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Cultural practices of the Khmer in Binh Duong - Historical particularism approach

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, Binh Duong has 2.885 the Khmer people, being the second largest ethnic minority compared to the Hoa people. They have contributed to the multi-ethnic culture of Binh Duong. Hundreds of works on the Khmer in the Mekong Delta considered their culture as a typical of Theravada Buddhist culture in Vietnam but this proposition is not suitable for the Khmer community in An Binh, Phu giao district who is this object of this study. By qualitative data sources from in-depth interviews, participant observations and approach to the historical particularism, this study documented the cultural characteristics of the Khmer in An Binh and analyzed the factors that make culture of the Khmer in An Binh different from the culture of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta. Natural conditions and socio-historical context make the cultural practices of the Khmer in An Binh more similar to the culture of the ethnic groups in the Central Highlands than the Khmer culture in the Mekong delta, especially, customs and folk beliefs.

Key words: *the Khmer culture, the Khmer in Binh Duong, cultural practices*

1. Introduction

According to statistics of the Chamber of Ethnic Minorities - People's Committee of Binh Duong Province (2014), Binh Duong has 2,885 Khmer people living in all districts and cities of Binh Duong. The largest is in Phu Giao district, 301 households (1,160 people), Dau Tieng has 232 households (587 people), Ben Cat has 94 households (364 people),

Thu Dau Mot has 232 households (336 people), Tan Uyen: 112 households (200 people), Di An: 34 households (137 people) (Phuong Chi, 2015). In particular, the Khmer has lived in Phu Giao since 1960, the main livelihood is agriculture while the Khmer of other districts are mostly immigrants from the Mekong Delta in recent years earn by non-agricultural jobs (workers, unskilled workers). The residential origin, the environment and the livelihoods are different, it can be assumed that the culture of these two Khmer groups is different. Despite hundreds of works on the Khmer in the Mekong delta (Mười, 2017, p.31) there isn't intensive research on the Khmer culture in An Binh. This article derived from the results of the basic research project "*the Khmer in An Binh commune, Phu Giao district, Binh Duong province*".

Having based on the proposition of historical particularism of Franz Boas (1858-1942) "Socio-cultural elements are results of the historical development and interaction between people and the environment of that society" the study identified, analyzed and interpreted the cultural practices of the Khmer in An Binh on two issues: (1) *The effect of historical context on residence's space and model of the community*; (2) *natural environment has shaped cultural practices of the community*.

2. Literature review

The fifth largest ethnic minority in Vietnam, almost living in the Mekong Delta in the 8th century (Mười, 2017, p.25), the Khmer is interesting to many researchers. Vũ Đình Mười divided the works into two stages: before 1975 there were not many studies on the Khmer but after 1986, it had more than 100 studies: 21 projects, 67 articles, 16 dissertation. Based on the research topic, there are 15 general studies, 47 monographs on spiritual culture, 11 studies on tangible culture, 20 studies related to cultural and social issues, 6 studies on economics, and 4 studies on policies for the Khmer (Mười, 2017, p.31).

While works on the Khmer in the Mekong Delta are extremely diverse and plentiful, the studies on the Khmer in Binh Duong are not much. At the late nineteenth century, the book *Gia Định thành thông chí* of Trịnh Hoài Đức (published in the reign of Gia Long King) only mentioned the residence of the Khmer in Gia Định (including a part of Binh Duong province today) was called Cao Mien but there was no description of the Khmer culture. The author named ethnic minorities living in highland areas as Cao Mien and Do Ba (Cao Mien is Khmer) (Đức, 2008, p.194). In the early twentieth century, the *Monographie de la province Thudaumot* (1910) mentioned the residence of the Khmer in the North of Thu Dau Mot province without further description (Đăng, 1987, p.217).

In the middle of the twentieth century, In *Le fameux Song Be*, André Baudrit also mentioned that the Kmers (André Baudrit's word) were in Song Be region, but not to

present to the Khmer culture as he described the cultures of Stieng and M'ngong people (André Baudrit, 1936, p.20).

In the book *Vấn đề dân tộc ở Sông Bé [Ethnic issues in Song Be]* edited by Mạc Đường (1985) and *Địa chí Sông Bé [Song Be Geography]* (1987) edited by Trần Bạch Đằng accounted history, culture, economy, governance, marriage, family and migration of ethnic minorities in Song Be. The authors cited Raulin's work which said that it appeared a Khmer village in Nha Bich in 1875. The work also addressed governance system including *phum*, *sóc*. The Khmer society was underdeveloped and the small landlord class played a dominant role in countryside. Before the twentieth century, the Khmer played a major role in the circulation and distribution of goods in ethnic minority communities. This was the earliest work of Vietnamese ethnologist presenting the Khmer in Binh Duong (at that time was Song Be province).

