

Marriages between Muong and Kinh People in Vietnam Today

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Abstract: Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country with a majority and 53 minority groups, among which the majority Kinh and the Muong belong to the Viet - Muong linguistic group and reside mainly in the plains and at the feet of mountains, with convenient geographical conditions and transport. Since the Party and State initiated the Doi moi (Renovation) process in 1986, the cultural exchange and absorption between the two communities has been increasingly promoted, with more and more Kinh - Muong marriages, that diversifies the picture of ethnic culture in Vietnam.

Key words: Marriage; Kinh – Muong marriage; culture; cultural exchange and acculturation.

1. Introduction

Ever since Vietnam embarked on the Doi moi process, the country's ethnic minority groups have had more opportunities to expand their activities of exchange, integration and socio - economic and cultural development. During this process of broader exchanges and deeper integration, the culture of ethnic peoples has gone through constant changes, absorbing the culture of peoples residing in proximity, gradually enriching and diversifying their own cultures. Being a minority ethnic group with a significant population and a historically close relationship with Viet (Kinh) people, Muong people have absorbed various cultural aspects of the Kinh, which is partly expressed by the increasing number of marriages between Muong people and Kinh people. This has made the already rich cultural landscape of Muong people illustrated via marriages now even more

diversified. With this article, the authors would like to present on the current status of marriages between Muong and Kinh people so as to provide necessary and useful materials for preserving and promoting typical cultural values of ethnic peoples, contributing to the effective establishment of new lifestyle in rural areas.

2. Some characteristics of the marriages between Muong people and Kinh people

2.1. Perception of Muong people on multi-ethnicity marriages

According to Muong people, marriage has a special meaning not only to the individuals involved. It is also a matter of utmost importance to the family and the clan. For the man, marriage marks his

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transition to become the head and the representative of a family, the roof-top of the house, the person who will participate in all the work of the family, clan and neighbourhood. For the woman, marriage also marks her adulthood, attesting that she is now capable of handling family matters, of giving birth to children and maintaining the race of the husband's family. According to tradition, especially before Vietnam was fully liberalised, the Muong people preferred that their children marry somebody within their hamlet, village and ethnic group so that they can continue to live near their children, benefiting from the addition to the labor force, and sharing similar cultural values with the in-laws. As a result, the instances of marriages with people from other ethnic groups, including Kinh people, were quite unusual, especially in remote, distant, or hardly commutable areas. However, after Vietnam implemented the policy of sending Kinh people from the Northern Delta to mountainous provinces to live in "the new economic areas" in the 1960s, there were changes in the cultural landscape of the ethnic groups: marriage between different ethnic groups started to occur, which was mainly the marriage between a female Muong with a male Kinh who migrated to the area to establish a new economic life and settle down. Ever since the Renovation process started (1986), marriages between Muong and Kinh people have become more popular as a result of various factors, notably the improved economic conditions, better traffic and access, and more opportunities for interaction and exchange between Muong and Kinh youngsters. This has resulted in a change Muong people's perception that enabled a significant increase in

multi-ethnicity marriages, especially those between Muong and Kinh people in urban areas.

2.2. Current status of marriages between Muong and Kinh people

Nowadays, thanks to the overall social development, Muong people have better access to the mass media and thus have had significant changes in the mindset and perception on marriage, especially on multi-ethnicity marriages (including those between Muong and Kinh people). From the field surveys carried out with Muong residents in Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa and Dak Lak provinces in 2013, 2014, 2015, it could be easily noticed that the number of multi-ethnicity marriages involving Muong people was higher and higher and expected to grow further in upcoming years. The number of marriages between Muong and Kinh people ranked second only to that among Muong people. However, the situation varies from one residential area to another, especially in terms of the people's origin and hometown. While most Muong youngsters in Hoa Binh province married Kinh people residing within the area and in other Northern places such as Hanoi, Son La, Cao Bang, Lao Cai, Lang Son, Thai Nguyen, Hai Phong, Hai Duong, etc. as they were working in the industrial zones in these cities and provinces, the majority of Muong people in Thanh Hoa, Dak Lak married Kinh people who migrated from the central Vietnam to the Central Highlands or Kinh people from the Southwestern region and Ho Chi Minh City. The marriages between Muong and Kinh people in different areas, with different cultural backgrounds are gradually making fundamental changes to the cultural lives

of Muong people in Muong - Kinh marriages, which is also gradually help the enrichment and diversification of the culture of the Muong.

