

**THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS  
ON THE KHMU'S WAYS OF COPING WITH FOOD SHORTAGE  
(A Research Conducted at Binh Son I Village, Ta Ca Commune,  
Ky Son District, Nghe An Province)**

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### **1. Introduction**

The socio-economic crisis that took place in Vietnam in the early 1980s, marked by severe food shortage, was an important factor in the country's adoption of *Doi moi* (renovation) policy. The reform movement started with a remarkable change in agricultural policies, of which the new land policy was the most critical watershed. Within a very short period of time, Vietnam had emerged from a food-deprived nation into the world's second largest exporter of rice, selling approximately 5 million tons of rice abroad in 2007.

Nonetheless, there exists a major paradox: while the lowland areas enjoy significant food surplus, the mountainous areas, home to most ethnic minority people, continue to suffer from food shortage. Although Vietnam has succeeded in attaining food security at the national level, in some regions, especially mountainous areas, food security at the community and household level remain an unresolved issue. This research, focusing on the issue of food security within a Khmu community in Binh Son I Village, Ta Ca Commune, Ky Son District, Nghe An Province, seeks to shed some light on this paradox and thereby put forward a number of scientific

recommendations by which the issue of food security among ethnic minority communities may receive further examination.

### **2. Overview of the Research Location and the Local Food Shortage Situation**

#### ***2.1. Some Main Features of the Food Shortage Situation among the Khmu and Other Ethnic Minority Communities in Western Nghe An Province***

The mountains in the western part of Nghe An account for 79.5% of the entire province's land area. This area's population was 1.4 million in 2004 and is comprised of people from different ethnic groups: Kinh, Thai, Tho, Khmu, Hmong, O Du and Lao. With a population of almost 1 million, the Kinh people reside primarily in the district center, close to major traffic routes. Meanwhile, 410,000 people of the other minority groups, are scattered all over the highlands. The mountainous areas in western Nghe An have a complex topology with steep slopes, resulting in uneven rain falls and unfavorable climate condition<sup>1</sup>, keeping

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<sup>1</sup> There are two distinct seasons in a year: the dry, cold season and the hot, humid season. During the dry season the area receive North-East winds from November through March of the following year; while in the hot summer South-West winds bring extreme heat and severe droughts to the area from April through October.

its residents in abject poverty and severe food shortages. Up to 80% of the local households in these mountainous areas live below the provincial poverty line. Along the Vietnamese-Lao border there are 115 communes belonging to Nghe An Province that fall under the “extremely difficult” category. These communes are home to 13,000 households with 75,000 household members, the majority of whom are ethnic minorities living mainly in Tung Duong and Ky Son Districts. 100% of the province’s O Du households and 42% Khmu households reside within this area. According to Nghe An Province’s Ethnic Council, the government subsidizes no less than 100 tons of rice directly to the ethnic minority population in this area during natural disasters (Tran Van Ha and Le Minh Anh, 2006). According to 2004 national statistics, Nghe An Province ranked 13<sup>th</sup> among provinces suffering poverty and food shortages nationwide, with 13.4% of the province’s population living under the poverty line. At the regional level, statistics from 1993 through 2004 consistently listed Nghe An as part of the Northern Central region, which ranked 2 out of 4 provinces with the highest poverty rates (Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, 2007).

The Khmu community in Nghe An accounts for more than 55% of the entire Khmu population in Vietnam. According to 1999 national census, there were 27,014 Khmu people in Nghe An. Most of them reside in Ky Son, Tung Duong and Que Phong Districts. In terms of population, the Khmu is the third largest minority community in the whole province, only after the Thai and the Tho, accounting for 9.6% of

the province’s population (General Statistics Office, 2001). In Ky Son District the Khmu make up the majority, with over 13,000 people (31.3%) living in 16 communes. By 2002 the Khmu population in Nghe An had grown to 29,257 people, dividing into approximately 4,253 households, of which 20,023 individuals in 2,609 households reside in 16 communes, covering 68 villages of Ky Son District. In Tung Duong District there were 7,351 Khmu people who live in 1,307 households, covering 30 villages and 11 communes. The Khmu population living in 5 communes and 10 villages of Que Phong district was 1,883, dividing into 337 households (Ho Tat Thang, Moong Van Nghe, Moong Thanh Nghe, 2005).