At present, there are not much works on the Khmer in Binh Duong except studies of researchers Lê Anh Vũ and Đỗ Thanh. Đỗ Thanh studied the Khmer community in An Binh, Phu Giao district They came from Binh Long because of the Saigon Republic Regime's hamlet strategy policy in 1960. They were descendants of the Khmer from Nha Bich. Her papers "*Studying on Khmer culture in An Binh, Phu Giao district; "Life cycle ritual of the Khmer in An Binh, Phu Giao district"* described and analyzed traditional cultural life of the Khmer. In the past, the Khmer earned their living by shifting cultivation so their culture were similar to that of ethnic groups in the Central Highlands.

Meanwhile, Lê Anh Vũ is interested in studying the livelihoods, causes of migration and the adaptation of the Khmer from Mekong Delta who are Theravada Buddhist. His studies are "*Supporting livelihoods for migrant Khmer laborers in Binh Duong*", "*Causes which the Khmer from Tra Vinh migrated to Binh Duong*"; "*Adapting to the present life and expecting the future of Khmer workers in Binh Duong*".

Two authors with different research approaches have shown that it has two different Khmer community in Binh Duong. Above studies provided an idea for this research.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. The effect of historical context on residence's space and model of the community

"Historical context refers to the social, religious, economic, and political conditions that existed during a certain time and place." (<https://www.thoughtco.com>). The Khmer in An Binh underwent four major historical events that led to changes in space and pattern of residence. First, 132 years ago (1887) the Khmer who participated in the patriotic movement led by the monk *Pu Cum Bo* failed (he cooperated with the patriotic Truong Quyen in the Can Vuong movement in 1866) in fighting against the Cambodian feudalism's surrender to the French colonialists forced to leave Cambodia and settled in

Loc Ninh forest, two sides of Vietnam – Cambodia border (Đặng, 1987, p.284-285). Initially, in order to avoid conflict with indigenous people in the Vietnam-Cambodia border, the Khmer settled in the forest and exploited jungle resources for their subsistence. They tended to choose offshoot forests, bamboo fields along streams to set up cottages and cultivated because soil were fertile, and had water resource for living and cultivating.

When agriculture techniques were still rudimentary, people completely depended on weather and the fertility of soil, it had only a crop for a year. In the first two years, the fertile soil, people cultivated the rice. From the third year, soil was less fertile, they cultivated maize or bean. After three or four crops, the people left the exhausted soil and found new fertile soil to cultivate. After many years of deserting, the exhausted soil became fertile (when the plants overgrew) villagers returned to reclaim and cultivate. During this period, the land was wide but sparsely populated, the Khmer divided land into four functions: arable land, residential land, forbidden land (in riverhead areas, forest of high trees), cemetery land for "ancestors". there were still many wild beast in the forest, they had better set up cottages on stilts.

Kim N recounted how the Khmer set up cottages on stilts when they lived in the forest “in the past, the forest was full of fierce wild beast, people had to set up cottages amidst big bamboo bushes, outer bamboo trees were fences protecting people from fierce wild beast” (Kim N, May 2017). He also recounted how the people settled in new place:

“When arriving at the new place, the head of clan would choose the big bamboo bushes, cut down bamboos in the middle of the bush, took their upper trunks and weaved them into a mat to make the floor. The cottage roofed by *Trung quân* leaves, 2 meter high and very sturdy. The outside bamboo were left as fences. Thus, the Khmer had a rational way of making houses, taking full advantage of available leaves and trees in the forest for building cottages, avoiding wild beasts. The house was structured like a high, firm and safe "cave".

Living in the forest, people needed to support each other to survive, the smallest residence unit was maternal line clan, they lived together on the one roof. The whole village had a few roofs. They lived, worked together without their own property.

Before the French colonial period, the Khmer lived in forests, had almost no relations with other communities and were not controlled by the colonial regime. During the French colonial period, French soldiers called for the support of the Khmer against the Viet Minh but the Khmer didn't support them and tried to escape from them. However, the Khmer supported the revolution, most of them followed Viet Minh. The colonial regime wanted to prevent the Khmer from contacting with Viet Minh so the government

issued a decree to gather people into controlled villages. The French soldiers burnt all the cottages, killed buffaloes and cows, forced the Khmer to leave the forest to live in An Binh village (now is Tan Lap commune, Dong Phu district, Binh Phuoc province) in 1936. At that time, the residence of the Khmer was separated from the forest but the distance from the house to the cultivation land was not very far (about 1-2 km) from residence areas. The Khmer still lived in stilted cottages. The village patriarch played an important role in choosing residence area of the villagers. The chosen site must be a slightly flat place to avoid flooding in the rainy season. According to the memory of a Khmer, the erection of a traditional stilt house must be done step by step, it cannot be different “The village patriarch worshiped Genies by seven rice grains, three betel leaves and three incense sticks. After burning incense, put rice grains, betel leaves on banana leaves, then covering them by a bowl. Next morning, if everything was still there, the village patriarch decided to erect cottages on this site, otherwise, he had to find another location” (Kim N, June 2018). The distance between the stilt cottages were not too far that ensured villagers could contact and help each other. This residence pattern existed until 1960.

