

REFLECTIONS ON THE RIVER

Khmer Perception of Ethnic Vietnamese in
Brâlai Meas before the Khmer Rouge Regime



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Reflections on the River:

Khmer Perception of Ethnic Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas before the Khmer Rouge Regime

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Cover photo: Vietnamese taxi boat rower, Kampong Chhnang (*KEO Duong*)

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PREFACE

Dear Reader,

This research report is a continuation of Kdei Karuna's previous report, *"Life Before Expulsion: Community History from Vietnamese Minorities in Kampong Chhnang"*, which presents the ethnic Vietnamese perspective of daily life in Kampong Chhnang province during the early 1970s. The current report is different from its forerunner as it focuses on the socio-cultural and economic activities between ethnic Khmer and Vietnamese in the Brâlai Meas commune from a Khmer perspective.

The Khmer perspective is a valuable addition to the information given by the ethnic Vietnamese in the previous report. The combination of the two perspectives helps to gain a deeper insight into the relations between Khmer and Vietnamese in Cambodia.

By promoting a more differentiated understanding about the history of ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia, we hope to foster a dialogue about the past, especially among the younger generation, making way for a better future based on mutual understanding and respect.

Mr. Minea TIM
Executive Director
Kdei Karuna Organization

ABSTRACT

Ethnic Vietnamese had lived along the Tonlé Sap River for decades before they were expelled from Cambodia during the 1970s. The majority of them were born in Cambodia. Located along the river approximately 20 km north of Kampong Chhnang Town, Brâlai Meas commune was one of the few communes in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge regime where hundreds of ethnic Vietnamese families lived in the same villages with Khmer villagers. This case study aims at examining the relations between Khmer and Vietnamese villagers in Brâlai Meas commune by looking at their socio-cultural and economic activities from a Khmer perspective. 24 Khmer interviewees who had lived in the commune during the late French protectorate, Sihanouk regime and Lon Nol regime were interviewed about their every-day lives and experiences living with the Vietnamese communities.

I

INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND

This report is the continuation from the previous report, *“Life Before Expulsion: Community History from Vietnamese Minorities in Kampong Chhnang”*. Based on oral history testimonies, *Life Before Expulsion* is a report that presents the daily life experiences of ethnic Vietnamese in Kampong Chhnang province before

they had been deported to Vietnam in the early 1970s¹. Most of the interviewees were born in Brâlai Meas commune, Kampong Leng district. They talked about their native villages, living conditions, occupation, migration and their experiences living through different political regimes in Cambodia.



Vendor in Kampong Loung commune, Pursat

Apart from the report *Life before Expulsion*, other articles and publications had also been written by researchers about the life of ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia and their relations with the Khmer people. They mostly describe the topic from a policy level and historical perspective and generally look at the story from a broader point of view. Annuska Derks, for example, brought to the reader the bigger picture of ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia focusing on different groups of Vietnamese people, their challenges of integration, economic activities and inter-ethnic relations². Another example is the research work of Ramses Amer who examined attitudes and policies of Cambodian authorities towards the Vietnamese people, migration patterns and anti-Vietnamese sentiment against the Vietnamese people. He investigated the situation of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia in chronological order from the pre-colonial times to the UN intervention in the early 1990s³. Stefan Ehrentraut also described in his work status and situation of ethnic Vietnamese throughout modern Cambodian history from a historical and political perspective⁴.

This current research report looks at a similar topic. However, it is different from its forerunner and the previously mentioned research documentations as it focuses on the Khmer perspective of ethnic Vietnamese in the Brâ-lai Meas commune. The Brâ-lai Meas commune was one of the few communes where thousands of ethnic Vietnamese shared the same villages with Khmer people before the expulsion during the early 1970s⁵. This research gathered the memory of Khmer people who had lived in the commune - some of them having experienced not only the evacuation in April 1975 but also the late French Colonization, Sihanouk regime and Lon Nol regime - regarding their experiences sharing everyday life with ethnic Vietnamese. This Khmer perspective is a valuable source of information and addition to the information given by ethnic Vietnamese in the previous report. The combination of the two perspectives helps to examine the relations between the Khmer and Vietnamese in Cambodia. The study specifically focuses on the commune of Brâ-lai Meas.

B. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to examine the relations between Khmer and Vietnamese villagers in Brâlai Meas commune by looking at their socio-cultural and economic activities from the Khmer perspective before the victory of the Khmer Rouge in 1975.

C. LIMITATIONS

The two main research limitations are the lack of representativity of the research site, and the possible errors in interviewees' information due to memory errors. Firstly, Brâlai Meas was chosen for the case study but it cannot be necessarily regarded as a representative site that could be generalized. The majority of communes in Cambodia did not have a Vietnamese community. More importantly, life around the Tonlé Sap River and lake has its very specifics which may not be easily comparable with other areas in which ethnic Vietnamese live together with Khmer. Secondly, after more than 40 years, interviewees might unintentionally forget some main events of their lives or some given information might not be fully correct.



Villager in Kampong Chhnang

D. METHODOLOGY

This research provides a case study of Brâlai Meas commune, Kampong Leng district, Kampong Chhnang province with the time frame from late French Colonization to Khmer Rouge victory in 1975. The interviewees are Khmer villagers who had lived in Brâlai Meas in the time of the late French protectorate during the 1940s to early Democratic Kampuchea (1975).

This research is mainly based on semi-structured interviews with Khmer people who lived in Brâlai Meas during the late French protectorate, Sangkum Reastr Niyum (Sihanouk time) and/or Khmer Republic (Lon Nol regime). The interviews normally started with questions regarding personal information, and gradually moved on to information regarding ethnic Vietnamese and their interaction with ethnic Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas with a special focus on the economic and socio-cultural sector

throughout the political developments in Cambodia during those periods. Geographic details and descriptions were also asked to be given in the interviews. In order to handle possibly influencing effects of political and environmental factors, the researchers tried to ask the interviewees for their experiences rather than directly asking them for their opinion of ethnic Vietnamese.

Snowball sampling was the main approach to find interviewees. 24 interviewees were interviewed throughout the three trips to Brâlai Meas commune. The first trip was 4-7 March 2015; the second trip was 18-21 March 2015; and the final trip was 6-10 July 2015. Data collections were mainly conducted during the field trips. Secondary data such as books, articles, newspapers and other research reports were used to embed the case study in the larger Cambodian context.



Interviewees from Krang Phtel village, Brâlai Meas commune



Interview in Kramal village, Brâlai Meas commune

II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ETHNIC VIETNAMESE IN CAMBODIA

The country of Cambodia shares a long stretch of the south and east border with Vietnam and obviously they share a long history as well. In modern history, both countries were under the same French colonization for nearly a century and throughout the Cold War. The two countries had gone through

friendship and enmity. At the same time, migration of Vietnamese people to Cambodia was also notable during the French protectorate era. This section aims at giving a brief overview of the history of ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia from the French colonization to Lon Nol regime.