Together with the Tho and O Du, the Khmu are one of the most economically challenged and food-deprived minority ethnic groups in Nghe An Province. There are 3,318 (74.88%) Khmu households living under the poverty line province-wide, of which 2,067 (79.2%) are residents of Ky Son District. Compared with other ethnic groups living in the same three districts, the Khmu are the most poverty-stricken and suffer from food shortage the most (Ho Tat Thang, Moong Van Nghe, Moong Thanh Nghe, 2005). In 2001 in particular, the percentage of Khmu households in Ky Son District living under the poverty line, defined according to the former poverty standard, was the highest (79.36%), while that among the Thai and Hmong were 68.04% and 58.2% respectively. Ta Ca Commune has the largest percentage of poor households, after Bao Thang and Muong Tip, with the percentage of households

living under the poverty line being 90.91 and 89.10 respectively. Over the past five years the Khmu, like other ethnic minority groups, received large amounts of funding for infrastructure development and micro credit for horticulture and husbandry, which aimed at reducing poverty and eradicating hunger. In 2004 alone the government provided nearly 30 tons of rice to 200 hungry Khmu households to help them cope with food shortage caused by drought in the region. In addition, as part of the national hunger eradication and poverty reduction program, the government provides annual support to poor households in the amount of 500,000 VND/household/year in the form of food, clothing and household necessities, and 1,000,000 VND/household/year in the form of production subsidy. Such support has alleviated these households' hardship to a certain extent (Pham Thanh Hai, 2006).

## **2.2. Information on the Research Location**

Binh Son I is one of the 11 villages in Ta Ca Commune, Ky Son District. In 2007 Ta Ca Commune had a population of 3,905, divided into 727 households, which are comprised of the Kinh, Thai, Khmu and Hmong. Mountain horticulture is the main source of income the commune, while husbandry is regarded as a sideline production in order to improve the households' livelihood. The total area of cultivated land in Ta Ca is 312.5 hectares, of which only 39.5 hectares can be used for growing water rice. The rest is used for highland horticulture (223 hectares for mountain rice and 50 hectares for corn) and forestry (3,184.5 hectares total, including

46.11 hectares of afforested forest, 581 hectares of **rừng chăm sóc**, 999.5 hectares of **khoanh nuôi** and 1,558 hectares of protective forest). In 2006 the commune's monthly per capita income was VND 165,000, which placed Ta Ca at the lowest rung of western Nghe An and Ky Son's poverty ladder according to the national categorization standards. The head of Ta Ca Commune People's Committee informed the research team that the commune had received 3 tons of rice each year from the government for food-shortage alleviation for the past 10 years. Although most of this rice was given to the Khmu people, this community still suffered from severe food shortage.

Binh Son I Commune lies on the edge of the 7B national highway, 600 meters from Ta Ca's commune center and 3 kilometers from Ky Son Township. The name Binh Son I was adopted in 1973 to replace the former Ke Hia.<sup>1</sup> During the time of research, there were 64 households and 443 household members in the village. Apart from one Kinh household with three members, the rest were Khmu. When Binh Son I village moved to the current location, the Thai people conceded part of their land to the Khmu only for residence. On average each household received 164 square meters. The Khmu had to travel back to their former location for farming. Of the total 876 hectares of farmland that the village owns, only 3 hectares can be used for growing single-crop water rice,

<sup>1</sup> According to the village administration prior to 1973 the village used to live in Khe Hia, which is 3 kilometers from the current location. The village moved to Khe Ca Nhan in 1973; and to former Binh Son I in 1973. They moved to the current location in 1996 but did not change the village name.

and the rest is mountainous farmland. The area of forest land assigned to the village by Ky Son I plantation is 201 hectares. This is a year-round source of non-timber forest products, which provide critical economic support for the village, especially during difficult months.

After settling in the current location, in addition to the government's development assistance, Binh Son village also received support from international and non-governmental organizations through various projects in horticulture, husbandry, communal house building and a clean water supply channel for everyday use. In terms of living standards, in 2006 there were as many as 53 households (82.81% of all households) that live under the poverty line, which, by definition is a monthly per capita income level of VND 200,000. Of these 53 households, 24 suffer from hunger two to six months each year and three run out of food after using up all the products they grow to pay back high-interest loans. The rest of these households are categorized as "average," and none of them make it "above average." Put in comparison, the poverty rate in Binh Son I Village is 1.14 times as high as that of Ta Ca Commune, which is 72.6%, and 0.81% higher than that of Ky Son District, which is 82.0% during the same period in 2006.

### **3. Main Findings**

This analysis is based on the relationship between social and cultural characteristics and the ways in which the Khmu community copes with food shortage.

### **3.1. The Relationship Between Family and Clan Ties and Food Shortage**

#### *3.1.1. The Khmu Family and Food Shortage*

A Khmu family in Binh Son I Village is generally composed of two to four generations living under one roof. There are 33 nuclear families, which are composed of two generations, including the parents and their children, accounting for 51.5% of the total households; 28 families with grandparents, parents and children living together, accounting for 43.7% of the total households; and two extended families with more than four generations under one roof, an equivalent of 3.1%.

There are generally more household members in an extended family. The average number of members of the 64 households surveyed was 6.81, with the largest family having 14 members and smallest two members. This average is lower than that of the Hmong family, but higher than the whole Ta Ca Commune's average, and much higher than those of the Kinh and Thai's.

The fathers are the head of the Khmu households. As a result, they have great power over the family's economic activities as well as everyday operations and external relationships. The mothers normally manage the household income and expenditures. However, managing the household could prove to be fairly complicated in extended families with multiple couples living together.