Table 1. Marriage between Muong and Kinh People in Hoa Binh Province
(data collected from selected districts)

No.	Name of District	Year	Cases of marriage between Muong and Kinh people
1.	Lac Son	2010 - 2015	200
2.	Kim Boi	2010 - 2015	55
3.	Tan Lac	2010 - 2015	151

Source: Divisions of Justice of Lac Son, Tan Lac, Kim Boi Districts, 2015.

As seen from the table, the number of marriages between Muong and Kinh people has been on the rise, especially in communes and towns with better economic performance, transport conditions and more exposure to the external world. Apart from that, Muong-Kinh marriages are also the result of a higher number of youngsters undertaking studies and working in many different areas.

An increasing ratio of Muong-Kinh marriages is not only recorded in Hoa Binh province but also in Buon Ma Thuot city of Dak Lak province in the Central Highlands, where many Muong people from Hoa Binh province emigrated from 1954 to 1990s. According to the data collected during field trips to the city in December 2014, there was a strong tendency for multi-ethnicity marriages, including marriages with Kinh people, in both Hoa Thang and Ea Kao communes. Specifically, in Ea Kao commune from 1978 to date, out of a total of 310 couples who registered for marriage, 127 were Muong-to-Muong couples and 184 Muong-to-non-Muong couples. As for

Hoa Thang Commune, which is located right in the political, economic and social centre of Buon Ma Thuot city, the changes in the perception and cultural habits were inevitable. From 2009 to 2014 alone, there were 312 Muong-to-Muong marriages and as many as 506 Muong-to-non-Muong marriages. Among the latter group, there were two instances of Muong-to-Tay marriage, two of Muong-to-Ede marriages, and the remaining 109 cases are Muong-to-Kinh marriages. Mrs. Dinh Thi Luu of Hoa Thanh Commune said: "Generally, Muong people are progressive: we go to school, seek employment and work in many places; we are not detached from society, and thus, it is quite common for Muong people to marry Kinh people. In our commune, there are many marriages between Muong women and Kinh men, and we even have marriages with Vietnamese living overseas. The two persons from our commune married Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) residing in the United States after they went there for studies. Nowadays, the society is much more open-minded than back in my

times, therefore, getting married with people of another ethnic group, especially with Kinh people, is considered normal. The important thing is that the couples love and understand each other. The parents no longer force the marriage upon their children as before”.

It can be seen that by sharing the living space with other ethnic groups, and through improved interaction and exchange in education, working and training activities, ethnic groups have been able to get close to one another and gradually eliminate the cultural differences among them.

2.3. Some customs and rituals for marriages between Muong people and Kinh people today

2.3.1. The case of a Muong groom and a Kinh bride

Nowadays, Muong men and Kinh women can meet, fall in love and marry each other as they see fit without the need of a matchmaker as in earlier days. In order to determine an auspicious wedding day for the young couple, the groom’s family will ask for the help of a fortune teller called “thầy bói đá rò” or “bói rùa”. For marriages involving a Muong groom, the Muong calendar, in which the days will be counted in an decreasing manner (countdown) while the months in the increasing manner, will be used. Unlike Kinh people, Muong people avoid holding weddings in the 4th and 10th lunar months as they perceive the months will bring bad luck to the couples and their children will often fall ill. However, similar to Kinh people, Muong people also avoid the 7th lunar month fearing separation, and “bad” hours that might affect the couple’s knuptial life and birth-giving.

Nowadays, marriages between a Muong groom and Kinh bride are usually held in his and her houses in line with the customs and habits of his and her own ethnicity: the groom follows the Muong customs, and the bride follows the Kinh customs. In practice today, most weddings involving a Muong groom and a Kinh bride combine “ti thăm thiếng” (the visit to get to know the other family) and “Ti kháo thiếng” (the proposal making ceremony) into one marriage-proposal ceremony. After the marriage proposal is made and accepted by the bride’s family, there comes the betrothal.