We can know the Khmer traditional stilt houses in the highlands (different from the stilt houses of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta) through the remaining the Khmer’s houses in Binh Phuoc today.

A Khmer traditional stilt house had three compartments including: The innermost corner used to contain agricultural products; two sides were descendants' rooms – in the West (sunset); the madhouse was parents’ room that showed the respect for senior members of the family. Under the floor was a place for daily essential items and working tools. Especially, the Khmer didn’t cook in main stilt houses like other ethnic groups they cooked in separate compartment to prevent smoke from blackening the main house.

When living in forest and in An Binh village (before 1959), the Khmer lived in extended families of blood and marriage relations. A man resided in his family wife's house after marriage, the youngest daughter stayed with her parents. Besides, mother’s siblings also resided by her side, so the village had their families. In other words, the blood and marriage relations belonged to women, their younger sisters and their daughters. According to Phan An “Initially, *phum*” (village) was a residence of families related by blood and marriage but later, families from other places migrated, they were not relatives” (See Nguyễn Khắc Càng, 1997, p. 53)

At the end of 1959, the political situation was increasingly detrimental to the Saigon Regime because the Khmer supported the liberation forces of South Vietnam so the Regime implemented the strategy hamlet to “Prevent the Khmer from contacting with Vietnamese communist”. The Regime forced the Khmer to leave their hometown to leave in Phu giao.

“Before immigrating to Phu Giao, the elderly held a meeting to choose a new place to immigrate. Among those people were Mr. Nguu Tho, Nguu Tuc who had practical experience of Phu Giao commune (they had participated in the French anti- resistance) decided to choose the area of today's Nuoc Vang hamlet to settle because this area had streams, pond, flat land. It was advantageous to cultivate. After this meeting, the all villagers (there were 20 households with about 200 people) moved their houses and cattle to a new place – Phu Giao commune (Nguru Ng, 2018).

Nguu Ng remembered that the villagers moved from An Binh to Phu Giao by ox carts or buffalo carts for many days. But Kim T. said a Kinh household (had a truck) transported cattle, utensils, materials for house construction from An Binh to Phu Giao. Any family without money could pay later (Kim T, 2018). Arriving Phu Giao, they settled down the desert land along the provincial road (DT 741 today, Nuoc Vang and Tan Thinh hamlets today). The government granted 1,600 m² to each household for housing. Around the residential area was 2 meter-high embankment (there are still some traces of this embankment), having four guard posts on four sides to control the people to ensure the communists did not reach the people.

Nguu Ng said that the beginning days from An Binh village (now Tan Lap commune, Dong Phu district), moved to Phu Giao (nowadays An Binh commune), the villagers felt too stifled, because they lived in a strategic hamlet, and were strictly controlled the time of entry and exit, the entrance opened at 5 AM and closed at 4 PM. Gradually they get used to this lifestyle, went out to work in the daytime, returned home at afternoon. Most of those 20 households have lived here now.

During the period 1960 -1975, the Khmer lived in concentrated areas and houses away from the cultivation areas. For policy granting cultivation land for nuclear family, extended families dissolved and nuclear families emerged. The first 5 years in Phu Giao, people lived in stilt houses then in ground houses. Each household was granted 1,600 m² of land, it was enough for growing fruit trees and vegetables to improve daily meals.

In 1978, the government of Binh Duong province decided to use the name of former An Binh village to name of the new commune in Phu Giao (separated from Phuoc Sang commune) – An Binh commune, where the Khmer community from the former An Binh village have lived.

Since 1975, the residence form of the Khmer have not changed and lived at the land granted by the Saigon government (except for a few poor households, they sold apart). Nowadays, the Khmer is still cohesive community in Tan Thinh hamlet (164 households) Nuoc Vang hamlet (46 households). Their houses have been built on two sides of streets. Around the houses they have grown fruit trees or vegetables to improve the meal or rubber trees to get income.

