

The impact of social relations on the livelihoods of the Hmong and Khmu ethnic groups in the border area of Ky Son district, Nghe An province¹

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Abstract: *Out of five ethnic groups residing in the border area of Ky Son district, Nghe An province, the Hmong and Khmu account for a larger proportion of the total population than the rest. They also have relationship with people of the same or different ethnic groups in other countries with and without a border with Vietnam. In particular, unique features in terms of their marriage, family and lineage relationships, as well as ethnic relationships, which are increasingly strengthened, expressed through means of earning a living, social activities, cultural exchanges, etc., have been bringing significant income to local households, transforming the economic structure, and contributing to the preservation of ethnic cultures.*

Keywords: Social Relations, Livelihood, Marriage and Family, Ethnic Relations, Hmong Ethnic Group, Khmu Ethnic Group, Nghe An Province

1. Introduction

Social relations refer to the connections among individuals, as well as between

individuals and organizations that are formed through various domains of social, economic, political, cultural, legal, ideological, and ethical activities. Such relations are characterized by their stability and durability among social actors. They are established through stable and recurrent social interactions, which may manifest diverse features, thereby creating different forms of social relations.

The borderlands of Ky Son district in Nghe An province are marked by particularly challenging conditions, including rugged terrain and slow socioeconomic development. The area also occupies

¹ The data used for this study were collected through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2023, when Ky Son was still an administrative unit at the district level. As of 1 July, 2025, a two-tier local government system will take effect under Law No. 72/2025/QH15 on the Organization of Local Government, which was adopted by the National Assembly on 16 June, 2025. Accordingly, Ky Son district will be dissolved, and its one township and twenty communes will be merged into twelve new communes, namely Muong Xen, Muong Tip, Nam Can, Chieu Luu, Huu Kiem, Na Loi, Keng Du, Huoi Tu, Muong Long, Bac Ly, My Ly, and Na Ngoi.

a strategically vital position in terms of national defense, security, and the protection of territorial sovereignty. As an expansive headwater and a critical watershed protection zone of the Lam river, inhabited predominantly by ethnic minority communities, Ky Son district plays an important role in promoting the nation's sustainable development. The development of this border region has been shaped not only by economic sensitivity but also by ethnic, cultural, and social complexity. Accordingly, social relations have had profound impacts on the livelihoods of the Hmong and Khmu people in this area.

2. The impact of marriage and family relations on livelihoods

Among the Hmong, marriage is perceived as a means of adding labor to the household. Having children ensures the continuation of the lineage and provides support in old age. Marriage also serves to enhance the clan's prestige and influence. Hmong people tend to marry at a relatively early age, typically between 13 and 15 for men and between 15 and 17 for women. Driven by the need to expand the household labor force, in many cases, husbands are considerably younger than their wives.

For the Khmu, in traditional society, it was both obligatory and customary for a man to marry his maternal uncle's daughter. Today, however, men and women are free to choose their marriage partners. A 2013 study found that 47% of households had sons who married freely rather than following the traditional cousin-marriage pattern. Nevertheless, marriage remains relatively endogamous within Khmu villages. Among the surveyed households, as many as 68.8% of married children had spouses from the same village. While most marriages conform to the legally prescribed age, early marriages among those aged 15

to 18 are still fairly common (Nguyen Van Toan, 2013: 73).

The villages of Hmong and Khmu people are predominantly located along the Vietnam-Laos border. As a result, intermarriage with co-ethnics across the border has been relatively common since the 1980s. However, findings from our ethnographic fieldwork among the Khmu in Ta Ca and Nam Can communes reveal that cross-border marriages do occur within this group, which are far less frequent than among the Hmong.

In practice, young Hmong men in the border area of Ky Son district, particularly in Nam Can, are free to seek marriage partners in neighboring communes or across the border in Laos, sometimes traveling to remote villages in Nong Het district, Xieng Khouang province, Laos. In Hmong traditional beliefs, kinship ties are not constrained by geographical distance or national boundaries.

Cross-border marriages among the Hmong serves as a key factor that reinforces affinal ties between families, thereby creating social networks that facilitate trade, exchange of goods, and contribute to household economic development.

Early marriages are also relatively common in Nam Can, particularly among those aged 13-15, though it is now more prevalent among females aged 17-19 and males aged 18-20. This practice of early marriage has had a considerable impact on school attendance among children of school age, especially girls.