According to Muong people, betrothal is the way to inform the neighbourhood about the progress of the wedding after the two families have finalised discussions and reached an agreement. Traditionally, after a good date has been chosen for the wedding, the groom’s family will prepare two pairs of sugar canes (to ensure the presence of even numbers), 20 kg of pork, 20 kg of rice, 20 litres of alcohol, a bunch of areca nuts, 100 betel leaves, as in Muong customs, or a casket including “bánh cốm” (green rice flake cake), “bánh phu thê” (husband and wife’s cake), “mứt sen” (sugar coated lotus seeds), green tea, wine, areca nuts and betel leaves, cigarettes, etc. with sticky rice and a hog’s head, as in Kinh customs. The number of caskets is usually odd (5, 7, 9, etc.) but the numbers of types of offerings in them must always be even. Even though the offerings used in the betrothal and wedding ceremonies of Muong people are now significantly different from tradition, their meaning remain unchanged: they demonstrate the gratitude of the groom’s family for the upbringing and education that the bride’s parents have given to

her, as well as the affection and respect of the groom's family toward the future daughter-in-law. The members of the groom's delegation going to the bride's family on the betrothal day include representatives of the groom's paternal and maternal sides, his siblings and cousins, the groom himself, his "piêng" (best man) and several unmarried young men tasked with carrying the offerings. The groom's family will appoint a glib talker within the family to be the head of the delegation. In the old days' wedding rituals, the groom's parents did not join the delegation going to the bride's family for the betrothal or bride-fetching but authorised the match-maker fully instead. Nowadays, in most weddings, the father of the groom is present in the delegation. Upon arriving there, after discussion, the groom's family hand over the offerings to the bride's and her family will bring part of the offerings to the ancestors' altar. They usually keep two thirds of the offerings with themselves and return one third to the groom's family, as in line with Kinh customs. The offerings kept by the bride's family will be presented to invitees to the wedding together with wedding invitations. And, in the betrothal, the groom's family need to prepare three envelopes of cash, called "black offerings": one for the bride's paternal side, one for the bride's maternal side, and one to be put onto the altar of the bride's family. The cash amount shall depend on what has been agreed between the two families. In practice nowadays, each envelope typically contains from VND 1 million to 3 million, depending on the economic condition of each family.

There are also regional differences in the bride-fetching ceremony today. In the

townships of some districts such as Kim Boi, Tan Lac (Hoa Binh province) or Hoa Thang, Ea Kao communes of Buon Ma Thuot city, the ceremony usually takes place from 5 to 7 days after the betrothal. Meanwhile, in remote communes of Tan Lac and Lac Son districts, the wedding ceremony is typically held only one day after the betrothal. There is an old saying of Muong people "Chầu bông klu, du lại mặt" (Becoming son-in-law at noon, becoming daughter-in-law in the evening), therefore, the time when the bride arrives at the groom's family must be around 2 or 3 p.m. as these are considered the good hours. This is different from the case of a Kinh groom. Thus, the cases of a Muong groom getting married to a Kinh bride, and of a Kinh groom getting married to a Muong bride differ not only in terms of the offerings, customs and rituals, but also in the time when the bride must be brought to the new home, a result of differences in perception and beliefs.

As the bride is a Kinh person, before going to the her house, the groom's family must prepare the betel tray (the betel is arranged so that it looks like the wing of a phoenix), in the case of the city and in Dak Lak province, or accompanied with a bottle of alcohol in the case of some communes of Hoa Binh province). The preparations are for the groom's mother and one young man in the paternal side to go for fetching the bride.

