

CHAPTER 5

ADAPTATION OF LIVELIHOOD PRACTICES FOR POVERTY REDUCTION

The previous two chapters examined people in the study area's perceptions of poverty and marginalization through the influence of state interventions, and how in turn the Khmer households have mobilized a variety of resources in support of their subsistence. This chapter will look at the coping strategies used by the poor Khmer households when trying to fight poverty, and demonstrate that given the social vulnerability created by the structure, they are not passive and have used the variety of coping strategies at their disposal to overcome their impoverished situation and maintain their livelihoods. I will analyze and compare the income generation levels of the different Khmer household groups, plus between the poor Kinh and Khmer households, in order to explore how some have managed to escape poverty and how others have remained poor, in response to the strategies adopted by the government poverty alleviation programs.

5.1. Livelihood Diversification as a Discourse on Poverty

From the information I collected and observed in the Khmer community, poverty in reality defined by the poverty line set by government discourse; the people have their own views on poverty, as mentioned earlier in Chapter 3, based upon their livelihoods and their own situation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, although Decision 74 and Resolution 25 have helped people to switch jobs, and the local government has organized vocational training for employees wishing to enter stable occupations, some training courses have actually demonstrated "reverse efficiency", in which trainees have found themselves unable to seek work in the occupation market.

Therefore, poor households have decided not to wait for development assistance to reach them and help them improve their living conditions, but instead

have used their assets and skills to create alternative livelihood strategies that are more profitable than the traditional ones. In response to poverty, Yaro (2002:12) suggests that the strategies pursued by households can be described as coping strategies, and these are geared towards maintaining a continuous flow of food for household consumption. This approach considers food as the main priority, and all coping strategies are geared towards maximizing immediate consumption without regard for the repercussions of those strategies. Like Yaro, Middleton (2001) observes that poor people's livelihood strategies often seem to be more about addressing vulnerability and handling shocks than "escaping" from poverty *per se*.

Results from my analysis of livelihood activities in the study area are presented in Table 5.1, which shows that poor people have had no choice but to work in the informal sector, in spite of the risks, insecurity and unstable characteristics of such kinds of work. Although different from the informal waged employment mentioned earlier, rural livelihood strategies also rely on the mobilization of household labor and the diversification of income sources for their survival. Among the two groups, a popular development has been the collective diversification into agricultural waged labor income-earning activities, with 85% and 87% of the Khmer and Kinh groups respectively using this as their principal source of coping. Due to their low education levels, they normally work as hired labor for other farm households, and this also reflects a seasonal migratory pattern, undertaking simple activities such as crop harvesting. Most do not want to change their traditional types of business activities learned from earlier generations or from their neighbors; however, under the present economic conditions, the demand for hired labor is falling and wages are declining due to the increasing pressure coming from farm mechanization in recent years, such as the introduction of rice harvesting machines, as shown in Figure 5.1 below.



Figure 5.1: Reduction in Labor Requirements due to Mechanization in Rural Areas

Apart from off-farm work such as cattle husbandry and seasonal agricultural employment, long-term migration among the poor Khmer group is twice as likely as among the poor Kinh group, at 7.4% and 4% respectively. About 250 young Khmers from rural core households engaged in non-farm jobs acquired their jobs through relatives working in the same place, or they were persuaded by relatives or friends to go and seek jobs in the same areas, especially when moving out of the village to urban areas to work as unskilled laborers, such as in the furniture factory. This is well illustrated by the case of Neang Soc N (27 years-old), who is part of an eight member family, including her elderly parents, four migrant workers and two grandchildren still studying at primary school. All the adults are illiterate, and five are laborers. They had 0.3 ha of upper paddy field and 0.2 ha of lower paddy field in the past, but now have only 0.1 ha of low paddy field because they had to sell the rest to pay off debts. Having seen family members migrate to Dong Nai for three years, their lives have improved and they have been able to escape poverty since 2010, after twenty years belonging to the poor household group in the village. She told me about her worries the first time she decided to move out of the village in search of employment:

My younger sister called me, asking me to move, and so my husband and I decided to work with her. In reality, before leaving, we worried about everything, because (i) it was our first time away from home, (ii) we do not speak Vietnamese fluently, (iii) we had not finished primary school, and (iv) we did not know what specific job we would do; we had experienced only as agricultural wage laborers. However, since

our business had failed due to low rice yields, we had mortgaged our land and become indebted, we had no other choice.