Labor distribution is defined fairly clearly among family members. The wives or daughters-in-law would get up early in the morning to make breakfast, feed the

cattle, chickens and prepare lunch for other family members to bring to work. Apart from general household management, the fathers normally take on more physically taxing responsibilities like fishing or working as hired laborers. When the household runs out of food, the responsibility falls on the mothers' shoulders. Therefore, it is not surprising to see the mothers go out to borrow loans or ask other clan members for help.

There are currently two issues related to the family structure that affects the household economics. First is the process of land redistribution, and second, the tendency of large households separating into nuclear families.

With regards to land redistribution, prior to 2005 when households were free to turn unclaimed land into cultivated land, most families had sufficient farmland to grow crops. However, most households lost the majority of their rice-growing land after the government adopted new policies to prevent deforestation, which included land assignments for forest protection and forest production as well as redistribution of farmland. In addition, large areas of infertile land had to be turned into cassava and corn-growing fields. This has created pressure for farmers to change their cropping structure and focus more on commercial crops and intensive farming. This requires Khmu households to adopt changes in labor organization as well as capital and technical investments, which is drastically different from their traditional labor distribution and cropping habits. In the meantime, lack of financial and

technical resources causes significant delays in land ownership registration not only in Ta Ca Commune but also other parts of the district.

At the same time, the number of large households separating into nuclear families is on the rise, with three cases in 2005 and four cases in 2006. This trend is set first by the fact that the traditional household management style has become outdated. Families with many sons and hence many couples living under one roof tend to face a common problem: the family members would rely on others' work while enjoying equal shares of the family's entire income. This eliminates incentives for people to be more productive. At the same time, the fact that the household serves as a unit for welfare benefits and micro-credit distribution has directly caused extended families to separate into smaller units. For instance, the local government's annual food subsidy stipulates that each household can only receive 20 kilos of rice each time. Other government and international development projects also use the household as the unit to deliver capital and technical support. This also explains the discrepancies between the number of households reported by the village head, which is 64, and that provided by the village police and population control officer, which is 85. This means that there are as many as 21 couples who have claimed to be independent households but still live in the same house with their parents or other couples.

What is the relationship between the Khmu family size and structure and their food shortage situation?

The 64 Khmu households in Binh Son I Village suffer from poverty and food shortage in different ways, since year-round food shortage and daily lack of nutrition is determined by each household’s labor productivity, economic capacity, access to the market and external assistance, as well as its size and structure. According to people in the village, a poor household is one that runs out of rice before the new harvest season, and hence has to substitute rice with cassava or has to purchase rice using wages from working as hired labor. More desolate households are not even capable of borrowing

high-interest rice from private businesses since they would not be able to pay back the loans. The project’s household survey suggests that only two out of all the households in the village can be considered “above average,” meaning that they have enough rice to feed themselves without having to borrow food from others, and possess a few household necessity items that are worth VND 500,000 or above. There are 19 “average” households, 32 poor households and 11 suffering from severe food shortage (see Table 1).

Table 1: Household categorization based on economic conditions

Category	Number	Percentage
Above average	2	3.1
Average	19	29.7
Poor	32	50
Food-deprived	11	17.2
Total	64	100.0

Source: Project household survey, 2007.

According to Table 1, the number of poor and food-deprived households is 43 out of 64, an equivalent of 67.2%. However, the 19 households (29.7%) that are categorized as average in fact are living in highly unstable conditions and run the risk of returning to poverty any time. This coincides with statistics on months of the year during which households suffer from food shortage.

Table 2 shows results from interviews with 59/64 households on the months during which they face low food supply. There are a total of 92.2% of households that suffer from food shortage at some point during the year, of which two households (3.1) suffer from severe food shortage for more than seven or eight months. The majority of the households lack food for one to three months (53.1%) or four to six months (31.3%).

Table 2: Level of food shortage suffered by households (month/year)

Number of months without sufficient food	Number of households	Percentage of households
1 – 3	34	53.1
4 – 6	20	31.3
7 – 8	2	3.1
Higher	3	4.7
Insufficient data	5	7.8
Total	64	100.0

Source: Project household survey, 2007.

Statistics on number of months in which households suffer from food shortage reflects the relationship between the Khmu households' size and structure and their food shortage situation. Table 3, which shows the relationship between the size of the household and their economic conditions, indicates that households with fewer members suffer more from poverty and hunger compared to larger households. Similarly, households with three to seven members suffer from food shortage longer than those with eight members or more. This

can be explained by the importance of human resource in the economic structure: since all these households rely on labor-intensive agriculture production, those with more labor have a better chance of securing sufficient food for the family. Households with less labor due to recent separation from their extended families, or having few children, have low food security, at least until they can afford to cultivate more intensively and employ more advanced technology. Such households normally have to cultivate two or three hectares of mountain land.