Villagers in Chhnok Trou village

A. FRENCH PROTECTORATE

During the French colonization, the French seemed to treat the Khmer and the Vietnamese differently. In Cambodia, the French brought Vietnamese people to work mainly in three sectors: rubber plantations, administration and the private sector. The Vietnamese were brought to work in the established French rubber plantations in Cambodia. In addition, the French offered many Vietnamese people to work in the colonial administration in Cambodia. They also encouraged the Vietnamese migrants to take role in the private sector⁶. This policy might have led to the increasing number of Vietnamese in Cambodia. In 1946, around 26 percent of the population in Phnom Penh were Indochinese⁷, and the Vietnamese were the majority among those Indochinese. At the same time, there were many Vietnamese who had settled on the Tonlé Sap River. According to a statistic of 1919 around 5,500 Vietnamese lived in Kompong Chhnang province, nearly 40% of them in Kompong Leng district alone⁸. Official census in 1874 found that there were around 5,000 Vietnamese living in Cambodia. It in-

creased to 150,000, according to 1921 census. Its number was estimated up to around 230,000 to 250,000 in 1951⁹.

During that time, the perception of the Khmer intellectuals of the Vietnamese could be seen in a famous Khmer Newspaper, Nagara Vatta, which expressed the widespread dissatisfaction with the dominating presence of Vietnamese in the Cambodian administration, the monopoly of the Chinese in the business sector and the unemployment of Cambodian intellectuals¹⁰. More importantly, the hatred and the accusation against Vietnamese of invading Cambodia can be found in this newspaper, too. In one article, the writer compares the invasion of Hitler to conquer other countries in Europe with the invasion of Vietnamese in Cambodia in the 19th century¹¹. According to the researcher Tully, some rebel groups, such as the Khmer Issarak who were against the French, were also against the Vietnamese. In his work, Tully quotes the call of one of the Khmer Issarak leaders, Chandara: *"The Khmer Issarak proclaimed that all Khmer should rise up and arm themselves, unite with*

the Khmer Issarak to fight and kill all Vietnamese and drive them back to Vietnam"¹².

This shows that the anti-Vietnamese perception in Khmer people's minds started since the establishment of the Nagara Vatta Newspaper, if not even earlier, and was mainly among educated people in urban society. As Tarr Chou Meng notes in her analysis "... in the countryside itself, one has to look very hard for the same anti-Vietnamese sentiments that, by the late 1960s, could be readily found in urban Cambodian society."¹³

B. SIHANOUK REGIME

During part of the Cold War, Cambodia was under Sihanouk leadership for more than a decade from 1955 to 1970. Sihanouk declared the country neither friend nor enemy of North Vietnam communist and South Vietnam Republic; Cambodia was neutral. However, its neutrality could not last for the whole period he was in power. In the 1960s, while Cambodia officially still used the banner of neutrality, Sihanouk practically stepped away from the Free World¹⁴ and stepped towards the

communist side. After he broke diplomatic relations with the United States in 1963, in 1966, Sihanouk allowed Communist Vietnamese forces, the Viet Cong, to have a military base in Cambodia. It was one of the reasons why Lon Nol could topple him from power later in 1970.

Even though both Vietnamese countries were at war, the majority of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia during the Sihanouk regime could live peacefully as the country was still at peace and the suppression of the ethnic Vietnamese was not very notable. From the narration of ethnic Vietnamese living along the Tonlé Sap, they said that their life during the 1960s was peaceful¹⁵.

Sihanouk's new ethnic typology during his years of power was well-known. "*He classified the diverse hill tribe inhabiting Cambodia's mountainous areas as 'Khmer Leou' (Highland Khmer), the Cham as 'Khmer Islam', and members of the Khmer minority in the Mekong Delta now belonging to Vietnam as 'Khmer Krom' (Lowland Khmer)*"¹⁶. Ehrentraut saw this typology as the dividing factor between the group that was included to

be part of the nation and the group that was excluded. The included groups were the hill tribes, the Cham, and the Khmer Krom while the excluded groups were the Vietnamese and Chinese¹⁷. Based on this distinction, ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia have been considered as foreigners. Hence, they needed to have immigration cards. Paying an immigration fee or *Lang Tai*¹⁸ became a notable challenge to ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia during that time. Many Vietnamese families in Kampong Chhnang province during the Sihanouk time could not afford to pay the fee¹⁹.

Regarding the number of ethnic Vietnamese people living in Cambodia, it was not much different from the figure of the late French colonization if we

compare it between the figure in 1951 to the official census in 1962. According to the official Cambodian census in 1962, 217,774 Vietnamese people were living in Cambodia at that time²⁰. However, the researcher Amer claimed that the most reliable figure may be the estimated number of 450,000 Vietnamese in Cambodia at the beginning of 1970²¹.

All in all, the relations between Cambodia and communist Vietnam were getting better during the second half of the 1960s while the relation between Cambodia and South Vietnam was not good. As to Vietnamese in Cambodia, they still could live peacefully but needed to pay for immigration fee in order to claim their legal status in Cambodia.



Villagers in Kramal village, Brâlai Meas commune

C. LON NOL REGIME

As the war between the two Vietnamese states intensified, it affected Cambodian politics. In 1970, after Sihanouk was deposed and replaced by a new government led by Lon Nol, the five year civil war started. Before the coup, Lon Nol called for the withdrawal of the Vietnamese Communist soldiers, Viet Cong, from Cambodian territory by the dawn of March 15th, 1970. However, his call was not effective as the Vietnamese soldiers did not leave²². Then many young people were pulled into the war against the Vietnamese. As many young Cambodian soldiers were killed, the nationalist sentiments against Vietnam increased in Phnom Penh. In May 1970, the massacre against the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia took place and many Vietnamese civilians were killed in Phnom Penh and other places around Phnom Penh²³. Researcher Poole claimed that the killing of Vietnamese civilians, the stealing and destroying of their properties in Phnom Penh were perpetrated by students and other potential dissident Khmer Groups²⁴. According to Chandler, the idea that Vietnamese

forces should leave Cambodia was more popular than the coup against Sihanouk in March 1970²⁵.

In Khmer publications during the 1970s, the writers tried to depict the Vietnamese as an invader. Bunchan Mol, the writer of a Khmer language book, "Political Prison" tried to spread the nationalist sentiment against the Vietnamese by attempting to wake up all Cambodians for what he describes as the love of the nation and to defend it from foreign invasion, namely "Yuon"²⁶ ²⁷.

With the intervention of the authorities of the Republic of Vietnam and the international pressure, the Lon Nol government changed its attitude and the authorities called for protection of Vietnamese people in Cambodia. However, many Vietnamese fled from Cambodia. In one year, about 250 000 ethnic Vietnamese had been expelled from Cambodia²⁸.

The political propaganda of the Lon Nol regime against the Vietnamese and the anti-Vietnamese sentiment of the people living in the cities, especially in Phnom Penh, was notable.

III.

CASE STUDY IN BRÂLAI MEAS

A. GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT BRÂLAI MEAS

The Brâlai Meas commune is located along the Tonlé Sap River about 20 km north of Kampong Chhnang town in Kampong Laeng district, Kampong Chhnang province. The commune can only be reached by waterway as there are small rivers around the commune. Since the French protectorate, it used to be an important economic and cultural center in Kampong Laeng district until the fall of the Lon Nol regime. There

were ten villages in this commune during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum²⁹ of Sihanouk time (1955-1970). The villages were Brâlai Meas, Ta Daok Touch, Ta Daok Thom, Kandal, Kbal Damrei, Anglong Sno, Anglong Kanhchos, Kramal, Krang Ptel and Koh Russey. Among those ten villages, Brâlai Meas village was the economic, administrative and cultural center of the commune. The biggest market, the main pagoda, and



Floating houses in Bralai village, Brâlai Meas commune



Brâlai Meas village

the administrative offices were located in Brâlai Meas village. Close to the Brâlai Meas village, there was a Catholic community where Catholic Vietnamese were living. According to the interviewees, no Khmer people were part of the Catholic community except a few Khmer families who were living inside the community compound³⁰.