Having observed the houses of Nguu Ng, Kim N, Niu B, Kim Th it can be assumed that these houses' architect are not different from the Kinh's ones. The houses built in a modern style, roofing with tiles or iron sheet, brick walls. Around the houses surrounded by fences, iron gates. The area around the house is exactly the same as when they first settled in An Binh (1,600 m²). In addition, each household also has other arable land, can be far from the house (more than 10 km away) that they reclaimed. Nowadays, the residence and the cultivated areas are completely separated. Nuclear family replaces extended family. When children married, parents often share the apart of family's land for their children.

Kim N assumed forest disappeared in 1994, the Khmer no longer live and cultivate in forest, but live on two sides of roads. They integrate into the overall society together with the Kinh. A study of Nguyễn Khắc Cảnh on the Khmer in Mekong Delta assumed "the Khmer traditional residence was popular in the 17- 19th century but it is now no longer dominant "(Cảnh, 1997, p.44). It is more and more common for the Khmer to live with the Kinh in a village. In Tan Thinh, Nuoc Vang hamlets where the Khmer live concentrative it is difficult to distinguish between the Kinh's houses and the Khmer's one because tools such as baskets (*gùi*), hole stick to sow, bamboo tubes containing seeds that make it easy to recognize the Khmer houses are no longer used. Before 1975 the Khmer lived in extended matrilineage families in the forest into a nuclear but nowadays they live in nuclear – families in town where is more comfortable, having electricity, asphalted roads, schools, health care center so their lifestyle has changed dramatically.

In June 2018, An Binh commune had 265 Khmer households (1035 people): Tan Thinh hamlet (164 households), Nuoc Vang hamlet (46 households) – on the land which they were allocated in 1960. In addition, the Khmer descendants live in Binh Thang, Binh Tien, Dong Sen, Ca Na, Cay Cam, Binh Hoa, Rach Cham, Bau Tru hamlets which were reclaimed recently (Report of the People's Committee of An Binh Commune, 2017). Nowadays, In An Binh commune, the Khmer ranks third in population of Binh Duong (less than Kinh and Hoa people).

The process of migration and settlement, along with living environment changes, the Khmer community today in An Binh is much different from the Khmer in three centuries ago and also different from the Khmer in Mekong delta on economic, cultural, social aspects which will be presented following:

Three major factors: (1) the failure of the resistance against the feudal government in the Cambodia; (2) the policy 1939 of the French colonial government which forced people to leave their cottages in forest to live concentrated villages to prevent the Khmer contacting with the Viet Minh soldiers; (3) the establishing of strategy hamlet of Saigon regime in 1960 changed the residence habits of the Khmer: Giving up nomadism to settle down in a concentrated village far from forest. The extended family living in

the stilted houses in the forest has been replaced with the nuclear family in the ground houses located along sides of the road that is convenient for transportation. The historical events mentioned above have completely changed the space and residence patterns of Khmer residents.

3.2. Natural environment has shaped cultural practices of the community

Culture can be understood as systems by which people interpret the world around them. These meanings and interpretations are most diverse in their linkages to the natural world, with the most conspicuous links often found in traditional resource-dependent communities (<https://www.resurgence.org>). Nature and culture converge in many ways that span values, beliefs and norms to practices, livelihoods, knowledge and languages. As a result, there exists a mutual feedback between cultural systems and the environment, with a shift in one often leading to a change in the other (<https://www.resurgence.org>).

Belief and worldviews

When science and technology weren't developed, people's livelihoods depended on nature, their beliefs and worldview imprinted nature.

Before 1939, the traditional residence space of the Khmer was forests and they relied on forests to survive, and natural phenomena had an impact on human life that's the reason they believed in animism. Gods dominated every aspect of life, they were the Gods of Fire, Forest, Mountain, River and Household. When a family or community held any ritual, all the Gods were invited to witness.

“The Fire God [*Arac Plon lua*]: the Khmer believed that the Fire God helped them to burn all plants in the fields to prepare for cultivation that was a good omen, promising a good harvest.

Three Gods related to the water: the God of Water [*Arac Túc, Tô lung*], the God of stream [*Arac Brét*], and the God of River [*Arac Brét*], the Khmer believed three Gods provided water for living and farming, they worshiped the river wharf, the Gods of the river and stream.

The Forest God [*Arac Bri*] dominated the living environment of the people. The Khmer worshiped the Forest God before reclaiming to request for permission to cultivate in that field.

The Household God [*Arac Pde*], the closest God to humans, brought the people good or evil things. When a family was unfortunate they worshiped the Household God to pray for peace.

Since 1960, the Khmer have not lived in the forest they no longer feel the influence of the Gods on them, the Gods of River wharf, Stream, Mountain just remained in the

memories of the elderly. The Young generation don't believe in Gods' influence. However, they still worship the Household God when the family happens to bad things. In addition, they worship the God of well on the 4th of Lunar New Year.

