

# Marriage and family issues in five ethnic minorities with very small populations in Vietnam today

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**Abstract:** *Based on a literature review and field research, the paper clarifies the existing problems and the social challenges of the five sparsely-populated ethnic minorities (O-du, Brau, Ro-mam, Pu Peo and Si La) in Vietnam today, with a focus on marriage and family aspects.*

**Keywords:** Ethnic Minorities, Social Issues, Marriage, Family Relationship, O-du, Brau, Ro-mam, Pu Peo, Si La

## Introduction

Ethnic diversity is a pride, contributing to enriching the national cultural identity of Vietnam, diversifying the world cultural picture, but also posing great responsibilities to the governing agencies, researchers and ethnic minorities themselves. The 2009 Vietnam Population and Housing Census show that 53 ethnic minorities account for 14.3% of the national population (Central Steering Committee for Population and Housing Census, 2010). Five ethnic groups with a population that is fewer than 1,000 are O-du (residing in Nghe An), Brau, Ro-Mam (Kon Tum), Pu Peo (Ha Giang) and Si La (Lai Chau). Despite great attention of the Party and the State paid to both material and spiritual life of ethnic minorities in general and five ethnic

groups with a population less than 1,000 in particular for years, it's not comprehensive to some extent. On the other hand, their low awareness of preserving and promoting cultural identity inevitably causes cultural loss or distortion.

Literature review coupled with fieldwork<sup>1</sup>, the paper overviews the issues related to marriage and family relations of these five ethnic groups today, thereby partly creating a scientific basis for their suitable and feasible socio-economic development programs.

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<sup>1</sup> Field research in 2014-2015 of the *Project on cultural exploration and preservation of ethnic groups in Lai Chau hydropower reservoir area* by Assoc. Prof. PhD. Nguyen Ngoc Thanh.

## 1. Marriage

### \* *Child marriage*

Results from the Survey on the socio-economic situation of 53 ethnic minorities in 2015 shows that the average proportion of under-age married is as high as 26.6%. There are five ethnic groups with a very high proportion of under-age married, being O-du (73%), followed by Ro-mam and Brau (50%), Si La (42%) and Pu Peo (11.8%) (Committee for Ethnic Minorities and General Statistics Office, 2015). It can be seen that child marriage is rather alarming and quite common in O-du and Si La people, respectively. According to Tran Thi Mai Lan et al (2015: 11), Si La people in traditional society do not attach much importance to girl's virginity. Therefore, those aged 13-15 years can have sexual intercourse before marriage but will be subject to heavy customary law if they become pregnant. Currently, the fact that Si La boys and girls in the two villages of Seo Hai and Si Hau Chai (Can Ho - Muong Te - Lai Chau province) married at the age of 16-17 is relatively popular. Some even become parents while being in the final years of secondary school. Because customary laws are no longer as strict as before, Si La girls with illegitimate children are no longer fined. Up to six Si La female students in these two villages became single mothers at school age, most of them went to school far away from home.

In fact, low educational level and limited awareness of laws of the ethnic minorities contributes to increasing early marriage, especially for women in ethnic groups with very small population. According to a survey, about one-third of women aged 20-49 years (26.9%) without any qualifications get married before 18, whereas only 1.2%

of whom had a high school diploma, vocational or college certificates and above gets married early (Committee for Ethnic Minorities, 2016: 5).

It can be seen that child marriage threatens girls' lives and health, and it limits their opportunities and future prospects, including their job prospects, and has long-term effects on their families (See: Son Nam, 2016).