Table 3: The relationship between the household size and level of food shortage

Number of household members	Number of months with low food supply				Total
	1 – 3 months	4 – 6 months	7 – 8 months	Higher	
2	1	0	0	0	1
3	0	1	0	0	1
4	4	2	0	0	6
5	7	4	0	1	12
6	6	2	2	0	10
7	2	3	0	1	11
8	2	1	0	0	3
9	1	1	0	0	3
10	1	2	0	1	4
11	1	1	0	0	2
12	1	3	0	0	4
13	1	0	0	0	1
14	1	0	0	0	1
Total	34	20	2	3	59

Source: Project household survey, 2007.

From another perspective, in a predominantly poor and hungry community like Binh Son I it is difficult to identify any relationship between the households' involvement in local government and their economic well-being. In fact, even households with members who are local cadres, government personnel or party members suffer

from food shortage one to three months per year. Three of them lack food for four to six months.

When asked about the cause of their food shortage situation the majority of people in Binh Son I concur that labor shortage and infertile land are the main contributing factors.

Table 4: Cause of food shortage among households (according to collected opinions)

		Household's economic condition				Total
		Above average	Average	Poor	Food-deprived	
Labor shortage	Yes	1	4	16	6	27
	No	1	15	16	5	37
<b>Total</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>64</b>
Infertile land	Yes	1	3	15	4	23
	No	1	16	17	7	41
<b>Total</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>54</b>
Spending on education and healthcare	Yes	0	2	6	2	10
	No	2	17	26	9	54
<b>Total</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>64</b>
No alternative livelihood	Yes	0	2	0	0	2
	No	2	17	32	11	62
<b>Total</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>64</b>

Source: Project household survey, 2007.

Food shortage has become a burden to all households. Therefore, the Khmu people have to cope with food shortage by working as hired labor for the Hmong and Thai and use their wages to purchase rice. At the same time, the yields from their land remain low due to infrequent weeding and field visits, exacerbated by the Khmu's lack of knowledge about fertilizing methods and unfamiliarity with the practice of alternating crops. Poverty and hunger become a vicious cycle, driving the Khmu deeper into high-interest debts. The majority of poor households in the village have to sell

their rice prematurely to get advance cash for food purchasing. When the harvest season comes, the debtor would come to the field to collect all the rice, leaving the farmers empty-handed in no time after the harvesting is complete.

### 3.1.2. Clan Ties and Food Shortage

There are four major clans within the Khmu community in Binh Son I: the *Tmoong* (weasel), the *Lu* (also known as *Rvai*), the *Vi* and the *Cut*. In principle, clan ties within Binh Son I Village are based on a system of patriarchy. The community observes a variety of traditional rules which

require consanguineous distance for marriage and forbid the consumption of sacred animals and birds and plants that are considered their ancestors. However, many of these rules do not apply to economic ties. The level of economic linkages through mutual support or loans differs among the clan, depending on the consanguineous distance. Close relatives, separated by four generations or less, would lend one another money with no interest and may occasionally give food to one another at difficult times. Relatives separated by five generations are more or less obliged to provide support to one another and require interests to be paid for the loans that they make. In all cases the recipients are supposed to be hard-working, responsible towards other clan members, and face hardships only due to external factors.

All in all, the clan is the households' major source of support, not only in times of food shortage, but also in farm work and home-building. This works not only from the household head's paternal (father's) side, but also the maternal (mother's) side, as well as his wife's side. The uncle therefore is of great importance in the Khmu community in Binh Son I, not only for his role in spiritual activities but also productive activities. It remains a common practice that a clan member having a difficult time securing food for the household would turn to his/her close relatives for help first before taking loans from others in the village. As a result, the clan can be considered each household's safety net. In addition, the clans and extended families could also provide support in terms of human resources to help each household cope with farm labor shortage during busy seasons.

### ***3.2. The Impact of Traditional Culture on Food Shortage***

#### ***3.2.1. Highland Farming - Food Production Instability***

Neither Binh Son I community's former nor current location possess the geographical characteristics suitable for growing water rice. There are not even any fields that could be irrigated by rainfall. Western Nghe An's harsh and arid climate creates immense challenges for growing highland crops. Furthermore, the soil nurtured by aged forests that used to yield bumpy crops is no longer existent. The farmers are now only allowed to turn two- to three-year-old production forests into farm land. The farmers, used to the traditional method of clearing and burning, often do not have the knowledge and capital needed to apply advanced technology in farming. In the meantime, the farm land converted from young production forests require much greater care, including more frequent weeding (three times a year instead of once or twice with old forests). In addition, instead of growing new hybrid species with higher yields, the Khmu continue to grow traditional rice, cassava and corn species. As a result, their rice crops only yield approximately two tons per hectare. There has been no alteration to the traditional farming calendar. Labor distribution continues to be determined based on gender and age. Such outdated farming practices shared among the North Central ethnic groups have contributed to the low level of income in these farming households. According to a number of focus group surveys and in-depth interviews with subjects from 30-50 and 50-65 age groups, there had been four major natural disasters and

epidemics that caused tremendous destruction to the village’s farming activities and food production in the 20-year period between 1986 and 2006:

From 1986 to 1990, droughts and plagues destroyed 60% of rice and corn fields, causing a 70% loss of total products. As a consequence, 85% of the village households went hungry for five to six months each year. There was barely any household that had enough food to eat all year round.