Nowadays, the Khmer reside alternately with the Kinh, they have absorbed the Kinh cultural practices including beliefs and worldview. At their home emerge the altars worshipping Goddess of Heaven, Ancestor, Celestial .

In general, world view can be understood as systems by which people interpret the world around them.

Livelihoods and practices

As a set of practices, cultures shape biodiversity through the selection of plants and animals and the reworking of whole landscapes. Such landscapes have been described as anthropogenic nature, as their composition is a reflection of local culture and a product of human history.

The livelihood of a community reflects the people's ability to exploit natural resources. The Khmer's live hoods have changed to adapt to natural and social circumstances.

Before 1960, the Khmer earned their living by shifting cultivation. The rice cultivation including seven stages: *ruông* (reclaiming) → *cốt* (cutting big trees) → burning → clearing → weeding → trimming → harvesting → threshing. A crop usually lasted about 6 months, so it was possible to grow one crop per year in the rainy season (From April to November). They grew rice on fertile land, but the two year later soil became less fertile, the villagers would grow corn, cassava and beans.

After three crops, the land became infertile, the people moved to reclaim other place - the period of shifting cultivation and nomadic life. In addition to farming, the Khmer also earn food from the forest, they hunted wild animals, caught fish in streams, picked edible (*lá diếp, đọt mây*) forest leaves and dug many kinds of bulb roots (*củ mài, củ nân, củ chup*), burnt bamboo for ash instead of salt. On the other hand, they also knew how to breed wild animals such as wild boars and chickens to improve their daily. A family had a division of labor: men go hunting wild animals, catching streams fish. Women weaved cloth or earned money by collecting and selling latex of plant (which can be produced caulk) (Nguu Ng, born in 1938, February 5, 2018).

Mr. Nguu Ng assumed that the period of living in the forest, the Khmer's economy wasn't developed but the life was not too difficult because every household shared each other what they had. For example when a villager hunted a big animal, villagers would eat together. Difficult families could be helped by other families. At that time, human needs were not much, just food and shelter. In addition, sparse population, stream had much fish, the forest still had wild animals, and the land was still fertile so it was easy to get food from nature.

The Khmer's livelihood changed when they migrated to An Binh commune in 1960. The Sai Gon Regime granted seedling and sent agricultural engineers to guide people to plant. "At house of Kim Th, in the garden still exist *vú sĩa* tree, which this seedling was given by the Ngo Dinh Diem government when the villagers came to settle here." (Field work diary, March 2018). When having settled in An Binh commune, the Khmer gave up upland rice cultivation and acquired the wet rice cultivation technique of the Kinh, two crops a year. Besides 1600 m² land granted by the government was residential land, each family also reclaimed wild land as much as they could that depended on household's labour resources.

They grew corn, peas on upland and cultivated wet rice on lowland. For 5 year (1960-1965), the life in An Binh commune was better than thin An Binh village because the yield of wet rice was higher than that of upland rice. During this time, the wild land was still large and fertilizer was not yet used in cultivation, in addition, the population was sparse so the Khmer still kept shifting cultivation. Nguu Ng said "settling down but shifting cultivation" (Nguu Ngot, 2018).

From 1965 to 1975, the war was much more fierce, people were no longer safe to go out of their residential areas to cultivate as before, because they could be bombed at any time. It couldn't cultivate, the people almost earned by gathering and hunting. Whenever they felt safe, they went to the forest to gather foods such as jungle vegetables, bulbs they also hunted wild animals. This was very difficult period.

The early years after the liberation, as the lives of people in the whole country the Khmer in An Binh were still difficult, because the government focused on stabilizing the political security didn't pay much attention to develop the economy.

According to Nguu Ng, in 1982-1984, the Kinh migrated to An Binh commune and resided side by side the Khmer so they took over the Kinh's rice seed named *than nong* IR-8 "high productivity, short - growth time, and resistant to some pests and diseases: leaf blight, blast, aphid, survive drought environment". By this rice seed, the Khmer had two rice crops a year, the economy was better.

However, rice cultivation was not the optimal solution for the soils of the Southeast region in general and An Binh and Phu Giao in particular. Having started the first colonial exploitation, in 1879, the French colonial government successfully planted rubber plants in *Ong Yem* garden (Thu Dau Mot). Then the government concluded that basaltic soil of the Southeast region in general and Binh Duong in particular are suitable for planting rubber and also suitable for cashew and pepper. Based on the results of this study, rubber become main crops in Binh Duong. However, the Khmer have not changed their production practices yet.