In the Brâlai Meas commune, the majority of the population was Khmer. Ethnic Vietnamese were the second main ethnicity, and followed by a small number of Chinese merchants. Khmer people were living in all of the ten villages in the commune while ethnic Vietnamese only lived in six villages, namely Brâlai Meas, Anlong Sno, Anlong Kanhchos, Kandal, Kramal and Krang Ptel³¹. Officially, those ethnic Vietnamese were under Cambodian authority. Any issues they had, they could only resolve internally with the community representatives and they would have to ask the village chief or commune chief for help if they could not deal with it on their own. Chinese people lived mostly in the markets. There were few Chinese people in the commune, but they were the commune's economic controllers.

Transportation within the commune was mainly by boat. Before 1975, people in Brâlai Meas still used rowing boats to travel or transport products from one place to another. Therefore, it took long for them to travel. For example, to go to Kampong Chhnang town, people needed to get up early in the morning and row together, often taking turns³².

To connect the commune to the provincial town, there were machine boats transporting people daily between Brâlai Meas and Kampong Chhnang town. According to Nhong Sarun, the ferry owner charged 10 Riels per person for one way; and 5 Riels per person for students³³. It was expensive for people during that time³⁴. There was also a ferry connecting Anlong Sno to Brâlai Meas village, the market village³⁵.

After Sihanouk was deposed in March 1970 and the civil war broke out, Brâlai Meas commune was no longer at peace. All Catholic Vietnamese left the community and, according to the Khmer interviewees, went to Vietnam. Some villages, for example Kramal and Anlong Kanhchos, were in the

battle field between the government forces and the Khmer Rouge forces. As the Khmer Rouge captured these two villages very often, the government forces started to bomb these villages. Gradually, people from these villages and other villages far from Brâlai Meas village moved to Brâlai Meas village. Until the beginning of 1975, all people in Brâlai Meas commune, except those who joined the Khmer Rouge, had moved to stay in Brâlai Meas village. Brâlai Meas village was heavily guarded by Lon Nol military and it was geographically difficult for the Khmer Rouge to attack the village as it was surrounded by a river. Therefore, the Khmer Rouge forces could only then capture the village when they had conquered the Lon Nol forces in Phnom Penh who then ordered their forces in Brâlai Meas to surrender. The Khmer Rouge evacuated all people in Brâlai Meas to other places. Those evacuated people were considered as “New People”³⁶ during the three years, eight months and twenty days of the Khmer Rouge regime. The remaining ethnic Vietnamese were also evacuated from the commune to the area around

Kangrei Mountains. Many of the ethnic Vietnamese were then expelled by the Khmer Rouge to Vietnam in the same year.

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge and people having returned to their villages, only six of the villages of the commune still existed: Brâlai Meas, Ta Daok, Anlong Kanhchos, Kramal, Krang Ptel and Koh Russey village. Some people could not go back to their old village because the Khmer Rouge soldiers were still occupying parts of the commune, especially those villages located deep in the jungle. For example, Kramal villagers needed to stay in Brâlai Meas for some times before they could return to their home village. The ethnic Vietnamese who had lived in Brâlai Meas before they were expelled to Vietnam, and who returned to Cambodia in the early 1980s could not go back to their home villages but were requested to settle by the river close to Kompong Chhnang town. Especially the east bank of Brâlai Meas, where once hundreds of Vietnamese lived, was not resettled again. Today, this land is used by Khmer for agriculture.



Food offerings at a spirit house in Brâlai Meas village

B. SOCIO-CULTURAL RELATIONS

In the context of the Brâlai Meas commune during the years of the late French colonization to the end of the Khmer Republic, the relationship between ethnic Khmer and Vietnamese living in the commune can be seen

through their socio-cultural practices. This section will examine the socio-cultural relations, discussing socio-cultural elements such as communication, education, religious practice, and traditions.

1. Education and Communication


During the French colonization, education had not been formally established yet in Brâlai Meas commune. On a national level, the French administration could only develop *Wat Education*³⁷ and had started expanding it from 1924 onwards³⁸. In Brâlai Meas, until 1952, when Cambodia was still under the French colonization, the first class was established at Brâlai Meas pagoda. Its primary purpose was to give Buddhist lessons while part of the curriculum also included the study of the Khmer language. Later on, this school turned into an official school teaching only grades one to three³⁹. Interviewee Un Sorn claimed to be one of the first students attending that school.

Even though around a thousand ethnic Vietnamese⁴⁰ were living in Brâlai Meas at the end of the 1960s, very few ethnic Vietnamese students attended the Brâlai Meas School. In the early 1950s, among the hundred students that were attending the school, there were only 10 ethnic Vietnamese students.⁴¹ Un Sorn said that those few ethnic Vietnamese students were children of rich ethnic Vietnamese fami-

lies. He gave the example of children of fishing lot owners in Prek Ponlea and Brâlai Meas who were among those ten ethnic Vietnamese students⁴².

At the same time, the Catholic community provided education to their members. More than a hundred families were members of the Catholic community known as Ong Ko⁴³. Their education was conducted in Vietnamese language in the church, but interviewees like Ouch Chheang did not know what the education of the Catholic members was about⁴⁴. As they had their own education and different religion, they did not go to Khmer school nor the Buddhist pagoda where traditional ceremonies normally took place.

During Sangkum Reastr Niyum there were four classes in the Brâlai Meas Primary School starting from grade one to grade four. While the number of Khmer students was slightly increasing, the number of ethnic Vietnamese attending the school was also slightly increasing. In a class of 30 students there were around 5, 6, or 7 ethnic Vietnamese students.

A young child with dark hair, wearing a light blue cloth, sits on a wooden cart. The cart is positioned on a dirt path next to a calm river. In the background, there are lush green trees and a clear sky. A tall, thin tree trunk stands prominently on the right side of the frame. The overall scene is peaceful and rural.