In 1991 a diphtheria epidemic caused six deaths in the village. Despite the local health service efforts to contain and eliminate the disease, the financial loss came as a major shock to many families.

In 2004 a hurricane damaged many homes and crops, slashing the village’s food supply. Ten households in Binh Son I lost up to 50% of their crops and faced food shortage for three to four months. 11 other households had their roofs blown off and one had both their home and farm taken away. Five households had to sell their rice reserves to fix the houses and went hungry for three to four months.

In 2005 a locust plague caused five households to lose 50% of their crops, leaving them without food for four months.

Binh Son I Village used to acquire an area of paddy field to grow water rice with credits provided by a settlement project. However, the entire area has been abandoned due to a damaged irrigation system. At the same time, the Khmu community never learned to grow water rice and did not know how to use fertilizer or pesticides. They did not know how to bring water into the fields either (Nguyen Van Toan, 2007).

### 3.2.2. Forestry Practices and Benefits from Forests

The Khmu have long learned to make use of the benefits from forests to enrich their food supply. Today the returns from forests continue to play a significant part in the economic life of Khmu people in Binh Son I. A look at their farming calendar (Table 5) shows that most farmers spend their time outside of the farm gathering products from the forest.

Table 5: The Khmu’s farming calendar

Month	Main activity	Labor division (by gender and age)			
		Male	Female	Old	Young
January	Collecting fuelwood, straws and <i>dot</i> , <sup>(*)</sup> home maintenance	x	x	x	x
February	Fishing, collecting <i>dot</i> , growing taro, beans and peanuts	x	x		x
March	Clearing corn fields, fishing, working as loggers	x	x	x	x
April	Growing cassava, hybrid corn, working as hired loggers	x	x		
May	Clearing rice fields, harvesting beans	x	x		

June	Clearing rice fields, collecting vegetables and bamboo shoots in forests	x	x		x
July	Sowing seeds, collecting vegetables and bamboo shoots, harvesting corn and cassava		x		x
August	Weeding rice fields, collecting bamboo shoots, fishing		x		x
September	Weeding rice fields, collecting rattan and bamboo shoots		x		x
October	Collecting chestnuts, rattan and harvesting squash leaves		x	x	x
November	Harvesting rice, trapping birds and forest animals, collecting rattan	x	x		x
December	Stocking rice, collecting <i>dot</i> , celebrating new year	x	x		x

Source: Project household survey, 2007.

Note: (\*) Stalk from a plant similar to rice, used for making household products.

As shown above, the Khmu community in Binh Son I still earn a fair portion of their income from timber and non-timber products from the forest all year round. This income helps alleviate for food shortages during difficult months. For chronically food-deprived households, the income generated from collecting bamboo shoots, *dot*, chestnuts and fuel wood is particularly crucial since it can be used to buy food.

### 3.2.3. Mutual Support Practice

Like some other ethnic minority groups, the Khmu have maintained the traditional practice of mutual support. Members of the community support one another during busy farming seasons, in times of hardship such as illness or natural disaster, or on special occasions such as home-building, weddings and funerals. Mutual support takes place at the following levels:

- *Within the family*: Family level support is mutual support among those related by blood (usually within three generations on the father's side). Within this circle of relatives, better-off households would give food or make long-term no interest loans of rice or money to households that lack food. When a household needs an extra hand to build their home or clear the field, their family would provide additional labor resource without expecting the recipient to treat them with a meal or wine. Siblings within a family would give one another animal breeders for free or in exchange of half of the newborns. Therefore, members of the family would be the first one would turn to in times of hardship. When a family member gets sick, other family members would not only donate money, food and other supplements but also take turns to look after

the patient, especially when he or she is hospitalized. Therefore, it is highly common to find large groups of family members taking care of an ethnic minority patient at a district or provincial hospital.

- *Among relatives*: Close relatives and distant relatives on both sides are treated differently, although those from the father's side are regarded as more important than those from the mother's side. The uncle plays a particularly important role. People of the same bloodline separated by four generations and above are considered relatives. This level of relationship would allow people to borrow from a relative but repayment is required. A meal is normally expected when a relative helps with home-building, farming or logging. Loaned breeders must be returned in money or another breeder. When people borrow money from distant relatives, they are supposed to bring along a gift. For instance, if it is a million-dong-worth loan, the borrower would be expected to give the lender a bottle of wine or a packet of cigarettes. When relatives come to help build the house, clear the field or sow seeds, the host would need to treat them to a nice meal with wine. Failure to do so would result in a poor reputation.