In the 1980s, some state official households pioneered planting cashew and rubber trees after that, they mobilized and instructed the Khmer to plant cashew and rubber. Having known the Kinh planted rubber successfully, the Khmer grew with them, one household planted efficiently, another followed. In 10 years (1985 - 1995), most land planted cashew and rubber.

Before planting industrial crops, those families had more than 3 hectares of rice only had enough food for year, there was no surplus product to trade. When cashew, rubber were harvested, agricultural products became commodities, the Khmer gradually accumulated capital to expand their cultivation. Since 1997, the Khmer have settled down and gave up shifting cultivation because there was no wild land to reclaim.

In 2013, the government granted 113 Khmer households (without arable land) land (1 hectare/ one household) (13 km from the Commune People's Committee) on which they have grown rubber.

According to the survey, the living of the majority of families moving from An Binh village to An Binh is stable. Each family has residential land (1600 m² granted by the Saigon Regime in 1960) and reclaimed arable land (at least 3 ha -5 ha).

Nowadays, the Khmer have known that if they just earn by agricultural they get risks, so they have actively diversified the form of their livelihoods as those of the Kinh. For example: The household of Nguu B has a fairly large miscellaneous (on the DT 741 street) run by his wife. He works as a veterinarian and his son is an agricultural official. His household also has 7 hectares of rubber. His family live in a large and nice house.

Nguu Ng household has 10 hectares of land, of which 3 hectares planting cashew and 7 hectares for rubber; Kim N household has 8 hectares of rubber, his sons are state official and his daughter are teachers; Kim Th's household is currently growing 1 hectare of wet rice, 2 ha of cashew and 1,500 rubber. Kim Th explained why he diversified plants "planting wet rice to have safe rice for own family because sold rice in shop is too much chemical, not good for health. On the other hand, growing rice to have rice stored in the home that makes us feel reassuring (that is the Vietnamese peasants' thinking). He cultivate both cashew and rubber because their harvest seasons are different, so the family will get income nearly throughout the year." (Kim Th, 2018). At residential land, he also grows vegetables so he doesn't worry about daily meals".

In order to avoid risks to the household economy, Kim Th and Thach To N (representatives of the behavior of avoiding the risk of the Khmer) have chosen the poly-culture and diversification of livelihoods as the Kinh assumed by James Scott in his book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976), the analysis of "peasant politics" in Southeast Asian pre- capitalist rural society should start from the "subsistence ethic" of peasants who, living close to the subsistence margin,

always tended to risk aversion and failure avoidance within a “safety-first principle”, as their “primordial goal” was a reliable subsistence instead of the “scope for the profit maximization calculus” (Scott 1976: 3-5) (Quang and Nghi, 2016).

In addition, other studies assumed that diversification of income is the way to create sustainable livelihoods of households (Ralitza Dimova & Kunal Sen, 2010); a necessary strategy to increase income and reduce poverty (Ibrahim, Rahman S.A, Envulus E.E, & Oyewole S.O, 2009), minimize income fluctuations and reduce risk (Awudu Abdulai & Anna CroleRees, 2001), (Adebeyo C.O., Akogwu G.O., & Yisa E.S., 2012); diversifying income sources contributes to household welfare (Naznin Sultana, Md.Elias Hossain, & Md.Khairul Islam, 2015).

Today, the Khmer are more rational, pay attention to reality, diversify livelihoods, change economic thinking, gradually improve their living standards: According to statistics of the People’s Committee of An Binh Commune (May 2015), among 227 Khmer households, 10 households have good economy, 213 average economic households, and 4 poor households (Binh Duong Provincial Party Committee, 2015, pp. 61-91).

Survey results of Binh Duong Museum showed that the Khmer occupation consists of four main groups: peasant, worker, government official, and veterinarian. The Khmer are not good at trading they just do small businesses at home (groceries, coffee shop) their main job is still agriculture.

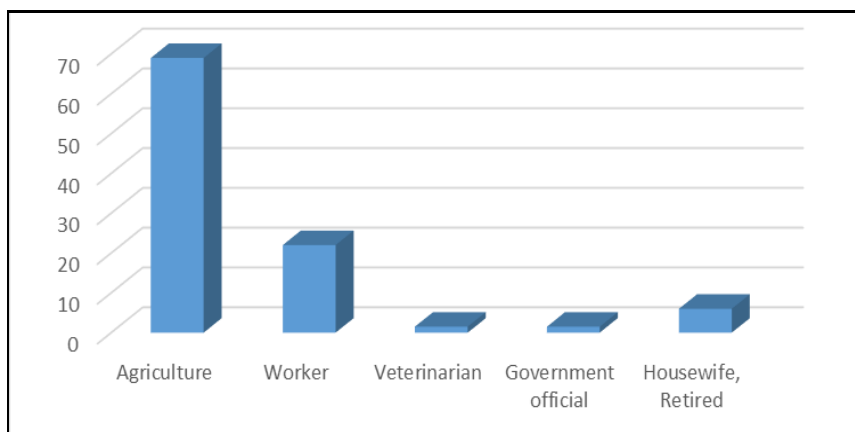


Figure 1. Occupation of Khmer people in An Binh commune (%).