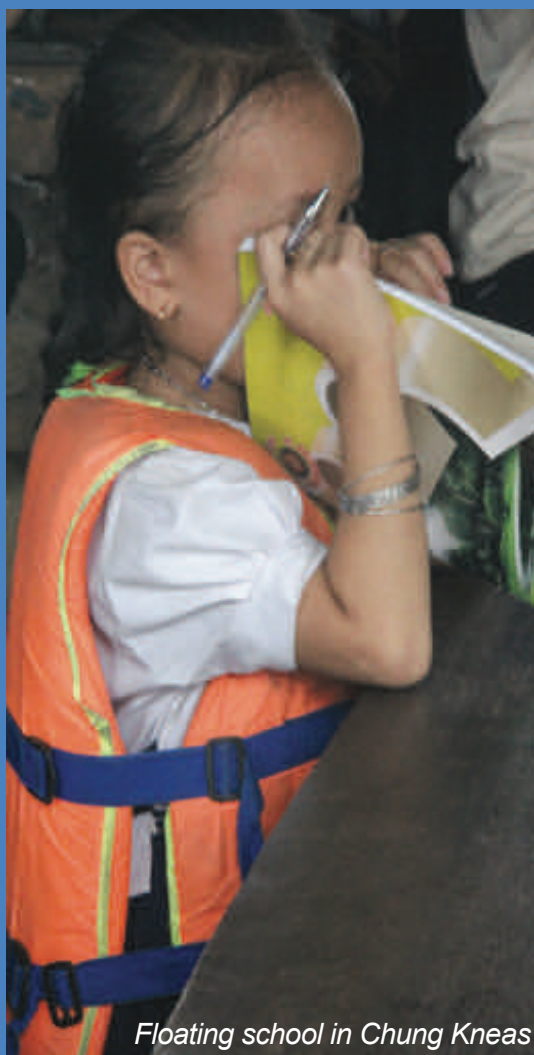
"When I was at school, I studied with 7 male and female Vietnamese and 5 or 6 Chinese students; they could study Khmer just like us. [...] They [ethnic Vietnamese students] were clever and even better than the Khmer students. They were all children of fishing lot owners. [...] Actually, the school was open for Khmer students but Vietnamese parents asked teachers for admission of their children and the teachers agreed." ⁴⁵

Interviewee Teav Nakong

Interviewee Nhong Sarun who was in 4th grade in a class with around 30 students experienced a similar situation. In his class, there were 5 ethnic Vietnamese students who were all from rich families and the families were living near Brâlai Meas market⁴⁶. However, most of the ethnic Vietnamese families in Brâlai Meas did not send their children to school even though the school teachers openly accepted the ethnic Vietnamese students, according

to Nhong Sarun. There were no ethnic Vietnamese students from another part of the river which was less than a kilometer away from school⁴⁷ and where around 400 mostly poor ethnic Vietnamese families lived⁴⁸. Considering the high number of ethnic Vietnamese families and the fact that none of them went to Brâlai Meas school, it can be concluded that ethnic Vietnamese parents did not see the necessity to send their children for education rather than keeping their children at home to help them for day to day living.

Cambodian government had shown some efforts to promote the integration of the ethnic Vietnamese into Cambodian society but they failed. The 1954 immigration law required the immigrant to have good character and morals, at least five years of living in Cambodia, two years if born in Cambodia or married to a Cambodian including sufficient Khmer language skills⁴⁹. With this law, the government introduced the Khmer class to the ethnic Vietnamese of all ages. According to Un Sorn, the commune chief invited all ethnic Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas to learn Khmer language. In Anlong Kanhchos, only few old eth-



Floating school in Chung Kneas

nic Vietnamese came to study and after several days they left the class one after the other. According to the interviewee, the program did not work for the ethnic Vietnamese⁵⁰.

Ethnic Vietnamese students in Brâ-lai Meas school had no difficulties in making friends with Khmer students or studying⁵¹. To show that he was close to his ethnic Vietnamese friends, Nhong Sarun gave an example of his reunion with an ethnic Vietnamese friend who after 1979 was one of the Vietnamese soldiers based in Kampong Chhnang. He and his friend gave each other a hug after they had been separated from each other for nearly ten years⁵².

The flooding season was an exceptional situation that made the ethnic Khmer and Vietnamese in Kramal village intensify their relations. The majority of the ethnic Vietnamese in Kramal were able to speak Khmer because they lived together with Khmer people during the flooding season. Khmer and the ethnic Vietnamese normally lived separately during the dry and some part of the rainy season; however, for a few

months during the flooding season, they had to pull their floating houses together and live closer to the jungle⁵³. It was during this time that they had to communicate more as they lived next to each other. For this reason, it was a special situation that a natural factor could force them to live together and communicate with each other. Nevertheless, young people in this village still did not attend school.

From the narration of the Khmer interviewees, the self-reliance of the Vietnamese living in their own communities might have been the reason for the scarce communication with the Khmer people. They could make their living without having to communicate with the Khmer people which may have led to a limitation of their Khmer language skills. Thus, they did not feel it was necessary to send their children to Khmer school. However, when there was a need to communicate more often, they could get along well with each other; ethnic Vietnamese could speak Khmer as seen in the example of the Kramal village.

2. Religious practices

a. Buddhism

Just as in the rest of the country, the majority of the Khmer people in Brâ-lai Meas were Buddhists. There were three main pagodas in the commune. Brâlai Meas pagoda was the oldest and main pagoda in the commune. Its concrete temple was built in the 1930s. Therefore, the founding of the pagoda must have been decades before its concrete temple was built. Anlong Kan-chos pagoda, on the other hand, was just built during the late French colonization. Krabao Srong pagoda, which

later turned into a Vietnamese pagoda known as *Wat Louk Yuon* (Vietnamese Monk Pagoda), was originally a Khmer pagoda; its official name was “Slab Kok pagoda”. These pagodas served as the religious venues for Buddhist believers in the commune.

Brâlai Meas pagoda is beautifully built with a concrete temple, gate, wall and other buildings. The temple and other buildings in Brâlai Meas pagoda were mainly financed by Chinese business-



Vietnamese temple in Chhnok Trou village

men and some rich ethnic Vietnamese⁵⁴ and the Khmer people also took part in financing the buildings. As Brâlai Meas was the center for Buddhist believers in the commune, there were normally many people participating in the ceremonies. Every year during *Kathen Tean season*⁵⁵, ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese people brought their donations to this pagoda and celebrated the ceremony with the Khmer people. However, the participation of the ethnic Vietnamese was still little as those who participated and donated money to the pagoda were those who were rich, for example fishing lot owners and other business owners⁵⁶.

Unlike Brâlai Meas pagoda, Anlong Kanhchos pagoda served only people in Anlong Kanhchos village. So, donations to the pagoda were minimal. The temple was made of wood. Interviewee Maen Beoun recalled that ethnic Vietnamese in Anlong Kanhchos also participated in some of the main religious ceremonies at the pagoda⁵⁷.

Krabao Srong pagoda was believed to have been built after the construction of Brâlai Meas pagoda. Interviewee

Sang, who was born during the French Colonization and 93 years old at the time of the interview, said that when he grew up, he knew that Krapao Srong pagoda had already been built. But, according to what he had heard from old people in the village, this pagoda was built after Brâlai Meas pagoda⁵⁸. He also described how Krabao Srong pagoda later became Slab Kok which was commonly known as *Wat Louk Yuon*. A Vietnamese monk came and stayed in the pagoda and later he asked for permission to turn the pagoda into a Vietnamese pagoda. With the help of his friend, Venerable Ros, who was the head of the Khmer monks, he obtained the official permission⁵⁹. Krabao Srong became Slab Kok pagoda, the sign on its gate was written in three languages: Khmer, Chinese and Vietnamese. The three languages may indicate that the pagoda was not only for the Vietnamese but also for Chinese people who believed in the same Mahayana Buddhism as the Vietnamese. The Khmer language on the sign didn't indicate anything in particular as all signs in Cambodia had to be written in Khmer.

There were few differences between

the Khmer Buddhist and Vietnamese Buddhist pagoda. During Sihanouk time, there were Buddhist monks in the Vietnamese pagoda, especially the head of the monks known as Ta Bai who strictly practiced the Buddhist principle. He was vegetarian. Another difference was that the Vietnamese *Samane* monks⁶⁰ were allowed to do fishing to supply for their livelihood in the pagoda which was against the principle of the Khmer monks who were not allowed to kill any living being. They did not dress as monks but people called them the Vietnamese monks.