(In-depth interview, 2010)

While the Khmer group considers the income received from animal husbandry to be the main reason for moving out of poverty, the Kinh group considers being hired laborers as the best way to fight poverty. This is down to the fact that most of the Khmer who have escaped poverty received two cows under Resolution 25 - 78% of Khmer households in my survey, and even though some Khmer households had already escaped poverty, they also received support from the program as it had a good relationship with the local Khmer officials. In contrast, 50% of the Kinh who have escaped poverty consider agricultural wage labor to be their main income source, because it is easy for them to find jobs from landowners both inside and outside the village. Furthermore, in contrast, the proportion of poor Khmer migrants is higher than the poor Kinh, for as mentioned above, 25% of the Kinh households that have escaped poverty have people working outside the region, whereas only 11.1% of the former Khmer poor do so. I also found that when agricultural intensification and local employment opportunities are limited, the alternative livelihoods option is to leave home and look for work opportunities in the urban areas.

For the non-poor groups of both ethnicities, self-employed agricultural production is the main livelihood activity, amounting to 83.3% of the total number of non-poor households (Table 5.1). As a result, the livelihood trajectories of peasants are not straightforward in my study area, but rather diverse and dynamic among the different groups of peasants with similar characteristics. As Yaro (2002:23) points out, the level of assets owned by a household and individual in different wealth groups has a significant influence on the livelihood path chosen and the strategies used to mitigate negative externalities.

Table 5.1: Different Income-generation Activities in Le Tri Commune

Unit: %

| Main Income Source Social Groups | | Farming | Husbandry | Petty Trade | Agricultural Wage Labor | Migration |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|---------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------|------------|
| Khmer | Poor | 18.5 | 29.6 | 3.7 | 85.2 | 7.4 |
| | Former Poor | 33.3 | 77.8 | 22.2 | 55.6 | 11.1 |
| | Non-poor | 83.3 | 0.0 | 33.3 | 0.0 | 16.7 |
| Kinh | Poor | 4.2 | 4.2 | 4.2 | 87.5 | 4.2 |
| | Former Poor | 0.0 | 37.5 | 12.5 | 50.0 | 25.0 |
| | Non-poor | 83.3 | 0.0 | 50.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

Source: Household survey data gathered by the author and students from An Giang University, 2010

Meanwhile, the men in the family tend to generate the majority of the income and are the breadwinners of the family, working as hired agricultural labor, while the poor women with some capital tend to set themselves up in petty trade activities using the space in their house or move around their village selling basic items demanded by community, such as candies, beverages, noodle soup and coffee (Figure 5.2). According to Mrs. Neang H , she was the first Khmer woman to invest her husband's income in becoming a street vendor selling vegetables on a bicycle. She learned about this work from the Kinh women and spends her earnings on basic necessities for the family. Although she heard that Resolution 25 provides the poor with small loans in order to set up petty trade businesses and runs vocational training for poor people, she has hesitated to participate thus far, saying:

Changing to a new job? I am pleased with my current job although the income fluctuates. A loan for cattle husbandry? That is a good idea for my family, but I heard that the local staff choose and buy the cows based on their opinions, even though they do not have experience like us. Because we are Khmer people, we are used to raising cows, so if the provided cows have health problems, who will be responsible and return this loan? So, thanks to the government for their support, but my

family will not accept it and I will continue with my job as a street vendor, and my husband as an agricultural wage laborer.

(Household interview in 2010)



Kinh Woman Selling Noodles for Breakfast in Front of her House



Khmer woman Selling Vegetables on a Bicycle around the Village

Figure 5.2: Women Contributing to their Households' Economy

Another method people use to escape poverty is based on their land and common property, whereby women and children harvest products such as wood from the forests, grass from the paddy fields, plus snails, crabs and water hyacinths during the flooding season from the canals/trenches for sale, or herd cattle in order to increase their household income (Figure 5.3). The level of financial distress determines the level of involvement of various members of different wealth groups in these activities. The poor Khmers employs these activities as a key source of income due to their health problems; for example, an elderly couple in the village told me they collect snails and crabs during the wet season and gather rice after the harvest in the paddy fields for their subsistence. In contrast, the non-poor tend to pursue only farming activities.