Our 2023 survey indicates that two-generation nuclear families are predominant among the Hmong and Khmu communities in the Ky Son border area. The trend of dividing into smaller households has become increasingly common. In particular, the implementation

of various State policies on hunger eradication and poverty reduction, social welfare, education, and healthcare has enabled local residents to benefit from development projects and resettlement programs. As most social security policies are administered on a household basis, the practice of household separation has been expanding rapidly. Family models with fewer children and an appropriate division of labor adapted to land resources and economic conditions are expected to influence the adjustment of family norms concerning the number of children (Nguyen Huu Minh, 1991). Among both the Hmong and Khmu, the tendency to form separate households in order to increase land ownership has been one of the key factors driving changes in household structure. With State policies allocating land and gardens to newly established couples, the process of family nuclearization, already present to some extent, has been further strengthened.

Under the influence of urbanization and industrialization, there has been a strong trend in recent years of young people migrating from rural areas to urban centers and industrial zones in search of employment and higher incomes. This movement has made a substantial contribution to economic development by helping to alleviate unemployment in rural areas and labor shortages in urban and industrial regions. It also represents a viable pathway out of poverty (Dang Nguyen Anh, 2006). The migration of family members to geographically distinct labor markets can be viewed as a strategy for diversifying and mitigating household income risks. The geographical dispersion and shifting economic opportunities not only affect intergenerational relationships but also give rise to distinctive family

forms (such as couples-only households or single-person families).

3. Kinship ties

In the borderlands of Ky Son district, Nghe An province, the Hmong people are organized into various clans, including the Ly, Song (Sung), Vu, Ho Giang (Gia), Vang (Va), Lau, Cu, Lu, Thao (Tho), Mùà, and Hang (Ha). These clans are distributed across different villages; however, in each village, one or two clans usually constitute the majority of the population.

Our ethnographic findings indicate that members of the same clan maintained distinct economic relationships. In traditional Hmong society, forests, mountains, and streams were collectively managed under the authority of each clan. Every member was entitled to clear land for swidden cultivation, gather forest products, and exploit both timber and non-timber resources. Those from other clans who wished to cultivate land within a forest area had to request and obtain permission from the clan responsible for managing that territory. During the cultivation season, the clan head, together with several experienced individuals typically household heads would select suitable land. Once an auspicious day was determined, the entire clan would gather to clear the fields collectively. The cleared plots were then allocated among households, not according to the amount of labor contributed but rather in proportion to household size. The communal ethos of the clan was further reflected in collective hunting activities, with hunting teams composed primarily of men and usually led by an experienced member.

The social cohesion of Hmong clans is clearly reflected in their settlement patterns. Traditionally, each clan occupied a defined tract of land that was cleared and cultivated by the clan head together with

the pioneering household leaders. Clans credited with founding a village often enjoyed greater privileges over those who arrived later, such as being selected to hold the position of “*chủ dõ*” (village head) or to preside over rituals dedicated to the Earth Spirit (*Thổ Thần*).

Contemporary fieldwork data indicate that villages inhabited by a single clan still exist in certain areas. Nevertheless, the predominant settlement pattern today is one of inter-clan cohabitation, in which several clans live together within the same village. Within such an arrangement, families belonging to the same clan or sub-lineage often cluster together in small groups, forming distinct sections of the village. This pattern is clearly reflected in the social composition of communes such as Muong Long, Nam Can, and Son Ha. Besides, families of a single clan may also be dispersed across different regions, families belonging to the same clan may be dispersed across various regions, not only within Ky Son district but also across other districts and provinces, and even beyond national borders. Although clan members do not necessarily live in close proximity, they maintain strong bonds of kinship. When they meet, they treat one another as family; it is even socially acceptable for a person to fall ill or pass away in the home of a fellow clan member. The Hmong believe that all members of a clan are siblings descended from a common ancestor and sharing the same ancestral spirits (“*cùng ma*”). Furthermore, they live in close quarters, they are bound by a duty to love, protect, and assist one another, especially during major life events (such as building a new house, weddings, and funerals, as well as in times of hardship namely illness or food scarcity). For example, although building

a new house is considered an individual household affair, all members of the clan take a genuine interest and provide mutual support. When a household plans to build a new home, the clan head carefully inspects their preparations; if materials are insufficient, he assigns other households to help provide what is lacking. Similarly, a member’s wedding is considered an affair of the whole clan. Every family must consult the clan, particularly the clan head, before arranging a marriage. In the case of a funeral, the entire clan jointly takes responsibility for arrangements. If the bereaved family is impoverished, other clan members contribute rice, wine, and meat for the funeral. Any clan that fails to conduct funeral ceremonies in accordance with its customary traditions is subject to public criticism and ridicule from the community and fellow villagers.