- *Within the community*: When a household needs help with a labor-intensive work, either at home or in the field, they could call on people in the village for support in addition to that provided by their family and relatives. Fellow villagers would also lend money or rice to one another, given that the receiver presents a small gift such as a bottle of wine or a packet of cigarettes. People who fall ill, lose a family

member or become solitary also receive assistance from other villagers. In difficult times such as these, each household in the village would donate half a kilo of rice or VND 2,000-5,000. When fellow villagers provide help in terms of labor, the recipients do not need to pay wages. They could treat the helpers to a meal, but this is not mandatory if the recipient cannot afford it. This practice of mutual support has been promoted as part of the village women union's agenda, and therefore has become increasingly popular.

However, besides its benefits, this rule of reciprocity has also become a burden to community members. Households that become better-off after separating from their extended families are generally expected to support other family members. This practice has discouraged lazy people from working and made them dependent on their siblings and relatives. This issue is particularly acute considering the fact that there are only two moderately self-sufficient households in the entire Binh Son I Village. The rest of the households still have difficulty securing food for the whole year. Therefore the expectation to support family members and other relatives has become a burden to most "average" families. Many poor households have had to resort to borrowing high-interest loans from individuals' downtown.

#### 3.2.4. *Spending and Food Consumption Practice*

The Khmu people in Binh Son I still maintain their traditional spending and food consumption habits. Khmu families normally eat three meals a day, of which breakfast and dinner are the main meals, while lunch is a smaller meal. The quality of

the meals remains low. The main course in a big meal is vegetable soup seasoned with salt. More nutritious dishes such as meat or fish are only seen during the harvest season and festivals or on special occasions. Poor households that face constant food shortage only eat two meals per day. Observations and interviews show that many poor households have to go without lunch. Children of these households have nothing to eat besides leftover rice. Even better-off households can only afford to buy meat every three or four days. Those that are less well-off only get to buy a little meat or fatty meat every eight to ten days, depending how much they can earn from working as hired labor and selling bamboo shoots and *dot*.

Religious rituals also assert great influence on household food security. The Khmu have dozens of festivals each year, in addition to various special events such as funerals, weddings and birthdays. These rituals and special events take up a considerable portion of each household's income. For example, a house-warming ritual would require at least two chickens and one pig; a New Year offering would require two chickens (one for seeing the old year out, the other to see the New Year in). On average each household needs to prepare three to five offerings to drive away illness or evil spirits. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that all the chicken and animals raised in the village are killed during the various religious rituals rather than sold for cash. This significantly reduces household income from husbandry.

In addition to spending on food, which accounts for 75% of each household's total expenditures, weddings and funerals are the

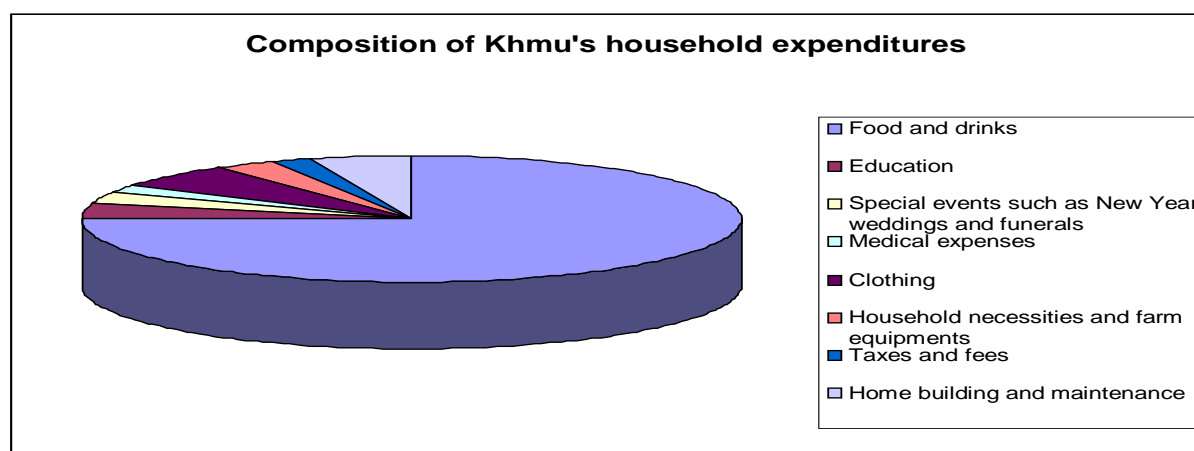
most significant expenses. Normally a large wedding would cost VND 10 million, which is spent on 15 jars of piped wine (each made of five to six kilos of rice or 12 to 15 kilos of fresh cassava), 60 liters of distilled alcohol, VND 200,000's worth of tea and cigarettes, 200 kilos of pork and 100 to 120 kilos of rice. A wedding banquet usually lasts three days. Even a small wedding would cost VND 3-4 million. As a tradition, all villagers are invited to the wedding banquet. When a parent passes away, each son would need to offer one pig for the funeral. The son with whom the deceased parent used to live would be expected to kill the biggest pig in the sty. The son-in-law would also need to contribute one pig, or split one with another son-in-law if he cannot afford a whole one. Better-off households could kill water buffalos or buffalos for the offering, while poor households have no other choice but to take high-interest loans to prepare for the ritual. On average four to seven pigs are killed for a Khmu funeral, depending on the deceased's number of children. In addition, the family would need to prepare 50 to 70 liters of wine and 40 to 70 kilos of rice to prepare meals for the guests who attend the funeral. Such extravagant expenses for weddings and funerals put the majority of Khmu households in debt.

