vinh noted that 19% of Khmer households now have non-ethnic family members.

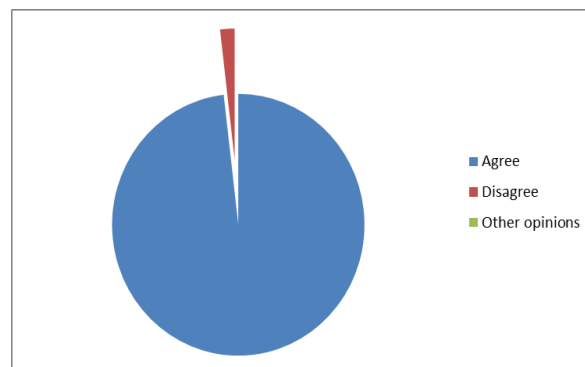


Graph 4. Number of Khmer whose have non-ethnic family members

Source: Khmer people survey in 2019

The real answer is the initial judgment because it is difficult to identify the origin of the people here. The history of the process of living together from the reclamation of the land to experiencing the ups and downs of life (the impact of politics, economy).

Descendants and relatives get married to people of different ethnicities: Interview on thoughts about marriage of descendants and relatives. The Khmer Tra Vinh people almost fully support the marriage between ethnic groups.



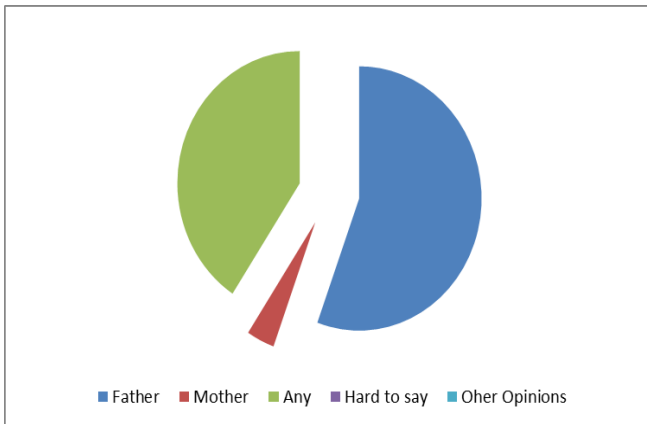
Graph 5. Khmer's opinion on partner's ethnicity

Source: Khmer people survey in 2019

Whose last name do the children need to follow?

Surname for your children and grandchildren depends on the cultural characteristics of each ethnic group. Vietnamese as well as Chinese consciously maintain their ancestral lineage, children are obligated to follow fathers. The notion of Chinese and Vietnamese culture is that the son is the one who can manage the generations, so they prefer sons to girls. Even the wife is willing to find another woman for her husband to give birth to a son. Khmer culture is different. Traditionally, the Khmer follow matriarchy. Women are the bearers and decision makers. So there may be a thought that the children will take their mother's surname. However, in the 1950s, Ngo Dinh Diem advocated grouping of the Khmer based on their place of living. Specifically, families such as Chau and Neang concentrated to reside in An Giang, Son, Kim, Thach concentrated to reside in Tra Vinh, and Danh concentrated to reside in Kien Giang ... It will make ease for the anthropological identification according to residence. However, it actually disturbs the cultural aspect of surname to their children when they are born. So far, the family name for the descendants of the Khmer is quite lackluster. They have different tendencies for choosing them as follows: 56% choose to follow a surname, due to the influence of the Chinese and Vietnamese. 41% had no choice. The surname should follow the father or the mother ... they don't care. A phenomenon is gradually popular in Khmer Tra Vinh today is the surname of the child is also the firstname of the father. For example, the father's full name is Thach Set, the full name of the child is Set Sophany.





Graph 6. Khmer's opinion on children's last name
Source: Khmer people survey in 2019

III. CONCLUSION

It is difficult to think of ethnic conflict from the interethnic relations in Tra Vinh from the Khmer perspective. They lead a peaceful and close life with other ethnic groups as illustrated by their choice of spouse's ethnicity, surnames. Especially, education shows the great interrelation between Khmer and other people. The number of classes in which Khmer students can get in vary from school to school, from place to place. Also, parents seem no care about ethnicity of their children's teachers.

In addition, the government and other ethnic groups respect and cherish them, namely students in the same class, teachers who are Khmer, and especially living in neighboring areas. The Khmer themselves also have no thought to make a difference in ethnic groups. Ethnicity in Tra Vinh promises the prospects for long-term and sustainable relationships.

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