The interconnections and cohesion in thought, belief, and funerary practices among clan members are vividly manifested in the exorcism rites known as *sâu su* and *thi su*.

Unlike the communal ritual dedicated to village spirits, the Sau Su ceremony is confined to the domain of a single clan. It is regarded as one of the clan’s major rituals, and all individuals recorded in the patrilineal genealogy spanning seven generations, whose names the clan head can recite and whose whereabouts are known, are informed and called to gather. As a result, a small clan may bring together several dozen members, while a large one can assemble several hundred. Families of the same bloodline within the clan head’s village treat relatives arriving from afar as their own close kin (Various authors, 1995: 274-276). To this day, the Sâu Su and Thi Su rituals continue to be faithfully preserved among the Hmong.

In Khmu society, the clan is known as “*tak*”. In a broad sense, a *tak* encompasses all individuals sharing the same surname and a common belief in the taboo linked to a sacred totem, either an animal or a plant, accompanied by a myth explaining its origin. In a narrower sense, a *tak* consists of those related through the patrilineal line within three to four generations, marked by distinctive ritual signs in domestic ancestor worship, known as *ma nha*, which in essence correspond to sub-lineages (*chi ho*).

The organization and kinship structure of Khmu clans are somewhat informal. Traditionally, clans had no formal heads and no clan-level rituals, except for the shared ceremony of domestic spirit worship (known as *hrôï gang*). Since 2010, under the national campaign “*All people unite to build a new cultural life*”, local authorities and village committees have sought to strengthen clan relations and elect clan heads. According to local residents, the reorganization of clans has resulted in better compliance with village regulations, improved implementation of government policies, and stronger kinship relations.

Our 2023 field survey indicates that Khmu settled villages have become more diverse in terms of clan composition. In Ta Ca commune, for example, Na Nhu village has seven clans, while Binh Son 1 village has five. Among these, the Moong and Hoa (Pha) clans are predominant, accounting for more than half of the households in each village.

Within the villages, families belonging to the same clan tend to live interspersed rather than clustered as in the past. Neighboring households frequently assist one another in both production activities and daily life. Communal feasts during festivals and holidays are held in rotation among households. During weddings or funerals,

the entire village participates, sharing work and contributing money and rice wine. However, whereas such community assistance was once given freely, it now often entails compensation in labor or cash (Nguyen Van Toan, 2013: 74). Despite differences between the Khmu and the Hmong in their clan relations, both groups share a common practice: When leaving their villages to seek work, whether within or beyond the province, clan members often travel in small groups of five or six, providing mutual support in finding employment and daily life, particularly during illness or hardship.

4. Ethnic relations

Ethnic relations, also referred to as inter-ethnic relations, are understood as the multifaceted interactions encompassing political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, religious and belief practices, settlement patterns, as well as the governance and utilization of natural resources. In the border area of Ky Son district, Nghe An province, these relations manifest within a single ethnic group, among different minority groups (ethnic minorities groups), between minority and majority groups, and between ethnic communities and the nation-state. Ethnic relations exert a critical influence on the stability and sustainable development of ethnic groups and the nation, and, in certain regions, their impact may vary depending on the nature of the relationship and the ethnic groups and nations involved (Nguyen Ngoc Thanh & Pham Quang Linh, 2021: 412). The following are several aspects of ethnic relations in the study area.

4.1. Intra-ethnic relations

Since the early 2000s, along with socio-economic development, intra-ethnic relations in Ky Son district have undergone notable transformations, giving rise to new

forms and modes of interactions reflected in livelihood activities, community management, and cultural practices. While in the past, within traditional society, relationships within co-ethnic communities were primarily governed by customary norms and manifested through mutual assistance in cultivation, animal husbandry, house construction, weddings, and funerals, today, most of these relationships have gradually transformed, becoming less bound by interdependence and less reliant on the support of co-ethnics or blood relatives. These transformations have helped ethnic minorities in Ky Son expand their connections, facilitating greater integration into economic development processes and enhancing their capacity for social governance. Only kin-based relationships, or those rooted in social customs and ethnic spirituality, persist to varying degrees depending on each group's cultural characteristics and residential setting, whether in lowland areas undergoing urbanization or in remote, and border regions of Vietnam-Laos.