At the same time, spending on wedding gifts, contributions to funerals, visits to sick relatives or newborn babies add up to a fair amount. Each household usually donates one or two kilos of rice or VND 2,000 to 5,000 to a household in need, or more to a solitary villager or a family facing extreme difficulty. The amount of aid given to a close relative or family could be as large as several hundred thousand dong.

In addition to weddings and funerals, which are also regarded as important events by the Thai and Hmong in Ta Ca Commune, the Khmu also spend large amounts of money on other festivals such as the Hroi cung, Hroi gang ritual, Hmall and house-warming rituals, along with sacrifices to drive away evil spirits when someone in the family falls ill. According to an elderly in Binh Son I,

although the Hroi cung ritual only takes place once a year, it costs nearly one million dong; a ritual to drive away evil spirits costs VND 600,000, the Hroi gang VND 150,000 to 200,000. When the head of a household is severely sick, the ritual would cost up to ten million dong. A house-warming ritual normally costs five to six million dong (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Composition of Khmu household's expenditures at time of survey (2007)



### 3.3. Ways of Coping With Food Shortage

#### 3.3.1. Use of Forest Products

Thanks to the government's policy of assigning the forest to the community, the 245 hectares of forest managed by the village has served as a rich source of additional livelihood for the Khmu, who supplement their

farming income with money earned by selling fuelwood and other non-timber products gathered from the forest. Many of these products go directly into the Khmu households' everyday meals, while others are sold in exchange for food or other household necessities (see Table 6).

Table 6: Forest products collected and exchanged

Type of forest product	Time of collection (months)	Exchange location	Buyer	Price (VND/kg)	Note
Dot	Dec. – Feb.	Home village, Muong Xen	Kinh + Thai	2,000	Bought by the Kinh Fuel would: VND10,000/bunch, each bunch approx. 25 kilos
Tiger roots <sup>1</sup>	Year-round	Home village, Muong Xen	Same as above	5,000 (dried)	
Bamboo shoots	Jul. – Oct.	Home village, Muong Xen	Same as above	2,000 (fresh)	
Cu rieng <sup>2</sup>	Year-round	Muong Xen	Same as above	1,000 (fresh)	
Chestnuts	Oct. – Nov.	Home village, Muong Xen	Same as above	2,000	
Fuelwood	Year-round	Home village, Muong Xen	Same as above	400	

Type of forest product	Number of households selling	Collecting location	Collecting capacity (kg/person/day)	Gender, age	Note
<i>Dot</i>	64/64	In and outside of village	20 kg/person/day	Women, children	
<i>Tiger roots</i> <sup>3</sup>	30/64	Same as above	<10 kg/person/day	Women	Older women have more experience
Bamboo shoots	64/64	Same as above	>30 kg/person/day	80% women	
<i>Cu rieng</i> <sup>4</sup>	<30/64	Same as above	~30 kg/person/day	Mainly women	
Chestnuts	64/64	Home village	>5 kg/person/day	Women, children	
Fuelwood		Home village	25 kg/person/day	Women	

Source: Project household survey, 2007.

Note: <sup>1</sup> A kind of root; <sup>2</sup> A root of the ginger family; <sup>3</sup> A kind of root; <sup>4</sup> A root of the ginger family.

Khmu women play a key role in utilizing forest products to enrich the households' food supply. They usually collect fuelwood and bamboo shoots on their way to the field to sell for cash or exchange for rice. When farm work is less busy, they often go in groups of three or four to collect *dot* and dig tiger roots. Sometimes they would even spend the night in the forest to save traveling time (see Table 6). During the last months before the harvest season, or when food supply is low, women become the households' primary breadwinner.

### 3.3.2. Working as Hired Labor

Both men and women in Binh Son I go out to work as hired labor. Women are often employed to clear the fields, harvest corn, while men work as loggers or timber movers for the Thai and Hmong in neighboring villages. Weeding often pays VND 25,000 per day. In addition, a local construction unit also hires men to cut down trees in protection forests. Licensed to log, this enterprise collects timber to make scaffolds for the commune's school construction project. Villagers are hired to log in Pu Te forest and are paid VND 5,000 per tree. Each

worker could earn up to VND 50,000 per day. This opportunity provided many Binh Son I households a considerable source of income in 2006.