Both Khmer and Vietnamese monks collected food from people. Khmer monks also went to the Vietnamese community to collect food, except for the Catholic Vietnamese community, while the Vietnamese monks also went to the Khmer community for collecting food⁶¹. According to Interviewee Om Sopha, Khmer people did not mind seeing Vietnamese monks come and ask for food; they also offered food. In the Vietnamese pagoda, there were less ceremonies during the year. The only known ceremony was called “Leung Hy Ceremony”. During that



Slab Kok pagoda, Brâlai Meas commune

ceremony, the head of the Vietnamese monks invited the Khmer monks to attend the ceremony. Many Khmer people participated in that occasion, too⁶².

During Civil war from 1970 to 1975, the situation in the country as well as in Brâlai Meas was chaotic. Around 1971 or 1972, almost all people in the commune came to stay in Brâlai Meas village because of the insecure situation and the danger of air bomb attacks in the other villages⁶³. Buddhist ceremonies could not be regularly practiced any longer. The Brâlai Meas pagoda also served as shelter for people seeking security and safety. Slab Kok pago-

da, about three kilometers away from Brâlai Meas pagoda, was still inhabited by monks until 1974 when the head of the Vietnamese monks, Ta Bai, fled to Brâlai Meas village⁶⁴.

Regarding the given information, the relations between the Khmer and the Vietnamese community in the commune in terms of religious practice seem to have been moderate. Khmer people participated in religious ceremonies in the Vietnamese pagoda, Wat Louk Yuon, and they also accepted the presence of Vietnamese monks walking and collecting food in the Khmer communities.



Villagers in Brâlai Meas village

b. Christianity

It was a special situation to have a Catholic community in the rural commune. In Vietnamese language, the Catholic community was known as “Ong Ko” which could be translated as “master”. With more than a hundred families living in a kilometer-long community along the river bank, they strongly practiced the religion. When they heard the church bell ring, the ethnic Vietnamese in Ong Ko would chant. They did it three times a day, once in the morning, once at noon and another time in the evening⁶⁵. As their religious practice was different from the local religion, they seemed to be isolated from the Khmer community. Catholic Vietnamese did not go to the Khmer pagoda or attend any Buddhist ceremony in the commune⁶⁶.

There were few Khmer families living in the Catholic community, but they did not convert to Christianity. Those Khmer people rent community land from the community chief for 20 Riels a year to build their house⁶⁷. Khmer people needed to pay this rent because the community also needed to pay tax to the state for land they were residing on⁶⁸.



During Christmas time, people in Ong Ko lit their Christmas lanterns in front of their houses. It looked beautiful. Yet, young Khmer people sometimes destroyed the lanterns and ran away. Moeung Chean who was a teenager during that time commented,

*“There were lanterns during their ceremony but our young Khmer people destroyed those colorful star shaped lanterns. [...] Ong Ko was in the middle of the Khmer communities, young Khmer people, about 14 to 17 years old, destroyed those lanterns when they returned home at night.”*⁶⁹



Church in Chhnok Trou village



Kramal village, Brâlai Meas commune

The young Khmer people seemed to be unhappy with the different religion of ethnic Vietnamese in the Catholic community or they were just trouble makers as Moeung Chean explained having done it for fun because they were young. During the Christmas ceremony in Ong Ko, Catholic Vietnamese marched along the road to celebrate it but they did not invite Khmer people to participate in the event⁷⁰.

The Catholic Vietnamese and Buddhist Vietnamese were also isolated from each other. They lived separated from the other Vietnamese community and did fishing in different places, too⁷¹. Catholic Vietnamese only lived in Ong Ko and did fishing at the Tonlé Sap Lake. They all stayed in the community only during flooding season and spent most of their time doing fishing at the lake. The Buddhist Vietnamese lived in different villages, particularly in Brâlai Meas village, and did fishing in the river nearby their villages only⁷². After the coup against Sihanouk in 1970, all Catholic Vietnamese in Ong Ko went to Vietnam⁷³. The houses and buildings of those Catholic Vietnamese were then used by Khmer people.

3. Traditional ceremonies

The scope and intensity of participation in traditional ceremonies could be an indicator to evaluate the relations between people living in the village or commune. This section examines the relations between the Khmer and the Vietnamese community living in Brâlai Meas commune by evaluating their participation in weddings, funerals, water festival events and New Year celebrations. Traditionally, almost all people in the villages participated in those events.



a. Wedding and Funeral

Cambodian wedding is a big event for the family and is traditionally celebrated for two nights and three days, especially in rural areas, during which the wedding family gets a lot of support from the villagers. Brâlai Meas commune was a rural area, except for the market in Brâlai Meas village. During the 1950s

and 1960s, weddings were strictly and traditionally practiced. Normally, the wedding family invited at least a hundred guests to participate in the wedding ceremony and usually all the villagers of the same village were invited. Referring to this traditional context, participation in the wedding is used as an indicator to mea-

sure the relations between the ethnic Khmer and Vietnamese. It's also used as an indicator to evaluate the level of integration of the ethnic Vietnamese into Cambodian society.

Regarding wedding ceremonies in the Vietnamese community, a number of interviewees agreed that not many Khmer people from the same village were invited by the Vietnamese to attend their Vietnamese wedding ceremonies. According to Nhong Sarun and Moeung Chean, ethnic Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas only invited a few Khmer people they were close to⁷⁴. It was also similar to the ethnic Vietnamese in Anlong Kanhchos⁷⁵. The situation was the same for Khmer wedding ceremonies where Khmer people did not invite many ethnic Vietnamese to join their wedding ceremonies, either.

However, an exceptional case is shared by interviewee Moeung Chean of his wedding in Kramal village. His father was a village chief who knew everyone in the village and closely worked with ethnic Vietnamese in collecting tax from them and the ethnic Vietnamese also needed to get his ap-

proval before starting any business or fishing. His father spoke Vietnamese fluently and was very powerful as every village chief during that time. So, during his wedding ceremony all people in the village were invited including all ethnic Vietnamese. He got married at the age of 19 during the late Sangkum Reastr Niyum and his family invited around 300 people and about 80 per cent of those invited guests were ethnic Vietnamese⁷⁶.

With regard to inter-marriages between Khmer and Vietnamese, many of the interviewees described it as "almost non-existent". Interviewees Chea Hongsan and Nhong Sarun told the case of a Khmer man, Toy, who got married to an ethnic Vietnamese woman in Brâlai Meas⁷⁷. And Moeung Chean recalled another Khmer man, Chhorn, who got married to an ethnic Vietnamese woman, Sour. The wedding was celebrated in a traditional manner but it was not legal⁷⁸. The ceremony of Chhorn's wedding was a hybrid form meeting the religious standards of bride and groom. The Khmer traditional ceremony was done for the first part of the wedding and the Vietnamese ceremony was in the other part⁷⁹. Teav Nakong and Teav Nakea commented

that they had never known of any inter-marriage between Khmer and Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas.⁸⁰

Some interviewees gave reasons why inter-marriages were so rare even though ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer lived together in the same commune or village for decades. Kong Korn explained that it was due to their different customs and traditions. As an example, he described how ethnic Vietnamese called each other “A or Anh”⁸¹ or using the word “Sie”⁸² for eating. In addition, the male ethnic Vietnamese wore certain kind of trousers and had long hair. But most separating according to him was the fact that most of them could not speak Khmer⁸³. Kong Korn concluded that there would have been more inter-marriages if more ethnic Vietnamese had spoken Khmer and understood the Khmer habits. Another interviewee claimed that the obstacle for inter-marriages were not only the cultural differences but also legal issues⁸⁴. As the wedding was not legally accepted by authorities, it was also difficult for the children of these inter-marriages to obtain legal documents. According to Moeung Chean who was a registrar

officer during Sangkum Reastr Niyum, the wedding was illegal. The ethnic Vietnamese bride-to-be who wanted to have the Cambodian citizenship needed to change her Vietnamese name to a Khmer name. Also, she had to show her good behaviors, knowledge of the Khmer habits and that she was not involved in any trouble in the village. Then, the authorities would consider giving her Cambodian citizenship and her children obtained a legal status with their Khmer names⁸⁵.