Our field research reveals that most economic relations between households within communities, as well as among the Khmu, Hmong, and Thai ethnic groups, have been influenced by market mechanism. The degree of marketization in these relations has become increasingly extensive, particularly among co-ethnic communities residing in small towns, commune centers, or areas with convenient transportation, where certain exchange services or commodity production have developed. These communities include the Thai, Hmong, and Khmu living along National Highway 7 and near the Nam Can border gate.

Overall, intra-ethnic relations shaped by market mechanisms have been gradually

expanding and are expected to become the dominant trend among most ethnic communities. These new relations have been fostering deeper integration between ethnic minority groups and the Kinh majority in areas of production, social governance, and the improvement of material well-being.

4.2. Inter-ethnic relations

Influenced by market mechanisms, land policies, and state development projects, inter-ethnic relations have been gradually integrating across multiple areas, particularly in economic activities, mixed settlement patterns, management and the utilization of natural resources. These developments have fostered new forms of linkage, with the Kinh majority continuing to play a leading role in maintaining political and social stability, as well as national defense and security. However, during the integration, new factors arising from inter-ethnic relations have either manifested or remain latent, posing various challenges that exert a dual impact on socioeconomic development and ethnic unity in the region.

The exchange of agricultural and livestock products has long played a leading role, creating opportunities for neighboring communities of different ethnic groups to strengthen their economic linkages. These exchanges have expanded considerably in diverse forms, contributing to the gradual erosion of self-sufficient economic practices prevalent in households and co-ethnic communities. However, such exchanges within co-ethnic communities still proceed much more slowly than among neighboring inter-ethnic groups. Most exchanges occur through local services or private traders from other areas. These interactions have enabled households in lower ecological zones

to become more dynamic in production and develop suitable handicrafts, thereby generating additional income through product exchange.

Inter-ethnic labor relations have also emerged as a new form of interaction, primarily as seasonal wage labor. These relations are currently developing strongly among neighboring ethnic groups across both lower and higher ecological zones, including the Vietnam-Laos border area. Our study indicates that poor households, those lacking agricultural land, or without a clear livelihood plan, often engage in wage labor. They work for households in need of additional labor within their village or in nearby communes, performing a variety of tasks such as clearing land for cultivation, weeding corn or rice fields, sawing and transporting timber for house construction, digging fish ponds, harvesting corn and rice, and building small roads for motorbike access.

The rise of wage labor in the current context has also fostered new inter-ethnic relations within the same locality, namely, market-oriented relationships centered on labor, employment, and income. This trend offers a favorable opportunity to address the increasing idle time among households caused by limited arable land. More importantly, it enables ethnic groups to jointly advance their economic conditions, diversify crop and livestock production, and adapt traditional handicrafts to local natural conditions, human resources, and market demands.

4.3. Cross-border ethnic relations among ethnic groups between Vietnam and Laos

Cross-border ethnic relations between Vietnam and Laos primarily involve the Hmong, Thai, and Khmu, ethnic groups with substantial co-ethnic populations residing across the border in Laos. Beyond

interactions in trade, natural resource use, marriage alliances, and visits during festivals and Tet (Lunar New Year), these groups also maintain ties rooted in shared historical origins, blood kinship, and cross-border co-ethnic neighborliness.

5. Conclusion

The Hmong and Khmu ethnic groups in Ky Son mainly reside in mountainous, border, and remote areas, locations of strategic importance for politics, economy, security, national defense, and ecological protection. Drawing on ethnographic field data, combined with the analysis and synthesis of relevant studies, it is evident that marriage and family relations, along with clan organization, have significantly affected the livelihoods of these two groups in their residential areas. Three types of relations, namely intra-ethnic, inter-ethnic, and cross-border relations between ethnic groups on the Vietnam-Laos border, have profoundly influenced the livelihoods of ethnic communities in the Ky Son border area of Nghe An province, particularly among the Hmong and Khmu □

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