

# Marriage Culture of Raglai Ethnic Group

Nguyen Ngoc Thanh<sup>1</sup>, Ho Sy Lap<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Information on Ethnic Minority Cultures, Vietnam Association of Ethnologists and Anthropologists.

Email: thanhvdth@gmail.com

Received: 1 March, 2017.

Accepted: 30 March, 2017.

**Abstract:** Based on the results of research on the Raglai ethnic group in Khanh Hoa province, the article points out that marriages of the group bear the features of a matriarchal society such as a girl “catching” a man to be her husband, a son-in-law residing in his wife's family, children adopting their mothers’ surnames... However, Raglai marriages are formed on the bases of the couple’s love and voluntarism and the consent of their parents and members of the clan. The Raglai follow the principles of [biological] exogamy and monogamy. In addition, the role and position of Raglai men in the family and society are different from those in other matriarchal ethnic groups. These factors are the features which characterise the ethnic group’s marriages.

**Keywords:** Marriage, matriarchal, clan, Raglai.

## 1. Introduction

Raglai is one of the minor ethnic groups that belong to the Malayo-Polynesian language family in Vietnam. According to the 2009 Vietnam Population and Housing census, the group’s population was 122,245, making it the 19<sup>th</sup> largest among Vietnam’s 54 ethnic groups. The Raglai follow a matriarchal system and is considered an ethnicity of native origin, which has settled in Vietnam for quite a while. They mostly reside in the mountainous areas of 500m high in Ninh Thuan and Khanh Hoa provinces. In addition, some sections are scattered in the districts of Binh Thuan and Lam Dong provinces.

Marriage is a social phenomenon that has been in history for a long time, whose

manifestations and features vary among particular historical areas. To a certain extent, it is a reflection of an ethnic group’s economic, cultural and social features. It is through marriage that the group’s cultural characteristics are more or less identified. Since the beginning of history, it has been fulfilling roles and missions that are sacred, noble and vital to both individual and community lives.

As with many other ethnic groups, the Raglai consider marriage especially important to a person’s life. It is their conception that having a spouse means maintaining one’s lineage. Marriage is of extreme significance, marking the maturation and transition of social status of the youth in a Raglai community or society, as it helps the newly married couples to

enter their new positions and embark on a sacred responsibility, which is the maintenance and development of their family and kin's lineage. Moreover, through marriage, the relationships between the family members, the bride's and groom's families and members of the ethnic community are further consolidated. The article studies and clarifies the Raglai ethnic group's marriages in both traditional and modern-day forms to shed light on its cultural perception and identity.

## **2. Marital characteristics**

### *2.1. Marriage age*

In the past, Raglai people got married at an early age, which was around 15-16. It was said by many that due to matriarchy, married bridegrooms had to stay at their wives' home as addition to the latter's workforce. In a Raglai-occupied area, a man of over 30 years old was married to a 12- or 13-year-old girl. In the communes of Ba Cum Bac and Ba Cum Nam, women were married at an older age, around 20-25, or even older [1, p.178]. In Cam Ranh, the Raglai couples were also married at a rather early age - 16, and had learnt about each other even sooner. Raglai people in coastal ancient villages such as Thong Nhat (Cam Phuoc Dong commune), Tinh Son (Cam Tinh Tay commune)... still maintains the custom of early marriage to add to the workforce. This shows that their conception of marriage age varies according to different factors, without a fixed standard of an appropriate age. A comparison between the male and female marriage ages shows

that men tend to marry at a later date, which may be due to their delayed puberty. But more importantly, "as a husband and at the same time a matriarchal family's son-in-law, he naturally becomes the family's "breadwinner". As such, the son-in-law must at any rate be more mature than his partner in both age and working experience in order to fulfill his responsibilities as defined by the customary laws" [2, p.77].

Today, the Raglai marry at a later date, with some male representatives getting married in their 30s, while their female counterparts – when they are older than 25. Many couples get married in the age group of 19 to 22, which is regarded as a lucky and proper period to form a family according the Raglai's conception. This trend of getting married at a later date is viewed by the natives as positive and relevant with their current living standards. Surveys taken in the districts of Khanh Son, Khanh Vinh and Cam Ranh (Khanh Hoa) showed that the period between 19 and 22 years of age occupies the largest proportion among both men (76.8%) and women (51.9%). According to statistics provided by the judicial cadres of Son Binh commune, Khanh Son district, in 2014, 24 couples registered for marriage, with the male average marriage age being 23.8 and women's being 22.3; in 2015 among 14 couples registering for marriage, the former group's reached 26.6 and latter group's was 24.9.

The marriage age has been lifted due to many reasons. First, thanks to an improved education system, 100% of the children are now able to go to school, universal primary and lower secondary education continues to be maintained, the number of students

entering colleges and universities increases, making children that are still in school less likely to drop out to pursue marriage. Second, nowadays the Raglai youth are more aware of the Law on Marriage and Family, and most of them acknowledge the illegal nature of child marriage. Third, the communal authorities are determined to forbid marriages before the ages of 18-20, even imposing financial sanctions on the transgressors, or not allowing them to set up a separate household (in the household registration system, demonstrated with *sổ hộ khẩu*, or household registration books), thus the awareness of marriage law is further improved.