Figure 5.3: Income Generating Activities of the Poor Khmer Women in Le Tri Commune

Middleton (2001) notes that the poor employ these activities and that they remain critically important to them because they help reduce their dependence on a single source of income - a key determinant of vulnerability. During my fieldwork, I noted that, in terms of diversifying their income sources, the poor Kinh households are much more flexible than the poor Khmer; for example, they carry out “backyard gardening” - producing their own food both for consumption and for sale (Figure 5.4). In terms of activities that have proliferated in response to enhanced vulnerability, during my observations in the field I witnessed a Kinh family striving to improve its situation by resorting to whatever means possible to survival; for example, engaging in the illegal sale of lottery tickets, putting it at risk of being caught by the local police. Meanwhile, the poor Khmer farmers tend to migrate illegally into Cambodia in search of employment, as the border is near plus they face no problems in terms of language. Similar to Van (2008), my research found that laborers go to Cambodia illegally to work, since the border is long and the frontier police do not have enough staff to cover the whole area. Although getting a passport is quite simple, laborers prefer to get permission from the Commune Committee and approach the border guards for a pass, which lasts for one year and attracts no fee.



Poor Kinh Cultivating Flowers, for Sale
during Lunar New Year



Backyard Gardening - for Sale and for
Consumption by Poor Kinh households.

Figure 5.4: Example of Income Diversification among Kinh Households in Le Tri Commune (*source*: photos taken by the author, 2010)

Large numbers of Khmer adolescents do not attend school, or drop out in order to contribute their labor to the household. During my interviews I found that some young girls have migrated to urban areas in search of work; for example, one young woman I met (Neang H - fifteen years-old) left independently but did not meet the minimum age requirement for a textile company; however, wanting to contribute an income to her family, she used her sister's name to apply for work in Ho Chi Minh City as an unskilled laborer. Her plan is to attempt to live and work in the urban area by any means. Although she is an unskilled laborer due to her low education level which limits her skill-set, and the fact that she receives a lower salary than the other workers, this is more stable work than being a hired agricultural laborer, which is what she did at home.

Another case that illustrates this situation is the family of Chau R, who is 50 years-old and has three young daughters and a son who migrated to work at a furniture company in Binh Duong three years ago. He told me that his family escaped from poverty the previous year due to the remittances received from his children in the city - about 1.5 million VND per month. However, rather than migrating, some children as young as ten contribute to their household economy by herding cattle for others in the village or by collecting grass for their cows - to help their parents (as

shown in Figure 5.5). As Middleton (2001) asserts, although child labor is mobilized in many place as a response to declining incomes, it is not clear whether or not it enhances household well-being. In reality, most young migrants have only finished to primary and/or secondary school level, and so the need to use child labor for survival is one of the most important obstacles to the advancement of rural education in the Mekong Delta (as mentioned in Chapter 3), for both the poor Kinh and Khmer groups.



Figure 5.5: Khmer Children Working in Le Tri Commune - Khmer children herd cattle and cut grass for use as cattle feed.

In general, due to the unequal distribution of capital and insufficient progress among Program 134 (providing housing land and houses) and Resolution 25 (supplying cattle and vocational training), poor households have had to be flexible and dynamic in their livelihood practices, as previously mentioned. In other words, development interventions do not achieve positive changes in the lives of those targeted without there being a good level of understanding about the realities faced by the poor, their livelihood strategies and the environment within which they operate (Al-Serhan, 2010). Poor households strive to cope with the changes they face by being flexible and modifying their own work strategies - sending more family members to work and engaging in a range of cash generating and subsistence activities. Although the income from some of these activities is insignificant, all the activities are undertaken in order to support their survival.