Source: Binh Duong museum, 2012

The Khmer in An Binh commune are no longer a self-governing, purely agricultural community, they have integrated into the Kinh people society and diversified their livelihoods. “Having observed the Khmer’s houses at hamlets of Tan Thinh and Nuoc Vang, An Binh commune it can know that their living standard has been well-off, their houses

are spacious, having adequate facilities for daily activities. In the yard, there are agrimotors and tilling machines for agriculture.

In reality, the Khmer economy is better than before. However it depends on each person, he/she will think the life is easier or more difficult. According to Kim Th, economic development provides the people better material life (houses, clothes, facilities, daily meals) but the market economy makes people more depressed. He explained: “In the past, the economy wasn’t developed but the life was easier. Nowadays, the people depend on money, they fell more difficult. In the past, it was easier to find food in forest for example gathering jungle vegetables, fishing in streams, hunting wild animals. Nowadays it can’t get food from nature, people have to spend money buying food (Kim Th, 2018).

However, The point of view of Nguu Ng is more optimistic “Nowadays, the living is easier, whoever has 3 hectares rubber, his/her family’s the living is comfortable. If he/she doesn’t have arable land, he can earn 4-5 million VND as workers, his household’s economy is stable. Some people don’t want to work, stay at home for drinking, playing. They spend much more than they can earn that’s reason they are poor. Therefore, some households in the resettlement area sold one hectare of granted land” (Ngru Ng, 2018).

The Khmer live hoods have changed by time, initially living in the forest, the economy was self-sufficient. Besides farming and breeding, people also hunted wild animal and gathered jungle vegetables. In 1960, cultivation remained the dominant economy of the Khmer, but wet rice instead of upland rice, two crop cultivation instead of one crop. Rice not only satisfied the family's food needs but it also became commodity. The community's economy was really stable when people cultivated industrial crops: cashew, pepper and rubber. Economy was developed, living standards is better.

Knowledge about Nature

If diverse cultural practices and worldviews are central to the management of biological diversity, then the key link between nature and culture is knowledge. How people know the world governs behaviors, understandings and values that shape human interactions with nature. Knowledge of nature, variously called traditional, indigenous, local or ecological, is accumulated within a society and transferred through cultural modes of transmission such as stories and narratives. Cultural understandings of the environment not only give rise to sustainable management practices, but also to knowledge of species requirements, ecosystem dynamics, sustainable harvesting and ecological interactions. This culturally engrained knowledge can enable people to live within the constraints of their environment in the long-term (Klaus Brinkmann, 1999).

Indigenous peoples and forest-dependent people in general hold a unique knowledge on natural resources in their surrounding environment (Martin, 2004). Among other things,

their knowledge about plants useful for medicine, food, and construction improves their resilience to adversity.

Before 1959, the Khmer relied on forests so the community created, accumulated knowledge of forest exploitation to have materials for housing, making working tools, household facilities. They also have the knowledge of healing with forest leaves. The forest also became a rich source of food for people when they have knowledge about jungle vegetables, fruits, knowledge of hunting and collecting honey.

The Khmer had knowledge of wood, they choose big and hard trees, such as: *Đom xư ca rãm* (*da đá* tree), *đom xơ lao* (crape myrtle), *đom pơ chất* (*cà chắt*) to make columns and floors of houses. Take *tơ reng* (kind of leaf), *pua* (kind of grass) or *trung quân* to roof. They used bamboo to make household facilities such as tables, chairs, and beds.

The knowledge of rice wine making and the cultural practices related to wine were features that considered the Khmer culture in An Binh as a part of the Central Highlands culture and different from the Khmer culture in Mekong delta. According to Kim N (February 6, 2018), the Khmer used to have a lot of experiences in “taking new rice, cooked and let it cool and then mixing it with homemade yeast from jungle leaves, trunk bark to make a very delicious wine jar which was not as harmful to health as wine produced by chemical yeast”.

Nowadays, it is impossible to find jungle leaves or trunk bark to make natural yeast, the people have to use chemical yeast, so the wine is no longer delicious and good for health as before. People also do not perform many rituals they do not have many occasions to consume wine. The knowledge of wine making just remained in the memory of the elders and it will disappear from the knowledge of the community.

When the Khmer did not have access to modern medicine, indigenous knowledge about the healing effects of jungle plants was an indispensable for them but today they are only remained in memory of elders.