## 2.2. Partner selection

Marriage is the point of time that marks one's maturity in biological development and social status. Whether the newly-created family can sustain its happiness depends largely on the selection of a man/woman's "partner". Thus, as soon as they start choosing the partners, the Raglai young men and women aim to find their ideal brides/grooms. In their view, ladies that proactively seek and court male counterparts are heinous and tainted. Upholding virginity is the leading criterion that defines a person's pre-marriage value. Women aside, men have to keep their integrity when contacting women. "Promiscuous" men find it difficult to find their life partners.

For her part, any woman wants to marry a resourceful and good-natured man that dedicates himself entirely to his wife, children and parents-in-law. As the Raglai

in Cam Ranh put it: "*Woa cumây mạ lacây la ghe*" (pronounced as "wa koomei ma lahca y lah ghair - a blessed woman has captured a man for her family). Given their slash-and-burn agriculture, labour is essential in maintaining productivity and the livelihood of a family. By being physically strong, business-minded and somewhat skillful in crafting household appliances, the man proves to be a potentially able husband.

For the men, all of them want to get married to a gentle, humble and hardworking partner that cares for her husband and children and, even better, is prettier than usual. Women are supposed to be gentle, meek, soft, "smile gently while working hard", and stay away from promiscuity and licentiousness [3, p.510]. Their modesty is also judged from the ways they dress, talk and behave, and ethically good women are socially respectable.

Today, apart from criteria such as having good nature, a decent health, farming and hunting skills, etc., there are other requirements such as sharing the same kinship, being highly educated and securely employed. The most important criterion for partner selection to the Raglai youth is still love and concord. Over 70% of the interviewees ranked love as the leading criterion. The second was coming from the same kinship. The ratios of Raglai individuals asking for this criterion in Khanh Son, Khanh Vinh and Cam Ranh were 40%, 21.4% and 6.5% respectively. In the Raglai view, being from the same kinship can help maintain greater harmony in daily life thanks to the similarities in the views on life, and the customs and habits.

There are also other criteria, such as being highly educated, employed or rich, that are not as statistically significant.

### *2.3. The right to determine marriage*

It is up to the couples to decide whether to engage in love and marriage. In the traditional Raglai society there were only a few cases when marriages were arranged. That is, if two families were close to each other, the parents would arrange for a marriage with the purpose of allying and further combining the two sides. Marriages were then verbally arranged without any written contracts (sometimes either a ring or token was used as a pledge). Formerly, it was impossible to cancel a marriage because promises were held as sacred. Furthermore, parents were the last to decide on their children's marital journey. As such, grown-up men and women would fulfill their parents' promises by officially getting married to their spouse.

Despite following a matriarchal model, in love affairs Raglai men are supposed to take the initiative. Their proactive role is based on the idea that buffaloes must seek marshes and swamps and not the other way round, or a girl had better try not to seek for the man though she is already longing for him. During the pre-marriage period, everything is decided by the young couple, but further decisions from their parents or the uncle, who is the mother's younger brother, are required if they want to be officially married to each other. The first requirement is whether a partner fits into the commonly-defined marriage principles,

after which other "standards" of a good spouse are taken into account such as gentleness, healthiness, interpersonal and business skills [1]. Nevertheless, being able to freely learn about one's future partner is a reflection of equality in the Raglai family relationships.

Most of the Raglai youth are currently allowed to be proactive in finding a partner. As with any other important affairs in a person's life, parents have become more attentive to their children's decisions and respectful of their affection. A minority of youngsters get into each other with the help of friends and relatives. Rarely is there a case when parents set up marriage for their children without prior consent. For their part, the youngsters somehow express their respect to the parents' experiences, listening attentively to and winning the consent of the latter, so as to enter the marriage life.

### *2.4. The practice of "ngủ thảo" (pre-marriage bed-sharing)*

In the Raglai view, marriage without love is doomed to be a misery. As such, the practice of pre-marriage bed-sharing is accepted as a way for young partners to learn about each other. It can be done by the male and female partners without their family's consent, which again proves that the Raglai respect equality and self-determination in marriage. As partners may have known each other for a long time, pre-marriage bed-sharing helps decide whether they can obtain life-long chemistry. Or, if they had not been familiar to each other, it would help them know more about each other.

In the traditional Raglai society, pre-marriage bed-sharing is popular but still bound by certain rules. As such, every night a man is only allowed to share bed with one woman and vice versa, while any sexual intercourse is forbidden. Violators will be without doubt punished by their family, relatives or the *palay* (village). Anyone since their childhood receives frequent reminders from their grandparents and parents of such points. Yet, there are still couples failing to be compliant and have to redeem themselves through tributary rituals. The man's family has to offer a cup of alcohol and a chicken to beg for being forgiven by the earth and their ancestors as they had broken the ancestral codes. After that, the two families are engaged in a casual feast in which other youngsters are advised against violating the codes.