5.2. Adapting Social Relationships to Strengthen Livelihood Strategies

The Khmer are second to the Vietnamese in population terms, forming part of the multi-ethnic communities that make up An Giang Province. They have established social relations with each other, contributing towards both the local culture and the general culture of southern Vietnam, which has diverse cultural characteristics. This section draws upon the local research and fieldwork I carried out to highlight some of the social relationship and neighborhood features to be found among the Khmer, plus between the Kinh and the Khmer when trying to cope with poverty, and in order to adapt to one another within the context of access to and implementation of the national poverty reduction programs in the locality. In terms of cultural characteristics amongst the Khmer villagers, there is a strong sense of family and gender relations in terms of shaping relationships. The young Khmer females get together in small groups to earn an income by migrating to urban areas, while the Khmer men tend to search for jobs as seasonal labor both near to and far from the village. In addition, I will highlight the fact that both the Khmer and Kinh groups prefer to obtain work through their informal social networks such as family and friends, and prefer to learn from their neighbor's successes and failures, rather than by going through official government channels.

Before the war with the Khmer Rouge in 1978, the Khmer people in An Giang Province lived in remote rural areas; their villages were traditionally constructed by households within clans. Social relationships in Le Tri commune were simple, with relationships among clans, kin and households in the village. Later on, after Le Tri commune was established, the local authorities also introduced Kinh people to the area, meaning that the Khmer people had to interact with them, but only to a limited extent.

As can be seen in Figure 5.6, I have analyzed the inter-relations between different actors within the Khmer community of Le Tri commune. They possess a broad spectrum of social relations, such as family, kinship and neighborhood relations, with associations at the village level. From my interviews I found that before the implementation of the national poverty reduction programs, there existed a long-standing model called *nuoi chia* (Vietnamese words) - as mentioned earlier in

Chapter 3, involving interest only loans and hired Khmer labor used in agricultural production, and this reveals the close social relations that existed between the Kinh owners and the Khmer hired laborers. In some marginalized households who have not received local government support, this form of relations has been maintained. The following case is a good illustration of such a social network, one that includes kinship and neighborhood relations, and how it plays an important part in the local people's survival (as demonstrated in Figure 5.6).

Mr. Chau On (68 years-old), is the head of a poor Khmer family with four children – all of whom are married and live away. He lives with his wife in a house that is borrowed from a kind Khmer neighbor. His nuclear family belongs to the poor family group in the village, as it does not have a labor force or meet the regulations and conditions required by the poverty alleviation programs. He also has health problems, so cannot receive this support. Although both he and his wife received no formal education and cannot speak Vietnamese, he negotiated with a Kinh employer in order to raise two cows as part of a *nuoi chia* process, with the hope his family's conditions will improve. His wife also catches fish and snails everyday in a nearby canal - to sell in the village. Their income is not enough and they consider health problems to be the greatest risk to their well-being. However, they also thank their Khmer neighbor and his Kinh employer for supporting their necessities to life.

(Household interview, 2010)

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 3, the feelings expressed by the poor people in the community manifests the neighborhood relations that exist among the Khmer villagers. The poor are encouraged to do their best to improve their situation; for example, if they are short of money, they can ask their neighbors or relatives to lend them some, can borrow small amounts of money from the Kinh, or in urgent cases, borrow rice from their Khmer neighbors. By and large, they try to support their neighbors and family by contributing manual labor when needed.

As one of my Khmer respondents said, social networking is the “best and safest road to build, to pave the way for your children”. In the same vein as Tuyen

(2011:226) regarding the perceptions of the Khmer towards their labor networks (as shown in Figure 5.6), he argues that the young Khmer generation has expanded and progressed when compared to the previous generations, due to the influence of the market and knowledge economies (Tuyen, 2011), but only to a certain extent. Nguyen (2008), in a study of the traditional economic activities of the Khmer community in An Giang Province, contends that the community used to strengthen cooperation and provides mutual help among its households, using the *phum* and *soc* methods for some activities, such as ploughing the fields, transplanting rice seedlings, weeding the paddy fields, and harvesting and threshing the rice to finish the job properly. However, in recent years they have abandoned this kind of labor exchange practice; now they work as hired labor and receive cash from the Kinh farmers, plus rice from the Khmer farmers.