When the time comes, the groom, together with his father and other representatives, will go to the bride's house in flowers-decorated vehicles in order to bring her home. At the bride's house, all the rituals will follow the Kinh culture (of

course, there are differences in cases of the Kinh brides coming from different regions). Nevertheless, as she is getting married to a Muong groom, the Kinh bride must wear a conical hat when going to the groom's house, regardless of the weather. She shall also bring at least two blankets, two mattresses and two big pillows to gift her parents-in-law, and tens of small pillows for the groom's family to gift their close aunts and uncles, in line with Muong customs. When the delegation reach the groom's house, his younger sister will take the bride's conical hat so that she can enter the house and carry out the necessary rituals, including presenting herself in front of the groom's ancestors, and being given a new name (the groom's family name) by the head of the family/clan. According to Muong people, in the wedding ceremony, the bride must be given a new name of the groom's family name in front of the ancestors' altar. Only this way will she be officially acknowledged as a member of the family and clan. If this ritual is not followed, when the bride passes away, she will not be buried in the family's cemetery, neither will she be welcomed by the ancestors in the other world and will become a wandering ghost. In some areas such as Hoa Thang (Buon Ma Thuot city) or in remote areas of Lac Son district, Tan Lac district, the groom's family also prepare an "áo chùng đỏ" (a loose coat in the red color) for her to put on when presenting to the ancestors and at the name-giving ritual as in the traditional customs of Muong people.

Be it in Hoa Binh, Dak Lak or Thanh Hoa, after introducing herself to the

ancestors, the bride will be taken by her mother-in-law to kowtow to the god of the kitchen as, according to Muong people, this symbolizes the mother-in-law's handing over the cooking and family-caring duty to the bride, and, later on, when the bride gives birth, the god will bless her and the baby with good health. After the rituals at the groom's house, the wedding will then be held for the couple in a restaurant or hotel or at the family's residence. It can be observed that, while the Muong community migrating from Hoa Binh to Dak Lak province have a strong willpower to preserve and promote Muong culture, those residing in Hoa Binh province have received and absorbed rather intensively the culture of Kinh people.

2.3.2. The case of a Kinh groom and a Muong bride

In this case, the wedding customs and rituals basically follow those of each of the couple in his and her own home, and, since the groom's family are Kinh people, the Kinh culture will prevail more throughout the wedding. The wedding between a Kinh groom and a Muong bride shall consist of the following steps: marriage-proposal, betrothal, and wedding ceremonies. The marriage - proposal ceremony sees representatives of the groom's family bringing simple offerings such as alcohol, cakes and fruit to the bride's family to ask for permitting the couple's marriage. However, according to the customs of the Muong people, the bride's family never accept marrying their daughter right in the betrothal ceremony, instead, they wait and respond in 2-3 days. Upon the acceptance of the bride's family, the groom's family

will choose a good date to hold the wedding ceremony for the happy couple. If the two families reside far from each other, e.g. in different provinces, the groom's family may choose the dates of the betrothal and wedding ceremonies in advance and inform the bride's, so that the latter have sufficient time for preparation. Unlike in the case of a Muong groom where the marriage proposal always falls on an afternoon, when the groom's family members are Kinh people, this shall be done on a good (auspicious) date and at a good hour for the young couple.

The offerings, composition of the groom's family delegation and the rituals of the betrothal ceremony, in this case, follow fundamentally the customs of his family. Usually, the family shall prepare from 5 to 9 caskets, including one with sticky rice, a hog's head; one for fruit; one for areca nuts and betel leaves; one for alcohol and cakes, one for "bánh cốm", one for "bánh phu thê" (or green bean cakes instead); alongside with 3 envelopes with money: one for the paternal side of the bride, one for her maternal side, and one to be used for buying new clothes for the bride to wear on the wedding day. Also, in line with Muong people's traditions, on the wedding day, the groom's family shall also bring offerings (rice, pork, alcohol, cakes, etc.) for the bride's to treat the guests, relatives and neighbors on the bride-fetching day. However, nowadays, to make it more convenient, cash is given instead to the bride's family for their preparation. Therefore, in weddings between a Muong bride and a Kinh groom, the latter's family shall also prepare such money to give to the other family. As of now, the amount of cash to be given to the

bride's family depends on the economic condition of each family, and on the specific region. However, based on the estimates mentioned by the respondents to our survey, that may range from VND 5 million to 15 million.