During Civil War from 1970 to 1975, it was difficult to celebrate weddings. In Anlong Kanchos, the village was captured by the Khmer Rouge, when people wanted to celebrate the wedding; they needed to inform the military commander in Brâlai Meas village about the event and cover the wedding hall with red clothes so the military air force would not bomb them⁸⁶.

The small number of inter-marriages and the limited participation of ethnic Vietnamese in Khmer weddings and vice-versa show the limited interactions between Khmer and Vietnamese people in the commune.

b. Pchum Ben and New Year

Just like today, Pchum Ben and Khmer New Year were the biggest traditional ceremonies during the year in Cambodia. Khmer New Year was celebrated at the pagoda which allowed Buddhist Vietnamese to participate, too. Catholic Vietnamese did not participate because of their different religion. During Khmer New Year, there were a number of ethnic Vietnamese who came to attend the ceremony. But they did not celebrate it at home as Khmer people did⁸⁷. Khmer people had to prepare food offerings for the Tevada⁸⁸ while the Vietnamese did not.

For Pchum Ben days, it was the same. There were some ethnic Vietnamese participating in the ceremony. In Anlong Kanhchos, Khmer people shared food with the Vietnamese during Pchum Ben, according to Maen Beoun⁸⁹.

According to the interviewees, no Khmer people were invited to participate in the celebrations of the Chinese/Vietnamese New Year during that time⁹⁰. Khmer people in the village did not celebrate it at their homes, either.



Food offerings during Pchum Ben, Koh Chivang commune

c. Water Festival

The Water Festival is an annual traditional ceremony, its big celebration usually taking place in Phnom Penh. At the same time, many cities and villages across the country, especially the communities located along a river, have their own ceremony. For Brâ-lai Meas it was also the same during Sangkum Reastr Niyum. Interviewee Thim Thoeun described that during Sangkum Reastr Niyum, the water festival in Brâ-lai Meas was celebrated for a whole week. The boat races did not only take place in one specific village but in many places; the racing was not a real competition, it was more for fun. They danced on the boats; they drummed⁹¹. There was no prize for the fastest boat, either. At the end of each day, they would go home and start to race again the next day⁹². Ethnic Vietnamese also participated in the racing.

They would be part of any Khmer team or they had their own team. Normally, Vietnamese boats were longer than the Khmer boats⁹³.

In some cases, when Khmer people did not have a boat for participating in the race, they went to ask Vietnamese they knew for a boat. Those ethnic Vietnamese would agree. Ouch Chheang recalled, *“Whenever Khmer people needed boats for racing, they would request boats from Vietnamese; even though they were busy using those boats, they would lend them to the Khmer.”*⁹⁴ When it came to communal festivals like the Water Festival where the different religions were not necessarily the focus of the celebrations, they seemed to be fine with their different ethnicities. Their every-day lives were all connected to the water.



Villagers in Chung Koh village, Kampong Chhnang

C. ECONOMIC RELATIONS

The Khmer perception of the ethnic Vietnamese in the commune also depended on their own economic situation, the Vietnamese economic situation and other related economic topics.

1. Livelihood

During the 1950s and the 1960s, Brâ-lai Meas commune was described by many people as the economic zone of the district, not underlying the direct supervision of the district administration but of the provincial administration.

The three main economic sectors in Brâ-lai Meas commune were trading, fishery and farming. These three sectors seemed to be dominated by different ethnicities. The majority of the Khmer were mostly working in the

agricultural sector while the Vietnamese were mostly working in the fishery sector. The third ethnic group was the Chinese who concentrated mainly on the market activities and became the leading traders⁹⁵.

Nhong Sarun's family returned from Kampong Thom in the early 1950s and his family had to clear land for growing green beans in Brâlai Meas village. He recalls that during Sangkhum Reastr Niyum the authorities were very strict in controlling the natural resources and that is why it was hard to clear more

land for farming. As his family only owned a small piece of land, they had to rent land from other people in order to be able to do farming⁹⁶. The majority of the Khmer people in Brâlai Meas commune grew green beans for one season and spent the other season at home or doing fishing.

All Khmer people in Kramal village grew green beans for a living during the dry season, and during the flooding season the villagers did small scale fishing. They were poor according to Moeung Chean. Also in Anlong Kanhchos vil-



Vendor in Chung Khneas village, Siem Reap

lage, all Khmer people were farmers and mostly grew green beans during the dry season and spent the other half of the year doing fishing⁹⁷. It was the same for the family of Sang who was responsible for supporting his family as his father was blind. He worked on a farm during the dry season and did fishing during the rainy season. Mr. Sang usually went fishing once a week and in one day he could fish about 10 to 15 kg of fish which he could sell for 3 to 5 Riels⁹⁸.

From the narrative of the Khmer people in the commune, they seemed to have the same pattern of working on farmland during the dry season and doing fishing during the rainy season. The living conditions of the Khmer people in the commune was similar in the different villages. Most of the families could make a living but could not earn enough money for saving.

The ethnic Vietnamese in the commune were mainly working as fishermen. In Brâlai Meas village, only a few ethnic Vietnamese were involved in selling at the market. But these ethnic Vietnamese were also the rich people

who owned fishing lots. The majority of the ethnic Vietnamese did fishing throughout the year to make a living. Many interviewees recalled that the ethnic Vietnamese were as poor as the Khmer people in the commune⁹⁹. They were also debtors of Chinese traders. In order to be able to buy fishing tools, the majority of both ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer people had to borrow money from the Chinese traders in the village. They also had to sell fish to the Chinese traders¹⁰⁰.

Maen Beoun described the living conditions of the ethnic Vietnamese as having been even worse than the living conditions of the Khmer people in Anlong Kanhchos. He said,

*"They were poorer than Khmer people in the village because Khmer people in the village had farm land; their floating houses were not properly built. Their houses looked messy like some floating houses in Kampong Chhnang today."*¹⁰¹

He explained that they fully relied on fishing and could not do fishing in some

of the rivers as they were monopolized by the fishing lot owners¹⁰².

The situation of the Catholic Vietnamese in Ong Ko was similar. They earned a living by fishing at Tonlé Sap Lake. So, they had to leave the Christian community for most of the time and came back only during the flooding season. According to Moeung Chean, only few of them did farming.