### 3. Marriage rules

#### 3.1. Lineage exogamy

Lineage exogamy is a common rule that has been long established. According to this rule, members of the same family line, ancestry or lineage as set forth in their parents are forbidden to get married and have sex with one another [5, p.122]. For a matriarchal society such as the Raglai, kin relationships are established based on the mother's family line rather than the father's. A family line (*patia*) is used by the Raglai to refer to a social institution comprising members of the same bloodline, based on the mother's surname, who is the descendant of an imaginary and made-up female ancestor that might have not existed in a reality

recognisable to her offspring. Initially, individuals bearing the same surnames (Chamalea, Pinang, Kator, etc.) were forbidden to get into marriage no matter how far they were from each other. The Tro family line, a Northern Raglai group, prohibits marriage among its members despite having divided itself into two (sub-)groups. Only the Chamalea, Pinang and Kator family lines, in response to their growing population, divide themselves into different branches and apply exogamy only to the main branch [1, p.159]. As such, members of the any same surnames of less than seven generations are prohibited from marrying each other. In reality, however, because no genealogy has been made, it is hard to remember one's cousins from the fifth generation, let alone seventh. The *wise elders* say that cousins of more than three generations are eligible to marry each other.

Lineage exogamy is also a way to avoid consanguineous marriage or incest. Incest taboo is the most universal cultural rule, which, save for exceptions, is imposed by any nations. But as a cultural rule, the incest taboo is not essentially absolute, as its degree and scope of application vary between social and cultural structures of different ethnic groups. Its universality and relativity do not conflict but both confirm that culture can transgress natural boundaries and influence nature. Therefore, exogamy is allowed as a means to create a network of social relationships, which helps ensure peace and stability.

#### 3.2. Ethnic endogamy

In the past, due to their rather distinct way of establishing residency, reserved mentality,

and limited understanding of other ethnic groups, the Raglai tended to get married to their fellow men. According to the *wise elders*, a resistant disposition to customary and habitual differences causes the Raglai to hesitate to marry people from other ethnicities. They are even unwilling to settle next to the Ede, an ethnic group that follows matriarchy and shares many similar customs and habits. In addition, ethnic endogamy is said to help preserve traditional values and ethnic identity. In the Raglai view, ethnic endogamy makes it easier to spread a village's customs and customary laws and a family line's regulations; and, familial cooperation in raising and nurturing children can help expand their ancestral customs and values.

### 3.3. Monogamy

The traditional Raglai marriage system is based on monogamy. The Raglai society puts a strong emphasis on fidelity to one's spouse while degrading those that abandon theirs. The Raglai customary laws make no mandatory rules but still use preventive methods and deterrence against "unfaithful" partners in order to maintain stability in marriages, which paves the way for social development. Despite following a matriarchal system and allowing a woman to "catch" her own husband, the role of men in general and husbands in particular are highly valued by the Raglai. This is evidently shown when a council of village elders, mostly consisting of male seniors well versed in the ethnicity's habits and customs, make judgements on every violation by the

members. In the family, a man is supposed to be the breadwinner and in charge of its main duties. Even after a Raglai man gets married and living with his parents-in-law, his uncle, who is his mother's younger brother, still plays an important role in his marital affairs.

The basic rules in traditional marriage such as biological exogamy and monogamy are currently strictly adhered to and observed by the Raglai. The group's customary laws sternly prohibit consanguineous marriage, and in daily life adults frequently remind and educate their children of observing these rules. However, a few cases of transgression have been found. Those involved in these cases were disdained by villagers and punished by the village elders in line with the customary laws.

Today, given the trend of mixed populations, the Kinh, Tay, Nung, Muong, Ede also reside in Raglai villages. Moreover, by increasingly coming into contact with other ethnic groups through using the internet and working far away from home, the Raglai marriages are no longer limited to a village or the endogamous basis. Ethnic endogamy was traditionally present in communities that live in seclusion, and thus will adapt itself if isolated dwelling is forfeit. Today, interethnic marriage has become more common among the Raglai, especially that with the Kinh ethnic group, which further consolidates the Kinh-Raglai relations and diversifies the ethno-demographic landscape in the commune of Son Binh. These partners will transfer and complement each other's cultural traits during their time together, and their children also adopt cultural feats from both parents.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Raglai marriages reflect their views on humanity and interpersonal relationships. In essence, the Raglai pay homage to matriarchal practices such as wives catching husbands, bridegrooms living with wives' family, children adopting mothers' surnames, etc. In some aspects, however, their marriages are renovated: marriages are voluntarily formed based on the couples' mutual affection, with the consent of their parents and relatives, and the marriage rules are not so severely binding - it is allowed to marry a person of an external ethnicity, and no longer a must to marry a sibling of one's deceased husband or wife, etc. On the other hand, the Raglai marriages show the differences regarding the male partner's familial and social role and position as compared to those of other matriarchal ethnic groups. In the current context, apart from the contribution of the Law on Marriage and Family, the views and rules in Raglai marriages add an important part to the development of Vietnam's new countryside.

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