Nguu B (born in 1961) still remembers a number of anti-inflammatory remedies for women giving birth including 30 kinds of medicinal plants such as *xa cha môi*, *xa mo*, *gưon*, *cà ghe*... A remedy for lactation includes kinds (transliterated in Latin because he can't write in Khmer) *Pa la cho mol*, *vau kla la*, *đứt đọt cha mô*t, *chôn*l chẹ, *cha rô*i. He also said meticulously on how to get medicinal plants: in the rainy season, taking the stems because at that time, by rain water, the medicinal substance contains on the stems, but in the dry season it should get roots. These medicinal plants should be boiled in water for drinking. The Khmer had rich knowledge about vegetables. They could distinguish between red or brown edible buds and white inedible buds and exploited jungle vegetables such as *săng ve*, *săn máu*, *bốp*, *săn*, *kim cang*, *bún*, *vùng*, *ngành*

ngách, chấp, sai, trai, éo; many kinds of bulbs such as *nân* bulb, *chup* bulb, *huỳnh tinh* bulb; many kinds of jungle fruits such as *gùi, trâm, sim, chùm đuôn*, banana, mango, jackfruit, strawberry;

Ethno-botanical knowledge is directly related to the use of plant resources (Gadgil et al., 1993): if a plant is no longer available, it cannot be used and knowledge related to it may disappear. Under rapidly changing socio-economic, political and environmental conditions, knowledge related to the use of natural resources can be lost within a single generation (Reyes-García et al., 2013), especially given that ethno-botanical knowledge is usually orally transmitted and rarely documented (Case et al., 2005; Turreira-García et al., 2015) (See: Jules Pretty, 2019).

Nowadays, the Khmer no longer live in the forest, their knowledge of forest exploitation just remained by elders. The community have integrated into modern society, what knowledge they need to update are related to contemporary life: Responding to climate change, diversifying livelihoods.

Norms and institutions

Ecological knowledge also gives rise to socially embedded norms and regulations. These govern human interactions and behaviors towards the natural environment, and have often co-evolved to sustain both people and nature. They often take the form of common property rules that govern the use of resources from forests to fisheries. These rules define access rights and appropriate behaviors, and maintain the productivity and diversity of socio-ecological systems – which is ultimately in the best interests of the community (Jules Pretty, 2019).

As ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands the Khmer had customary law to protect forests, maintained forest resources: no hunting in the breeding season, no cutting plant to get fruits, no taking jungle trees to plant in home garden. The customary law prohibiting the exploitation of watershed forests and old forests to balance ecology, the customary law of encouraged people to both exploit and conserve. The customary law wrote:

“Without water people cannot survive so the people were forbidden to cut watershed and plants along streams. Deforestation will cause drought and flood”. “Big tree forest were not allowed to be cleared for cultivation. Deforestation made the wild animals lose their habitat. People couldn’t live without forests. It was not allowed to cut big tree for farming or housing. If cutting down one tree it have to plant seven trees. It was forbidden to cut small trees. By that way, the forest would be green forever”. Protecting forest to maintain source of food, water, habitat of people. Forest protection was the duty of every villager”.

The reclaimed forests was not watershed forests, primeval forests, precious timber forests. In reality, the forest was burnt for cultivation was mostly young offshoot forest.

When burning fields, people were also conscious of protecting forests from fires. Whoever burned primeval forests was punished by the Deity and villagers.

Today, the Khmer no longer live in the forest these customary laws just remained in the elders' memory that shows the living conditions have changed, cultural practices altered to responses to the natural environment and social and historical context.

4. Conclusion

In present, the Khmer's living in Phu Giao communes is not much different from that of the Kinh because they have been living alternately with the Kinh since 1960, including mixed marriages between the two ethnic groups. The Khmer has adopted Kinh's culture. In the Khmer residential area in Nuoc Vang hamlet, An Binh commune, it is difficult to distinguish the difference between the Khmer's houses and the Kinh's ones. The cultural practices such as housing, dress, entertainment and rituals of life cycle: birth, marriage, funeral, *Tet* holiday of the Khmer are similar to those of the Kinh.

Few people may know that, in the past (before 1939), the Khmer settled in the forest their cultural practices were very similar to that of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands: staying in houses on stilt, wearing loin- cloths, exploiting natural resource for food (jungle vegetables and wild animals), drinking *rượu cần* (Khmer called *sà lun*) (wine drunk out of a jar through pipes). They believed in animism and had a rich indigenous knowledge system to exploit forest resources for essential needs: food, accommodation, clothing and medical treatment. Because of living in forests and relying on survival, the community has a customary law to protect forests and protect water resources.

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