After the fall of Sihanouk and Lon Nol's takeover in 1970, war broke out. There was a massacre against the Vietnamese civilians claiming thousands of lives in Phnom Penh. All ethnic Vietnamese from the Catholic community fled to Vietnam leaving the Catholic community empty. Then the Khmer people lived in the community¹⁰³. Other ethnic Vietnamese in the commune gradually moved to Kampong Chhnang town or to Vietnam.

Brâlai Meas commune was in the front line of the war for the entire five years of the civil war. Brâlai Meas village was the military base of the Lon Nol armed forces while other villages in the commune far from Brâlai Meas

village were occasionally captured by the Khmer Rouge. People in the commune faced a lot of difficulties. The business at the market could only be run when there was no fighting between the Lon Nol soldiers and the Khmer Rouge soldiers. The prices for the market products were gradually increasing. The price for 15 kg of rice increased from 15 Riels to 20 Riels and went up more than double¹⁰⁴. When the clashes between the two forces occurred more often, the price for mainly rice and white gas suddenly increased¹⁰⁵.

Some Khmer people could not go to their farm land regularly and eventually could not access their land because of the war. Kramal village was captured by the Khmer Rouge and there were a lot of bombings from the Lon Nol side. So, around 1971 or 1972, people from Kramal fled to Brâlai Meas village.

The ethnic Vietnamese who had remained in Brâlai Meas commune encountered great difficulties and tried to fight for their lives there¹⁰⁶. The remaining ethnic Vietnamese were re-

garded as second class people and the Lon Nol administrators had very strict rules for the Vietnamese. They needed to have documents. Moreover, the Lon Nol authorities did not trust Vietnamese. While all Khmer people were given weapons by the Lon Nol military for self-protection, the Vietnamese did not receive any¹⁰⁷.

The remaining ethnic Vietnamese in the commune did not only face dangers during the clashes between the Lon Nol and Khmer Rouge soldiers but they also faced the risk of being killed by the Khmer Rouge guerrilla forces. When the Khmer Rouge forces found

Vietnamese, they would kill them; and when the Khmer Rouge forces found Khmer people, they would send them to serve at their military base in the jungle¹⁰⁸. With these high risks, ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer people could not travel far away making their everyday lives even more difficult. The coup of 1970 strongly affected the ethnic Vietnamese in the commune, but it did not necessarily change the Khmer perception of the ethnic Vietnamese as none of the interviewees expressed a change in their perception of the Vietnamese.



Floating house in Chung Khneas village, Siem Reap

2. Taxation and Fee

During Sangkum Reastr Niyum, Khmer people in Brâlai Meas needed to pay taxes for farm land and a fee for their identification card. Adult Khmer people (18 years of age or older) needed to pay for an ID card which was known as the “four-folded card”. Not all people could afford or were willing to pay for this ID card¹⁰⁹. For those who did not have an ID card it was not safe to travel out of the village, especially to the market. That’s why a Khmer saying from that time reads: *“In the water, there are crocodiles; on the ground, there are tigers; in the jungle, there are thorns; in the market, there are policemen”*. It was not safe for people to run into policemen as they did not have an ID card.

Vietnamese were also obliged to pay a yearly immigration fee which they called “Lang Tai” during the Sihanouk time. Khmer people in Brâlai Meas did not know the exact amount of money the Vietnamese needed to pay for Lang Tai. Moeung Chean estimated the amount of money that Vietnamese

had to pay for Lang Tai by comparing it to the weight of gold. He said Vietnamese needed to pay around one or two Chi of gold each year per person. One Chi¹¹⁰ of gold cost around 300 Riels during Sihanouk time¹¹¹. This is close to what the ethnic Vietnamese said in their interviews stating that they had to pay 700 Riels for the immigration fee¹¹². This amount of money was expensive during that time and most of the Vietnamese could not afford paying it.

As a result, many of the Vietnamese tried to avoid paying the immigration fee and to hide from the immigration officers. For example, if there were few people in a family who needed to pay the fee, the family would only pay for one or two persons and would have only those persons go to the market or town¹¹³. Some village chiefs understood the situation of the ethnic Vietnamese and sometimes tried to help them when the immigration officers came to collect the fee. Moeung Chean recalled the situation in his village:

*“The village chief would warn the Vietnamese in the village who needed to pay for the immigration fee when the immigration officers were coming. He would call them loudly and they would then hide from the officers. [...] during that time, the Khmer people in the village felt sympathy for the Vietnamese who could not afford paying it. [...] Many Khmer people did not pay for their ID card, either. From around 20 to 30 families in Kramal, only 4 to 10 people had an ID card.”*¹¹⁴

According to the interviewees, the violation of Cambodian law by the Vietnamese in the commune did not affect the Khmer perception of Vietnamese during that time. Khmer people did not consider it an illegal act not to pay the immigration or ID card fee because they perceived it as an unfair pressure from the government. Even though the fee for the Cambodian ID card was less than half the cost of the immigration fee, and it was a once-in-a-lifetime

fee, the Khmer people did not commit to paying for it, either.

In this context, Khmer people saw Vietnamese as victims. Many described how the Vietnamese tried to escape and hide from the authorities or suddenly ran away when they saw the authorities coming. None of the interviewees describe it as a violation of Cambodian law. Maen Beoun recalled, *“Once they knew that the authorities were coming to collect the immigration fee, everyone ran in different directions; they did not have money to pay for it. The law during that time was very strict.”*¹¹⁵ In some cases, Cambodian people also helped hiding them in their homes. Ouch Chheang described, *“Some Vietnamese escaped to the jungle and some people hid in Khmer houses until the authorities went away again”*¹¹⁶.

So, the violation of the law did not make those Vietnamese look bad in the perception of Khmer people. The habit of the Khmer people trying to escape the obligation to pay for their ID card and taxes made them get used to the violation of the law.

3. Natural Resources

When talking about natural resources, interviewees often compare the fish stock of the 60s and the 70s with today's fish stock. They did not care about ethnic Vietnamese fishing during the 60s and the 70s because there were plenty of fish at that time that people could easily catch. They talked about today's illegal fishing. Some of them point their finger at the ethnic Vietnamese accusing them of using banned fishing tools, for example, electric shock. During the 1960s and the 70s, none of the ethnic Vietnamese used banned fishing tools. Teav Nakong said, "*Vietnamese who lived here before the revolution did not do illegal fishing [...]*"¹⁷. They did not see it as a threat that the ethnic Vietnamese living in their commune did fishing. This was an important factor which influenced the Khmer perception of ethnic Vietnamese.





IV

CONCLUSION

With the aim to examine the relations between the ethnic Khmer and Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas commune, this paper is mainly based on interviews with Khmer people who had lived in Brâlai Meas commune during the late French Protectorate, Sangkum Reastr Niyum and Lon Nol regime. However, most of the stories from the interviewees fall into the time of Sangkum Reastr Niyum and the Lon Nol regime as only few of the interviewees were old enough to recall the time during the French Protectorate. From the descriptive narration of Khmer people in Brâlai Meas commune, their relations with ethnic Vietnamese living in their commune before the revolution can be seen as not fully positive, however, they did not necessarily hold a negative perception of the ethnic Vietnamese, either.

The narrative indicates that the majority of ethnic Vietnamese in the commune could not speak Khmer fluently, except ethnic Vietnamese in Kramal who were in the situation to commu-

nicate more with the Khmer people so that their Khmer language skills were good. They had lived in Cambodia for decades and many of them were born in Cambodia, too. Still, many of them did not speak sufficiently the language of the country they were residing in. Self-sufficiency was likely the reason for the limitation. They could live with their community without communicating much with the Khmer people and the chances of communication between them and the Khmer people were few since they lived in separately as their own community.