Although the government has introduced many programs to help the poor, the farmers have their own networks that can meet their basic needs on a daily basis. Accordingly, through my research among representatives of the poor farmers in the study community, I found that they seek employment opportunities in other provinces, even in the urban areas. Moreover, due to a lack of employment opportunities in the village, I found that friends and neighbors who live near to each other often gather together into small groups of approximately six to eight people, to form a labor network and carry out off-farm activities - moving to other villages or provinces, and even over the border to Cambodia. This reliance on mobility as a form of informal support, and by keeping matters inside their own families and kin groups, reveals that they have a strong tendency toward self-help and self-sufficiency. They told me that although Resolution 25 has provided vocational training, they have seldom found jobs through this official channel (local authorities); however, they are thankful for the role played by and the assistance given by the village authority staff, because they help them to complete job applications when they find jobs on their own. Therefore, the relationship between the state authorities and the Khmer villagers clearly originates from a relationship of adaptation, one that has been constructed through the practice of state policies related to the poor villagers' livelihoods.

With respect to cultural relations, temples play a central role in the lives of Khmer villagers (see Figure 5.6), because a temple is a cultural center in which Khmer people come together for both the exchange of information and to express their devotion to Buddha (Ngan, 2010). When any Khmer household faces difficulties, an Acha - a respected person in the Khmer community, goes with a monk to raise money for them.

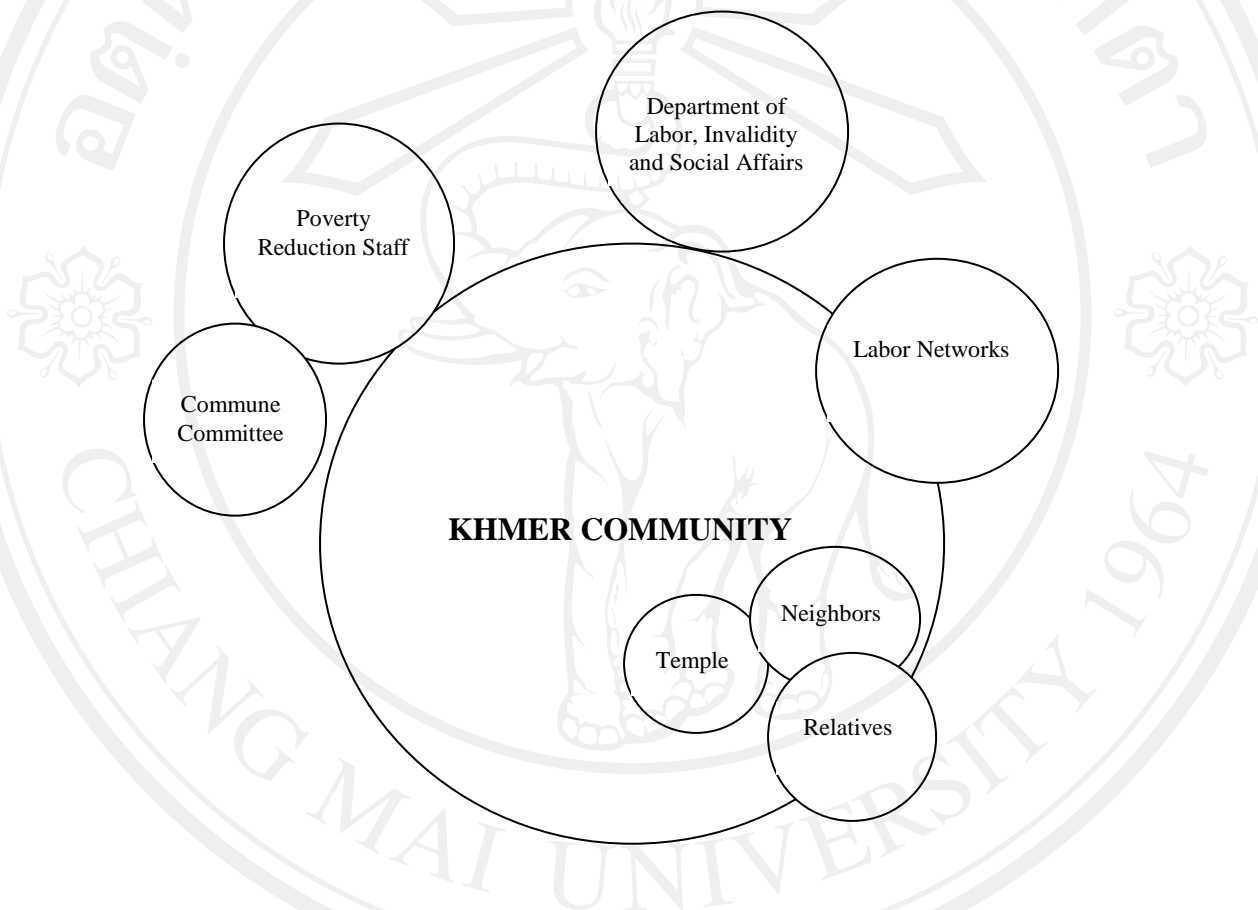


Figure 5.6: Khmer Community Social Relations in Trung An Village, Le Tri Commune (*source*: Group discussion in 2010)