### \* *Consanguineous marriage*

Consanguineous marriage among the smallest ethnic groups that has been discussed much in ethnographic/anthropological studies in recent years, is a matter which requires special attention. Some statistics show that although there has been a tendency to decline, inbreeding in these ethnic groups are still at risk of resurgence. Statistics of the General Department of Population and Family Planning (Ministry of Health) reveal that the proportion of near-blood married in ethnic groups of Si La, Pu Peo, Ro-Mam, Brau is up to 10%. It means that ten in every hundred marriages are of inbreeding, which makes these ethnic groups the most exposed to a decline in population quality. Cross-cousin marriage is most popular in the northern mountainous region and the Central Highlands. From 2004-2011, Lai Chau province had more than 200 people involved in inbreeding, in which the proportion of near-blood married in some ethnic minorities with a small population was up to 20% (Cited by the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, 2014b: 5-6). In Kon Tum province where the Brau and Ro-mam are largely concentrated, there were 56 near-blood married in a total of 350 child marriages (Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, 2014a).

On the other hand, recent ethnographic/ anthropological studies have yielded more positive survey results: inbreeding among ethnic groups with very small populations have declined greatly, even no longer survived. Research on the O-du people, Bui Xuan Dinh (2014) shows that the practice of clan exogamy and unaccepted marriage among cousins within five generations are their typical features and basic principles today. Therefore, marriage between ethnic groups is a long-standing trend, mainly due to the fact that this group is among those with the fewest people so they are always aware that the O-du people all carry the same surname of “Lo” so they are blood-related (Bui Xuan Dinh et al, 2017: 1227). Pu Peo men and women also default to the principle of lineage exogamy to avoid unnecessary risks for their married life (Le Hai Dang et al, 2016: 786). The Brau’s practice of inbreeding, polyandry, levirate, and sororate... has been so far a special case. The majority of Brau people follows the principle of lineage exogamy and ethnic endogamy (Bui Ngoc Quang, 2017: 1164). For Si La people, inbreeding no longer happens in young couples. Statistics from the marriage register of the People’s Committee of Can Ho commune shows that, from 2007 to 2013, there are 11 Si La couples getting married but none of them are relatives (Tran Thi Mai Lan et al, 2015: 13).

The above statements are completely reasonable because the level of awareness, ethnic relations as well as the pattern of alternating residence will promote the mixed marriage. Therefore, in our opinion, the near-blood married is no longer really worrisome as noted on the media over time.

#### \* *Mixed marriage*

Mixed marriages are an increasing trend in the five ethnic groups with very small population thanks to the more expanded relationship and exchanges in terms of social space and ethnic composition. Previously, only members of the same ethnic group and even at the same locality married each other, which is due to traditional practices and inferiority complexes of a community with very few people.

Currently, people’s awareness and their social position are gradually improved. The process of bringing together creates an increasingly close relationship between ethnic groups not only in the fields of politics, economy, and culture but also expressed quite clearly in marriage relations. Socio-economic factors impact and promote the trend of mixed marriages between ethnic groups with very small population.

For Pu Peo people, after *Doi moi*, the reopened borderline, convenient traffic, and better learning opportunities have facilitated the exchanges between the Pu Peo youth with other ethnic groups. While studying in boarding schools, participating in social work, trade and festivals in localities, even making friends on social networking sites, many Pu Peo young people have chosen their spouse, including those from other ethnic groups. A survey of Pu Peo people in Dong Van district, Ha Giang province today reveals that among the male-headed households in Chung Chai village (Pho La commune), the number of other ethnic households such as Tay, Co Lao, Kinh, and Nung makes up a small percentage, but in Pu Peo families, more than 50% of the total households have different ethnic women (Hmong, Kinh, Giay, Co Lao, Tay,

and Chinese) as a bride (Le Hai Dang et al, 2016: 784-785).

The period from 2000 onward, many Si La people tend to marry Ha Nhi, Thai, Cong, Dao, Kinh, Muong and Tay people in the region. According to incomplete statistics of a research group, Can Ho commune has 22 couples of mixed marriages between Si La people and those from other ethnic groups (Tran Thi Mai Lan, 2015: 13). In Si Chau Chai village alone, there are five, three and two couples who are Si La people married to Kinh, Thai women and Kinh men, respectively (Nguyen Ngoc Thanh, 2015: 887). For these marriages, the girls of other ethnic groups who marry the Si La people must follow the customs of the Si La people and vice versa. The Ro-mam community currently has many brides and bridegrooms who are members of other ethnic groups such as Brau, Gia-rai, Xo-dang, Thai and Muong. According to one study, the village of Le (Mo Rai - Sa Thay - Kon Tum) has an official population of 423 people/111 households, of which 42 are from other ethnic groups marrying the Ro-mam (Nguyen Thi Ngan, 2015: 34).