However, if the criterion of having Cambodian citizenship during Sangkum Reastr Niyum was an indicator of assimilation and deeper integration, possibly the majority of ethnic Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas were still far behind the criterion. The three main requirements for foreign people to be eligible for naturalization were previous continuous residency in Cambodia for at least five years, demonstrated knowledge of Khmer language and sufficient assimilation.

lation of the Khmer customs and traditions. The Khmer language and assimilation of the customs and traditions were the main challenges for them to obtain Cambodian citizenship. While Christian Vietnamese were very separated from Cambodian main religion and custom, Buddhist Vietnamese in the commune also practiced their own custom and traditions. From the narration of the Khmer interviewees, the majority of the ethnic Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas had not adopted Khmer traditions and custom.

Weddings and funerals are very participative social events in the community, especially in rural areas; however, the narrative shows a different picture. The Khmer people recalled that the ceremonies were celebrated with few members or without the participation of the other ethnic group. Also, inter-marriages between Khmer and Vietnamese in the community are described as “almost non-existent” because of the language barrier, traditional differences and legal issues. However, participations of both Khmer and Buddhist Vietnamese in religious ceremonies and the acceptance of Vietnamese monks

collecting food in the communities indicate a positive side of their relations. The Water Festival, on the other hand, integrated both Khmer and Vietnamese people. Vietnamese people participated in the festival and donated their money to support the organization of the festival. The Vietnamese may have sensed a feeling of belonging as they, too, lived along the water and the festival was not a religious one.

While socio-cultural relations were moderate, the economic relations were stronger and it helped to portray a good image of ethnic Vietnamese in the Khmer perception. Two observations can be noted about the relations between the Khmer and Vietnamese during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum in terms of economics. First, the majority of the ethnic Vietnamese in Brâlai Meas were just as poor as the Khmer people; so, there was no envy or rivalry. They were not competing in any business. The Khmer people mainly focused on doing farming while the majority of the Vietnamese relied on fishing. Due to their non-competitive occupations and similar living conditions, the Khmer did not have a negative perception of the

ethnic Vietnamese.

Second, the obligation of the Vietnamese to pay an immigration fee and the rich natural resources also helped maintain a positive image of the Vietnamese. During Sangkum Reastr Niyum, the majority of the Vietnamese families could not afford to pay the immigration fee; so, they were struggling to pay the fee. Those who could not pay the fee would hide from the Cambodian immigration officers. By doing so, they obviously violated Cambodian

immigration law, but it did not affect the Khmer perception in the commune. On the contrary, Khmer people saw those Vietnamese as victims of the immigration law because most of the Khmer people did not pay the ID card, either. Additionally, as there were plenty of fish in the river during that period, Khmer people did not see the threat of possible extinction of the fish stock. In addition to the rich fish stock, illegal fishing did not take place before the Khmer Rouge regime, according to the Khmer interviewees.



Kandal village, Kampong Chhnang

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 - 54 Nhong, Sarun, Mr., Thim, Thoeun, Mr., and Chea, Hongsan, Mr., March 05, 2015.
 - 55 This is a month-long traditional season from the second half of Asoch (a month of lunar calendar around November) to the second half of Kadek (around December). During this period, there is normally a ceremony day on which people, especially rich people, donate money or other things to the pagoda.
 - 56 Thim, Thoeun, Mr., March 05, 2015
 - 57 Maen, Beoun, Mr., July 09, 2015.
 - 58 Sang, Mr. March 05, 2015.
 - 59 Ibid.
 - 60 A monk who is under 21 years old.
 - 61 Om, Sophal, Mrs., March 19, 2015

- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Moeung, Chean Mr., July 07, 2015
- 64 Maen, Chhun, Mr., March 18, 2015
- 65 Thim, Thoeun, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 66 Nhong, Sarun, Mr., July 08, 2015
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Hongsan Chea, Mr., and Sarun Nhong, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 69 Moeung, Chean Mr., July 07, 2015
- 70 Ouch, Chheang, Mr., July 09, 2015
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Thim, Thoeun, Mr., Hongsan Chea, Mr., and Sarun Nhong, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 73 Moeung, Chean Mr., March 05, 2015
- 74 Nhong, Sarun, Mr., July 08, 2015 and Moeung, Chean Mr., July 07, 2015
- 75 Un, Sorn, Mr., July 09, 2015.
- 76 Moeung, Chean Mr., July 07, 2015
- 77 Mr., Hongsan Chea, Mr., and Sarun Nhong, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 78 Moeung, Chean Mr., March 05, 2015.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Teav, Nakong, Mrs., and Teav, Nakea, Mrs., July 07, 2015
- 81 A disrespectful title
- 82 There are different words for “eating” for the king, monks, older people, same aged or younger people. The word “sie” was only used among people of the same age. Still, it was not polite to use this word for every person.
- 83 Kong, Korn, Mr., July 06, 2015
- 84 Ouch, Chheang, Mr., July 09, 2015
- 85 Moeung, Chean Mr., March 05, 2015
- 86 Maen, Beoun, Mr., July 09, 2015.
- 87 Nhong, Sarun, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 88 In Buddhism, Tevada is one of many different types of non-human beings who share the characteristics of being more powerful, longer-lived, and, in general, much happier than humans.
- 89 Maen, Beoun, Mr., July 09, 2015.
- 90 Nhong, Sarun, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 90 Thim, Thoeun, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 91 Ouch, Chheang, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 92 Nhong, Sarun, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 93 Ouch, Chheang, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 94 Moeung, Chean Mr., July 07, 2015
- 95 Nhong, Sarun, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 96 Maen, Beoun, Mr., July 09, 2015.
- 97 Sang, Mr. March 05, 2015.
- 98 Moeung, Chean Mr., July 07, 2015; Maen, Beoun, Mr., and Un, Sorn, Mr., July 09, 2015.; Nhong,

- Sarun, Mr., Ouch, Chheang, Mr., March 05, 2015; Teav, Nakong, Mrs., July 07, 2015.
- 99 Moeung, Chean Mr., July 07, 2015.
- 100 Maen, Beoun, Mr., July 09, 2015.
- 101 Maen, Beoun, Mr., July 09, 2015.
- 102 Nhong, Sarun, Mr., March 05, 2015
- 103 Om, Sophal, Mrs., March 19, 2015
- 104 Ibid.
- 105 Ibid.
- 106 Moeung, Chean, Mr., July 07, 2015
- 107 Om, Sophal, Mrs., March 19, 2015
- 108 Sang, Mr., March 05, 2015.
- 109 1 Chi = 3.75 grams
- 110 Moeung, Chean, Mr., July 07, 2015
- 111 Chhim, K., Ly, R., Sao, S., & Meyer, S., *Life before Expulsion.*, p. 14
- 112 Maen, Beoun, Mr., July 09, 2015.
- 113 Moeung, Chean, Mr., July 07, 2015
- 114 Maen, Beoun, Mr., July 09, 2015.
- 115 Ouch, Chheang, Mr., July 09, 2015
- 116 Teav, Nakong, Mrs., July 07, 2015
- 117 Teav, Nakong, Mrs., July 07, 2015

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