It is estimated that wages from part-time employment of this type could make up for nearly 45% of each household's total income. Like collecting forest products, part-time employment takes place all year round. In addition to borrowing and collecting forest products, this become the main source of income for households that have to turn in all of their farm products to debtors' right after each harvest season.

### 3.3.3. Loans and Credit

Although mutual support is common within each clan and the whole village community, it is impossible for local households to rely on one another for food sharing or lending since hardly any of them manage to make ends meet. Therefore, people from Binh Son I usually have to go to Muong Xen Township to take high-interest loans. Statistics shows that as many as 23 households in the village take loans from two major rice emporiums, which are known for their high-interest rates in Muong Xen.

In times of low food supply, these households usually purchase rice on credit from these emporiums and pay them back at harvest time on negotiated terms. Normally for each 100 kilos of rice borrowed during between-crop period, which normally falls in May, the borrower would need to pay back the debtor 120 kilos at harvest season (October). Similarly, for every 50 kilos of husked rice borrowed, the borrower would need to pay the debtor 130 kilos of unhusked rice. The calculated interest rate could be as high as 50%. Some extremely poor households keep taking one loan after another. As a result, when harvest time comes, their debtors would go directly to their fields to take away all the harvested products. It is not uncommon to find households that are in debt for three or four years in a row, with the total amount of rice owed reaching several tons.

In addition to food for everyday meals, many households borrow money from these private businesses at interest rates of 10 - 12% per year in order to send their children to school or pay for weddings and funerals.

#### *3.3.4. Government, Non-government and International Assistance*

Many households facing food shortage receive assistance in the form of rice from the government and other charity organizations such as the Red Cross. Over the past five years the Vietnamese Women's Union has provided food, medicine and clothing to households in the village.

According to statistics collected by the People's Committee of Ta Ca Commune,

many households in Binh Son I have received rice subsidy from the government every year for the past five years. Specifically:

- In 2004: five households received 100 kilos of rice.

- In 2005: six households received 120 kilos of rice.

- In 2006: ten households received 200 kilos of rice.

- In the first half of 2007 eight households received 80 kilos of rice.

In addition to rice, many households also receive credit from various development projects, including the Programs 134 and 135 and the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies to enhance productivity. There were six households that received rolling credits of three million dong per household from the Vie-01 program to purchase buffalo breeders. By 2007 all of these households had bought a buffalo breeder. In 2006 the Agriculture University I provided ten million dong for a buffalo-breeding mini-project. In 2002 the Social Policy Bank loaned 79 million dong to 17 poor households at an interest rate of 0.45% for them to raise buffalos for meat.

Unfortunately, the village administration reported that about one fourth of the households receiving such loans used the money to pay back previous debts or buy rice and other household necessities.

## **4. Analysis and Recommendations**

### **4.1. Analysis**

i) The Khmu in Binh Son I is a severely food-deprived community. Factors

that contribute to prolonged food shortages among the community include eroded and unfertilized soil, unfavorable climate, unpredictable natural disasters and failure to adopt advanced technology in highland agricultural production, along with expensive rituals and arbitrary spending habits, dependent and egalitarian mentality and over-reliance on external assistance, both from the government and charity organizations. Since poverty is widespread among all households, mutual support from family and clan members remains extremely limited. At the same time, women play a crucial role in maintaining food security for their households.

ii) To increase their food supply, the Khmu have to collect forest products, seek part-time jobs and take high-interest loans. However, none of these proves to be a sustainable method, one that would help the community escape the vicious cycle of poverty.

iii) Lack of food security among the Binh Son I community is a note-worthy phenomenon. The fact that this village is a planned settlement at a favorable location in terms of transportation, close to the commune center with fairly complete infrastructure (including a school, a health center and day-care service), with good connections with other ethnic groups and market access suggests that human resource plays a key role.

#### **4.2. Recommendations**

Below are a number of recommendations in order to guarantee food security for the Khmu community in Binh Son I:

i) A solution to the issue of food shortage needs to incorporate agricultural growth with environmental protection and sustainable cultural enrichment.

ii) New plant species are needed to increase highland farming efficiency. Selected species need to have high commercial value in order to help farmers escape poverty and hunger. *Hybrid corn* is a good example of such a species. However, the local community's traditional mentality, farming habits and ethnic culture should be taken into consideration during the transition process.

iii) Promotion of agricultural expansion should be enhanced at the village level. Customized programs are needed to address the special needs of poor, food-deprived households without a strong education background. Workshops for farmers need to be practical and relevant to the local community's agricultural transition orientation. Special attention needs to be paid to the community's culture and traditional customs to guarantee successful implementation of these projects.

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in Ky Son District, Nghe An Province.

*Photo: Tran Hong Hanh*