The Brau people since 1995 have expanded the marriage relationship with several different ethnic groups (Gia-rai, Xo-dang, Ro-mam, Hre, Thai, Muong, Kinh, Khmer, etc.) living in three countries of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. There are 39 couples of mixed marriages between the Brau people with members of different ethnic groups, namely Xo Dang, Muong, Thai and Kinh people are 28 couples (71.8%), 8 couples (20.6%), 2 couples (5.1%) and 1 couple (2.6%), respectively. Under the strong impact of the process of cultural integration, exchange and acculturation, the Brau people now have a diverse and

complex ethnic composition. In addition to the Brau people, there are members of other ethnic groups who come to live after marriage with Brau people and those who voluntarily come to live (free migration and migration according to the State's programs and plans). Their descendants were born, making it difficult to determine the composition of the ethnic group. Increasing mixed marriages lead to the risk of humanity dissolving in Brau people. Those are marital relationships that are both mixed and overlapping, creating new generations with a mix of bloodlines. The census of this ethnic group will become more and more difficult and inaccurate because the Brau lineage becomes increasingly fading (Bui Ngoc Quang, 2014: 1165).

Exclusively for the O-du, marrying members of other ethnic groups have happened for a long time because it's believed that they have the same origin so they cannot marry each other; meanwhile, they live together with other ethnic groups, so it's rare for the O-du to marry each other. In Vong Mon village (Nga My - Tuong Duong - Nghe An), according to statistics in 2014, only two couples who are the same O-du, the remaining couples are the O-du people marrying Thai, Kho-mu, Kinh and Lao people. Of the 421 inhabitants of the village, there are 316 O-du people, 8 Thai people (two families) and remaining 97 people from other ethnic groups who married to the O-du people or declared by O-du adoptive grandparents or parents (Bui Xuan Dinh et al, 2017: 1228).

Currently, ethnic exogamy is currently strongly affecting the improvement of the population quality of these ethnic groups. In addition, it also has a positive meaning in strengthening the exchange of good cultural

values, creating solidarity, attachment and mutual support among ethnic groups.

In the ethnic groups of Pu Peo, Brau and Ro-mam, due to the transnational ethnic relations in China, Laos and Cambodia, women of these ethnic groups get married to the members of the same or different ethnicity across the border. However, many of these marriages are not legally registered with local authorities apart from wedding ceremonies held in the host country. Through marriage and kinship relations, many cultural traits of the ethnic group across the border have a profound impact on costumes, food, production practices, rituals and beliefs of Vietnam's ethnic minorities.

It can be clearly seen that trade relations and family visits have formed a new type of marriage relationship, which is one of the factors that increase the trend of the cross-border marriage of ethnic groups residing in the border areas. However, cross-border marriages also involve a number of social problems, above all the risks to women who marry foreigners when they fail to perform marriage procedures according to the laws of the host country. In addition to the tendency to marry in neighboring countries, many women have been trafficked across the border. Therefore, cross-border marriages in some smallest ethnic groups are also posing many challenges in border management and stable socio-economic development of localities in this region.