On the bride-fetching day, the groom, together with his father and other representatives from the family will go to the bride's family on vehicles decorated with wedding flowers. At the bride's house, the bride and groom will carry out the rituals in line with Muong culture. The bride, who wears the traditional costume of the Muong, and the groom will kowtow and pay their respect in front of the altar of her ancestors. The couple must drink alcohol and receive the wishes of the bride's family. In some places, the members of the groom's family must also drink *ruợu cần* (alcohol fermented with leaves in a jar and drunk out through pipes) and do antiphonal singing with the bride's family to boost the spirit of the wedding day. Previously, Muong people did not have the customs of giving gifts to their daughter and son-in-law on the wedding day. Instead, they did that later on when the daughter gives birth to the first child. However, nowadays, this has changed: on the day the bride goes to her new home, the parents, grandparents and other close relatives have already bought items, golden rings and necklaces to give and wish the bride the best. In some places, when the groom arrives to take the bride home, the Muong bride must go to her room and change into the wedding dress or "áo dài" (long dress) before going to the groom's house and perform the rituals at the groom's in line with the Kinh culture.

3. Some issues on the marriage between Muong and Kinh people today

Multi-ethnicity marriage represents a bridge that connects and brings together different ethnic communities to get to know each other and the other cultures. Under today's development and integration context, besides traditional factors, there are now many new elements brought in with the integration and globalisation trend, that have impacts on the marriages. Therefore, we have seen changes in the cultural patterns and social relations regarding marriages, especially multi-ethnicity ones. Kinh people are currently the most populous ethnic group who have a more advanced level of socio-economic development and reside across the country, while having contacts with the communities of various ethnic minorities. As a result, the number of marriages between Kinh people and the minorities has been on the rise and will be even faster increased in the future. As for the Muong people, they have had the natural process of exchange and acculturation with Kinh people, that is added to the cultural similarities and the fact that their societies are both patriarchal. The reasons have made marriages between these two ethnic groups increasingly popular. This is illustrated most evidently in the table mentioned above. According to Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh of Hoa Thang hamlet, the tendency nowadays in her locality is that it is not Muong-to-Muong marriages, but Muong-to-Kinh marriages that are more and more popular. She said that, in terms of norms, customs, cultural behaviours and family values, there are great similarities between Muong people and Kinh people. There are no major

differences, she added. Nowadays, the general understanding is that every person has his/her ancestors, grandparents, siblings, etc., who are to live in harmony with, and, though sharing the similarities, each ethnicity has its own culture to follow in life, Ms. Binh concluded.

It can be said that the rising number of marriages between Muong and Kinh people will help strengthen the relationship between the peoples, diversify and enrich their cultures, improve their educational levels, and contribute to social development, community management, social stability and sustainability. And, apart from the positive aspects, multi-ethnicity marriages also pose challenges to the preservation of the cultural identities and languages of the ethnic groups involved. The preservation of the Muong language, Muong costumes, or Muong cuisine in families living in urban cities and towns will certainly be more difficult than in the cases of marriages between Muong couples. The preservation depends on the awareness and cognition of the communities and the members of the families of multi-ethnicity marriages, as well as on the dissemination of competent authorities to raise the awareness of the Muong and Kinh communities.

4. Conclusion

Ever since Vietnam embarked on the Renovation process, the socio-economic conditions of Muong and Kinh people in Vietnam in particular and of all other ethnic groups in general have been developed; the communities of different ethnic groups have had more opportunities to interact with one another, which has helped them

understand more about the other's culture, that leads to numerous marriages between different ethnic groups.

Marriage used to be within the "borders" of the village and ethnic group. It now has crossed any such limits to include brides and grooms originating from various ethnic backgrounds. This has helped enhance the ethnical diversity in Muong regions and stimulated cultural exchange between multi-ethnicity couples during the lives they lead together, creating a new generation that can absorb the cultures of both their parents.

However, the preservation and promotion of the cultural values of each ethnic group are also challenged by the risks of the loss of languages and various traditional wedding customs and rituals. The exchange and acculturation among ethnic groups residing in the same area, if accompanied by cultural preservation and conservation activities, will help promote the positive impacts arising from multi-ethnicity marriages between Muong and Kinh people on the lives of the people, and help them develop the new rural lifestyle the practice of which has been promoted by the Party and the State of Vietnam.

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