5.3. Changing Cultural Lifestyles in the Khmer Community

Although the Khmer in Vietnam and Cambodia share a variety of traits in terms of culture, language and traditions, due to historical reasons the two Khmer communities have lived separately for almost three centuries, living in two different countries and subject to different cultural environments and social contacts. As a result, as well as the common characteristics they share with all Khmers, the Khmer in Vietnam have developed their own characteristics, those developed during the long

process of interaction with the other ethnic groups in Vietnam. This is reflected clearly in their costumes and in the large number of tasks they share with the Vietnamese, those that the Khmer employ in their daily lives.

In order to integrate with Vietnamese culture and escape poverty, the Khmers not only focus on trying to create a prosperous and stable life; they have also attempted to access external information and cultural education (using social information), plus participate in local meetings. They have also attempted to create the right conditions so that their children can go to Vietnamese schools and take part in cultural exchange and education activities. In recent years, while most of the young Khmers from better-off households have studied and now work in white-collar jobs, those from medium-income households have tended to migrate to urban areas in search of work and to access modernity. However, middle-aged migrants have tended to retain their spiritual side, so they still go to temples near their work places - at least four times a month.

Basically, the traditional cultural festivals associated with community activities in accordance with Khmer folklore in An Giang, are mostly connected with the local people's beliefs revolving around agriculture. They have established a system based on the agricultural calendar, with crop arrangements and folk festivals held every year in accordance with the different growing phases of the rice crops, plus in line with the traditional customs in their community. However, I will only discuss the most notable events. *Chol Thnam Thmay*, or Khmer New Year, is celebrated at the beginning of the wet season, when people start farming, and *Sen Dolta* takes place at an important moment in the rice's development and is a festival designed to show gratitude to one's parents. The *Ok Om Bok* festival is celebrated when the harvest of the winter crop is approaching, and is the so-called 'agricultural New Year' or 'pray to the moon' festival. As well as these traditional celebrations, Vietnamese New Year is also celebrated between the first to the third of January each year (according to lunar calendar).

Due to their reliance on generating an income far from home, the Khmer migrants only participate in the key traditional festivals. All of Mrs. Neang N's family members work at a furniture company in Binh Duong, and said that they cannot return