## **2. Family relationship**

In the traditional society, families of ethnic groups of Pu Peo, Si La và O-du follow a patriarchal system, while those of the Brau and Ro-mam abide by the dual system. Currently, the Brau and Ro-mam extended families including many generations living in a house no longer exist, which is replaced

by nuclear families. The manifestation of patriarchy in these two ethnic groups is also more and more clearly reflected by the direct impact of the State's population densification programs and projects, split households, setting up gardens and financial support policies for house building. As a result, the family structure is fragmented and loose, affecting the functions of the family in traditional society and the bond between members and generations in the family (Bui Ngoc Quang, 2017: 1168). For the Ro-mam ethnic group, the transition from an extended family to a nuclear one is accompanied by the gradual transfer of the leading role from the woman to the man. There is more or less reversal in order and discipline in the family relations among the studied ethnic groups. As young people increasingly expand their social relations, the role of families in educating and orienting their personality becomes more and more fading. Many people in the generation of grandparents and parents today can't help feeling uneasy by the rapid change of their descendants (Ma Ngoc Dung, 2000: 144). In addition, the trend of increasing mixed ethnic marriage also changes the relationship between family members compared to tradition. For the Brau people, mixed marriages significantly change the relationship between Brau parents and their daughters-in-law/sons-in-law who are from other ethnic people. Communication and transmission between this generation and other generations in the same ethnic family will be continuously and positively. Meanwhile, each generation in different ethnic families must "compromise" in this multi-dimensional relationship (Bui Ngoc Quang, 2014: 1170). Besides positive values, mixed ethnic marriage

also has certain limitations. In fact, if the relationship between mixed marriages is well reconciled, the culture of each ethnic group will be more and more enriched. However, in modern society, marriage and family life are governed by complicated issues, coupled with differences in language, customs, viewpoints, lifestyles, etc., mixed marriages are therefore more likely to break up than that of the same ethnicity. In Dak Me village (Bo Y - Ngoc Hoi - Kon Tum), divorce is no longer rare and more common among couples between a Brau wife with a husband who is different ethnic member, especially Kinh and Muong. There is a Brau family with four couples divorced out of a total of five couples in which the husband is from different ethnic groups (Bui Ngoc Quang, 2014: 194). Certainly, it is not easy to reconcile the differences in language, and lifestyle among members and generations of this multi-ethnic family. In recent years, due to the influence of the resettlement process to build hydropower projects, the family relations in ethnic groups of Si La and O-du have also made significant changes. The process of relocation and resettlement has torn apart the population of Si La people. In the old village, big families of Si La lived close to each other, often the parents' house was in the middle, their children's gathered around. When moving to the resettlement area, the household location is determined by lucky draw so nuclear families are forced to live apart from each other (Tran Thi Mai Lan et al., 2015: 47). Resettlement has broken the traditional community structure, causing certain pressures for community members. Some households in the resettlement area cannot only cultivate as livelihoods, but they also have to find

work outside, including those are usually young girls who go to work in big cities and send money home. Therefore, the traditional family structure is somewhat incomplete, and young girls face many risks when living away from home.

Besides, hydropower projects involve a number of social problems. Our field survey in 2015 of Si La people in the resettlement area shows that, when the resettlement happens, there are many road and bridge workers on construction works in the area. The Kinh male workers among others come to live with Si La girls. The fact that when the project is completed, they move to another place, leaving Si La women to raise their children alone and confront the public opinion has a strong influence on the transformation of family structure in this ethnic group.

### **3. Conclusion**

The O-du, Brau, Ro-mam, Pu Peo, Si La ethnic minorities who have gone through many ups and downs, still survive to this day thanks to their own efforts, the support from Vietnam's Party and the State as well as other ethnic groups and attention from international organizations. After resettlement, swidden farming still holds a key position in their livelihood. Shifting cultivation is replaced with fixed cultivation. However, due to many objective and subjective reasons, the lives of these ethnic groups still exist many challenges and obstacles related to marriage and family relations. These ethnic groups live in the border areas, so these problems become more urgent and require more timely intervention, especially in the context of external forces always seeking to take advantage of life difficulties, people's low educational level and credulity to incite people, divide and undermine our great

national unity, destabilize politics and defence security in border areas. Issues related to marriage and family relations play an important role in the socio-economic development process of each ethnic group. Therefore, appropriate ethnic policies need to be promulgated by the Party and the State to overcome the above social limitations in a comprehensive and synchronous manner □

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