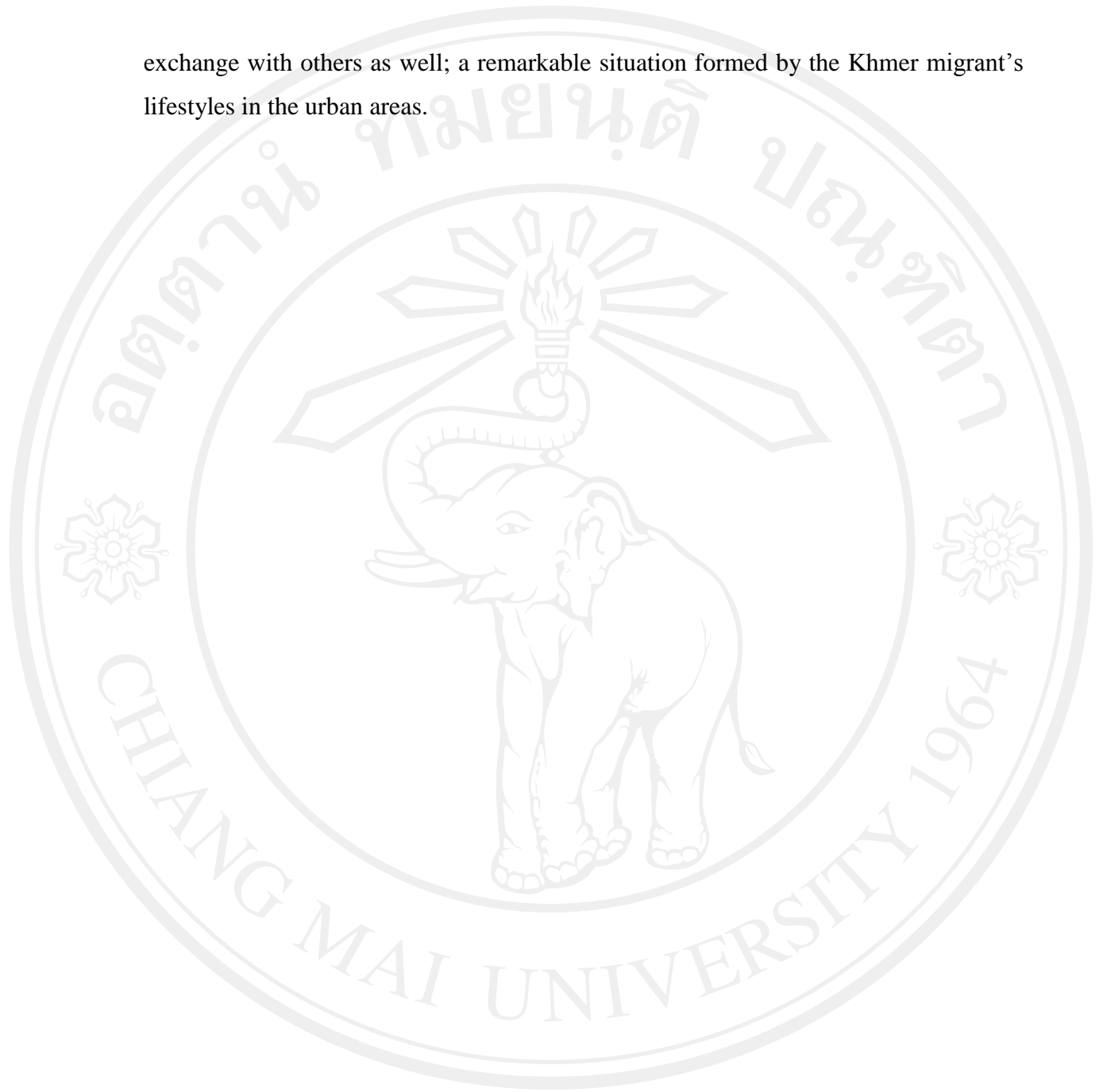
home to enjoy all the Khmer festivals, such as the fifteen day *Sen Dolta* festival, because the companies demand that they should work night shifts, and if they took time off, their salaries would be deducted for the number of days absent from work. The family therefore returns to celebrate some of the shorter festivals during the year. However, the traditional Khmer festivals in An Giang have changed in recent years in accordance with the socio-economic development of the locality. Combined with the traditional rituals from the past are beliefs and forms of entertainment from recent times, and these act as a bridge for cultural exchange to take place, not only among the different ethnic groups such as the Cham, Kinh and Khmer living in An Giang Province, but also for tourists as well. On the other hand, declining financial resources and the timing of some of the festivals have changed their cultural practices, meaning they have had to adopt an expenditure-minimizing strategy. In particular, the hamlet authority contends that the Khmer villagers have limited time to celebrate weddings - three days, whereas more commercial events like Vietnamese weddings are given seven days, as before.

5.4 Summary

This chapter has illustrated that the poor have been able to diversify their livelihood strategies and create a variety of income sources in order to survive. Depending upon their specific conditions, each category of poor household, both Kinh and Khmer, has devised its own survival strategy. While the general tendency of the Kinh and Khmer poor households has been to develop a strategy based on mobility, many of them are hired as seasonal labor working in the rice farms, while the former poor of both groups tend to generate an income by migrating to the urban centers. It is also clear from my study that, at the micro level, these survival strategies are very much related to the dynamics to be found in the different households.

Adapting to secure a livelihood has meant expanding the villagers' social relations – the most important capital asset for the poor Khmer, such as connections and networks. Furthermore, the result of cultural integration among the Khmer people in An Giang Province has been their connection with and access to new forms of information, educational attainment and migratory patterns, in order to generate an income. They have not only retained their traditional culture, but also practice cultural

exchange with others as well; a remarkable situation formed by the Khmer migrant's lifestyles in the urban areas.



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